

# **Dr. Donald Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Lecture 23, Persians and Greek Conflicts and the End of Persia**

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This is Dr. Don Fowler in his teaching on Old Testament Backgrounds. This is session 23, Persian and Greek Conflicts and the End of Persia.

Well, the events that we're looking at are far, far beyond the borders of tiny Israel, but they are, as is so often the case with world events, much more important to the Israelites than they could have ever known.

These wars between the Greeks and the Persians were going to determine which direction civilization went, and it turned out it would go west. Darius lost the Battle of Marathon, which was hardly a catastrophe for the Persians.

But before we leave Darius, let me just mention to you that in every other way possible, he was one of the most successful Persian kings. It could be argued that Darius was an organizational genius. It was Darius who created an administrative system for the satrapy that would be followed by all subsequent Persian kings.

In other words, he created a system of offices in each satrapy so that there were checks and balances within the satrapy to make sure that they could not coalesce in opposition to the throne. So that would take me a while to talk about it, and I'm probably not going to do it because we want to move along and finish this section of history, but it was a brilliant system of checks and balances within each satrapy that would guarantee a royalty to the Persians. He created a royal tax collector, for example.

That office had not existed. He created a royal tax collector who had, therefore, jurisdiction over all the satrapies, and this meant revenue on a scale unlike which the world had ever seen. And so, this made, of course, the Persian throne wealthy as well.

He's a little bit like Tiglath-Pileser in the sense that this administrative system will serve the empire for the remainder of its existence. He created a gigantic trunk road for the Persian Empire, and this trunk road, this extensive road system, stretched all the way from Susa to Sardis. So, if you want to find with me Susa, here's Susa.

You can see this great Persian royal road in line form, running all the way from Susa over here to Troas and Sardis and so on. This royal road stretched over 1,600 miles

and was paved. Of course, it gave the Romans the idea, I'm sure, of their own road system.

On this trunk road to unite the Persian Empire, he had 111 stations that were staffed with soldiers as well as horses so that this could serve as a life artery for the Persian Empire, uniting east and west. This was just a brilliant Tiglath-Pileser-like move. It's also not well known among people in churches that this is the king who really popularized, invented, and popularized coinage.

The earliest coins employed were made of copper during the reign of Sargon, the Assyrian king. However, they were simply ceremonial coins. It was left to Darius to invent coinage.

He created the derrick, D-A-R-I-C, which was so named because of him. This was the gold coin, and he created a silver coin called the siglos. A siglos, interestingly enough, is a term that was under the influence of the ancient Semitic term shekel.

Shekel and siglos are etymologically related. So, the gold coin was named after him, the derrick, the silver coin, the siglos. So, this meant for the remainder of human history, coins would now be the means of currency rather than foodstuffs or metal things that were weighed out.

So, he left a huge footprint on the world. I might add it was a bigger footprint than any other of the Persian kings because it lasted for such a long period of time. So Darius, in the mythology of Hollywood and classical scholars, is pictured in dark colors, but he was a brilliant king.

Darius is followed by Xerxes, the Ahasuerus of Ezra 4:6. So, we'll talk some here about Xerxes, and Xerxes is, of course, a figure of some consequence in the Bible. When Xerxes takes the throne, there are the usual revolts upon his accession to the throne. Many of the older anti-Zoroastrian priests chose to rebel at this moment, so Xerxes then underwent religious reform, in which he placed their religious system on the worship of Ahura Mazda.

Egypt also revolted but was reconquered. Babylon revolted in 482, so he reduced it to a satrapy. He razed the walls of Babylon, destroyed its temples and fortifications, melted the 18-foot high gold statue of Baal, weighing 1,800 pounds of gold, and dropped the title King of Babylon from his royal titulary.

So, this set of actions that I just described to you became all too common for each subsequent Persian king, and thus it was with each succeeding Persian king, military battle after military battle by people revolting against Persian rule. He is best known, however, because of his wars against the Greeks, all of which he ended up losing. There are a number of good works on this subject.

The Greek historian Herodotus argued that when Xerxes invaded Greece, he had an army of 1.7 million soldiers, 80,000 cavalry, and 20,000 riding camels or driving chariots. In reality, the Persian invading force was somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000 men. But as I have mentioned to you, the Greeks exaggerated.

It's not history the way we know it. It's utterly tendentious. So, we want to read the Greek material tongue-in-cheek.

So, what I would mention to you is that he did invade, and it was a perilous moment for the Greeks. And so, let me get my cursor going to show you some of this information. As he brought his army down into Greece, it can be hard to see where the land and water are in this graph.

But as he brought his army down to Greece, he was obviously heading for Athens, which he considered to be the main source of trouble for his empire. So, he is obviously heading for Athens to try to conquer it. And I seem to have... There it is.

Oh, my goodness. So, his army is just too large for the Greeks to succeed against. So his army is coming down like this, and of course, it's heading for Greece.

And the Greeks know their territory well, so they assign a group of Spartans the task of holding here at the pass of Thermopylae. It's a case where the pass is only about three meters wide. Legend has it that there were 300.

We know from other sources that there were about a thousand of these Spartan warriors, and they were given the task of holding this pass in order to give the Athenians an opportunity to save what they could. This force as it makes its way south is such that it has no chance of... The Greeks apparently have no chance of stopping it. And so, they're just buying time.

Hollywood has multiple movies about the gallant holding action at Thermopylae. Of course, if you know Hollywood, it has to have romance in it; otherwise, people won't watch it. There's absolutely no evidence that beautiful, nubile Spartan women accompanied the scantily clad, beefy Spartan soldiers.

But it was a real battle, and it did save Athens for a brief period of time. The Spartan troops are annihilated. Oh, and Hollywood has one of them saved.

It turns out that they want to bring the news of the incredible action back to Sparta. So they save one Spartan soldier with his beautiful maiden to go back and tell the story. Yes, Hollywood.

Well, the truth of the matter is, at Thermopylae, they were annihilated. The Persian forces head south. Athens is sacked and burned.

What really happens as a result of the holding action is that the Greek fleet that was located at Athens is able to escape. And we have the real monumental battle of history here on an obscure island area called Salamis. I think in my class notes, I have a picture of this battle at Salamis for you.

And here's what happened at Salamis. The Athenian fleet was able to leave Athens and relocate to this narrow waterway, which has come to be called Salamis. So, the Athenians had their ships inside this area.

As you can see, it would be surrounded by land. And the Persians, the Persians didn't really have a navy. They hired navy-going people to fight for them.

So their ships were out here. Of course, they look like they've trapped the Athenians. Perhaps the mistake—I am not; I don't know this battle inside out—but perhaps the Persians would have been better off to have left their navy out here.

But they actually took their ships inside the harbor, inside this region. This turned out to be a mistake because the Persian ships were larger and more difficult to maneuver, while the Greek ships were smaller.

And in those narrow waters, they were able to outmaneuver the Persian fleet and wreak havoc upon the Persian fleet. Well, with the loss of the fleet at the Battle of Salamis, the Persians are in an impossible military situation. Greece is a poor country.

It can't even feed its own population. The only way the Persians can sustain this large military force is by feeding the troops through grain hauled on these ships, which forces the Persians to withdraw.

As a result, Greece was saved. One of the things that someone like me finds just comical is that Marathon gets all the ink, but the real battle that saved the West was Salamis. So, the Persian forces withdrew.

Greece is saved. And this gallant-holding action led to the success of the battle against the Persians in this invasion. With the defeat of a... Well, and so that battle occurred in 480.

This year was to the Persians what 1943 was to the Germans. Not only were they defeated in several key battles, but their allies, the Carthaginians, were rendered a shocking defeat in the Battle of Himera. And so, for all practical purposes, the Persians are permanently hindered in their attempt to conquer Greece.

With the defeat of Persian land and naval forces, the battle shifted to the shores of Ionia, where in 479, at the Battle of Mycale, a Persian fleet was caught, divided, and burned. Sometime during this general time period, a Persian army of 40,000 to 50,000 men was defeated in Ionia at the Battle of Plataea. So, when 49... When 479 was over, the Persian attempts to conquer Greece were doomed.

They were done. These disasters led to the end of the Persian attempts to conquer Greece properly, and so Xerxes seemed to have turned his efforts into building rather than burning. So, with this in mind, what we have is the end of round one between east and west.

And I say round one because round two in the battle east and west is going to be Alexander the Great. And Alexander the Great will carry the battle into the east and, of course, win. Subsequent Persian kings have their own history.

I'm not sure how much of this to go into. Artaxerxes I ends up creating the... Signing into the Peace of Callias between the Greeks and the Persians, which brought peace between them on terms that were completely favorable, as you can see by reading the notes there, terms that were perfectly favorable to the Greeks, not to the Persians. In essence, the Persians had lost the wars against the Greeks, and to reduce this long time period yet to go, what it will turn out to be is Persian gold against Greek disunity.

To reduce these following years, to reduce this into something manageable, what we can tell you is the only thing that saved the Persian Empire from an early demise was Greek disunity. The only thing that united the Greeks was fear of the Persians. And when it became clear after the Peace of Callias, when it became clear that the Persians were done as a political entity, then they went back to doing what they had been doing for centuries, and that was killing one another.

So destructive wars gripped the Greek cause. The Persians are able to shrewdly manipulate the Greeks by buying and using Persian gold to buy one Greek political entity strength and battle against another one. And so, for the remainder of a period of time, it's Persian gold against Greek disunity while the Persian Empire grows ever weaker, ever more corrupt.

So, I think I'm not going to walk you through the remaining story of these Persian kings and instead paint the picture for you of what does happen, and it's what brings an end to the story of the Middle East. And that is the triumph of another Greek form of population, and that's Alexander the Great. Alexander the Great's father, Philip, apparently had conceived of the idea of a holy war against the Persians.

It was plain for everyone to see that Persia was weak and able to be conquered. The Greek forces, whether they were Athenian, Spartan, Corinthian, or Macedonian,

were superior to the Persians. So, Philip seemed to have caught on to the idea of a war to end the Persian Empire.

Some people think Alexander killed him. There's no way of knowing. But Alexander becomes the individual who has the means to defeat, who gets the opportunity to defeat the Persians.

So, Alexander creates a Macedonian army, and they invade this region. Here at the Granicus River, they met the first Persian troops and won a hard-fought battle. The Persian Empire may have been seriously weakened, but it was still a powerful force, and the forces of Alexander at the Granicus did not win a triumph of just crushing the Persian forces. It's a hard-fought battle.

But they win, and when they win the battle, they then move their forces to the south. And this has been one of the grand mysteries of Alexander the Great because one would have thought he would have been driven by Persian gold, but instead of moving his army to the east, he moves his army to the south, and there he conquers Egypt. He goes down to Egypt, is received as a liberator, is divinized, and then, after Greece, he returns and begins again the battle to conquer Persia. So, it only takes two battles to destroy the Persian Empire, one at Issus here, the other at Gaugamela over here.

Both battles are hard-fought. Both battles could have gone either direction, but both battles were won by the Macedonian forces. After Gaugamela, the Persian king is assassinated by his own troops, and the path is open for Alexander to make his way to the historic domain of Cyrus the Great.

Alexander marches all the way to India. For all of whatever deficiencies Alexander had, Alexander was a man of courage, and he was in every way imaginable a military genius, but Alexander's success may well have been something more than just the superiority of the Macedonian troops. After all, all three of these battles, Granicus, Issus, and Gaugamela were hard-fought.

What may well have turned the tide for Alexander is that he was a genius in the area of logistics. He knew how to utilize logistics to give his troops a military advantage over these less sophisticated opponents, and so he was able to move his troops all the way across thousands of miles and to do so successfully because of his ability to master the art of logistics. For example, when he was moving his troops to Egypt, he provisioned his troops through the navy that he had offshore here, and that navy not only fed his troops but also protected them.

And when he moved his forces into Mesopotamia, he actually used part of his navy by putting his ships on rollers, his naval ships on rollers, rolling them across the terrain so that he could then provision his troops through the navy on the Tigris and

Euphrates rivers. Things like that which set him apart unnerved his opponents and enabled him to have a victory, victories, multiple victories. There are things here that I should tell you before we finish the course because with Alexander the Great, we really are in the area we could call New Testament backgrounds.

Alexander the Great seems to have been an apostle of Hellenism. Alexander was not content, as almost every conqueror would have been, to have simply invaded, to have taken away the mule train. The mule train hauling gold and silver back to Macedon was so large that it was simply staggering.

Everybody else probably in the world would have been content to bring the silver and gold back to Macedon, go back to Macedonia to sit upon his throne there and die in luxury. Alexander seems to have been wired in such a way that he could only live effectively in war. Death seems to have been life to Alexander.

So, as long as he was conquering, he was driven. But like certain key people in history, Alexander seems to have been unable to survive peace. After he had conquered, he came back to Babylon and there he died.

But there was more to Alexander than just war and gold. Alexander was an apostle of Hellenism. Alexander sought to take the culture of his region, Macedonia, Greece, and Achaia, and to bring that culture into the East.

He established dozens of cities that he named Antioch and throughout this entire region, he deposited groups of Macedonian soldiers so that they could establish islands that were rooted in Hellenistic culture. These islands of Hellenism would ultimately be swallowed up by the much larger populations here. Hellenism, the further east one went, the less successful Hellenism was.

But Hellenism was going to leave a footprint that was too big to fail. And so even though Hellenism did not dominate the East, the soldiers of Alexander, and in particular the generals, would bring a culture of Hellenism that would dominate the Fertile Crescent and Anatolia and would ultimately, of course, triumph, not in the persons of the Macedonian soldiers, but in the successor states led by Alexander's generals. In actuality, Alexander's real triumph was in the culture of the Romans.

Alexander sought to Hellenize his world; he sought to give it a common language, koine Greek, he sought to give it a common language, he tried to give it a common culture, and some people think he tried to give it a common religion. Alexander sought to Hellenize his world, but he only succeeded in part. By the New Testament time period, this world that is ancient here had been a world in which, in many ways, Hellenism triumphed, but in other ways, the war between East and West continued to exist right here.

In the years 66 to 70 AD, the native Semitic Jews and some Hellenistic Jews declared war against Rome and the war between East and West broke out into one of the great rebellions in Roman history. So, what Alexander seems to have done, at least in my look as we leave this topic, is this. He sought to Hellenize a part of the world that had its own culture and he did not succeed.

He succeeded some, but he did not succeed. As a result of his involvement here, we have tension between East and West. It's ironic that tension between East and West has continued today between the successor states to the ancient Middle Eastern kingdoms, as evidenced in the Islamic world. The Islamic world is not Hellenized, and it perpetuates the ancient world of its predecessors in many ways.

And so here we are today, centuries later than the conflict between Alexander and his world, the conflict between Rome and its world, and yet to this very day, the tectonic plates of conflict between East and West are drawn along this same East-West line that we have a world in which Semitic dialects dominate in the form of Arabic, in which the Semitic culture is dominated by the Islamic world. So we bring the world of the Bible in Old Testament backgrounds to an end by reminding us that Alexander, well actually his predecessors as well, began a conflict between East and West that geographically and topographically continues to this very day. So with that, we will finish our discussion on Old Testament backgrounds, recognizing and closing with the comment that I fully recognize that Alexander the Great belongs in New Testament backgrounds, but there's a sense in which Alexander is a hinge person.

He's the hinge from the Old Testament to the New Testament, from the Middle Eastern to the Hellenized world. For that reason, we take these few moments to talk about him as the man who sought to bring Hellenism to the East, succeeded in part, but left us a heritage of conflict East from West.

It's my great privilege to have this opportunity to introduce you to the wonderful world of Old Testament backgrounds. It's a world that I hope that you will just, in being introduced to, find yourself fascinated by. I trust it's a world in which you will make use of the wonderful study sources that are available to you, the commentaries, the wonderful books, and the wonderful historical information that's available in thousands of books now.

And I hope that it's a journey that you will never tire of for the rest of your life. We can rest assured of one thing. We will never know all there is to know because what we have through archaeology is a world that never ceases to teach us new material.

So, I'm standing here today in 2017, knowing that maybe in 2018, there'll be the next great tablet find. A new generation of people will be introduced to a new generation of data, which will bring about a new generation of knowledge, such as the exciting,



wonderful world of backgrounds. There will never be an end to information retrieval until the Lord returns and brings an end to this world.

May God bless you as you engage with that exciting new world. Thank you so much for your attention.

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