

Dr. Donald Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Lecture 20, Demise of Assyria

© 2024 Don Fowler and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. Don Fowler in his teaching on Old Testament backgrounds. This is session 20, Demise of Assyria.

I remember a saying from the great Chicago Bear football coach Mike Ditka who said something about throwing away nickels like they're manhole covers.

I kind of turned that into a saying that I use a lot. When you're going through these empires like we're doing, it isn't like we're doing this from 40,000 feet. It looks more like we're actually on the moon looking at the earth.

That's how far removed we are. But what you sort of do in Old Testament studies is you throw centuries around. You throw centuries around like they're nickels.

We're talking centuries that we're dealing with, and we just focus on a couple of small, or not a couple, small things. We just focus on a couple of things. And this is the problem with the Old Testament, or one of the problems because it covers so much territory.

My goodness, it is next to impossible to do justice to it. And no matter how many credit hours somebody gave me, I theoretically would need more. So that's where we're at.

But we are going to put paid to the Assyrian Empire in this video and probably begin the Neo-Babylonian Empire. So, let's turn our attention back to Sennacherib. Sennacherib met with a rebellion in the West, and so he became famous in the pages of the Bible because of this.

So, in the West, he came south and removed the usurper Meredith Baladan, which we had talked about. And then we're ready to look at this campaign to the West, which has elicited much controversy. And the reason for it is, in part, because the Bible records the campaign of Sennacherib, and then we have Sennacherib's account of the campaign.

They're a little bit different from one another, which makes it difficult to know exactly how to interface these two accounts of his campaign against Judah, the southern kingdom. Earlier, Hezekiah had been asked to join this rebellion against Sargon, but he had wisely refused. Now, against the council of Isaiah, he joined a coalition led by Tyre in Egypt, which included Byblos, Arpad, Moab, Edom, Ammon, and Ashkelon.

Well, that's a lot of names that we have listed there, but only a couple of kingdoms. Most of them are just cities. So, this was not a particularly impressive coalition.

One can't help but wonder, what was going through Hezekiah's mind? The Assyrians had never really been defeated, and in fact, they had rarely ever lost a battle. I mean, they did lose some, but when they lost a battle, it was noteworthy, let alone defeating them. So, because of that, you find yourself saying, what was Hezekiah thinking of? Now, Isaiah was a great king.

When you look at the map, you know, I keep talking about the mistake of trying to read the headlines on the front page, but the only favorable headline I can see is that the Assyrian kings were making fewer military campaigns. Maybe they were making fewer military campaigns because there were fewer revolts. But I'm at a loss to tell you in any meaningful way; I'm at a loss to try to pull something out of my head that would explain why Hezekiah would revolt.

He has enough freedom that he would have been so much smarter to have just waited to see if the Assyrian Empire would crash, but instead, he was tempted. He gave in to temptation, and he revolted, and as they say, the rest is history. So, this coalition, and by the way, it might sound impressive when you've got Egypt on your side, but it's exactly like Isaiah said. Egypt is like a reed, you know, a sharp wooden reed that grows in the Nile area.

If you put your hand on the reed and you lean, it will simply pierce right through your hand. So, Egypt might look like something you could lean on, but Isaiah warned him that this would just pierce you, and of course, that's exactly what happened. So, I guess what I can say about Hezekiah is what I can say about the rest of us.

You can be godly and dumb. This was a really dumb move. So, he revolts, and when Padi, who is the king of Ekron, Ekron is one of those Philistine cities, when Padi refused to join the coalition, Hezekiah had him removed.

So, let's see if I can pull up where there it is. Alright, so here is, Ekron is not on our map here, amazingly, but Ekron would be down here in this general area like this, and so Hezekiah tries to force this relatively insignificant king, he tries to force him to join the coalition, and so Poti refuses to join, and so Hezekiah has him removed, and this appeared to be the event that brought Sennacherib to the west. However, after Tyre fell, Hezekiah was nearly alone in choosing resistance.

So, here's what I want to make the point then: here is Tyre, and so Tyre was one of the participants in this rebellion, and so we had this coalition. It reminds me of some stunts that we pulled when I was a high school kid, and you know, you and your buddies, you're going to make mischief, and then you start down making mischief,

and then something happens, and you look around, and your idea of making mischief is such that you're all by yourself, and all the other wannabe mischief makers have fled. Well, that's what happened here; when this coalition started out, there were a number of cities, and no sooner did Tyre fall than everybody pulled out except for the Egyptians. Well, of course, the Egyptians are not the Egyptians we know from the past; they're not that strong and powerful.

So, in essence, Hezekiah almost immediately finds himself between the proverbial rock and a hard place. So, he brings his army to the west, and Hezekiah was nearly alone, probably after defeating the Egyptians in the plain, Sennacherib then moved to the east. So, here's where I'm trying to describe something to you that's just a little confusing, but it goes like this.

We have a relatively good idea of how he would have moved his army. He would not have moved his army like this, but he did move his army over here until he captured Tyre. But probably the main body of the Assyrian army, the main body probably traveled just like this, and then made its way south like this, and then came right about here.

Now, you can't tell from this map because it's not very topographical, but there's a mountain range that runs just like this. And so, it was at this point that Sennacherib, as he's going to defeat or try to defeat Israel, makes a choice. Does he send his main body like this because there is a ridge route that runs north-south? Try not to think of Interstate 80, but there is a ridge route that runs north-south.

Did Sennacherib split his army or send his main army like this? Or did he send part of his army like this and send his main army like this down along the coast? Well, what we know from the records is that he fought a major battle against the Egyptians on the coast at a place called El Teka. So, it was down here, and so very likely when Sennacherib invaded, what he did is brought his army south like this, sent part of his army up to besiege Jerusalem, here, put it under his commander, the Rabshakeh, and then he himself went with his army down here and defeated the Egyptians. Well, now everybody in the coalition is gone, and Hezekiah is standing all by himself.

The entire Assyrian army is here, and they're going to make their way up to Jerusalem like this. Jerusalem can be gotten to by several different paths, but if you are somewhere in this region here, you're going to get to Jerusalem, which is here, by coming north like this, and then there's a ridge called the Beit Horon Ridge, which you would then march up to, and then come down to Jerusalem. So, the Rabshakeh has part of Sennacherib's army besieging Jerusalem, and that's where we enter into the account with Hezekiah in chapter 6, verse 36.

So, I'm going to read to you from Isaiah's account. It came about in the 14th year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah, and he seized them. That was anticlimactic.

He doesn't tell us that Hezekiah brought this on himself. He just tells us that he came and seized them. And so in verse 2, the king of Assyria sent Rabshakeh from Lachish to Jerusalem to King Hezekiah with a large army, and he stood by the conduit of the upper pool on the highway of the fuller's field.

Then Eliakim, the son of Hezekiah, who was over the household, and Sheba Shebna the scribe, and Joach, the son of Asaph the recorder, came out to them, and the Rabshakeh then makes a long speech. So, in this long speech, Hezekiah is inside Jerusalem, right here. The Rabshakeh has a fairly large part of the army up there with him, and the Rabshakeh begins to speak to the and so now what we have is one of the rarest of rarities in the Old Testament.

We have a speech made by a foreign king who is besieging Jerusalem, and we have the record of his speech. It's absolutely amazing. We have it not just here but also in 2 Kings 18 and 19.

It's a synoptic account. So, I hope I won't bore you, but I'm going to take time to read a little bit of his speech. So, the Rabshakeh says to them, and they're inside, say now to Hezekiah, thus says the great king, the king of Assyria, what is this confidence that you have? I say your counsel and strength for the war are only empty words.

Now on whom do you rely that you rebelled against me? In other words, by this stage, Hezekiah is all by himself. So, the Rabshakeh is making fun of him. Call all your allies.

Well, there aren't any. So, behold, you rely on the staff of this crushed reed, even on Egypt, on which if a man leans, it will go into his hand and pierce it. So is Pharaoh, king of Egypt, on whom you rely.

Well, he's already been defeated. So, if you say to me, we trust in our God, is it not he whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah has taken away and has said to Judah and Jerusalem, you shall worship before this altar? Now, therefore, come and make a bargain with my master, the king of Assyria, and I'll give you 2,000 horses if you can find people to ride them. He's taunting Hezekiah because the Assyrian army is incredibly powerful, and Hezekiah is all by himself.

How, then, can you repulse one official of the least of my master's servants and rely on Egypt for chariots and horsemen? Now, I have come up without Japheth's approval against this land to destroy it. Japheth said to me, go up against this land

and destroy it. Well, okay, let me tell you what's going on in the passage because what it is, it's a case of propaganda.

The Rabshakeh is engaging in propaganda. The people inside the city of Jerusalem, and especially those on the wall, can hear his propaganda, and so he's taunting Hezekiah about his impossible military predicament. To put it like this, by all the annals of warfare one can imagine, Hezekiah has no chance.

There is no way that Hezekiah can defeat the Assyrians militarily. So with this, in verse 13, Rabshakeh stood and cried out with a loud voice in Judean, he knew Hebrew of all things, and listen to the Rabshakeh's blasphemous speech. Hear the words of the great king, the king of Assyria.

Thus says the king, do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you. Nor let Hezekiah make you trust in Japheth, saying the Lord will surely deliver us. This city shall not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.

Do not listen to Hezekiah, for thus says the king of Assyria, make your peace with me, and come out to me, and eat each of his vine and each of his fig trees, and drink each of the waters of his own cistern, until I come and take you away to a new land like your own land. Remember that Sennacherib deported 500,000 people. Beware lest Hezekiah mislead you, saying the Lord will deliver us.

And then he asks a question for which there is no answer that you can give. Has any of the gods of the nations delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamat and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sefer Valim? And when have they delivered Samaria, that is, the northern kingdom, from my hand? Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered their land from my hand, that Japheth should deliver Jerusalem from my hand? Well, what the Sennacherib is doing is he's conducting very powerful propaganda because he's saying to Hezekiah and the Judeans, why do you think you have a chance? Walk back with me for an entire century. Go back a century and a half.

Who has ever been successful against us and our gods? Has any god in all this time ever delivered his people from us? Hezekiah knows the answer to that. The answer is none. Not one kingdom, not one city, not one army, no one had ever actually beaten the Assyrians.

Now you might say, well, Ahab won at Qarqar. Well, we're making a distinction between a battle and a war. No one has ever, ever won a war against Assyria.

So, the Rabshakeh is outside the walls taunting Hezekiah, and Hezekiah's own foolishness has gotten him into this predicament. So, the text tells us in verse 24,

inside the city wall, they were all just silent. No one can say anything because there's nothing to say.

Well, when they come inside the city wall, we read in chapter 37 that when Hezekiah heard it, he tore his clothes, covered himself with sackcloth, and entered the house of Japheth. Then he sent Eliakim, who was over the household, with Shebna the scribe and the elders of the priests, covered with sackcloth, to Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz. And they said to him, thus says Hezekiah, this day is a day of distress, rebuke, and rejection, for children have come to birth, but the mother is unable to deliver them.

Perhaps Japheth your God will hear the words of Rabshakeh, whom his master, the king of Assyria, has sent to reproach the living God, and will rebuke the words which the Lord your God has heard, therefore offer a prayer for the remnant that is left. So the servants of Hezekiah came to Isaiah, and Isaiah said to Hezekiah, Thus you shall say to your master, Thus says the Lord. That's wonderful, you know, the armies are outside, the blasphemies is a foot deep, but Isaiah says, Thus says the Lord.

The oracular words of a prophet. Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria blaspheme me. Behold, I will put a spirit in him so that he shall hear a rumor and return to his own land, and I will make him fall by the sword in his own land.

Well, here's what happened then. Following this event, during the night, the text tells us that the angel of the Lord killed 185,000 Assyrians. That's a lot of dead people.

I would suggest to you that the 185,000 is probably not much more than 30 or 40,000 soldiers, and the larger percentage of that number is about logistical personnel. It's extremely unlikely that the Assyrian army had 185,000 people, but during the night, the angel destroys both the army and the entire logistical support team, and in the morning, no one wakes up. Well, just like that, the Assyrians, for the first time, are completely devastated.

And so, with this in mind, we can see that God has delivered his city, Jerusalem. Hezekiah will, later on, surrender to the Assyrians because Hezekiah looks at the political situation and says something like this. God has destroyed the enemy army, but everyone knows how the Assyrians are, and it may take them three years, it may take them four years, but they are simply going to come back, so it is better to surrender and pay the tribute now than to have the army come back and destroy my city.

So, Hezekiah sends a tremendous amount of gold and silver talents. He sends to him this entire list, if you want to read the document, it's available to you in English

translation, in which the list of everything that Hezekiah sends is listed. He even sends into captivity, Hezekiah sends the temple musicians, he sends his daughters, he sends some of his wives, he sends an enormous amount of silver and gold, so that Hezekiah, in all frankness, Hezekiah sends the tribute that he would have sent if the city had been captured.

But by doing this, he can guarantee his personal safety, and for his country, he can guarantee that the Assyrians will not come back. By accepting the tribute, he does not come back. So, what are we to make of this whole very interesting story that I just alluded to? Well, what we can tell you is that this occurred in 701 BC, and we know it.

Isaiah wrote I will put a spirit of rumor in him, and he will go back to his own country, and there he will be assassinated. That has caused a lot of scholarly confusion about what's going on because, indeed, Sennacherib is assassinated, but he is not assassinated until 689. So, that has led to one of the more intriguing questions of the Assyrian period, and the question is, did Sennacherib come once against Jerusalem? We know he came in 701.

Did he come a second time in 689 or 690? Well, this is perhaps unanswerable, but it's just to tell you that when Isaiah wrote, I will put a spirit in him of rumor, and he will go back to his own land; it was 11 more years, 12 more years before Sennacherib was actually executed. So, that has caused people to think that maybe there were two campaigns of Sennacherib and not just one. So, Sennacherib returns to Babylon and ultimately is executed.

There are a couple of things that I would like to tell you about what has happened here that I think are noteworthy. The first of which is that God does deliver Jerusalem from the enemy. The city is besieged, there is no escape, there is no hope, but God delivers the city, and we ask the question, why does he do that? He didn't do it before, and he doesn't do it later, so why is he doing it here? Well, I have heard in the pulpit that it had to do with Hezekiah's prayer, that Hezekiah was a righteous man.

Well, he may have been foolish, but he was a righteous man. But in reality, I think the text is pretty clear that God delivered Jerusalem because of the sacrilegious, taunting, propagandistic statements of the Rabshakeh. God did not deliver Jerusalem because Hezekiah was so righteous.

He did not deliver Jerusalem because God couldn't bring Jerusalem to fall, couldn't bring himself to let Jerusalem fall. He did not deliver Jerusalem paradigmatically so that he could send to all subsequent generations the message that if you have faith, this is what God will do. He sent the message to the world's greatest empire that when you blaspheme Israel's God, Israel's God has the power to destroy you.

Unfortunately, this appears to have led to a catastrophically bad theology, which is called Zion theology. We know Zion theology. It's embodied in the phrases that we read in books like Micah and later in the Babylonian period.

Zion theology is built on the premise that Jerusalem is the home of Japheth, and he will never let Jerusalem fall to an enemy. Zion theology became a fixed part of Judean religion, and I think it's because it was misinterpreted. That is to say. They seem to have come to the conclusion that since Japheth had kept Jerusalem from falling this time, then Japheth was going to do the same on behalf of Jerusalem at all times.

They had a theology that argued this. It is the dwelling place of the Lord. It is the place where the temple is.

It is the place where the ark is, and as a result, it can never fall or be destroyed. Maybe that was part of Hezekiah's trouble.

Maybe Hezekiah was under the influence of the idea that he had been faithful to the Lord, and the Lord would have to be faithful to him. But in fact, Zion theology was cancer that ate away at the reality of God's presence with them until the very fall of Jerusalem, for at a much later date in the time period of the Neo-Babylonian period, they would revolt again in a circumstance eerily reminiscent of here, thinking that by revolting, they would force God's hand to deliver them in the time period of the Neo-Babylonian period in the same way that he did right here. So, this very powerful and important story in Isaiah 2 Kings 18 and 19 reminds us that Israel's presence in the land can end.

As a matter of fact, when you go back to Deuteronomy, and you read the curses, God says straightforwardly in those curses in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, he says straightforwardly I will expel you from your land if you are disobedient. So, this story, which is a bit confusing because we can't easily recreate the chronology of it and things like that, this story is a story to show to the Assyrians and to other subsequent readers that Israel's God is really the God who is in charge and that Israel only does what God, excuse me, Assyria only does what Israel's God lets him do. Isaiah wrote on behalf of God, Assyria is my rod.

That means God is trying to teach the world that Assyria may be the world's first hyperpower, but it belongs under the authority and power of Israel's God. Now, as for Hezekiah, Hezekiah is, unfortunately, both a godly king and a king who wants to control the affairs of the state. So, here's what happened as a result of his rebellion against the Assyrians.

He lost all those things that I told you about that you can go read. He also lost 46, Sennacherib tells us that he captured 46 walled cities. That's a lot of Judean cities that Hezekiah lost, 46 walled cities.

Sennacherib tells us that he took into captivity 200,000 Judeans. So, what that meant is this in practice. So, the purple area on the map is Judea.

What that meant is as a result of the invasion of Sennacherib because of the foolishness of Hezekiah, that was probably half the size following this catastrophic choice. At a later date, Hezekiah commits another spiritual indiscretion because the king of Babylon sends emissaries to Hezekiah. We read about it in the next chapter.

Hezekiah goes to the temple in Jerusalem, opens the temple, and shows the emissaries of Merodach-Baladan. He shows them the wealth of the temple. Almost certainly, what Hezekiah was doing was trying to forge another alliance.

This time with the Babylonians. And, of course, Hezekiah is judged for this one as well. So, I know it sounds easy to say and simple to say, but I will remind you, God warned them that a king like all the other nations around you means the king must not be an internationalist.

Twice, Hezekiah has formed alliances or tried to form alliances. Both times it has been a catastrophe. The king must not be a militarist.

That is, he must not rely on armies to fight his battles. So, Hezekiah, unfortunately, for all of his orthodoxy, for all of his godliness, Hezekiah is functioning all too much like a king, like all the other nations. All right, so one last thing before I let this go, because we have a very interesting account concerning the fall of the city of Lachish.

If you can see where my cursor is pointing, we're at a spot called Maresha, and that is also the area where we have the city of Lachish. Lachish, at this time period of Hezekiah, is the most important city in Jerusalem. Lachish guards the coastal plain, and it makes Hezekiah powerful because it can interdict, Lachish can interdict traffic along this road, it can guarantee revenue for the king.

Lachish is the greatest city in Jerusalem at this time. Naturally, Hezekiah put Lachish under siege, and so we have a picture here showing the siege of Lachish.

I'm not sure how much of this your eye can pick up on, but this is one segment of the battle relief. Sennacherib recorded this in his palace back in Assyria. Here is a Judean battlement tower.

At the top of the tower, we see a Judean archer shooting. We see them throwing strange-looking things that look a little bit like a cigarette or something like that.

These are actually bound pieces of stalks and burnable things that they're throwing down here because this is the siege engine.

They're trying to penetrate the walls of Lachish. So here is the Assyrian siege engine. Can you see how it looks? Here is the battering ram.

The battering ram is attacking the battle tower. They're trying to burn the siege engine. Here are the Judean women going into captivity.

This is taken from Sennacherib's palace, which celebrated the capture of Lachish. So, we have this picture making that point. Hezekiah lost the most important city of his empire to the Assyrians.

And so, all things considered, a king who is given a moderately fairly strong hand when he assumes the throne ends up with a greatly weakened hand because of his violation of the commands that God gave about not making international alliances. As for Sennacherib, in 689 he's murdered. He's murdered by two sons who are conspiring against him and want to become kings themselves.

So, friends, when you see in kingdoms, when you see kings removed by assassination, then you are looking at an empire or a kingdom that has troubles. It's not going to be much farther before we have the end of the Assyrian kingdom. So that will take us to Esarhaddon.

Sennacherib is assassinated by his sons. Esarhaddon is going to be the son who becomes the king, but he's not the heir apparent. He's actually the faithful son.

He won the throne after being exiled. Apparently, his first act was to rebuild Babylon. So Esarhaddon's brothers, who are older and want to be king, have forced him into exile.

After they have murdered their father, Esarhaddon comes out of exile, succeeds in defeating and killing these two sons, these two brothers I should say, and wins for himself the throne of Assyria. In his seventh year, he attempts to invade Egypt, but is unsuccessful. A ubiquitous Nubian means, of course, that Tirhakah was of a black Egyptian pharaoh coming from actually far south of Egypt.

Tirhakah is ubiquitous. He will be a thorn in the side of the Egyptians for some time. In his tenth year, however, he returned and conquered Memphis.

Several years later, he attempted to return as Tirhakah fomented rebellion, but died on the way. So, what we can read about is this. I'm not sure we can see it.

Here's the expansion of Esarhaddon. And what it means is this light blue, this light blue is the territory that Esarhaddon conquered. He succeeded in conquering northern Egypt, or in the Egyptian language, lower Egypt since the Nile flows to the north.

So, he succeeded in capturing Memphis. And for all practical purposes, look at the balloon. The balloon just looks like it's getting bigger and bigger.

As a matter of fact, you look at all this, and you think nothing can ever stop this nightmare of human existence as the empire simply continues to grow larger and larger. So, Esarhaddon does not rule for a long time. Here is a little bit of an example showing you how they moved these heavy pieces of rock that made up their world.

They developed a system of pulleys, and they wrapped them around these gigantic blocks, or in this case, a winged bull. And they could move these gigantic, very heavy items through block and tackle and move them and create large structures. There's a lot of mythology that I read as I hear about the construction of the pyramids.

People talk about the pyramids because the stones were just so big. They must have had help from outer space. So, we're not that far from the pyramids, but as I show it to you, it may not be outer space. It's just block and tackle.

But they could move very large items, including these very large blocks that you see right here, which were also moved. So, the ancients were very ingenious in how they could make their world work for them. Well, here we are.

The last great Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal. As you can see, he has a long reign. He rules from 668 to 627.

He has a long reign, and he looks like he's successful because when you look at the map, it just looks like nothing will ever end this nightmare. Look at the dark blue. There's some debate about whether Ashurbanipal added Elam or whether Esarhaddon did.

I prefer to argue that Ashurbanipal added Elam to his empire, but notice Elam has been added and then Egypt. I did that incorrectly. Excuse me, I forgot that.

Let's go back up here and take a look. He added Egypt to the empire. And so now, if I could just say for the sake of drama, here's the last great Assyrian king.

The nightmare continues. It looks like it can never end. And look what happens.

In the last great Assyrian king, the empire is at its greatest, the last greatest. Elam, which is the oldest surviving empire, is added to the Assyrian empire. It loses its independence.

Egypt, the longest-lived empire of all of antiquity, lasted nearly 3,000 years. Egypt is now added to the empire. Look at the map. Not only all of the Fertile Crescent and Anatolia but all of Egypt as well.

The balloon has an actuality. The balloon has reached its greatest extension. In a relatively short period of time, the balloon is going to explode.

And then, within a decade, it's all gone. This monolith, this horrifying conglomeration of violence and paganism, will be gone so suddenly that it could not be imagined. So, we will look at the reign of Ashurbanipal.

He is the last great Assyrian king, and so we will look at his reign. He made nine military – by the way, in Ezra 4:10, he's referred to as Osnappar. Can you see this? It makes for kind of a funny word in English, but it reminds us that these names were not always easy to transfer into the native language.

Thus, for example, the Greeks came up with Sardanapolis for Ashurbanipal. So, it's almost pretty funny. During his reign, he made nine military campaigns, the first of which was against Egypt.

Tirhakah had once again taken over Memphis, so Ashurbanipal invaded and defeated Tirhakah, who apparently died soon after. So, Tirhakah was a very effective Nubian king who had gotten himself put on the throne of Egypt. Some people used to think a hundred years ago that blacks weren't smart enough to do things like this.

Somebody forgot to tell Tirhakah. He managed to be a major thorn in the side of the Assyrians and was a man of some courage. His successor, Tanut Amun, however, also opposed Assyria.

So, now Ashurbanipal gathers an immense army. He invaded Egypt. He recaptured Memphis, but he pushed upstream and captured the ancient historical city of Thebes.

This was intended in the Book of Nahum to serve as a warning to Judah. If no Amun, or Thebes, can fall, so too you can fall. Later, the 20th Dynasty in Egypt starts, and Semiticus expels the Assyrians.

Meanwhile, in Babylon, the brother of Ashurbanipal, Shamash-Shum-ukin, attempted to break the rule of his brother Ashurbanipal. He wanted freedom. He wanted to be his own king.

So, he was already giving passive support to Semiticus, and then later was in open revolt. So, in the years 651 to 48, Ashurbanipal besieges, or has Babylon besieged, and then Babylon falls, and Shamash-Shum-ukin is killed, and it looks like still another victory for the Assyrians. It looks to all the world like this is just never going to end.

In 645, he conquers Elam, and sacks Susa, making the end of one of the oldest countries in the world. By all appearances, in 645, Assyria is at its greatest power. Such is not to be the case, however.

Now, before we talk about the fall of Assyria, let me tell you that the greatest contribution of this king, ironically, and I think it's one of the most amazing ironies of all of ancient history, is that this king's greatest contribution to humanity and to history was certainly not his empire, but his library. In other words, Ashurbanipal was an antiquarian. He was a king who knew how to read and write, and he loved learning about the incredible history of Mesopotamia.

He was fully aware that Mesopotamia had a history stretching back thousands of years, and he was interested in it. He had the luxury of no formidable opponents, so he could turn his attention to his library. Now, of course, this is not a library like we know of.

This is a library of clay tablets. But what he did is he commissioned, perhaps as the first archaeologist, he commissioned teams of workers to go into the important cities that were no longer used, and they would dig, they would find the ancient libraries, and they would dig them up, and then they would bring the tablets back to Ashurbanipal's library, and then they would translate them into Neo-Assyrian. See, in other words, the tablets would be written in Sumerian, or they'd be written in Akkadian, but those are languages that can no longer be read by people.

So, he sent these teams out to find the tablets to have them translated by his professionals into Neo-Assyrian documents so that when we talked earlier about the Gilgamesh epic, we weren't talking about the Gilgamesh epic written in Akkadian or written in Old Babylonian. The Gilgamesh epic we were reading from is the Neo-Assyrian account. It was translated by Ashurbanipal's scholars into Neo-Assyrian, and that's the account from which we work.

So, to my way of thinking, it is almost an irony that brings a smile to our faces when we read about these Assyrians who were so utterly brutal, and yet it was the reign of Ashurbanipal that led to the world's first great library and gave to us documents that we may never have had had he not left them for us. How ironic, isn't it, that these peoples who destroyed so much, murdered so many people, tortured so many people, how ironic that Ashurbanipal would leave the world a treasury greater than

all of Assyria's gold because he left his world knowledge. Who would have dreamed that this would be the work of the last great Assyrian king? Well, here's our situation.

We're almost out of time today. After 639, the records come to an end, and so we really cannot recreate the years at the end of the Assyrian Empire. A number of obscure kings are listed in the Assyrian king list, although there was probably internal strife, if not civil war.

However, we simply cannot recreate the events of the last 20 years of the Assyrian Empire. By 614, Cyaxares, a Persian king, a king of Media, captured the Assyrian capital of Ashur. In 612, the great city of Nineveh fell to the Medes when the forces of Nabopolassar, king of Babylon, arrived too late to the battle.

A few forces escaped west to Harran, which you might remember from our northern Ur discussion, and there they tried to found a new dynasty with Egyptian help in Harran. By 609, Assyria would be gone forever, a measure of the hatred which it had inspired throughout the ancient world. So in just a matter of a handful of years, the 300-year-old empire is exterminated.

Never again will the cities of Assyria be occupied by Assyrians, and Assyria will be lost and forever lost as the Babylonians finally get their revenge, and the Babylonians finally have their own empire. It has been a long time since Hammurabi. It only takes about a millennium, and the Babylonians have their last empire, and that's what we'll begin with in our next tape, which is about the Neo-Babylonian Empire, made famous by Nebuchadnezzar.

I trust you'll look forward to it with us. We're almost at the end of the course. So, once again, I thank you for your attention.

This is Dr. Don Fowler in his teaching on Old Testament backgrounds. This is session 20, Demise of Assyria.