

Dr. Don Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds,

Session 22, Persian Empire

6-min. Video Overview

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

So, we all think we know the Persian Empire, right? This ancient superpower that ruled the world for over 200 years. The story usually goes something like this. Decadent, tyrannical kings versus the heroic, freedom-loving Greeks.

But what if that's not the whole story? What if it's not even close? Because when you start digging, you run into one massive problem. And that right there is the central mystery we're looking at. I mean, think about it.

This wasn't some small, backwater kingdom. This was a global superpower that stretched across three continents. Yet, when we go looking for their side of the story, their histories, their chronicles of how they saw the world, we find next to nothing.

You want to know how many historical documents we have written by the Persians themselves about their own history as the world's number one power? Zero. Zilch. Nada.

So, if they didn't write it, where does everything we think we know about them actually come from? Well, it comes almost entirely from their biggest rivals, the Greeks. Our whole picture of this massive, complex empire is filtered through the eyes of the people who fought them, who feared them, and, let's be honest, who pretty much despised them. Now, this doesn't just mean we're missing a few details.

It means that the information we do have is almost certainly biased from the get-go. We're trying to understand a global superpower through a tiny keyhole, and that keyhole was carved out by their enemies. So, let's see what happens when we start to question that story.

Let's start at the beginning, with the founder of the whole thing, Cyrus the Great. Now, here's the wild part. Even though the Greeks were his rivals, their own accounts often paint him as this incredible, almost perfect king.

And that glowing reputation, it pops up in some really unexpected places. I mean, just look at this. This is from the Bible, written centuries before Cyrus was even a thought, and it's prophesying his arrival not as some brutal conqueror, but as God's shepherd.

That is a completely unprecedented five-star review for a foreign king. So, what did this guy do to earn that kind of press? Well, he basically threw out the old playbook on how to build an empire. Instead of crushing local cultures and religions, he actually promoted them.

Instead of slaughtering his defeated enemies, he showed them leniency. He let conquered people have a say in their own affairs. And, this was huge, he allowed entire populations

that had been forcibly deported by older empires, like the Jews in Babylon, to finally go home.

And to really get how radical this was, you have to understand the world he lived in. Before Cyrus, empires were built on what you could call black propaganda. Pure terror, cruelty, making sure everyone was too scared to fight back.

Cyrus invented white propaganda. He sold himself, not as a conqueror, but as a liberator. This was a complete game-changer in how you wielded power.

Okay, so you've got this incredible legacy from Cyrus. But then, the Greek story takes a really dark turn with his son, Cambyses. According to them, the enlightened founder was followed by a raving, sacrilegious lunatic.

But again, you have to ask, who's telling the story? The Greek historian Herodotus just paints this picture of a man who is completely off the rails. He claims Cambyses had the sacred disease, madness, and that he committed the ultimate sin in Egypt by killing a sacred bull. That he murdered his own wife.

And the grand finale? That in a fit of pure insanity, he marched 50,000 of his own soldiers into a desert sandstorm to die. It's a heck of a story. But is it true? Or is it possible that this is just a really, really effective smear campaign? I mean, think about it.

The Greeks had every reason to paint the new Persian king, who was expanding the empire ever closer to them, as a dangerous and unpredictable madman. Because when you strip away that madness label that the Greeks gave him, his actions suddenly start to look, well, pretty strategic. That invasion of Ethiopia? Not a mad quest, but a very logical move to control Egypt's gold supply.

That march west into the desert? Not some foolish whim, but a totally plausible attempt to conquer North Africa. Suddenly, he looks a lot less like a madman and a lot more like a calculating empire builder. You know, just like his father.

And if the story of one man can be twisted that easily, it makes you want to re-examine the most famous story of them all. The Battle of Marathon. We've been taught to see it as this ultimate showdown, this critical turning point for all of Western civilization.

But the story we learned in school? It might be more myth than reality. The myth frames this as so simple, right? It's democracy versus tyranny, good versus evil. The reality is, it's a lot messier.

Athens wasn't a democracy as we think of it today. It was an oligarchy, run by a handful of wealthy elites. And this battle wasn't about morality.

What it was, though, was the first real head-on collision between the great power of the East and the rising powers of the West. Its importance isn't moral; it's geopolitical. So how did the smaller Greek force win? It wasn't because they were morally superior.

It was because they were better trained and had an absolutely brilliant plan. They intentionally weakened the middle of their line, practically inviting the Persians to attack.

The Persians took the bait, thinking they were breaking through, and then, wham, the strong Greek flanks crashed in from both sides, trapping the Persian force.

It was a tactical masterpiece. This was the number of Persian soldiers who died at Marathon. For the Greeks, it was a legendary, world-changing victory.

No question. But for the massive Persian Empire, an empire that could call on armies from half the known world, losing 6,400 troops wasn't a catastrophic military defeat. It was an embarrassing loss, a very nasty surprise.

But it was far from the end of the line. So what's the big takeaway from all this? It shows us that history isn't just a list of things that happened. It's a story.

And whoever gets to write that story controls the narrative for centuries. The Persians built one of the greatest empires the world had ever seen, but they let someone else tell their story. And that is where we're left, with this partial, deeply biased, and maybe totally wrong picture of a civilization that literally changed the course of history.

We can try to piece things together from archaeology, from other sources like the Bible, from reading between the lines of Greek propaganda, but the true, complete story of the Persians? It's silent. And that leaves us with one final, and I think pretty crucial question. We can look back 2,500 years and see just how easily the entire story of a global power can be shaped and twisted by its rivals.

So, whose stories are being told by their enemies today? And what crucial parts of the truth are we all missing because of it?