

Assur is King of Persia

Illustrations of the Book of Esther in Some Nineteenth-Century Sources

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Abstract

The marriage of archaeological referencing and picture Bibles in the nineteenth century resulted in an astonishing variety of guises worn by the court of Ahasuerus in Esther. Following the exhibition of Neo-Assyrian sculpture in the British Museum and the wide circulation of such images in various John Murray publications, British illustrators like Henry Anelay defaulted to Assyrian models for kings and rulers in the Old Testament, including the principal actors in Esther, even though authentic Achaemenid Persian art had been available for illustrative pastiche for decades. This curious adoptive choice echoed British national pride in its splendid British Museum collection and imperial adventures in the Middle East.

Ancient Persia in the Canon of Nineteenth-Century Illustrations

[1] The nineteenth century spans the rise of the biblical archaeology movement and the assimilation of ancient Persian and Assyro-Babylonian iconography into the *erewhon*-world of biblical illustration. It was also the period when older orientalist tropes of the unchanging east – sensual, despotic, primitive, doomed – would take flight in illusorily realist academic paintings narrating the exotic stories that westerners expected of the Middle East. Illustrations of the Bible, a signal force within the stream of historicist artworks, were themselves products of western fantasies about the mysterious Orient and should be placed in context.

[2] Early nineteenth-century illustrators of the Bible had access to a surprising variety of ancient Near Eastern visual sources through plates in travelogues, such as Carsten Niebuhr, *Reisebeschreibung nach Arabien und andern umliegenden Ländern* (1774), and specifically antiquarian works, notably the *Description de l'Égypte* (1809), presenting the Napoleonic survey of Egypt. *Joseph Supplying Corn from the Egyptian Store-Houses*, a woodcut from the 1846 *Illuminated Bible*,

attests to the exploitation of Egyptian motifs by nineteenth-century Bible illustrators; notice the Egyptianizing headdresses, lotus columns, and obelisk with pseudo-hieroglyphs (Figure 1). Persian relief scenes had been published in Europe in poorly executed line drawings since the seventeenth century; the English traveler Robert Ker Porter (1821-1822) assembled these drawings of the same relief scene by John Chardin (1674), Cornelis de Bruyn (1704), and Carsten Niebuhr (1765) (Figure 2). Compare the excellent engravings after sketches by Ker Porter himself (Figure 3). Certainly by the 1820s, European and American Bible illustrators, bent on fastidious archaeological referencing, enjoyed ready access to reproductions of artworks from Achaemenid Persia.



Figure 1. *Joseph Supplying Corn from the Egyptian Store-Houses*, in *Illuminated Bible*. 49.

The Illustrated Esther, with and without Archaeological Referencing

[3] Theodore Chassériau (1819-1856) was a disciple of the French academic artist Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780-1867). Chassériau painted biblical, classical, literary, and orientalist themes. He entered Ingres's studio at the age of 11; five years later he gained immediate recognition with the exhibition of his *Caïn maudit* and *Return of the Prodigal* (Ribner). After a visit to Algeria in the 1840s, he emphasized the exotic, romantic elements in his painting, while still adhering to classical techniques (Rosenthal). *La toilette d'Esther* (1841), now part of the Louvre collection, stands squarely in the French Orientalist tradition. The blond hair and Caucasian fairness of Esther's nubile adolescent body contrasts with the sketchily drawn women of color behind, who provide unguents for her physical enhancement for the eyes of the king, to which we are voyeuristically privy. The bathing or exposure of a languid nude female body within the context of the Middle Eastern harem was, perhaps, the most popular trope within the male canon of Orientalist art themes. That the workings of the "house of women" in Esther bore scant resemblance to the well-documented western (Ottoman imperial) harem prevented neither artist nor exegete from equating the two.¹

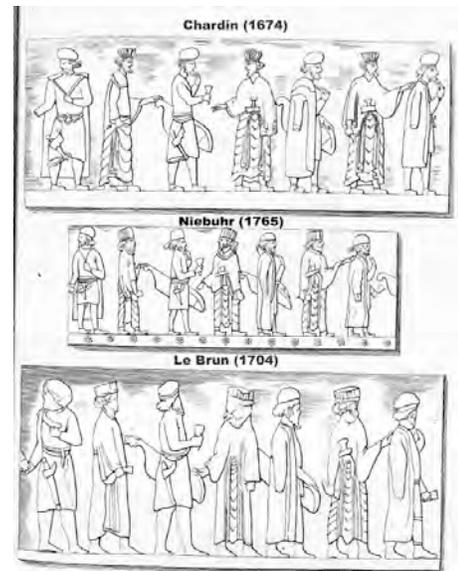


Figure 2. Sketches of Persepolis reliefs from Chardin (1674), Niebuhr (1765), and Le Brun (1704), in Porter: Plate 1:6.

¹ Elna K. Solvang has argued persuasively that the "house of women" in Esther lacks all of the major internal procedural and hierarchical institutions that defined the Ottoman imperial harem, its implicit model.

[4] Early in his career, the French artist James Jacques Joseph Tissot (1836-1902) painted historical costume pieces, but around 1864 he turned to scenes of contemporary life, usually involving fashionable society women. Following his involvement in the Paris Commune (1871) he took refuge in London, where he lived from 1871 to 1882 and became enormously successful. Tissot's numerous oil paintings of stylish London women in elegant settings made him one of the chief visual scribes of Victorian West End highlife. In 1888 he underwent a self-styled religious conversion when he entered a church to "catch the atmosphere for a picture," and thereafter devoted himself to religious subjects. He visited the Holy Land in 1886-1887 and again in 1889, and his illustrations of biblical events were hugely popular, both in book form and when the original drawings were exhibited (Misfeldt). Many of his paintings of Old Testament subjects, unfinished when he died, were completed by other artists, a fact that accounts for the unevenness in execution.

[5] Tissot composed seven illustrations for the Book of Esther. The monochrome aquarelle *Esther Presented to Abasuerus* exemplifies his flair for orientalizing pastiche, as he draws on Egyptian, Persian, Mesopotamian, and Ottoman motifs in his creation of a fantastic Persian court (Figure 4). The heavy-lidded Esther, whose fully-illuminated calm face contrasts with the deference of her maids-in-waiting and the bored gaze of the lad, is as much in command of the situation as the aristocratic doyens of London high society that Tissot painted with effortless *éclair*.

[6] Turning from portrait to composite illustrations in Esther, we consider Julius Schnorr von Carlosfeld (1794-1872), German religious and historical painter and draftsman. In 1817 he went to Rome and joined the Nazarenes, a group of German Catholic artists. In 1827 he was summoned by King Ludwig I of Bavaria to Munich, where he became professor and later director of the academy and decorated the Königsbau in the Munich Residenz with his *Nibelungen* frescoes. Schnorr is best known for his vigorous drawings for 240 Bible illustrations, *Das Buch der Bücher in Bildern* (1851-1860). Clearly inspired by old German and Netherlandish masterpieces of the engraver's art, Schnorr labored over his Bibel illustrations for better than 30 years



Figure 3. Sketch of Persepolis relief scene, in Porter: Plate 1:37.



Figure 4. *Esther Presented to Abasuerus* (*Esther* 2:16), in Tissot: 2:547.

(Andrews). *Esther wird von Abasveros zur Königin erwählt* draws on Renaissance and German revival conceits of royalty, but is wholly innocent of ancient Near Eastern flourishes (Figure 5). *Mardochai wird zu hohen Ehren erhoben*, in contrast, inaugurates a veritable deluge of Esther illustrations that utilize Neo-Assyrian motifs (Figure 6). The French and British excavations in Ottoman Mesopotamia radically transformed the western visual imagination of high antiquity, beginning with physical accessions to the Louvre and the British Museum in 1847 and the mass-marketing of line-drawing representations of palace reliefs in John Murray publications in 1849. The sensation caused by the recovery of the Bible-kingdom of Assyria in Victorian England is difficult for a modern audience to grasp, surfeited as we are with 160 years'-worth of graphic reproductions and originals in museums scattered across the globe. At the end of the 1840s, however, when Julius Schnorr engraved *Mardochai wird zu hohen Ehren erhoben*, Assyrian horse-trappings from the palace of Sennacherib, strikingly novel as they were, evidently possessed enough intrinsic "brand-recognition" to warrant inclusion in biblical Persia (Figure 7). Schnorr exploited Assyrian visual cues more aggressively in *Sanberib's Macht wird auf Hiskias Gebet gebrochen*, with Assyrianizing weapons, chariots, and royal tiara (Figure 8).



Figure 5. *Esther wird von Abasveros zur Königin erwählt*, in Schnorr von Carlosfeld: unnumbered plate.



Figure 6. *Mardochai wird zu hohen Ehren erhoben*, in Schnorr von Carlosfeld: unnumbered plate.

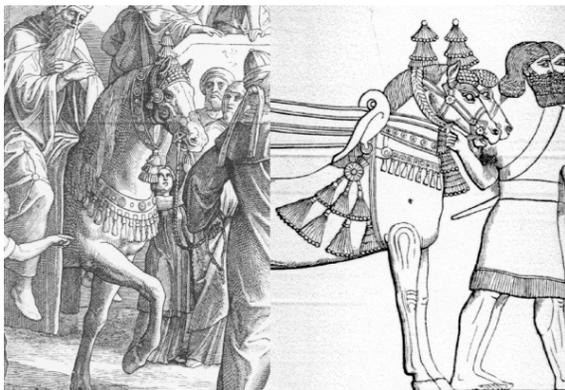


Figure 7. Neo-Assyrian harness-model for *Mardochai wird zu hohen Ehren erhoben*, in Schnorr von Carlosfeld: unnumbered plate; Layard 1849a: 2:356.



Figure 8. *Sanberib's Macht wird auf Hiskias Gebet gebrochen*, in Schnorr von Carlosfeld: unnumbered plate.

Esther, Ahasuerus & Co. in Nineveh

[7] The floodgates were opened but the foundations did not totter. Henry Anelay (1817-1883), a minor Victorian landscape painter and illustrator, worked for the *Illustrated London News* from 1843-1855, and may have been sent to Constantinople for the paper in 1853 to cover the Crimean War. A versatile illustrator, he created woodcuts for children's books, Gothic horror tales like *Wagner the Wehr-Wolf* by G. W. M. Reynolds, an illustrated church fathers, and a British edition of the ever-popular *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Chatto, Jackson, and Bohn: *575; Houfe: 48). The following engravings by Anelay can be securely dated to 1859-1863, the years in which the oft-reprinted *Cassell's Illustrated Family Bible* first appeared in 211 weekly fascicles. John Cassell and partners² commissioned some 100 illustrators and engravers for the creation of over 900 woodcuts for his ambitious picture Bible, a large number of which are signed.³ Although Anelay may have worked from the John Murray engravings in Austen Henry Layard's publications (1849a, 1849b, 1853a, 1853b), it was very common for



Figure 9. *Reading the Book of the Records before Ahasuerus*, in Cassell: 593.

² John Cassell (1817-1865), autodidact publisher and social reformer, rose from humble origins to international prominence as the founder of the Cassell line of illustrated books, newspapers and magazines. Won over to the temperance movement at an early age, he stumped for the National Temperance Society and sold tea in shilling packets as a substitute for the hard drink affordable by the laboring classes. A shrewd businessman unafraid of innovation, Cassell learned to print his own beverage labels and advertising bills and took the logical next step by entering the publishing world with the *Teetotal Times* in 1846. Commercial success with his *The Illustrated Exhibitor, a Tribute to the World's Industrial Jubilee* of 1851 demonstrated the profitability of publications richly adorned with woodcuts, and many of his subsequent print products trumpeted the adjective "illustrated" in their titles. His acute instinct for combining amusement and earnest education for the disadvantaged was not matched with good bookkeeping, and his business, liabilities, and publishing name were purchased by the printers Thomas Dixon Galpin and George William Petter in 1854, though by 1858 Cassell had become a full partner to the latter. Having commissioned three Old Testament illustrations for the *Illustrated Family Bible* from a French artist little known in England, Gustave Doré, Cassell and company reaped lasting fame and fortune by publishing Doré-illustrated versions of *Don Quixote*, Dante, the Bible, *La Fontaine*, *Croquemitaine*, *Baron Münchhausen*, *The Wandering Jew*, and a specially commissioned *Paradise Lost*. Inspired by the newly-prospected Pennsylvania oil fields, Cassell in his final years attempted without success to break into the fledgling petroleum industry. As of 2008, a reorganized version of the Cassell Illustrated publishing firm that John Cassell founded persists as part of the Octopus Publishing Group (Nowell-Smith: 3-66, 82-84; Mitchell; Flower: 50-59).

³ Billed in April 1859 as "The Greatest Enterprise of the Age," the first London edition of the *Illustrated Family Bible* cost Cassell £100,000 but sold 300,000 fascicle copies a week at 1 penny a fascicle (Nowell-Smith: 57). During his visit to America in 1859-1860, Cassell boasted that ten members of the Creek Indian tribe purchased subscriptions to the *Illustrated Family Bible*, and that "the Indians, both heathen and Christian, were delighted with the pictures" (quoted in Nowell-Smith: 58). An 1860 review of the American edition praised it both for the quality of the artwork as well as the cheapness of price: "Nobody who is in want of a family Bible is ever likely to have an opportunity of procuring one in which so much beauty is combined with so much use at so low a price, so good as Mr. Cassell now offers to the public" (Anonymous 1860: 3). The W. J. Holland & Co. edition is based on the first one published by Cassell, Petter and Galpin in London between 1859 and 1863. For an incomplete list of engravers and artists identified in this edition, see Maxted.

commercial and professional Victorian artists to take their sketchpads and easels into the British Museum and thereby impart authentic atmosphere to their productions from the originals. *Reading the Book of the Records before Ahasuerus* gives us an Assyrian king with square-cut beard and royal tiara resting on the pedestal to the left, attended by two eunuchs with flywhisks (Figure 9). A palace relief with the king is partially hidden by the smoking lampstands; the winged solar disk, understood by Layard and others as the symbol of Assur *par excellence*, figures both on the pedestal and behind the king as a shadowy outline. In the untitled frontispiece to the Book of Esther, Anelay depicts Mordecai in full royal Neo-Assyrian regalia, on a suitably caparisoned mount (Figure 10). Glowering Haman is almost as royal a figure as Mordecai; Assyrian helmeted and armed soldiers flank the tableau and look on inquisitively. *The Ancient Jews Celebrating the Feast of Purim* illustrates tippling Persian Jews in heavy square-cut beards and vaguely Assyrianizing robes (Figure 11). In the melodramatic *Mordecai at the King's Gate*, a massively princely Haman stands angered, complete with Assyrian sword sheathe with addorsed lions, and a plethora of identifiable palace reliefs (Figure 12). My favorite among these Anelay woodcuts is *Haman Discovered by Ahasuerus Pleading for his Life to Esther*, with Gilbert-and-Sullivan-esque stage tableau of furious Assyrian-attired Ahasuerus, horrified eunuchs, revolted Esther, and groveling Haman (Figure 13), replete with numerous identifiable Assyrian trappings on display in the British Museum.



Figure 10. Untitled frontispiece to the Book of Esther, in Cassell: 587.

[8] The famous *Dalziel's Bible Gallery*, published in 1881 but incorporating wood cuts commissioned over a 20-year span, contains many remarkable Assyrianizing renditions of Old Testament scenes created by artists working from British Museum originals, including the Pre-Raphaelite William Holman Hunt and the Royal Academy historical painter Sir Edward John Poynter (De Freitas; Inglis; Esposito). The Brothers Dalziel hired Edward Frederick Bawcutt (1846-1902) to illustrate *Haman Supplicating Esther*, notice Ahasuerus in Assyrian garb in the arras, breathing threatenings and slaughter (Figure 14) (Houfe: 73; White: 36, 70, 146; Fenwick). The chamber walls bear outlines of Neo-Assyrian bas-reliefs, while the end-table by the couch and the couch itself were clearly modeled after the Assurbanipal banquet scene in the British Museum.



Figure 11. *The Ancient Jews Celebrating the Feast of Purim*, in Cassell: 597.



Figure 12. *Mordecai at the King's Gate*, in Cassell: 590.



Figure 13. *Haman Discovered by Ahasuerus Pleading for his Life to Esther*, in Cassell: 595.



Figure 14. *Haman Supplicating Esther*, in Dalziel: unnumbered plate.



Figure 15. Untitled frontispiece to the Book of Nehemiah, in Cassell: 569.

[9] Could not Victorian-era Bible illustrators pull off a convincing Persian pastiche? Of course they could; witness this frontispiece to the Book of Nehemiah (Figure 15) in the same *Cassell's Illustrated Family Bible* that showcased Henry Anelay's oeuvre.⁴ But for several years

⁴ The illustrator of the Nehemiah frontispiece, F. Philippoteau, was presumably French. The foreword to the 1859-1863 edition notes, "The numerous engravings have all been executed by eminent British and Foreign artists" (vii). Most of the illustrators hired by Cassell's were either British or French. John Cassell had for years purchased clichés (electros) in Paris as an inexpensive way of procuring illustrations (Nowell-Smith: 82). It is probably not coincidental that this unusually early nod to Achaemenid archaeological referencing, prepared for an Old Testament, was executed by a French and not a British artisan.

following the mass marketing of Assyrian artwork, Anglo-Saxon Bible illustrators defaulted to Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs for evocations of biblical kings, like *Solomon Conducting the Daughter of Pharaoh to the Palace* (Figure 16), *Artaxerxes Delivering his Letter to Ezra* (Figure 17), and even *Shaphan Reading the Book of the Law before Josiah* (Figure 18). To project a dominant image of ancient Near Eastern kingship into spaces where it clearly did not belong, by making the imaginary court of Ahasuerus sexier and more topical through Assyrianizing embellishments, incarnates a form of the western bias we identify as Orientalism. Comparable Orientalisms emerged in academic biblical commentaries at the same time; I am most conversant with scholarly efforts to identify Assyrian deities and cultus behind the idolatries of Manasseh and the Josianic purge, but there were, and continue to be, a host of misguided refractions of biblical narrative through the burning lens of Assyria (Holloway 2002: 1-50, 427-44).

[10] To be sure, Victorian illustrators were neither Assyriologists nor biblical scholars, but artists of the caliber of Henry Anelay read their Layard and Rawlinson closely, attended popular lectures, and labored for hours before original palace reliefs housed in the British Museum. For instance, in his remarks made at the Royal Academy dinner of 29 April 1865, Philip Stanhope, the Fifth Earl Stanhope (1805-1875), observed,

The accessories and appurtenances to this banquet given by Esther [in a painting by Edward Armitage], are in style accordant with the florid description of the sacred chronicler, and consonant with the remains of Assyrian magnificence which recent researches have brought to light. The bas-reliefs which cover the walls of the palace of Ahasuerus at Shushan, were probably, as here represented, similar to the mural carvings found generally on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates. Mr. Armitage has thus wisely fallen in with the prevailing realistic treatment of history (Anonymous 1865: 163).

[11] The visual idiom they created on the fly incorporated contemporary developments in Assyriology and biblical studies; indeed, their powerful graphic images of biblical narrative, reproduced in countless illustrated Bibles,



Figure 16. *Solomon Conducting the Daughter of Pharaoh to the Palace*, in Cassell: 521.



Figure 17. *Artaxerxes Delivering his Letter to Ezra*, in Cobbin and Goodspeed: 463.



Figure 18. *Shaphan Reading the Book of the Law before Josiah*, in Cassell: 550.

Bible histories, and streaming miles of devotional literature, were themselves a potent reinforcement of the Orientalist tradition that mediated between popular audiences and the biblical studies guild.

[12] Unlike France, England's archaeological exploits in the territory today encompassed by Iraq early on inspired a popular enthusiasm for things Assyrian that acquired a nationalistic fervor of remarkable proportions. For example, at high noon in the Guildhall of the City of London, 10 February 1854, the archaeologist Austen Henry Layard was awarded the "Freedom of the City Of London," a seldom bestowed honor comparable to the stateside granting of the keys of the city. The decision to distinguish Layard thus was reached a year before, when a magnificent casket modeled on Neo-Assyrian motifs was commissioned by the jewel-smith John S. Hunt from drawings prepared by his brother, the sculptor Alfred Hunt, one of the earliest modern adaptations of Assyrian artwork. The dedication by the Mayor of London was engraved on the lid's interior:

It was resolved unanimously that the Freedom of this City, In a Box of the value of fifty guineas, be presented to Austen Henry Layard, as a testimonial of his persevering & zealous exertions in the discovery of the long lost Remains of Eastern Antiquity, & for securing them in so perfect a state as to demonstrate the Accuracy of Sacred History, & illustrate the early habits of the Human Race, & for his indefatigable labour by which this Country has been enabled to place such valuable memorials of ancient grandeur amongst the collections of the British Museum.

[13] The keynote address by the Chamberlain acknowledges the importance of Layard's work in adding pages to the scroll of secular history, but belabored the point that its chief significance lay in confirming the truth of Scripture. Layard, intent on a parliamentary career, adroitly gauged his audience by amplifying the same theme:

I could not doubt that every spadeful of earth which was removed from those vast remains would tend to confirm the truth of prophecy and to illustrate the meaning of Scripture. But who could have believed that records themselves should have been found which, as to the minuteness of their details and the wonderful accuracy of their statements, should confirm, almost word for word, the very text of Scripture?⁵

[14] Layard's subsequent career as a Member of Parliament, Government Minister, Consular General, and art expert never eclipsed his enduring popularity as benefactor-in-chief of the British Museum's Assyrian sculpture collection, as demonstrated by cartoons from *Punch* that, from 1855 to 1878, juxtapose "The Member for Nineveh," with an animated Assyrian

⁵ Text of the speeches are printed in Anonymous 1854a. On the casket itself, see Anonymous 1854b, which includes the text of the Lord Mayor's dedication. The casket was donated to the British Museum in 1976 by Layard's great-granddaughter Phyllis Layard; descriptions of the artisans involved in its manufacture, with plates, accompany (Rudoe 1987: 224, pls. 45-48; 1991: 57-59, cat. no. 15-16). The secondary literature often confuses the date on which the resolution to award Layard the Freedom of the City of London was passed, March 1853, with the ceremony of bestowal, 10 February 1854.

human-headed bull, often melded with the features of iconic John Bull.⁶ The eclipse of biblical Persia by Neo-Assyrian iconography in the Bible illustrations of Henry Anelay and others stems from the same nationalistic indexing that lionized Layard's successes against his French counterparts, not to mention the despised Turk, and found in the relics of the ancient Assyrian capital cities welcome scriptural confirmation in the face of geological and rationalist challenges to biblical inerrancy (Holloway 2001a, 2001b; Bohrer 2003: 98-223).



Figure 19. *Queen Vashti Refusing to Obey the Commands of Ahasuerus*, in Doré: 134.

[15] Gustave Doré (1832-83), the most popular and successful French book illustrator of the mid-nineteenth century, gained notoriety for his illustrations to such books as *Dante's Inferno* (1861), *Don Quixote* (1862), and the *Bible* (1866). The financial success of the Doré Bible and of a major London exhibition in 1867 led to the foundation of the Doré Gallery in New Bond Street, which received about 2.5 million visitors before its closing in 1892. His later work included *Paradise Lost*, *The Idylls of the King*, and *The Works of Thomas Hood*; his artwork also graced the *Illustrated London News* (Chazal; Kerr). *Queen Vashti Refusing to Obey the Commands of Ahasuerus* clothes the *dramatis personae* in vaguely Persian garments, and uses Assyrian winged human-headed bulls as exotic enhancements (Figure 19). Indeed, most of Doré's illustrations of biblical Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia exploit the instant-recognition value of the Assyrian human-headed bulls as a visual device for communicating a *mis-en-scène* east of the Euphrates.

Triumph of Assyria over Persia at the Royal Academy

[16] This survey of Esther illustrations concludes with Ernest Normand (1857-1923), a largely forgotten British Orientalist painter. Normand's paintings that are known to me, *The Bitter Draught of Slavery* (1885), *Pygmalion and Galatea* (1886), *Esther Denouncing Haman to King Ahasuerus*, (1888), *Vashti Deposed* (1890), *Bondage* (1895), and *Pandora* (1899) suggest that this artist, who fancied oversized canvasses populated with nude and shackled women, would have felt at home in the contemporary BDSM community.

[17] *Esther Denouncing Haman to King Ahasuerus* is the ultimate painterly triumph of ancient Assyria over Persia (reproduced in Bernard: 112; also online in the Tyne and Wear Museums' Collection). There is scarcely an item in this confection without an echo of the Assyrian palace reliefs save for the classicizing marble floor and floral swags. Both Haman and the king sport lush Assyrian beards and tresses, are swathed in blazing robes whose fabric

⁶ Layard as Assyrian winged bull, challenging PM Palmerston with the disasters of the Crimean War (*Punch*, 19 May 1855); Layard, the House of Commons "Member for Nineveh" exhumes an Assyrianized John Bull, the British equivalent of American Uncle Sam, from political graft and waste (7 April 1855); Ambassador Layard enters Madrid, triumphantly riding John Bull (9 November 1869); and a diplomatic gaffe by Ambassador Layard in Constantinople inspired a "Nineveh Bull in a Turkish China-Cabinet" *Punch* cartoon (2 March 1878).

designs closely mimic the Assyrian king reliefs, and sit on furniture that painstakingly reproduces Assyrian originals. No fewer than four human-headed winged bulls grace the picture: three polychrome renditions flank the gate leading into the garden courtyard, and one splendid example in ebony with golden hooves and polos supports the armrest of Haman's chair. The choreography is camp melodrama: the denunciatory Esther, possessed of exaggerated Jewish features, dutifully bending her knees before her liege-lord, hurtles an invisible bolt of doom that Haman futilely tries to ward off. The stupid king knits his brow in dawning consternation, while the servants gossip knowingly among themselves. With Egyptian fan-bearer in fetching animal skin and a nude African servant kneeling on an Oriental carpet, this painting utterly overwhelms the biblical narrative with a fantasy world that masterfully corroborates our every expectation of Oriental luxury, sensuality, and murderous despotic power.

[18] The Book of Esther embodies fantasies about Persian court life through its cast of stock fairy-tale characters, high-stakes court intrigue, and impossible house of women. As such, nineteenth-century artists could take vast liberties with the *dramatis personae*, modeling them on idealized European royalty, the contemporary Ottoman Empire, or a bricolage of ancient Near Eastern inspiration. Beginning in the 1850s, British Bible illustrators of Esther tended to default to striking Neo-Assyrian visual motifs on display at the British Museum or widely circulated in John Murray publications, despite the ready availability of drawings of authentic Achaemenid imperial sculpture. Much of the impulse behind this curious choice stemmed from popular nationalistic identification with "ancient Assyria," tied to the heavily-publicized acquisition of original pieces by the British Museum and the adventurous exploits that Layard masterfully fashioned in his travelogues, the archaeological best-sellers of the Victorian age. A Protestant country beset by scientific and rationalist challenges to comfortable historicist assumptions about biblical narrative found a champion in the royal inscriptions from Assyria that, at first blush, seemed poised to carry off the skeptics in a torrent of unassailable proofs. The doubts would reemerge, but the cash value of Assyrian visual motifs for boosting picture Bible sales persists to this day in lands touched by Anglo-Saxon Protestantism.

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