THE AGE OF DECIPHERMENT: THE OLD TESTAMENT
AND THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST IN THE
NINETEENTH CENTURY

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According to the Introduction in J.B. Pritchard's Ancient Near Eastern
Texts, "the importance of Assyriology for Biblical studies was widely
heralded through the spectacular announcements of George Smith".1
This is a reference to Smith's translations of a cuneiform account of
the flood, which he gave in a paper read to the Society of Biblical
Archaeology in December 1872, and to his identification of fragments
of an account of creation, which he communicated in a letter to the
London Daily Telegraph in March 1875. Cuneiform materials which
were considered relevant for the study of the Old Testament were
published in E. Schrader's Die Keilinschriften und das alte Testament,
a work which appeared first in 1872 and was translated into English
in later years.2 A wider range of ancient Near Eastern texts was used
in the Danish work of V. Schmidt, Syriens Oldtid belyst ved Ikke
Bibelske Kilder.3

Yet how many biblical scholars are familiar with the significant,
if less spectacular, discoveries which were made during the thirty
years or more previous to Smith's announcements? The present writer,
for one, would have only a limited appreciation of the nature and
scope of the unflagging efforts made by the pioneers of decipherment
and their immediate followers, if he had not systematically read several
thousand pages of largely unpublished correspondence and papers of

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2 (Giessen, 1872) The rapid progress of cuneiform studies and Old Testament studies
is reflected by the appearance of a second edition (Giessen, 1883), and a third edition
by H. Zimmern and H. Winckler (Berlin, 1903). An English translation of the second
edition was published by O.C. Whitehouse, The Cuneiform Inscriptions and the Old
3 2 vols (Copenhagen, 1872).
some of the early pioneers. Two scholars in particular, Edward Hincks (1792–1866) and Peter le Page Renouf (1822–97), corresponded with many of the Egyptologists and Assyriologists of the time.\(^4\)

It should be remembered, however, that the decipherments of ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian cuneiform were not accepted by everybody. Charles Wall, the Professor of Hebrew at Trinity College, Dublin, wrote to Hincks in March 1842: “I thank you for your paper which I got last night and have read over today—I can only say that I regret to see so much ingenuity and talent thrown away in the effort to support an erroneous theory. For my part, I have long since dismissed from my mind the subject of Egyptian hieroglyphics, together with Champollion’s merits or demerits, and am at present engaged in preparing for the press proof of the spurious nature of the vowel letters in the text of the Hebrew Bible.”\(^5\) In later years the same academic heaped scorn on Hincks’s work in Mesopotamian cuneiform, saying: “It appears to me no better than mere moonshine and I have very little doubt that if as much Chinese were laid before you as you have samples of Assyrian cuneiform writing, and if you applied the same industry and ingenuity to the investigation, you could coin as plausible fragments of a language from one set of materials as from the other.”\(^6\) In 1863, Renouf felt it necessary to publish a refutation of G.C. Lewis’s claim that the decipherment of Egyptian was bogus.\(^7\)

In this paper, the principal concern is with some aspects of Egyp-

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\(^4\) A fair portion of Hincks’s correspondence was published by his grandson, E.F. Davidson, Edward Hincks. A Selection from his Correspondence with a Memoir (Oxford, 1933). See also K.J. Cathcart, “Edward Hincks (1792–1866): a biographical essay”, in K.J. Cathcart (ed.), The Edward Hincks Bicentenary Lectures (Dublin, 1994), pp. 1–29. This writer is preparing an edition of Hincks’s extensive correspondence and unpublished papers. Renouf’s correspondence is equally voluminous, but little of it has been published. Some of Renouf’s letters to Hincks are in Davidson, pp. 110–11, 115–16, 126–7, 223–4, 243. See also W.H. Rylands, G. Maspero and E. Naville (ed.), The Life-Work of Sir Peter le Page Renouf, 4 vols (Paris, 1902–7), esp. vol 4, pp. v–cxxxiii (a biography of Renouf, probably written by his daughter Edith). Permission to cite or refer to correspondence of Edward Hincks and Peter le Page Renouf was kindly given by Cambridge University Library, the Department of Western Antiquities at the British Museum, and the Griffith Institute, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

\(^5\) GIO/H 539. (GIO/H = Griffith Institute, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford: Hincks correspondence.)

\(^6\) GIO/H 542 (letter dated 29 August 1850).

\(^7\) “Sir G.C. Lewis on the Decipherment and Interpretation of Dead Languages”, Atlantis 4 (1863), pp. 23–57. In this article Renouf refers to Lewis’s An Historical Survey of the Astronomy of the Ancients (London, 1862). Note, however, that in the same year, Lewis also published Suggestions for the Application of the Egyptological Method to Modern History (London, 1862).