

Dr. Don Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 18, Rise Of Assyria Audio Podcast Overview

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Welcome back, everyone. We're diving into some seriously fascinating and kind of terrifying history today. We're talking about the rise of the Assyrian Empire.

Yeah, the Assyrians, they weren't exactly known for their gentle touch. Definitely not. Our main source for this deep dive is a lecture series by a professor who, after decades of teaching this material, is still, and I quote, sobered by just how cruel and successful they were.

Sobering is a good word for it. Brutal, but brilliant, right? Absolutely. And that's what makes them so compelling to study.

How did this relatively small kingdom, kind of tucked away in Mesopotamia, surrounded by all these powerful rivals, manage to explode onto the scene and become this unstoppable force? It's a pretty remarkable story. All right. So to get a handle on this meteoric rise, let's go back to the beginning.

Paint us a picture. What was Assyria like before it became this superpower? Well, if we rewind back to around 1300 BC, early Assyria, they weren't exactly calling the shots. They were actually under the thumb of another kingdom, the Mitanni.

So not exactly top dog yet. No, not at all. And it's interesting, they didn't actually win their independence through some grand rebellion or anything.

It was actually thanks to a Hittite king, Suppiluliuma. He stepped in and basically liberated them from the Mitanni. The Hittites, weren't they a pretty big deal themselves? Oh yeah, definitely a major power player at the time.

But you can already see how these complex power dynamics are going to play out, right? Yeah. Everyone vying for control, shifting alliances. It's like a recipe for chaos.

Oh, absolutely. And then on top of all that, you've got these larger forces at work, shaping the destinies of entire civilizations, like the Sea Peoples' Movement- these groups of seafaring raiders just rampaging through the Mediterranean around the 12th century BC. They caused all sorts of mayhem and took down some major powers, including the Hittites.

Remember them? The ones who had earlier liberated Assyria. Right, right. So the Hittites, who were a check on Assyrian power, suddenly collapsed, which created a power vacuum.

Exactly. It's like dominoes falling. One major power collapses, and it triggers this whole chain reaction.

With the Hittites out of the picture, the stage is set for Assyria's rise to dominance. Right. So the rivals are weakened, things are shifting.

But when do we actually start seeing Assyria flexing its muscles, acting like a true empire? That shift, you can really pinpoint it to around 911 BC, where the king named Adad-Nirari II, he's the one who really wakes Assyria up. He pushes back the Arameans who were encroaching on their territory, expands eastward, and get this, starts setting up supply dumps. Supply dumps.

I mean, that doesn't sound particularly impressive. Why would that be a sign of imperial ambition? Ah, but that's where you have to think strategically. Supply dumps, they're not for quick raids.

They're for sustained campaigns, long-term control. It's a logistical move that points to Adad-Nirari's vision. He wasn't thinking like a small-time king anymore.

He was thinking like an empire builder. So that's the turning point: 911 BC, the start of that imperial phase. But hold on, how do we actually know these dates with any certainty? Are we just relying on desk work here? No, no, not at all.

Actually, we have these amazingly reliable sources for reconstructing Assyrian chronology. The Assyrian king list and the limmu lists. The king list is essentially a genealogy of their rulers.

And the Limmu Lists name each year after a different official. Oh, interesting. So each year gets its own unique label based on who was in charge.

That's a pretty clever system, like how we name hurricanes. Exactly. And here's the key.

We actually have a fixed point in this whole chronology, an eclipse that was recorded in 763 BC. By working backward from that date, historians have managed to create a surprisingly accurate timeline of Assyrian history. Wow, that's incredible.

Talk about piecing together the past. That timeline must be so helpful for understanding how things unfolded. It absolutely is.

And it lets us trace the expansion of the Assyrian empire step by step, which brings us to a king whose name is basically synonymous with terror: Ashurnasirpal II. Ah, yes, Ashurnasirpal II. I got to admit, this is where things start to get a bit, well, unsettling.

We've hinted at Assyrian cruelty, but what exactly did they do that earned them such a terrifying reputation? What made them so different? Well, Ashurnasirpal II, he really takes things to a whole new level. I mean, he's relentless in his military campaigns, expanding westward all the way to the Mediterranean. But it's not just about conquering territory.

That's how he chose to rule. Ashurnasirpal made a conscious decision to govern through terror. So it wasn't just about winning battles.

It was about sending a message. Precisely. And that message was fear.

And we see this really vividly depicted in Assyrian art. It's full of these graphic scenes: people being flayed alive, impaled, having their tongues cut out, heads displayed on stakes. It's tough to even look at some of these images.

It's hard to imagine the mindset behind that level of brutality. Was it just pure bloodlust, or was there a more, I don't know, calculated strategy at play? I mean, it's easy to just assume it was sadism, right? But if we look closer, it's clear that this was a deliberate strategy. Ashurnasirpal understood that ruling a vast multicultural empire required more than just military might.

You had to break the will of your enemies, make the cost of rebellion seem unimaginable. Terror was his tool of control. So in a twisted way, it was about maintaining order, ensuring the stability of the empire.

Did this approach actually work? Well, the fact that the empire continued to expand under his rule certainly suggests that it was effective, at least in the short term. And we even have inscriptions from his predecessor, Adad-nārārī I, describing the aftermath of a conquest. Just to give you a sense of how brutal this was, imagine a pillar covered with the skins of flayed enemies, people wallowed up alive inside the structure, victims impaled on stakes, mounds of decapitated bodies and heads outside the city gates.

That's, it's hard to even grasp that level of violence. It's almost like a form of psychological warfare designed to completely break any resistance. Exactly.

Shock and awe, making resistance seem utterly futile. And disturbingly enough, it's a tactic that we still see echoes of today. With groups like ISIS employing similar methods to instill fear and control, the legacy of ancient Assyria is, unfortunately, still relevant.

That is a chilling thought. But all this talk of terror makes me wonder: how did they actually manage to conquer so much territory? Were there military tactics and weaponry that advanced? Yeah. It makes you wonder about the ripple effects of these ancient events, right? Shaping the world we live in.

But getting back to those Assyrian kings who orchestrated these conquests, who comes after Shalmaneser III? Well, after Shalmaneser, Assyria goes through a somewhat rocky period, a few rulers who didn't really have a lasting impact, you know. But then in 745 BC, Tiglath Pileser III takes the throne. And he really, I mean, he ushers in this whole new era of Assyrian power and expansion.

Okay. So what makes Tiglath Pileser III different? More brutality, or did he bring something new to the table? Oh, he definitely wasn't afraid to use brutality. That's for sure.

But Tiglath Pileser III was more than just a warrior. This guy was a brilliant strategist, a ruthless reformer. He understood that to build a truly lasting empire, you needed more than just military might.

So he completely revamped the Assyrian army, made it even more efficient, even more deadly. Streamlining for maximum carnage. Basically.

But here's the thing. He also implemented administrative changes, setting up a system of provincial governors to manage those conquered territories. So not just conquer, but also effectively govern a more long-term vision.

Exactly. He streamlined tax collection, built roads, fortifications, created the infrastructure for a lasting empire, and it paid off. Under Tiglath Pileser III, Assyria just exploded outward, conquering territory from Babylonia in the south to Urartu in the north, pushing into Syria and Palestine.

So full-blown superpower at this point. Unchallenged in the region. Pretty much, yeah.

And his successors, they keep the expansion going. Sargon II, for example, he brags about capturing the Israelite capital Samaria in 722 BC, effectively ending the northern kingdom of Israel. He deports the inhabitants, scatters them throughout the empire, and attacks the Assyrians used quite frequently to squash rebellions.

Deportation. That sounds like a logistical nightmare, forcibly moving entire populations. Why go to such lengths? Oh, it was brutal, but incredibly effective.

By uprooting people from their homelands, you break up those communities, scatter potential rebels among loyal Assyrian subjects, and prevent organized resistance. It's a divide-and-conquer strategy that worked incredibly well for them. Not just military might, social engineering, disrupting the fabric of societies to prevent them from fighting back.

Clever, but disturbing. It does make you wonder: how did this constant relocation of people affect the region? Long term, I mean. Oh, it had a massive impact.

It actually led to the spread of the Aramaic language, which became this common tongue across the vast Assyrian empire. It resulted in this much more diverse, but also fragmented social landscape. Effects were felt for centuries.

Right. We talked about the capture of Samaria, the end of the northern kingdom of Israel, a pretty major event, biblically speaking. So were the Assyrians a direct threat to the kingdoms of Israel and Judah? Absolutely.

And it's fascinating to see how the biblical accounts and the Assyrian records kind of complement each other. Give us this multifaceted view of these events. For instance, after Sargon II, you have Sennacherib, and he campaigns relentlessly against the Babylonians and other rebellious subjects.

He even laid siege to Jerusalem, the capital of the southern kingdom of Judah in 701 BC. Wait, that's in the Bible, right? The story of Hezekiah and the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem. It's amazing to think about these events coming to life like that, connecting ancient history with what I learned growing up.

It really is. And when you compare the biblical account with the Assyrian records, it reveals some really interesting details. For instance, Sennacherib's inscriptions claim victory in the region, but they never actually mention capturing Jerusalem.

He just says he shut Hezekiah up like a bird in a cage. So a little ambiguity there, a bit of a historical mystery. But it sounds like Jerusalem survived the siege despite the Assyrian onslaught.

Yeah, that seems to be the case according to both biblical and Assyrian sources. But even though Sennacherib didn't capture Jerusalem, he inflicted heavy losses on the surrounding Judean towns and villages, weakening the kingdom. It was a demonstration of power, showing everyone who was really in charge.

So even in defeat, they still made an impact, instilling fear, asserting dominance. I imagine their presence loomed large over the whole ancient Near East. Oh, absolutely.

It did. And this leads us to Esarhaddon, Sennacherib's son. He takes over in 681 BC and keeps the Assyrian war machine rolling.

He pushes into Egypt, rebuilds Babylon, and expands the empire even further. So even after setbacks, the empire keeps growing. Remarkable, really.

When did this expansion finalize? Was there ever a moment when the Assyrians reached their limit? That moment came under Esarhaddon's son, Ashurbanipal. He ruled from 669 to 627 BC. He's often considered the last great Assyrian king, known for his military campaigns, but also for his vast library at Nineveh and his patronage of the arts.

So more to Ashurbanipal than just brute force. He had an intellectual side too. He did.

And under his rule, the Assyrian empire reached its greatest extent, stretching from Egypt in the west all the way to Persia in the east. This vast, diverse territory- it seemed like nothing could stop them. But even at their peak, cracks were starting to show.

What do you mean? What could possibly cause this mighty empire to start crumbling? Well, there were internal conflicts, succession disputes, and growing resentment among the conquered people. I mean, they had endured decades, centuries even, of Assyrian rule. But perhaps the biggest factor was the rise of new enemies.

The Medes, the Babylonians. They were eager to throw off the yoke of Assyrian domination. It's almost like the Assyrians created the conditions for their own downfall.

By conquering so many and being so ruthless, they sowed the seeds of their own destruction. I think that's a great observation. Their relentless pursuit of power, their brutal tactics, it ultimately backfired.

They made too many enemies, and those enemies were now united. They wanted to see Assyria fall. And that's exactly what happened.

In 612 BC, a coalition of Medes, Babylonians, and other rebellious forces finally captured Nineveh, the Assyrian capital. Almost poetic justice, isn't it? The empire built on terror and brutality was consumed by those very forces. A reminder that power, no matter how great, is always fragile.

Always temporary. It really is. It makes you wonder: what legacy did the Assyrians leave behind? Were they just another brutal empire that vanished? Or did they contribute something more lasting? Yeah, it's a good question.

When we picture the Assyrians, it's all warfare or brutality. But were they just conquerors? Or is there more to their story? Well, that's where things get really interesting. You see, underneath that fearsome reputation, the Assyrians were surprisingly sophisticated.

Builders, innovators, patrons of the arts, even. Okay, so more than just destruction and conquest. Oh yeah, absolutely.

Look at their architecture. Nineveh, their capital. It wasn't just a military stronghold, right? It was this sprawling city with palaces, temples, massive walls covered in these intricate carvings.

Really impressive stuff. That reminds me, the professor talked about Ashurnasirpal II's palace at Kalhu. This massive structure spanning six acres could host banquets for something like 70,000 people.

I mean, can you imagine the scale, the grandeur of a place like that? It's mind-boggling, isn't it? And that's just one of many palaces built by Assyrian kings. They were obsessed with projecting this image of power and dominance. And their architecture is a key part of that.

All their subjects, their rivals, make a statement. So even their buildings were a form of propaganda, huh? Showcasing their might. Exactly.

And we see that same impulse in their art too. We've talked about the graphic depictions of violence, but it wasn't just about intimidation. Their art also told stories, glorified their kings, their gods, their military victories.

I've seen some of those reliefs. The detail is incredible. Hunts, battles, muscular warriors, fearsome beasts.

I mean, they're captivating, even if they are a bit unnerving sometimes. They do tell a story visually; that's for sure. And those reliefs, they give us a glimpse into Assyrian culture.

Their beliefs, worldview, strength, discipline, order. These were core values woven into their art, their architecture, even their military organization. So not just ruthless barbarians then, a complex culture with its own set of values, artistic expressions.

Exactly. And their ingenuity went beyond art and architecture. They developed these really advanced irrigation systems, which boosted agricultural production and helped support a growing population.

They were also skilled metalworkers and made elaborate weapons, tools, and jewelry. And we can't forget Ashurbanipal's library at Nineveh, right? Pretty significant achievement for an empire known mostly for its military strength. Ah, the library.

Yeah, that's definitely one of the most important legacies of the Assyrians. This massive collection of clay tablets, thousands of texts, myths, epics, historical records, scientific

treatises, medical texts, even. Wait, so they weren't just warriors; they were scholars, archivists too.

It seems so. And thanks to them, we have this incredible window into the intellectual life of ancient Mesopotamia. So many of those works would have been lost forever if not for Ashurbanipal's library.

It's a remarkable contribution to human knowledge. It's almost ironic, isn't it? We owe some of our understanding of the ancient world to this empire that's, well, mostly remembered for brutality. History is rarely black and white, huh? I completely agree.

The Assyrians were complex, contradictory, capable of terrible cruelty, but also of great cultural and intellectual achievements. So as we wrap up this deep dive into the Assyrian empire, what are some of the key takeaways here? What can we learn from their story thousands of years later? Well, I think it's a powerful reminder that power is fleeting. Empires rise; they fall, often consumed by the very things that made them great in the first place.

Like in the Assyrians' case, their ruthlessness, that drive for domination, backfired and led to their downfall. That's a huge part of their story. It really highlights the dangers of unchecked ambition, the importance of balance, and thinking about the long-term consequences of our actions.

That feels very relevant today, don't you think? Absolutely. We see it everywhere. Political conflicts, environmental crises, that relentless pursuit of power and wealth.

So the Assyrians offer a cautionary tale then. Even the mightiest empires can crumble. True strength isn't just military might; it's wisdom, compassion, a long-term vision.

Well said. It also reminds us of the importance of understanding history, learning from both the triumphs and the failures of those who came before. Because even the most terrifying empires, like the Assyrians, have something to teach us.

Indeed they do. And who knows, maybe somewhere in those ancient Assyrian texts, waiting to be deciphered, there's some wisdom that could help us move towards a more just and sustainable future. Now that's a thought-provoking note to end on.

Thanks for joining us on this journey through the ancient world. Be sure to check out the show notes for maps, images, and other resources to keep exploring the world of the Assyrians. We'll see you next time for another deep dive.