

Dr. Don Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 20, Demise of Assyria Audio Podcast Overview

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Welcome to another Deep Dive, everyone. We're going back in time a bit today, back to the ancient Near East. Always a fun trip.

To look at the fall of one of history's most, I don't know, imposing empires, the Assyrians. Yeah, they really were the empire for a while there, weren't they? I mean, they were around for centuries, right? A military powerhouse seemed invincible. Right.

And that's the thing that makes their collapse so fascinating. You know, it really makes you rethink that whole phrase, built to last. It does.

And to help us unpack this historical puzzle, we're going to be looking at a lecture by Dr. Donald Fowler. He's an expert in Old Testament backgrounds, and he really focuses on those final decades of the Assyrian empire. The beginning of the end, so to speak.

Yeah. And in particular, the reigns of two kings, Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal. Two very different rulers, but both played key roles in the empire's trajectory.

Now, Dr. Fowler argues that the seeds of Assyria's downfall were sown even during its peak. Interesting. Right.

Like those cracks were already there, even when they were at their strongest. He points to the reign of Sennacherib as a turning point. He faced a pretty audacious challenge from, well, a seemingly smaller power, Hezekiah, the king of Judah.

Yeah. Hezekiah's rebellion is one of those moments where you kind of wonder, what is he thinking? Taking on the Assyrian war machine. It's like poking the bear with a stick.

So what prompted Hezekiah to take such a gamble? Well, it seems he was hoping for some backup. He thought he could get a coalition of allies, you know, folks like the Egyptians, to join his side. Strength in numbers.

Right. But Dr. Fowler suggests that Hezekiah may have overestimated the willingness of those allies to commit. And at the same time, probably underestimated just how brutal the Assyrian response would be.

Oh, absolutely. The Assyrians didn't mess around. When they felt threatened, they unleashed the full force of their military might.

So what happened when Sennacherib got word of this little rebellion brewing on his doorstep? Well, he sent his army to deal with it, led by a commander named the Rabshakeh. Now that name just sounds intimidating. It does, doesn't it? And he lived up to his name.

The Rabshakeh was a brilliant military strategist. So did he just march on Jerusalem and, you know, crush the rebellion with overwhelming force? He could have, but he chose a different tactic. He decided to try something a little more psychological.

Oh, a mind game. I love those. Tell me more.

Instead of just launching a full-on assault, he laid siege to Jerusalem, and then he started talking. Talking? What do you mean? He delivered this speech from outside the city walls, aimed at demoralizing Hezekiah and the citizens of Jerusalem, filled with taunts and insults. Ancient trash talk.

Exactly. It was a calculated move to break their spirit before even engaging in battle. So give us some highlights.

What kind of verbal jabs was the Rabshakeh throwing out there? Oh, he really went for the jugular. He mocked Hezekiah's reliance on Egypt for help, comparing it to, and I quote, a bruised reed that pierces the hand of anyone who leans on it. Ouch.

Not exactly a confidence booster, is it? Nope. He also basically told the people cowering behind those walls that their god Yahweh was powerless against the mighty Assyrian gods. Yeah.

Right. He even pointed to the string of Assyrian victories, saying something like, "Has any of the gods of the nations delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? Basically saying, look around. No one messes with us and wins.

You're doomed. Chilling. It must've been terrifying for the people trapped inside Jerusalem, listening to this enemy commander, basically boasting about their impending doom.

Absolutely. Yeah. And you have to remember that the Assyrians had a reputation for brutality.

They weren't exactly known for their mercy. So what did Hezekiah do? Did he, you know, fire back with some witty retorts of his own? Well, realizing things were getting out of hand, he turned to the prophet Isaiah for guidance. Okay.

Makes sense. When in doubt, consult the prophet. Right.

Isaiah, in turn, delivered a message from God, assuring Hezekiah that the Rabshakeh's taunts wouldn't go unanswered. So we're about to see some divine intervention, right? Oh yeah. Get ready for a plot twist.

Okay. Buckle up. So that night, the angel of the Lord strikes down a huge chunk of the Assyrian army.

Sennacherib's plans are completely thrown into disarray. Wow. Talk about a game changer.

So the Assyrians are defeated, right? They retreat. Well, not quite. It gets a little complicated.

I was afraid you were going to say that. It was a huge victory, no doubt, for Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem. It really solidified that belief in God's protection, but Hezekiah still ends up surrendering to Sennacherib.

Wait, really? Why would he do that after such a miraculous, you know, divine deliverance? This is where Dr. Fowler's analysis gets really interesting. He suggests that Hezekiah, even after witnessing that divine intervention, was still very aware of the Assyrian Empire's power. I mean, they had vast resources, and they were known to hold grudges.

So it was more of a pragmatic decision, like a choose-your-battles kind of moment. Yeah. Hezekiah ended up paying a hefty tribute to Sennacherib, emptied his treasury, and even sent some of his own family members as hostages.

It was basically a way to buy peace and ensure that the Assyrians wouldn't come back for round two. It makes you wonder what was going through his mind. Relief, disappointment, maybe a bit of both.

Probably. It really highlights the complexities of leadership in the ancient world. You've got faith and politics all tangled up.

And sometimes even divine intervention isn't enough to completely change the course of events. Right. Realpolitik, as they say, often wins out in the end.

Now, speaking of political maneuvering, Sennacherib's story takes a pretty dark turn, doesn't it? It does. Years later, he gets assassinated by his own sons. Talk about family drama.

It sounds like something straight out of Shakespeare. It really does. And Dr. Fowler argues that this assassination wasn't just a personal tragedy, but a sign of instability brewing within the empire itself.

So on the surface, the Assyrians seem invincible, but beneath that facade, things are starting to crumble. Exactly. Sennacherib's assassination really exposes that fragility of power, even at the height of an empire's dominance.

Before we move on to the reign of Ashurbanipal, there's one more thing that Dr. Fowler mentions that I want to touch on. The possibility that there were actually two separate Assyrian campaigns against Jerusalem. Oh, yes.

The mystery of the two campaigns. So the timing of Sennacherib's death, if you line it up with the biblical account, is a little murky. It's led some scholars to believe that he might have actually attacked Jerusalem twice.

Yeah, it's a bit of a historical puzzle. Maybe some pieces are missing. So much we still don't know.

Right. It's a reminder that history is always more complex than we might initially think. There are layers upon layers to uncover.

Speaking of layers, let's shift gears and talk about Ashurbanipal. He's a fascinating character, wouldn't you say? A brutal conqueror who also happened to be a bookworm. Yeah, that's a historical paradox.

On one hand, he expands the Assyrian empire to its greatest extent, conquers Elam, even takes on Egypt. And yet he also creates one of the first great libraries in the ancient world. It's almost like he had a split personality.

The ruthless warrior king and the scholar king all rolled into one. Dr. Fowler argues that Ashurbanipal's library wasn't just a vanity project. It was a conscious effort to preserve knowledge.

Right. He saw the value in the past, even as he was busy conquering new territories in the present. So imagine we could step into Ashurbanipal's library for a moment.

What would we find? Picture this. Rows and rows of shelves stacked with clay tablets, thousands of them, all inscribed in cuneiform. Okay, I'm picturing it.

You'd find epic tales like, you know, the Epic of Gilgamesh. The version we have today is actually from Ashurbanipal's library, translated into Neo-Assyrian by his scholars. Amazing.

So he was preserving these ancient stories for future generations. Exactly. And it's not just myths and legends.

You'd also find hymns to the gods, astronomical observations, medical texts, even what we might call scientific treatises. Things like mathematics, zoology, a whole range of subjects. It's incredible to think about the sheer volume of knowledge contained in those clay tablets.

It was like the ancient equivalent of, I don't know, the Library of Congress or something. And without Ashurbanipal's library, so much of that knowledge would have been lost forever. It really makes you appreciate his foresight, doesn't it? Almost like he had a premonition that his empire was going to vanish, so he wanted to make sure at least some of its intellectual legacy survived.

A time capsule of sorts. Exactly. And thanks to his efforts, we have this amazing window into a world that would otherwise be shrouded in mystery.

It's not just about stories and myths. It's about understanding the daily lives of these people, their beliefs, their intellectual pursuits. It's about connecting with the human experience across millennia.

Right. It makes you wonder what else is out there waiting to be discovered. What other secrets lie buried beneath the sands? There's always more to learn, always another layer to peel back.

Now, before we get lost in the stacks of Ashurbanipal's library, why don't we take a quick break? When we come back, we'll dig deeper into his reign, unravel the mysteries surrounding the Assyrian Empire's collapse, and of course, connect it all back to you, our listener. Sounds good. Stay with us.

Welcome back. We were talking about Ashurbanipal right before the break. Yeah, the last great Assyrian king.

This guy is fascinating. He really is a brutal conqueror, but also a scholar. Yeah, it's wild to think that the same civilization that produced, like, ruthless warriors like the Rabshakeh also gave us a king who was obsessed with collecting and translating old texts.

Yeah. And Dr. Fowler makes the point that this library that Ashurbanipal built, it wasn't just some, like, ego thing. Right.

Not just a trophy cave. Yeah. It was a deliberate attempt to, you know, preserve Mesopotamian knowledge.

He recognized the value of the past. Even while he was out there conquering new lands. Exactly.

It's like he understood the importance of both, you know, military power and intellectual legacy. So let's just imagine for a second that we could actually, like, step into Ashurbanipal's library. A climb, travel, adventure.

What kind of treasures would we find among all those clay tablets? Oh, man. Imagine this. You walk in, and there are rows and rows of shelves all filled with these clay tablets inscribed in cuneiform.

I'm trying to picture it. You'd find epic tales like, you know, the one we talked about earlier, the Epic of Gilgamesh. Oh, right.

The version we know today actually comes from Ashurbanipal's library. Yeah. His scholars translated it into Neo-Assyrian.

Wow. So he's preserving these ancient stories? And not just that. You'd also find hymns to the gods, astronomical observations, medical texts, stuff that we would even consider, like, scientific today.

Like what? Treatises on mathematics, zoology, all sorts of subjects. It's mind-boggling how much knowledge they had back then. It's like an ancient Wikipedia.

Yeah. Something like that. And without Ashurbanipal's library, so much of that knowledge would have just vanished.

Gone forever. It's kind of amazing to think that we have this window into the past because of him. It is, right.

It makes you wonder if he had some kind of, I don't know, premonition? That his empire was going to collapse. Maybe he was trying to leave something behind for future generations. Like a time capsule.

Exactly. And thanks to him, we can learn so much about the Assyrians. Not just their military conquest, but their culture, their beliefs, their intellectual pursuits.

It helps us connect with them as people, you know, across all these centuries. And it makes you wonder what else is still out there buried, waiting to be discovered. Always more mysteries to unravel.

Right. Always. Okay.

So we've talked about Ashurbanipal the bookworm, but what about the empire itself? What happens in those final years? What leads to this once mighty empire just disappearing? Well, this is where the historical record gets a little fuzzy. Dr. Fowler points out that after Ashurbanipal, the detailed accounts that we have from previous Assyrian kings, they just stop. Like someone hit the mute button on history.

So we're left with a puzzle. A once mighty empire vanishes into thin air. Well, not quite into thin air, but the speed of the collapse is definitely remarkable.

Within a few decades, the Assyrian empire is just gone. Just like that. Yeah, pretty much conquered by a coalition of Medes and Babylonians.

It's kind of hard to wrap your head around how something so powerful could just disappear so quickly. It is, isn't it? So what happened? Well, Dr. Fowler points to something called imperial overstretch. Imperial overstretch? Sounds complicated.

It's the idea that as empires expand, they get harder and harder to manage. You know, they're spread too thin militarily and administratively. It makes them vulnerable.

So they're stretched so thin that they eventually snap. Exactly. And on top of that, the Assyrians also had internal problems.

Divisions, rivalries, power struggles. Right. Remember Sinatra getting assassinated by his own sons? Yeah, that kind of stuff definitely weakens an empire from the inside.

So if the records are so spotty, how do we even know anything about those final years? Well, we do have some bits and pieces from other sources, like there are Babylonian chronicles that mentioned the fall of key Assyrian cities. Oh, like which ones? Ashur, for example. That was the empire's first capital.

It fell to the Medes in 614 BC. And then, of course, there's the fall of Nineveh. Nineveh, the legendary Assyrian capital.

Yeah, that happened in 612 BC. It was a huge event; it shook the ancient world. A whole city just wiped out.

It's a stark reminder that nothing lasts forever. Right. Even the mightiest empires can crumble.

So what about the Assyrians themselves? What happened to the people? That's a good question. And one of the big mysteries of this period is that the Assyrian people seem to just vanish from history. It's likely that they were absorbed into the populations of the conquering empires.

So their culture, their language, it all just faded away over time. Pretty much. It's a tragic end for such a powerful civilization.

Yeah, it really is. But Dr. Fowler mentions that a few Assyrian troops actually managed to escape the fall of Nineveh. Oh, yeah.

They fled west to a city called Haran, tried to make a last stand. A final act of defiance. Yeah, you could say that they even tried to get help from the Egyptians.

But it was too late. It was. By 609 BC, Assyria was gone.

Wiped off the map after centuries of dominance. And the Babylonians, who had been under Assyrian rule themselves at one point, finally got their revenge. It's like that saying: what goes around comes around.

But there's another interesting aspect that Dr. Fowler brings up. This idea of Zion theology emerged after the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem. Oh, yeah.

That's a fascinating thread that connects to some later events in a really, well, kind of troubling way. OK. I'm intrigued.

Tell me more. So basically, Zion theology is the belief that Jerusalem is divinely protected. Invincible.

Yeah, exactly. Like it could never be conquered. Yeah.

Because God saved it from Sennacherib, you know. So they took this one instance of divine intervention and made it into a blanket guarantee. Right.

And Dr. Fowler argues that while this belief is understandable, given what happened, it might have led to a sense of complacency among the people of Judah. Like we're untouchable, kind of thinking. Yeah.

And as we see later on, that belief in Jerusalem's invincibility doesn't exactly hold up. It's a cautionary tale. About misinterpreting historical events.

Exactly. And Dr. Fowler uses this example to show how historical narratives can be used to, like, support certain theological or political agendas. So we have to be careful how we interpret history.

We do. Because even divine protection doesn't make you immune from bad decisions. Right.

So it's not about dismissing faith, but about understanding the nuances of it. Exactly. OK, so we've covered a lot of ground today.

We've explored the rise and fall of the Assyrian Empire, the complexities of its leaders, the theological ripples caused by its interactions with Judah. But what does it all mean for our listener sitting here in the 21st century? That's the big question, isn't it? Why should anyone

care about a bunch of ancient history? Well, I think there are a few key takeaways here. First, it reminds us that even the most powerful empires can collapse.

The things that led to the Assyrians' downfall- things like imperial overstretch and internal divisions- are still relevant today. Yeah, it's a good reminder that power is temporary and that no one is invincible. Absolutely.

The second takeaway is that ideas can outlast empires. While the Assyrian Empire itself is long gone, the knowledge preserved in Ashurbanipal's library still shapes how we understand the ancient world. It's a legacy that continues to inspire us.

Right. And finally, I think this deep dive encourages us to think critically about the narratives we encounter, whether they're historical, political, or religious. Don't just take things at face value.

Question assumptions. Seek out multiple perspectives. Exactly.

Be an informed citizen. Dig deeper. Ask questions.

Don't settle for easy answers. We hope you enjoyed this journey back in time. And as always, keep exploring, keep questioning, and keep learning.

Thanks for joining us. So, this whole Zion theology thing. Yeah, we were about to unpack that before the break.

It's one of those things, you know, you might read about it in a history book, but not really get it. Right.

Yeah. It's one of those threads that pops up again and again later on. And it gets kind of, I don't know.

Messy. Yeah, a bit. So to recap, Zion theology is basically this belief that emerged in Judah after the Assyrian siege.

That Jerusalem was special. Right. That it was divinely protected.

Yeah. And inviolable. Because God stepped in and saved them from Sennacherib.

Exactly. And so the idea takes root that Jerusalem could never be conquered. Kind of like a get out of jail free card.

Yeah, sort of. And Dr. Fowler's point is that this belief, while it makes sense given what happened, you know. It was a pretty dramatic event.

Yeah. It might have created this sense of, I don't know, overconfidence among the people of Judah. Complacency.

Yeah. Like they took one data point, one instance of divine intervention. And turned it into an absolute truth.

Exactly. But history rarely works like that, does it? No, no, it doesn't. And we know from the biblical narrative that, well.

That belief in Jerusalem's invincibility. Let's just say it didn't age well. Yeah.

It's a good reminder that even divine protection has its limits. Right. And Dr. Fowler uses this example to show how historical narratives can get twisted, you know, to support certain agendas.

So we have to be careful about how we interpret history. We do. We need to think critically, question our assumptions, and always try to see the bigger picture.

Don't just take things at face value. Exactly. So, OK, big picture time.

We've journeyed through the rise and fall of the Assyrian Empire. We've met some pretty fascinating characters along the way. We've talked about kings and conquerors, prophets and libraries.

But what does it all mean for us, you know, here in the 21st century? Well, I think there are some key takeaways here. First, it reminds us that no empire lasts forever. The Assyrians were the top dogs for centuries.

And then, poof, gone. The factors that led to their downfall. Things like, what was it, imperial overstretch.

Right. And internal divisions. Yeah.

A failure to adapt. Those are all things that we still see today. Right.

Absolutely. So it's a good reminder to, you know, stay humble. Don't get too comfortable.

Don't rest on your laurels. Right. Second takeaway: ideas can outlast empires.

Yeah, that's a good one. The Assyrian Empire is long gone. But the knowledge that Ashurbanipal preserved in his library.

It's still with us. It still shapes our understanding of the ancient world. That's a pretty amazing legacy.

It is. And finally, this whole deep dive, it's a call to action. You know.

How so? It encourages us to think critically about the stories we're told, to question the narratives. Whether it's history or politics or religion. Yeah.

Don't just accept things blindly. Do your own research. Dig deeper.

Be an informed citizen. Exactly. So there you have it.

The rise and fall of the Assyrian Empire. A story of power, intrigue, and ultimately collapse. But also a story of resilience, of knowledge preserved and lessons learned.

And hopefully a story that inspires our listeners to keep exploring, keep questioning, and keep learning. Thanks for joining us on this deep dive.