

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Bruce Kuklick.** *Puritans in Babylon: The Ancient Near East and American Intellectual Life, 1880-1930.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996. xii + 253 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-02582-7.

**Reviewed by** Clifford Wilcox (The Bolles School)

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In the late 1880s, a handful of scholars affiliated with the University of Pennsylvania launched the first American exploration of the ancient Near East. Americans were latecomers to this field, having been preceded by English and European explorers who had been excavating various sites in the Near East since the middle of the nineteenth century. The Penn expedition established an American presence in the field, nevertheless, and it marked the beginning of a serious commitment to Near Eastern studies within the American academy. In *Puritans in Babylon*, Bruce Kuklick traces the rise of American interest in the ancient Near East from the 1880s through 1920s and examines the institutional and intellectual consequences of this interest.

Kuklick begins by exploring the reasons that lay behind America's interest in Near Eastern studies in the late-nineteenth century. He argues that this interest arose largely in response to the negative influence of German "higher criticism" of the Bible. During the late-nineteenth century, the Bible served as almost the sole source of historical information on ancient Israel, Egypt, and Babylonia. The German higher critics challenged the veracity of the biblical narrative by using new techniques of literary criticism. Most American biblical scholars rushed to denounce liberal German scholarship and devoted their efforts to shoring up traditional interpretations of the Bible. These American scholars believed, furthermore, that they could refute the German higher critics if they could discover actual historical evidence to corroborate the biblical narrative. The Penn archaeological expedition to the Near East represented, Kuklick asserts, one of the very first missions undertaken to search for objective evidence to support the traditional reading of the Bible. Using manuscript sources in the archives of Penn's University Museum, Kuklick shows how William Pepper, provost of Penn during the 1880s, skillfully used the biblical defense issue to bring together a group of philanthropists, administrators, and scholars who proceeded to launch the first American expedition to conduct scholarly excavations in ancient Mesopotamia. Through his

handling of the challenge posed by the higher critics, Pepper secured major donations from wealthy philanthropists, established a program at Penn in Semitic languages for which he hired nationally-prominent professors, obtained funding for a museum to house archaeological artifacts, and launched the Babylonian Expedition Fund, a program that supported over the 1880s and 1890s four major archaeological explorations of ancient Babylonia.

In the first half of *Puritans in Babylon*, Kuklick focuses almost entirely on these institutional aspects of the development of Near Eastern studies in the American academy, particularly on developments at Penn. In the second half of his book, however, Kuklick shifts his focus to the intellectual aspects of this development. Here he explores the various motivations held by scholars attracted to the field, the constellation of academic disciplines constructed around inquiries into the archaeology and history of the ancient Near East, and the range of scholarship that developed across the American academy as Near Eastern studies emerged during the first decades of the twentieth century as a recognized field. Although many scholars, perhaps the majority in the field, entered Near Eastern studies in the late-nineteenth century with the intent of using academic scholarship to defend traditional Christian readings of the Bible, many also entered the field for other reasons.

Most prominent among those in Kuklick's account are the many Jews who entered the field during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The field offered Jews an important avenue in which they could apply knowledge of languages learned in a religious setting to secular studies. Moreover, this field offered Jewish scholars a path by which they might use knowledge of Hebrew as a wedge to gain entrance into the almost exclusively Protestant establishment of American higher education. Like many of the Christians who entered Near Eastern studies, many of the Jews held devout beliefs upon entry into the academy. Ironically, many of the

scholars who entered the field as believers—Christian and Jewish—came, through their investigations, to entertain grave doubts about the historical veracity of the Bible. In addition to exploring these social, intellectual, and religious factors that motivated the study of the ancient Near East, Kuklick also explores the efforts these students made to organize their growing body of knowledge. In particular, he discusses how Near Eastern studies had no clear fit into the matrix of formal disciplines and departments that emerged in American higher education during the late nineteenth century. As a result, extra-departmental structures, such as interdisciplinary institutes, became an important form of organization that lent unity and structure to the expanding enterprise of Near Eastern studies. Kuklick's concluding chapters were for this reviewer the most interesting part of his book.

In his last three chapters, Kuklick explores the intellectual contributions made by American students of the ancient Near East during the 1880s through 1930s. Especially interesting is his discussion of the advances made in the 1930s through study of the many clay tablets found by the Penn excavators during the 1890s. He concludes with a discussion of the "Orientalists and their civilizations" and ultimately leads the reader to see how both generations of American scholars viewed the study of the ancient Near East to be central to the project of constructing Western identity. In short, Kuklick has written a provocative and useful book that should be read with interest by intellectual historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and historians of higher education, religion, and the social sciences. The book transcends disciplinary lines and addresses scholarly developments from a broad social, intellectual, and disciplinary perspective.

However, although Kuklick has succeeded in offering a challenging and provocative view of the development of Near Eastern studies in America from the 1880s through 1930s, his book is not without limitations. Most obvious is the brevity of the work. Kuklick raises a host of fascinating issues in this book—too many for him to pursue in adequate detail in a volume of only two hundred pages. His discussions of such issues as the problems archaeologists faced in being located midway between museums and academic departments, the intellectual and spiritual motivations of the first generation of American students of the ancient Near East, anti-Semitism in the field of Near Eastern studies, and the development of the history of civilizations as an interdisciplinary field of study in the 1920s and 1930s are all fascinating and provocative. Unfortunately, he does not pursue these issues in adequate detail. Moreover, his account lacks balance. He devotes too much attention to the Penn expeditions to Nippur and not enough attention to efforts undertaken in the field by other major American universities.

Kuklick has provided us, nevertheless, with an engaging and stimulating account of a central development in American higher education. He has not only offered a valuable examination of the early development of American Near Eastern studies, but also he has clearly defined the central issues associated with this development, issues that will necessarily need to be engaged by all subsequent scholars who explore this topic.

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