

Dr. Don Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds,

Session 18, Rise of Assyria,

6-min. Video Overview

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So, let's talk about one of history's most, well, most horrifying empires, Assyria. These guys were just unbelievably successful, but at the same time they were so cruel, so brutal that they were hated like almost no one else. And that's the paradox we're going to unpack today: how their incredible power and their absolute terror were really just two sides of the same coin.

I mean, think about it. For 300 years, the Assyrians basically ran the show in the ancient Near East. Their military? Unmatched.

Their government? A well-oiled machine. So, you got to ask, how in the world did they pull that off? How did they get so good at, well, empire? But, and this is the huge but, all of that success was built on something just unimaginably cruel. This wasn't just your standard ancient warfare, no, this was something else, something way more sinister.

So, that's the real mystery, right? How did these two things, unbelievable success and bone-chilling terror, actually fit together? Okay, so to get this, we've got to go back. The year is 911 BC; a new king, a guy named Adad-Nirari II, takes the throne. And suddenly, Assyria just wakes up.

This guy wasn't just about winning a few fights here and there, nope. He kicked off a 300-year imperial run that was going to change everything. And this is where you see the guy's genius.

He wasn't just a raider, you know, smashing and grabbing. He was a builder. Think about it: he sets up these strategic supply dumps. What does that tell you? It tells you he's not just visiting; he's planning on coming back, year after year.

And those little supply stops, they grow into fortified garrisons, run by governors, collecting taxes. That, right there, that's the blueprint for a real, lasting empire. Alright, so now let's jump to his successor, Ashurnasir Paul II, because this is where things take a really dark turn.

He absolutely took the empire to the next level, no question. But he also brought something new to the table, a horrific new policy. He made extreme cruelty an official tool of the government.

And here's the thing: the Assyrians didn't hide this stuff. They were proud of it. They carved it into stone for everyone to see.

I mean, just listen to this inscription from the king himself; he's bragging about it. Can you even imagine walking up to a city and seeing a pillar just covered in the skin of the leaders

who tried to fight back? That's not just violence, that's a message. And it's being sent in the most terrifying way possible.

And the creativity of their cruelty is just staggering. They weren't just killing people; they were walling them up alive inside pillars, impaling them on stakes. They'd build these gruesome towers made of bodies and heads right outside your city gate.

This was not random, out-of-control violence, oh no. This was a systematic, carefully calculated policy of pure horror. So here's the key takeaway.

Most historians agree this wasn't just sadism. It was a brand new political weapon. It was all about sending a message, a really simple one.

Surrender now, or this is your future. And if you've already surrendered, and you even think about rebelling, this is what happens to you. And the scary part? For 300 years, it worked.

This absolutely terrible strategy actually worked. But you know, you can only push people so far. The world didn't just roll over and accept this.

As the next king, Shalmaneser III, starts pushing west, he takes down this major city-state called Bit Edini. And its fall sends this massive shockwave across the whole region. It was one of those moments that made all the other little kingdoms look at each other and realize, okay, if we don't team up right now, we are all going down.

And man, did they team up. What they put together was this massive coalition force. At the Battle of Karkar in 853 BC, they met the Assyrians head-on.

And get this: when you look at who brought the most chariots, which were basically the tanks of the ancient world, it wasn't the big players like Damascus or Hammat. No, the biggest contribution came from King Ahab of Israel. He brought 2,000 chariots.

This was, up to that point, the biggest battle in world history. So this brings us to a really cool historical mystery. Who actually won? I mean, if you read the Assyrian records, they're like, oh yeah, we totally crushed them.

Glorious victory. But here's the thing with ancient kings. They never ever admitted they lost.

It just wasn't done. So can we really trust their side of the story? Because when you start digging, the evidence tells a very different tale. Alright, let's play detective format.

Clue number one. The Assyrians don't come back to that area to fight for another four or five years. Hmm.

That sounds a lot like an army that took a serious beating and had to go home to lick its wounds. Clue number two. The enemy coalition? They stuck together for another 12 years.

These kinds of alliances fall apart super fast unless they're actually winning. So all the evidence points to one thing. The Assyrians got a serious bloody nose at Karkar, even if they'd never admit it.

Now even with that setback, the Assyrian Empire kept on rolling for a long time, and so did its reputation for pure terror. So let's talk about the endgame here. What are the long-term consequences of building an empire on a foundation of such incredible brutality? In this regard, this is the key to understanding stories you might already know, like the biblical story of Jonah.

You know, God tells him to go preach to Nineveh, the Assyrian capital. And Jonah literally runs in the opposite direction. It's not just him being stubborn.

You have to understand, he would have seen the Assyrians as the embodiment of evil. He hated them so much that he'd rather die than play a part in saving them. And that brings us right back to the central paradox.

Their power was off the charts; for 300 years, they were on top. But their legacy? Pure, unfiltered hatred. So when their empire finally fell, it didn't just fall.

It was wiped from the face of the earth. Their enemies were so determined to get rid of them that they were systematically erased from history. Gone.

Just like that. So what's the lesson here? The Assyrians proved that, yeah, ruling by terror can be incredibly effective. For a while.

But their ultimate fate teaches us something else, doesn't it? They were uniquely successful, sure, but they were also uniquely hated. And that leaves us with a pretty big question. Is an empire built on terror just destined to be erased by the very hatred it creates?