

# **Dr. Donald Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 22, Persian Empire Resources from NotebookLM**

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide Quiz, and 5) FAQs

## **1. Abstract of Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 22, Persian Empire, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL**

This lecture discusses the Persian Empire, focusing on the reigns of Cyrus the Great and Cambyses II. It highlights the scarcity of primary Persian sources, relying heavily on often biased Greek accounts. The lecture analyzes Cyrus's conquests and benevolent policies, contrasting them with the less certain legacy of Cambyses. The lecture also examines the pivotal Battle of Marathon, emphasizing the unexpected Greek victory and its broader historical significance in shifting global power dynamics. Finally, the lecture emphasizes the need to consider potential biases in historical sources when assessing the Persian Empire.

**2. 20 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 22 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Old Testament → Old Testament Introduction → Old Testament Backgrounds).**



**Fowler\_OTB\_Session  
n22.mp3**

### 3. Briefing Document: Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 22, Persian Empire

Okay, here is a detailed briefing document summarizing the key themes and ideas from Dr. Fowler's lecture on the Persian Empire:

#### Briefing Document: The Persian Empire

**Introduction:** Dr. Fowler's lecture provides an overview of the Persian Empire, focusing on its rise under Cyrus the Great, the reign of Cambyses, the ascension of Darius, and the initial conflicts with the Greeks. A recurring theme is the difficulty in accurately portraying the Persian Empire due to a lack of primary Persian sources. Much of our understanding comes from the perspective of the Greeks, who were often hostile towards the Persians. Dr. Fowler urges caution in interpreting history through the lens of Greek bias and attempts to provide alternative interpretations where possible.

#### Key Themes and Ideas:

##### 1. The Problem of Historical Sources:

- Dr. Fowler emphasizes that there is a significant lack of Persian historical inscriptions or documents. *"We do not have a single Persian inscription. Zero. The only document that we have in Persian is on the wall of a mountain, the famous Behistun Inscription."*
- This forces historians to rely heavily on Greek sources, which are often biased against the Persians. *"The Greeks hated the Persians, and so the information that we have is always skewed by the Greek perspective."*
- He cautions that many historical accounts of the Persian Empire are "skewed, if not a completely distorted perspective."
- Artifactual evidence is available, but the absence of Persian historical documents creates a significant gap in our understanding. *"We are forced to rely largely, hugely, on Greek material...we do not have material from the Persian perspective."*

##### 1. The Rise of Cyrus the Great:

- Cyrus initially was subordinate to the king of Media, Astyages.
- Astyages's troops turned against him and handed him over to Cyrus.
- Cyrus skillfully united the Persian and Median tribes, making Ecbatana his capital.

- He conquered Lydia, making its capital, Sardis, a new satrapy.
- Cyrus's military conquests were sweeping, stretching from the Indus River to the Aegean Sea.
- The Babylonians welcomed Cyrus as their king, potentially due to his humanitarian reputation. *"The monolith that confronted Nabonidus may well have run from the Babylonians. So the Babylonians, small wonder, opened the gates to welcome Cyrus as their king."*
- Dr. Fowler highlights that Cyrus is mentioned in the Bible by name (Isaiah) centuries before his birth, leading some scholars to propose multiple Isaiah authors. *"Cyrus is one of only two people in the Bible who are named before they're even alive."*
- Isaiah describes Cyrus as God's shepherd and the one who will rebuild Jerusalem. *"It is I who says of Cyrus, he is my shepherd and he will perform all my desire."*

#### 1. **Cyrus's Humanitarian Policies:**

- Dr. Fowler presents Cyrus as a pioneering humanitarian ruler who encouraged local religions, unlike the Assyrians and Babylonians. *"Unlike his predecessors, Cyrus encouraged the well-being of local religions."*
- He showed leniency towards conquered peoples, allowing rulers like Croesus to retain some power. *"Cyrus was also a king who regularly showed leniency to the conquered foes."*
- He granted conquered powers autonomy, fostering loyalty among them. *"he allowed conquered powers autonomy."*
- Cyrus allowed deported populations to return to their homelands, including the Jews in Babylon, whom he allowed to return to Jerusalem.
- Dr. Fowler asserts that Cyrus employed "white propaganda," presenting himself as a liberator rather than a conqueror. *"Cyrus was the world's first effective white propagandist...he successfully presented himself as a liberator."*
- He views Cyrus as "the most unique king of all antiquity," and potentially the first to conceive of religious freedom and human dignity, based on his actions.

#### 1. **Cambyses' Reign: Conflicting Accounts:**

- Unlike Cyrus, Cambyses' reign is primarily understood through the hostile accounts of the Greeks.
- He conquered Egypt successfully but failed in a campaign to the south (Ethiopia/Nubia).
- Dr. Fowler offers a rational explanation for the Ethiopian campaign, suggesting it aimed to secure gold supplies.
- Greek sources depict Cambyses as insane, claiming he killed the sacred bull of Apis and his sister-wife, Roxanne. *"According to Herodotus, he then slew the sacred bull of Apis at Memphis, along with other bizarre actions, including killing his sister-wife, Roxanne."*
- Fowler challenges this portrayal, proposing that Cambyses might have had a grand strategic plan to conquer the whole world.
- He speculates that Cambyses' campaign west into the desert was not an act of insanity but an attempt to conquer other areas and possibly to have himself divinized. *"It's entirely plausible that he may have been moving his armies in order to bring all of North Africa under his control."*
- Cambyses' army of 50,000 men was destroyed in a desert storm.
- The circumstances surrounding Cambyses' death and the succession of Smerdis are unclear, with two conflicting accounts of what happened.

#### 1. **Darius's Rise and the Greco-Persian Wars:**

- Darius, not a direct descendant of Cyrus, came to power after a period of instability, killing pseudo-Smerdis.
- He recorded his monumental achievements on the Behistun Inscription, a crucial primary source of Persian history.
- Darius' reign is marked by conflict with the Greeks.
- The Greek accounts depict Darius as a military aggressor, but Fowler proposes that Greek meddling in Ionian city-states provoked Persian intervention.
- Darius's forces suffered significant losses in the early battles. *"Then begins a series of defeats that...it's almost as if the hand of God orchestrates events to arrange for the defeat of this superpower against this very small political entity here."*

- The Persians lost a portion of their fleet in a storm near Mount Athos.
- Despite a much larger force, the Persians were defeated at the Battle of Marathon, a major blow that marked a turning point in history. *"Few battles had more political significance with such minimal military consequences."*
- Dr. Fowler underscores that Marathon was *not* a triumph of democracy, as the Greeks at this time had an oligarchical system.
- He rejects the notion of the battle as a struggle between good and evil, or the West against the decadent East. *"I would encourage all of you to fight the tendency to picture this as the triumph of the West over the decadent East, to fight the concept that the Greeks were the good guys and the Persians were the perverts. It literally gets presented that way, and it is really, in my judgment, a bad history."*
- Fowler explains that the Greeks won at Marathon due to superior military tactics, training, and weaponry (hoplites with long lances). *"The superior weaponry and mobility of the Greek soldier was called a hoplite."*
- While not a major military victory, Marathon was a significant embarrassment for the Persians and highlighted the emergence of a new form of military warfare.

**Conclusion:** Dr. Fowler's lecture offers a nuanced perspective on the Persian Empire, highlighting the limitations imposed by the available source material and encouraging a critical approach to historical narratives. He emphasizes the unique character of Cyrus the Great, questions the negative portrayal of Cambyses, and provides context for the early conflicts between the Persians and the Greeks. He is careful to caution against viewing the conflict as one of good versus evil. The lecture provides a necessary reminder of the importance of considering multiple perspectives when studying ancient history.

## 4. Study Guide: Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 22, Persian Empire

### The Persian Empire: A Study Guide

#### Quiz

**Instructions:** Answer each question in 2-3 complete sentences.

1. What was Cyrus's initial position in relation to the Median kingdom before rising to power?
2. What were the four major powers in the world when Cyrus became king of Persia?
3. Why does the speaker emphasize the limitations of our historical knowledge about the Persian Empire?
4. How did Cyrus's conquest of Lydia change the balance of power in the region?
5. What does the biblical book of Isaiah say about Cyrus, and how do critical scholars interpret this?
6. What are the four key policies of Cyrus that are considered to be unique for his time?
7. What is the difference between "white propaganda" and "black propaganda", and how did Cyrus use the former?
8. How does the speaker describe Cambyses, and why is the Greek version of his story questioned?
9. What two explanations are given for the death of Cambyses' brother Smerdis?
10. What were the key factors that led to the Greek victory at the Battle of Marathon, despite being outnumbered?

#### Quiz Answer Key

1. Cyrus was initially a subordinate to Astyages, the king of Media. He was not initially the all-conquering king, but instead, he rose from a position of vassalage to become powerful.
2. The four major powers were Babylon, which controlled the Fertile Crescent; Media, which controlled a large arc to the north and east of Babylon; Lydia, which

controlled the western Anatolian Plateau; and Egypt, which was powerful but weakening.

3. The speaker emphasizes that we lack Persian primary source documents and instead must rely primarily on Greek accounts, which are known to be biased against the Persians. He cautions that these sources may offer a skewed or distorted perspective of the Persian Empire.
4. By conquering Lydia, Cyrus gained control of the western Anatolian Plateau and established a new satrapy, giving him control of the land over Mesopotamia.
5. The book of Isaiah refers to Cyrus by name as God's shepherd, chosen to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. Some critical scholars suggest that this indicates that Isaiah chapters 40-66 were written by a second or third Isaiah, as this was written centuries before the birth of Cyrus.
6. Cyrus encouraged the well-being of local religions, showed leniency to the conquered, allowed conquered peoples autonomy, and supported the return of deported peoples to their homelands.
7. "White propaganda" is benign and positive, while "black propaganda" is terrifying and negative. Cyrus used white propaganda to present himself as a liberator, not as a conqueror.
8. The speaker suggests that the Greeks portray Cambyses as a mad tyrant, but the speaker questions this, proposing his actions could be viewed as strategically sound and aimed at expanding and controlling his empire.
9. One view is that Cambyses had Smerdis killed before leaving for Egypt, keeping his death a secret. Another is that a pseudo-Smerdis named Gaumata killed the real Smerdis and usurped the throne.
10. The Greeks had superior military training, tactics, and weapons (especially long lances used by hoplites). Their ability to move troops in battle through trumpets and their effective use of envelopment tactics were key factors that allowed them to defeat the numerically superior Persian army.

## Essay Questions

**Instructions:** Develop a well-organized essay in response to each question.

1. Analyze the challenges historians face in reconstructing the history of the Persian Empire, and discuss how those challenges influence our understanding of its key figures.
2. Compare and contrast the leadership styles and legacies of Cyrus the Great and Cambyses, based on the provided source material, and consider whether the information provided is reliable.
3. How did Cyrus's policies toward conquered people differ from those of previous empires, and what were the effects of these policies on the stability and growth of the Persian Empire?
4. Examine the significance of the Battle of Marathon in the context of the broader conflict between the Greeks and the Persians, paying particular attention to the military strategies and political ramifications.
5. Discuss the ways in which the speaker's understanding of the Bible and historical accounts influences their interpretation of the Persian Empire and its key figures, and explain the ways this approach could create challenges in drawing accurate conclusions.

## Glossary of Key Terms

- **Anshan:** The capital of Cyrus's kingdom before uniting with Media.
- **Astyages:** The king of Media to whom Cyrus was initially subordinate.
- **Behistun Inscription:** A crucial Persian document written in Akkadian, Elamite, and Old Persian that recounts Darius's rise to power.
- **Black Propaganda:** A form of propaganda that employs terrifying and negative messaging.
- **Cambyses:** Cyrus's son, the king of Persia after Cyrus's death.
- **Croesus:** The king of Lydia who fought against Cyrus.
- **Cyrus:** The founder of the Persian Empire who was seen by some to be a humanitarian leader.



- **Darius:** A Persian king who rose to power after the death of Cambyses and defeated nine kings to unite all 23 satrapies.
- **Ecbatana:** The capital city declared by Cyrus upon uniting the Persian and Median tribes.
- **Fertile Crescent:** The region of the Middle East known for its rich soil and abundance of water.
- **Gaumata:** The name of the person who was suspected of being a pseudo-Smerdis.
- **Halas River:** The boundary between Lydia and the Anatolian plateau.
- **Herodotus:** A Greek historian whose writings about the Persians are viewed with skepticism because of his bias.
- **Hoplite:** A heavily armed Greek infantry soldier.
- **Ionia:** The region along the western coast of Anatolia populated by Greek city-states.
- **Lydia:** A kingdom on the Anatolian Plateau conquered by Cyrus.
- **Marathon:** A battle where Greek forces defeated the Persians despite being outnumbered.
- **Masageti:** The tribe Cyrus was fighting against when he died in the Caucasus area.
- **Media:** One of the five main tribes that Cyrus united into the Persian Empire.
- **Nabonidus:** The king of Babylon who opened the gates of the city for Cyrus.
- **Nubia:** The ancient name for the area south of Egypt, now known as Ethiopia.
- **Sardis:** The capital of Lydia, captured by Cyrus and made a Persian satrapy.
- **Satrapy:** A Persian political boundary or identity, similar to a state.
- **Smerdis:** The brother of Cambyses, who may have been killed and impersonated by Gaumata.
- **White Propaganda:** A form of propaganda that employs benign and positive messaging.

## 5. FAQs on Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 22, Persian Empire, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

### FAQ: The Persian Empire and its Interactions with the Greeks

- **Q1: What makes studying the Persian Empire challenging for historians?**
- **A:** The primary challenge is the lack of substantial primary source material from the Persian perspective. Almost all historical accounts come from the Greeks, who were often hostile to the Persians. This creates a skewed and potentially distorted picture of Persian history and motivations. The main Persian inscription available is the Behistun Inscription. This lack of original documentation forces historians to rely heavily on Greek sources and archaeology, which limits a complete understanding of Persian culture and governance.
- **Q2: Who was Cyrus the Great, and why is he considered a significant figure?**
- **A:** Cyrus the Great was the founder of the Persian Empire, who rose from being a vassal to the king of Media to become a powerful ruler. He is significant for his rapid military conquests that spanned from the Indus River to the Aegean Sea, uniting a large territory. Unlike his predecessors, Cyrus is lauded for his progressive policies, which included encouraging local religions, showing leniency to conquered peoples, granting them autonomy, and allowing deported populations to return home. These actions earned him the reputation of being a humanitarian ruler, a view that is further reinforced by the Bible which uniquely names him as God's shepherd to fulfill God's purposes.
- **Q3: What was the significance of Cyrus's policy towards conquered peoples?**
- **A:** Cyrus's policy was radically different from his predecessors and contemporaries, such as the Assyrians and Babylonians. He actively encouraged local religions, showed leniency to defeated foes, and granted them self-rule as long as they remained loyal. A key act was his allowance for deported populations, like the Jews in Babylon, to return to their homelands. This humanitarian approach set a new precedent and likely contributed significantly to the stability and expansion of his empire by gaining the loyalty of the peoples he conquered.

- **Q4: How is Cyrus portrayed in the Bible, and what does that signify?**
- **A:** Cyrus is portrayed very positively in the Bible, specifically in the book of Isaiah where he is called "God's shepherd" and "his anointed," used by God to fulfill his purposes, such as rebuilding Jerusalem and the Temple. This unprecedented positive reference to a pagan ruler by the biblical text is significant, as it suggests a divine influence in Cyrus' actions and leadership. This perspective contrasts with some modern critical views that might see these prophecies as written post-event. However, the biblical view sees Cyrus as uniquely ordained to help God's people.
- **Q5: What are the key differences between Cyrus the Great and his son Cambyses?**
- **A:** While Cyrus is portrayed as a benevolent leader, Cambyses is depicted by Greek sources as unstable and cruel. The Greek accounts describe Cambyses as going mad, desecrating temples, and engaging in bizarre acts. However, there is a plausible counter-narrative which suggests that Cambyses was strategically motivated, continuing his father's ambition of world domination by conquering Egypt, Ethiopia, and possibly other territories. The negative Greek narrative towards Cambyses might be due to his ambition threatening their region.
- **Q6: Why is the reign of Cambyses so difficult to interpret?**
- **A:** The reign of Cambyses is hard to interpret because of the contradictory nature of Greek sources. On the one hand, Greek accounts depict him as a mad, destructive tyrant. On the other hand, a more plausible case can be made for his actions being strategically motivated. The absence of Persian sources makes it extremely difficult to verify which view is accurate. This forces historians to speculate and consider both the political motivations of the Greeks to present him as a foil to the more benevolent Cyrus and the strategic value of Cambyses' actions.

- **Q7: How did Darius I come to power, and what was his relationship to Cyrus's family?**
- **A:** Darius I was not a direct descendant of Cyrus, but he was of Achaemenid royal blood. He rose to power after a period of instability following the death of Cambyses, possibly after the usurping of the throne by a pseudo-Smerdis. Darius campaigned to take the throne, defeating several rivals, and recorded his rise to power on the Behistun Inscription. His accession to the throne represents a shift in leadership following the unusual circumstances of Cambyses' death and the uncertainty surrounding the claim of the pseudo-Smerdis.
- **Q8: What was the significance of the Battle of Marathon, and how does it fit into the larger conflict between the Persians and the Greeks?**
- **A:** The Battle of Marathon was a significant yet limited victory for the Greeks against the much larger Persian army. It marked the first time the Persians had been significantly defeated in battle. While not decisive in ending the wars, the battle was a boost for the Greeks. It revealed the superior military training and strategies of the Greek hoplites, particularly their ability to use a phalanx formation with superior weapons and battlefield mobility which was new to the Persians. Marathon is often seen as a symbolic moment where the East and West clashed, and the success of the Greek forces marked a shift in world power towards the West.