

Dr. Don Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 21, Neo-Babylonian Empire and the End of Judah, Audio Podcast Overview

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All right, let's jump into another deep dive today. We're heading back to ancient times. Yeah, way back to a time of some serious shake-ups in the ancient world. Definitely. We're talking about, you know, the mightiest Syrian Empire, right? They ruled for what an incredible 300 years. Yep, but then boom, they fall.

Yeah, and then we see the rise of this new power, the Neo-Babylonian Empire, right, and all of this, of course, had a huge impact on the Kingdom of Judah. Oh, absolutely. Yeah, so we're going to be talking about some big names, some familiar players, but get this: there are some unexpected alliances. Oh, yeah, and twists and turns that I think you can be surprised by for sure.

It's a wild ride. So buckle up It really is. I mean, seriously, the Assyrians seemed invincible-great, dominant for centuries.

How do they just disappear like that? Yeah, it's pretty amazing when you think about it, right? It makes you wonder what was going on behind the scenes. Well, to understand their fall, we need to look at both the internal problems they were facing.

Oh, yeah, like, you know, were they having issues within their own Empire and also the external pressures, like from other powerful groups? It's like a perfect storm, exactly a combination of things. Yeah, internal weakness. That's one thing, but then from the outside you've got this powerful coalition forming.

Okay, who are we talking about here? You've got the Babylonians, obviously, and then the Medes. Okay, and then these guys, the Scythians- who are they? They were fierce warriors, right, likely from, you know, the Eurasian steppes, those vast open plains. Okay, so can you imagine? Wow. You've got the Babylonians, Medes, and Scythians all teaming up against Assyria.

That's a formidable force. No wonder the Assyrians crumbled, right? It's not surprising when you consider all those factors, and then to make things even spicier, you've got the Egyptians getting involved. Oh, yeah, that's a whole other layer to this story. Yeah, I mean, former enemies, right, teaming up.

Yeah, it's not something you see every day. No, not at all. So what was their motivation? Why would the Egyptians help the Assyrians against the Babylonians? Yeah, they had a long history of conflict with the Assyrians. They had centuries of rivalry. So why the sudden change of heart? Well, think about it.

The Egyptians saw the Babylonians as a threat yeah, a rising power that could disrupt the balance. Okay, and they didn't want that. So they decided to team up with their former

enemy to counter a greater threat. Exactly. It's all about strategic alliances and shifting power dynamics. It's a real Game of Thrones ancient style.

It really is. Yeah, so with all this Empire clashing going on, where did the key battles take place? Well, there were several, but two really stand out. Okay, which ones? Carchemish in 605 BC. Carchemish. A vital city on the Euphrates River, strategically important. The Babylonians just crushed the Egyptians and Assyrians there.

Oh, wow. So that was a major turning point, definitely marked the end of Egypt's dominance, and it weakened the Assyrians even further. All right, and the other key battle. Ah yes, that would involve the kingdom of Judah, specifically their King Josiah, the one who tried to stop the Egyptians. Yeah, the one known for his religious reform. The Righteous King, exactly. But he met a tragic end.

He did, trying to stop the Egyptian army as they marched to help the Assyrians. Yeah, bold move. He confronted them at Megiddo. Megiddo, that rings a bell. It's a strategic pass through the Carmel mountain range. Okay, so a key location, absolutely, and unfortunately Josiah was killed in the battle.

This must have been devastating for the people of Judah. Oh, absolutely. It sent shockwaves through the kingdom. I mean, how could their godly King, the one leading a religious revival, meet such a tragic end? It's a question that has echoed throughout history. Yeah, it makes you think about the role of fate, divine will. All those big questions really do force us to grapple with the mysteries of faith and the uncertainties of life. And how do you make sense of it when even the most? Righteous can suffer such a fate. Exactly, it challenges our understanding of justice and the ways of God. It's a heavy topic for sure.

It is, but it's an important one to consider. So after all this, the serious, falling King Josiah is gone. What happens to Judah? Well, it doesn't look good for them. Yeah, I can imagine they're caught in the middle of these warring empires, right? Vulnerable, very much. So and just a few years after Josiah's death Nebuchadnezzar the second the Babylonian King.

Oh, yes, Nebuchadnezzar. He lays siege to Jerusalem, the heart of Judah, and in 597 BC the city falls. Wow, and about 10,000 Judeans are taken captive to Babylon 10,000. That's a huge number. It was a massive forced relocation, and this is the beginning of the Babylonian exile, right? Exactly, a pivotal moment in Jewish history. It's more than just a change in leadership, isn't it? It's a complete upheaval of their world. They're losing their land, their temple, everything, their king, everything.

They know they're forced to live among a completely different culture. Yeah, talk about a culture shock. It was a time of immense crisis and uncertainty. It makes you wonder how they even survived. It's a testament to their resilience, their faith. But how did they keep their identity? They were stripped of everything, everything that defined them. Well, this is where their faith takes a really interesting turn. Oh, house without the temple, without their priests, right? They start to focus more on the Law of Moses, the Torah; it became their anchor. It did become a source of strength, a way to maintain their identity even in exile. So even though they were physically uprooted, they had this portable faith.

Yeah, it was something they could carry with them. It's fascinating how such a traumatic event could lead to such a profound shift. It's really remarkable. So while all this is happening with Judah, what's going on back in Babylon, back in the heart of the rising Empire? Yeah, tell us about Nebuchadnezzar the second the guy who conquered Jerusalem. Well, he was quite a figure, a complex character. Okay, fill us in: he was a brilliant military strategist. He expanded the Babylonian Empire significantly, right, and he transformed Babylon itself into a magnificent city. Oh, yeah, Babylon, the legendary city think about the Hanging Gardens, one of the seven wonders. That was Nebuchadnezzar's doing, so he wasn't just a conqueror.

He was a builder. He was a patron of the arts, right, a ruler who left a lasting legacy, but his reign couldn't have lasted forever. Well, no one's reign does, so what happened after Nebuchadnezzar? He was succeeded by his son Nebuchadnezzar. Okay, now he's a fascinating character, very different from his father. Oh, so Nabonidus was known for his, shall we say? Eccentricities like what? Well, for one thing, he decided to abandon the Babylonian throne just like that for over a decade- he just walked away, essentially. Yeah, where did he go? He chose to reside in the distant oasis of Tima in the desert. Yep, far from the bustling capital, talk about a change of scenery. It's certainly a puzzling move.

Yeah, historians must have a field day with this. They do; there are all sorts of theories about his motives, like what some say: he was deeply religious, okay, devoted to the moon god Sin, interested, and wanted a life of seclusion. So he basically went on a spiritual retreat, you could say that. Okay.

What are some other theories? Well, another theory suggests he was trying to unify his Empire Under this shared religious identity, with the moon God as the central figure. Ah, so a political strategy masked as religious devotion, perhaps, and then there's the geoeconomic view. What's that? It suggests that he was trying to shift the Empire's economic center westward. Okay, maybe in response to the rising threat of the Medes and Persians. So he was trying to shore up his defenses in a way. Yeah, by strengthening the western part of his Empire makes sense, and the area where he went, it was on important trade routes. Oh, I see.

So a strategic location. Absolutely. So while Nabonidus is off in the desert.

No, he's running the show. Well, his son Belshazzar was left in charge. He ruled in his father's absence. Interesting, and it's Belshazzar who becomes central to one of the most famous stories from the book of Daniel. Oh, yeah, the handwriting on the wall. Exactly. That's always been one of my favorite stories.

It's a classic. Yeah, can you set the scene for us? All right, so picture this: Belshazzar is throwing a lavish banquet. Okay, sounds fancy. Oh, it was he's using these sacred vessels that were looted from the temple in Jerusalem. Talk about adding insult to injury, right? But here's the thing: he has no idea that the Persian army, led by Cyrus the Great, okay, is right outside the city walls. They're under siege- yeah, laying siege to Babylon and Belshazzar is just partying away, oblivious to the danger. Wow, talk about bad timing, right? So in the middle of this feast, huh? This disembodied hand appears, my hand.

Yeah, out of nowhere, and it starts writing on the wall, writing this cryptic message: many, many take a part, many, many take a part. Okay, and everyone's freaking out. I bet no one can figure out what it means except for Daniel Exactly Daniel the exiled prophet right Belshazzar calls him in okay, and Daniel interprets the message as a divine warning a Warning about what about Belshazzar is downfall Oh, no, and the impending conquest of Babylon by the Persians So the writing was literally on the wall it was a prophecy of doom And what about those words many many tackle a person they basically refer to being numbered weighed and divided Okay, so the Empire's days are numbered exactly. So what happens next? Well, that very night Cyrus's forces launch their attack.

How do they get past the city walls? They divert the Euphrates River, the one that flows through Babylon. Yeah, they basically drain it. Wow, that's clever. And then they sneak into the city through the water gates.

So they catch them completely off-guard, completely, and just like that the Neo-Babylonian Empire falls, just like Daniel predicted exactly. It's a pretty dramatic end. It really is. It reminds me of how the Assyrian Empire fell. Yeah, a sudden and decisive shift in power.

So who are these Persians, the ones who conquered Babylon? They were an Indo-Aryan people. Okay, so Different from the Semitic cultures that had dominated the region before, right? They represent a new power dynamic in the ancient world, and their victory marks a major shift. The center of influence moves eastward away from the Fertile Crescent, which had been the cradle of civilization for so long. It's amazing how these events completely reshaped the ancient world. It's a reminder that nothing lasts forever, even the mightiest empires. So we've seen the fall of empires, the rise of faith, and this incredible story of the Persian conquest, right? But one question remains: what happens to those Jewish exiles in Babylon? Yeah, what becomes of them under Persian rule? That's something we'll have to explore in our next deep dive. It's a fascinating story of resilience and adaptation, so stay tuned. We'll be back to delve deeper into that story.

So I can't wait to get into it. It's going to be good for sure. All right. See you next time.

See you then. Yeah, you know It really is a remarkable story. It is.

Yeah, I mean, think about it. They lost their homeland, yeah, their temple, everything they knew, uprooted, and yet they not only survived, but they thrived. That's what's so amazing: 70 years in exile, right, and they managed to keep their identity, their faith. It's a testament to how they adapted, and I think how their faith evolved during that time. Yeah, so how did it evolve? Like, what did they do differently? Right, were there new rituals, new ways of connecting with God? Well, they definitely adapted but maybe even more important was how they re-centered their faith Okay, how so they really emphasized the law of Moses the Torah, okay, so the Torah became even more central it did Yeah, it became like a source of strength and continuity during all this upheaval because I mean think about it Yeah, their temples gone their priests are scattered right, but they still had the Korah right? Yeah, those teachings, those commandments it was something they could hold on to. It's almost like the Torah became their portable homeland. That's a great way to put it. They could carry their faith with them wherever they went, exactly as long as they followed its teachings. It

provided this framework for living a righteous life. Even without their traditional structures. So this shift towards the Torah during exile, uh-huh, really had a lasting impact. Oh, we did.

Yeah, on Judaism as a whole, it shaped its development for centuries. It's amazing how something as traumatic as exile could lead to such a transformation. It's really remarkable. Yeah, but of course we can't forget about the man who ultimately ended their exile: Cyrus the Great, the Persian King who conquered Babylon. He plays such a pivotal role. Yeah, he's a key figure in this whole story.

Absolutely, and his story. Well, it's full of surprises. It really is. Yeah, he wasn't your typical conqueror.

Not at all. He was known for his tolerance, his respect. For the cultures He conquered.

Yeah, he was pretty unique in that regard. I mean, didn't some ancient writers even call him a shepherd? They did. Yeah, it's not the image that usually comes to mind when you think of a powerful emperor, right? A shepherd. Yeah, very different. It speaks to how he was perceived even by those he conquered. Okay, so he wasn't just imposing his own beliefs. Nope, his own customs on everyone. No, he actually allowed conquered peoples to keep their own traditions.

So he was pretty open-minded. Yeah, very much so, and get this: he even allowed exiled populations to return to their homelands. He did. Yeah, it was a pretty remarkable policy. Wait a minute. Are you saying Cyrus actually allowed the Jewish exiles to go back to Jerusalem? He did, after 70 years. Yep, in 538 BC. He issued a decree, a decree.

Yeah, basically saying, "Hey, you can go home. You can rebuild your temple. Wow, that's incredible. It's an extraordinary act. It really is, and it's fascinated historians for centuries.

Yes. Yeah, I can only imagine what the exiled Jews must have felt, right? It must have been a mix of joy, disbelief, relief, all of that. So what motivated Cyrus to do this? I mean, what was he thinking? That's the million-dollar question, right? Historians have come up with a few theories. Okay, what are some of them? Well, one theory is that he genuinely believed in religious freedom. Okay, so he was ahead of his time in that regard, very much.

So that's pretty progressive. It is. Yeah, another theory is that he saw the Jews as a valuable asset. Okay, how so? They were skilled; they were literate, right? He thought they could contribute to the stability of the region.

So it was a strategic move in a way. Yeah, maybe he thought hey if they're back in their homeland, they'll be more loyal to me, right? It makes sense. And then there's the political angle. Oh, the political angle, of course: by allowing them to return, by framing himself as their liberator, it really boosted his image. He did, yeah, just a benevolent ruler, so it was good PR. You could say that, so maybe it was a combination of all these factors, probably, yeah. But regardless of his motivations, his actions had a huge impact. Oh, absolutely on Jewish history.

It's a turning point. It is. Yeah, so after 70 years of exile, they're finally going home. It must have felt like a miracle. It must have, yeah, but I imagine it wasn't all smooth sailing.

Well, no, going back to Jerusalem wasn't easy, right? I mean, they were starting over in a lot of ways. Yeah, their land had been neglected for decades, and they faced opposition, oh yeah, from people who had settled there while they were gone. So they had to rebuild their lives, their community, from the ground up. Must have been daunting. It was a huge challenge, but they had this renewed sense of purpose. Yeah, they were determined to rebuild their homeland, their temple. They had their faith to guide them. It's a really inspiring story.

It is. Yeah, and it makes me want to learn even more about Cyrus. Oh, yeah, he's a fascinating character, this Persian King who made it all possible. He's more than just a king, though. Oh, so his stories are intertwined with the fate of, well, the entire ancient world.

Okay, that's a big claim. He built this massive Empire Stretching from the Mediterranean to the Indus River. Wow, that's huge, and his legacy. It still shapes how we understand leadership, tolerance, the interplay of culture and power, exactly.

He was a really significant figure. So we've talked about his conquest of Babylon, his decree allowing the Jews to return. Mm-hmm. But where did he come from? Yeah, how did he rise to power, right? What's his origin story? Well, it's a pretty amazing story full of twists and turns. Okay, I'm intrigued.

Remember, the Persians were originally subservient to the Medes. Yeah, Cyrus's grandfather was actually a vassal king. Yeah, under Median rule. So not exactly in a position of power, right? But Cyrus, he wasn't content with that. You wanted more.

Oh, yeah. He had bigger ambitions. I bet he did. He led a revolt against the Medes.

No way a full-on rebellion. He united the Persian tribes under his banner. So he was a charismatic leader. He must have been, yeah, a skilled Military strategist, so he went from rebel leader to Emperor.

It's a pretty incredible journey. It really is, and it seems like his life was full of bold moves. Oh, yeah, challenging the Be'ehudna, conquering Babylon, shaping the destiny of the Jewish people Cyrus the Great definitely played a pivotal role in shaping the ancient world. There's no doubt about that, but his story is far from over. We've only just scratched the surface, so we'll delve deeper into his conquests, his leadership, his impact on history all of that.

Yeah, in our next segment. So stay tuned. So be good. All right, we're back again and ready to really dig into the story of Cyrus the Great. Yeah, he's quite a character.

He really is, and you know, we've talked about his conquest of Babylon, his decision to let the Jewish exiles go back to Jerusalem, right, but there's just so much more to uncover. There is, yeah, about this guy who really changed the course of history. He did so, I guess. Where do we even start? Well, that's the thing about Cyrus, right? He's got so many sides to him. He does, I mean; he's been called a conqueror, a liberator, a visionary, a shepherd, even. Yeah, some ancient writers called him a shepherd, which is not, you know, not your typical image of a powerful emperor. Not at all, but I mean, he was a brilliant military strategist. Oh, absolutely built this massive empire. Yeah, but he was also known for being

tolerant, respectful of different cultures, and he really had a knack for bringing people together.

He did. Yeah, so it's almost hard to reconcile those two sides. Yeah, how do you balance being a fierce warrior, right, and a benevolent ruler? I think that's the paradox of Cyrus. Yeah, he understood that real strength, like lasting strength, came not just from military power but from creating a stable Empire where, you know, different cultures could actually live together peacefully, and that was revolutionary for the time. Oh, absolutely. I mean most conquerors back then they just imposed their own beliefs Yeah, they were all about assimilation, but Cyrus was different totally different He let people practice their own religions Keep their own customs even returned exiled people to their homelands like he did with the Jews So it's like it's like he was playing the long game.

Yeah, he was thinking ahead. He knew that a diverse Empire could be a strong Empire as long as there was that sense of unity and shared purpose, right? I think that's a pretty relevant lesson for today. It is. Yeah, especially in a world that feels so divided sometimes. So let's back up a bit. Okay.

Yeah, where did Cyrus come from? What's his origin story, right? Look, how did he end up being this world-changing figure? Well, he was born into a dynasty of Persian kings- okay, royalty- but his rise to power wasn't, you know, just handed to him. All right, there's got to be more to it. Remember, the Persians were under the rule of the Medes at that time, right? Right, Cyrus's grandfather. He was actually a vassal King. So basically, like a subordinate King.

Yeah, answering to the Medes, okay, but Cyrus, he had bigger plans. He wasn't content with just being second fiddle. Not at all. So, what did he do? He led a revolt; he did.

Yeah, against the Medes. Wow. That's a bold move. It was; he united all the Persian tribes, really brought them together with his leadership. So he was a charismatic leader. Oh, definitely, and a brilliant military strategist.

So he went from being a rebel leader to the Emperor of this new Empire. It's pretty remarkable. Talk about a career change, right? And that was just the beginning.

So after he overthrew the Medes, what did he do? Well, he went on this, like, string of military conquests. Okay, he conquered Lydia, or is that in Anatolia, modern-day Turkey? Okay, he defeated King Croesus, who was, like, famously wealthy. Oh, wow, I've heard of him. Yeah, then he turned his attention eastward.

Okay, he started expanding into Central Asia. So he was building this vast Empire. Yeah, piece by piece, and then, of course, there's Babylon, right, the crown jewel, a conquest that changed everything, exactly. And you know, it's interesting: he didn't actually have to fight to take Babylon. No, he didn't; they just let him in. It seems that way. Yeah, it's like they welcomed him as a liberator.

Mm-hmm, especially compared to their previous king, Nabonidus, right? Who was off in the desert? Exactly. So Cyrus had this ability to win over people; he did. Yeah, not just through force.

It was more than just Military power, right? It was something else. I think it was his charisma, his reputation for justice. Yeah, and his tolerance. Absolutely, so going back to his Decision to let the Jews return home.

I mean, why do you think he did it? It's a question that's been debated for centuries. Yeah, some people say it was purely out of the goodness of his heart. Okay, a true act of benevolence. Yeah, and you know Cyrus was known for his religious tolerance, right? So it's possible he just genuinely believed in letting people worship freely. But then there's also the practical side of things. Oh, definitely. The Jews were a skilled people; they were literate. They could contribute to the economy, right? Help rebuild the region, and a stable region is good for the Empire. Exactly. So it was a smart move from a strategic perspective, right? So maybe it was a win-win, could be, yeah, and Let's not forget the PR aspect.

Oh, yeah, the propaganda by letting the Jews go back, by framing himself as their liberator. Cyrus really boosted his own image. It made him look good, like a just and merciful ruler, exactly, which helped to solidify his rule. So it's all connected, right? It is, yeah- the political, the practical, maybe even the idealistic. It's hard to know for sure what was going on in his head, right? But whatever his reasons, his actions had a huge impact.

They did. Yeah, so Cyrus. I mean, he was a military genius. Oh, yeah, a political mastermind, champion of religious tolerance. He was all of those things; what a legacy.

It's pretty amazing. So, how did his reign? How did all of this shape the course of history? Well, for one thing, he created this Empire that lasted for over 200 years. Really set the stage for the later Persian Empires, the ones that would eventually clash with the Greeks, right? And his policies of tolerance and cultural respect became a model for some later rulers, though not all of them. Unfortunately, sadly, no, and his influence wasn't just limited to politics, right? No, not at all. I mean, he's even mentioned in the Bible. He is in the book of Isaiah.

He's hailed as a Messiah. That's right, an anointed one, which is pretty incredible when you think about it. It is. Yeah, I mean, this Persian King being praised in the Hebrew Bible.

It shows how highly he was regarded. So he really was a figure who transcended his own time. Absolutely became a symbol of wisdom, leadership, and unity. He's a fascinating figure to study.

He is, and there's still so much we can learn from him. So as we wrap up this deep dive, you know, into Cyrus, his life, his times. What are some of the key takeaways? What can we learn from this guy? Yeah, what lessons does his story hold for us today? Well, I think one of the biggest lessons is that True leadership. It's not just about power and conquest, right? It's also about wisdom and compassion.

Yeah, and the ability to build bridges between different cultures, different beliefs- exactly. He showed us that diversity can be a strength, not a weakness, and that unity can come from respect, from understanding. It's a powerful message. I think it is especially in today's world, yeah, where it feels like we're constantly being divided.

So Cyrus's legacy is almost like a glimmer of hope; it is a reminder that even in the midst of all the conflict, it's still possible to find common ground to build a better future. It's a good note to end on. It is so; from the fall of empires to the rise of new powers, we've seen how individuals can really shape history for better or for worse, and Cyrus, I think, is a great example of how a leader's choices can have a ripple effect that can last for generations. It's pretty amazing. It is, so thanks for joining us on this journey through time. It's been a pleasure. We've explored a lot of history, some culture, and the power of ideas, and we hope you've enjoyed it. We'll see you next time for another deep dive into the past.

That's good