

Dr. Don Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 22, Persian Empire Audio Podcast Overview

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All right. So today, we're diving deep into the Persian Empire. Sounds exciting.

It is. It's fascinating. But we've got a little bit of a challenge here.

Uh-oh. What's that? Well, the Persians, they didn't leave a whole lot of written records behind. Wow.

Wow. Yeah. So to piece their story together, we're going to be relying on a lecture by Dr. Donald Fowler on Old Testament backgrounds, and it kind of adds this extra layer of intrigue to the whole thing.

Interesting. So we're looking at the Persians through a biblical lens, in a way. Exactly.

So how much do we actually know about the Persians from their own perspective? Well, that's the thing, right? We have to be careful because a lot of what we know comes from the Greeks. Ah. And they weren't exactly best friends with the Persians, were they? Not really.

No. Yeah. They were rivals, competitors, and you know how history is written by the victors, or at least with a certain slant.

So we're getting one side of the story here. Potentially. Potentially.

It's like trying to understand a rivalry based on just one person's trash talk. Okay. So how do we sift through all that and try to get to a more balanced view? Well, we start with what we do have, and there's one inscription that's absolutely key.

Ooh. Tell me more. It's called the Behistun inscription.

Behist? Okay. It's carved high on a cliff face, almost like it was meant to be noticed, and it was written in three different languages. Wow.

Three different languages. That's incredible. What were they? Okay.

So we have Akkadian, Elamite, and Old Persian. Okay. So it's like a Rosetta Stone kind of thing.

Exactly. And that's how a scholar named George Rawlinson finally cracked the code. Wow.

So he was able to, like, match up the languages and figure out what they were saying? Yeah. By comparing the Old Persian to other Indo-European languages that he knew, it was like a giant puzzle. That's amazing.

So this inscription, it gives us like a direct line to the Persian way of thinking. To an extent, yes, but there's a catch. There's always a catch, isn't there? It was commissioned by King Darius.

Oh, Darius. He was quite a character, right? He was. And like any king, he had his own agenda.

So we have to take it with a grain of salt. So even though it's in their own words, it's still filtered through, like, a political lens? Exactly. But even with that in mind, the Behistun inscription offers some invaluable insights.

Like what kind of insights? Well, for example, it tells us a lot about how Darius came to power, but we'll get to that a little later. Okay. So let's rewind a bit.

Before Darius, we had the founder of the Persian Empire, Cyrus the Great. Ah, Cyrus. Yeah.

A legendary figure. He really was. I mean, this guy created an empire that stretched from the Indus River all the way to the Aegean Sea.

That's an enormous amount of territory. Huge. And what's even more impressive is how he managed to do it.

I mean, we've all heard the stories about how brutal ancient empires could be, but Cyrus, he was different. You're right. His approach to conquest was quite a departure from the norm.

Like Dr. Fowler actually calls him the world's first humanitarian. That's a bold statement. Yeah.

It is. But when you look at his policies, it's hard to argue with them. I mean, instead of just going in and, like, burning everything down, he actually showed leniency toward his enemies.

That was unheard of back then. I know. He let them keep their customs, their religions, even a lot of their local leaders.

He understood that to rule effectively, you needed to win over the hearts and minds of the people. It was a brilliant strategy. Really.

He was basically playing 40 chess with his empire-building. Yeah. He was way ahead of his time.

But there's also another really interesting aspect to Cyrus's story. It has to do with the Bible. Oh, right.

The prophecy about him in the book of Isaiah. Exactly. Isaiah actually predicted that Cyrus would come along and free the Israelites from Babylonian captivity.

And that he would even help them rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. And the crazy thing is this prophecy was written like hundreds of years before Cyrus was even born. Talk about foreshadowing.

Right. And then there's the Cyrus Cylinder, which is this clay cylinder with all these decrees on it. Some people call it an ancient declaration of human rights.

It's definitely a fascinating document, and it adds to the whole debate about whether Cyrus was truly this benevolent ruler or if it was all just really good propaganda. Yeah. I mean, all these good deeds also helped him solidify his power.

Exactly. It's that idea of, like, white propaganda, where even though the actions might be genuinely motivated, they also serve a political purpose. So we're left wondering how much was genuine altruism and how much was strategic genius? It's hard to say for sure.

But regardless of his motivations, Cyrus left an indelible mark on history. He did. And that brings us to his successor, Cambyses.

And let's just say he didn't quite inherit his father's good PR. Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Cambyses is a whole other story. A much more controversial figure. So what went wrong? Well, a lot of what we know about Cambyses comes from Greek accounts.

And they paint him as, well, kind of erratic. Oh, so here we go again with the Greek bias. It's possible.

We have to remember, they weren't exactly fans of Cambyses. He conquered Egypt, which was a major threat to their interests. Okay.

So maybe they were trying to make him look bad. Potentially. But there are some wild stories about him.

Herodotus, the Greek historian, claimed that Cambyses killed a sacred Apis bull in Egypt. A sacred bull? That's like sacrilege. Right.

And there were even rumors that he murdered his own sister. Oh, wow. Okay, that's getting dark.

It is. But again, we have to be careful about taking these accounts at face value. So what do we know for sure about Cambyses? Well, he definitely conquered Egypt, which was no easy feat.

And initially, he even showed some respect for Egyptian culture. Really? Yeah. He appointed an Egyptian as an administrator.

Okay, so maybe he wasn't a complete tyrant after all. But what about that whole disastrous campaign in Ethiopia? You know, the one where he supposedly lost a whole army in the Sahara Desert? Ah, yes. That story.

It's fascinated historians for centuries. Fifty thousand men just vanished without a trace. That's insane.

Just imagine being lost in the Sahara with an entire army. It's like something out of a horror movie. It really is.

So what happened? Was it just pure madness on Cambyses' part? Well, Dr. Fowler offers a different perspective. Okay, I'm intrigued. What does he say? He suggests that there might have been more strategic motivations behind this ill-fated expedition.

Really? Like what? Well, there were rumors of valuable gold resources in the region. And maybe Cambyses was trying to secure trade routes and solidify Persian control over North Africa. So it wasn't just about blind ambition? Not necessarily.

Remember, this was a time of intense rivalry with Carthage. Maybe Cambyses was playing a long game. It's like his actions, even the ones that seem crazy to us, might have been part of a bigger strategy that we just don't fully understand.

It's a good reminder that history is often more complex than it seems on the surface. Definitely. But Cambyses' story ends on a rather mysterious note, doesn't it? It does.

There are conflicting accounts about his death. And this whole power struggle ensues. And that's where Darius comes in, right? He wasn't exactly next in line for the throne.

So his rise to power must have been, well, dramatic, to say the least. It was. He had to overcome nine rivals to claim the throne.

Not an easy feat. Sounds like the guy had some serious ambition. He did.

And a lot of cunning. He was a master strategist and a ruthless politician. And his reign would have a profound impact on the course of history, especially with the conflict with the Greeks brewing on the horizon.

This is getting good. But we'll have to pause here for now. When we come back, we'll delve deeper into Darius' story, exploring his rise to power, his grand architectural projects, and of course, that epic showdown with the Greeks at the Battle of Marathon.

Stay tuned. All right. So we're back, and we're picking up with Darius, this ambitious, maybe even ruthless ruler who really had to fight his way to the top.

He did. And once he secured that power, he really focused on building and managing this vast empire. Right.

Because it wasn't enough to just conquer all this territory. He had to figure out how to keep it all together. Exactly.

And he was actually a brilliant administrator. He realized that to effectively rule such a diverse and massive empire, he needed a system, a structure that could maintain order across different cultures and languages. So how did he do that? I mean, it's like herding cats on a continental scale, right? Well, he came up with this system of satrapies.

Satrapies. Yeah. Basically, he divided the empire into 23 provinces, these administrative regions.

Each one was governed by a satrap who reported directly to Darius. Oh, so it's like a chain of command. Exactly.

And the system allowed for a degree of local autonomy, you know, respecting local customs and laws while still maintaining central control over important things like taxes and military recruitment. It's like he was delegating, but still keeping a firm grip on the reins of power. Exactly.

He found that balance between control and flexibility. And speaking of control, he also implemented some groundbreaking economic reforms. Oh, yeah.

Tell me about those. I've read a little bit about that. He, like, standardized the coinage, right? He did.

He understood the importance of a stable economy for a thriving empire. He introduced a system of silver drachmas and gold shekels, standardized coins that made trade much easier and also helped streamline tax collection across the empire. That's amazing.

It's like he created a unified currency zone centuries before the euro. It really was a revolutionary idea for its time. And speaking of revolutionary, let's not forget about those legendary Persian roads.

Oh, yeah. The Royal Road. That was like the superhighway of the ancient world, wasn't it? It was.

Stretching for over 1600 miles, connecting the far reaches of the empire to the heartland, it facilitated the rapid movement of troops, messengers, goods, everything. I can only imagine how much that transformed communication and trade. It would have been a game changer.

Absolutely. It allowed for a level of interconnectedness and efficiency that was unheard of at the time. So he was connecting people, cultures, and ideas across vast distances.

It's like he was laying the groundwork for a globalized world centuries before the concept existed. He was definitely a visionary leader. And it wasn't all just about practicality and efficiency either.

Darius also invested in grand architectural projects, projects that showcased the wealth and power of the Persian Empire. Ah, yes. Like his magnificent palace at Persepolis.

Exactly. Persepolis. A masterpiece of Persian architecture.

It was envisioned as a grand ceremonial capital, a place to receive dignitaries from across the empire and showcase the splendor of Persian art and culture. I've seen pictures of Persepolis. It looks like something out of a movie.

It's absolutely breathtaking. It truly is. And the detail that went into the construction, the reliefs and sculptures that adorn the palace walls, tells us so much about Persian culture, their religious beliefs, even their interactions with other peoples.

It's like we're getting a glimpse into their world through these intricate carvings. We see their clothing, their rituals, their relationship with the natural world. It's fascinating.

So it wasn't just about power and conquest. They were also a people of art and beauty, builders and creators. They were.

And I think it's important to remember that amidst all the talk of battles and empires. Absolutely. But we can't forget about those battles, especially the one that was brewing with the Greeks.

Because while Darius was busy building his empire, there was a lot of tension simmering over in Greece, right? Oh, yeah, there was, especially in the Ionian city-states, those Greek settlements along the western coast of Anatolia. So these were Greeks living under Persian rule. Were they happy about that? Not exactly.

They were fiercely independent, and they resented Persian control. They felt their autonomy was being threatened, and they started to rebel. Oh, so they were poking the bear a little bit.

They were. And they definitely underestimated Darius's resolve. Their actions would eventually spark one of the most famous clashes in history, the Battle of Marathon.

Ah, Marathon, the battle that's practically become a legend. What was it about those Ionian Greeks that pushed Darius over the edge? Well, it started with the Ionian Revolt, where these Greeks, with some support from Athens, rose up against Persian rule. This infuriated Darius.

He saw it as a direct challenge to his authority, a slap in the face. So he decided to make an example of them. He did.

He assembled a massive army, sailed across the Aegean Sea, and made it very clear that he would not tolerate rebellion. So we have these two powerful forces, the Persians with their massive empire, and the Greeks, these fierce and independent city-states, on a collision course. What happened when they finally clashed at Marathon? The Battle of Marathon, 490 BC, was a clash of civilizations, a pivotal moment where the unstoppable force of the Persian Empire met the unyielding spirit of the Greeks.

And the outcome? It was far from certain, right? I mean, the Persians had the numbers; they had the resources. They did. But the Greeks had a secret weapon.

The Hoplites. The Hoplites! Those heavily armored Greek warriors. Tell me more about them.

They were the backbone of the Greek army. These disciplined infantrymen wore bronze armor, carried shields, and fought in a tightly packed formation known as a phalanx. Ah, the phalanx.

I've heard about that. Wasn't it like a moving wall of shields and spears? Exactly. Their discipline and training allowed them to move as a unit, presenting a formidable front to the enemy.

It's like they were a single armored organism. And this disciplined formation, combined with their superior tactics, would prove to be the key to their victory at Marathon. Okay, so how

did they actually pull it off? I mean, they were outnumbered, right? Did they have some kind of brilliant strategy? They did.

The Greek general, Miltiades, knew he couldn't win a straight-up fight against the larger Persian force. So he got creative. I like where this is going.

He strategically positioned his troops, strengthening his flanks, those sides of the formation, while intentionally weakening his center. Oh, so it's like he was luring them in. Exactly.

And the Persians, seeing this seemingly weak center, charged forward, thinking they had an easy victory in their grasp. Classic blunder. It was.

As the Persians pressed their attack, the Greek flanks, those strong, disciplined hoplites, swung around and enveloped the Persian forces. Like a pincer move. They trapped them.

Exactly. And then the disciplined Greek hoplites, with their superior weaponry and training, tore through the Persian ranks. The Persians were caught off guard, panicked, and their lines broke.

So the Greeks basically turned the Persian strength against them. Brilliant. It was a masterclass in tactical maneuvering.

The Persians were routed, driven back to their ships in a chaotic retreat. It was a decisive victory for the Greeks. Wow.

What a story. David and Goliath, Ancient Greek edition. It was a defining moment, not just for the Greeks, but for the course of history.

The victory at Marathon sent shockwaves through the ancient world. It showed that the Persians, this seemingly invincible force, could be beaten. The underdogs prevailed.

So what was the impact of this victory? I mean, for the Greeks, it must have been a huge boost to their morale. But for the Persians, a major blow to their pride. It was.

For the Greeks, Marathon solidified their sense of independence, instilled this incredible sense of national pride, and really marked their emergence as a major power in the Mediterranean world. Like a coming-of-age moment on the world stage. But for Darius and the Persians, this must have been a bitter pill to swallow.

Oh, absolutely. It was a humiliation. He had underestimated the Greeks, their determination, their fighting spirit.

And this defeat would fuel his desire for revenge, setting the stage for future confrontations. Oh, man. The plot thickens.

This clash of civilizations is far from over. Not at all. The Battle of Marathon was just the first chapter in a long and complex story, a story that would shape the fate of both Greece and the Persian Empire.

OK, so we've covered a lot of ground here. We've explored the rise of Darius, his administrative genius, his architectural achievements, and now this epic clash with the Greeks at Marathon. But the story doesn't end there, right? It doesn't.

There's so much more to uncover. The aftermath of Marathon, the legacy of the Persian Empire, and how their story continues to resonate even today. I'm ready for more.

This is fascinating stuff. Well, then you won't want to miss the next part of our deep dive. We'll be exploring the enduring impact of the Persian Empire, their cultural influence, their legacy of innovation, and how their story is still relevant in the 21st century.

Sounds like we've got a lot more to unpack. I can't wait. OK, so we're back, and we're still trying to wrap our heads around that Greek victory at Marathon.

It really was a turning point. I mean, the ripple effects were felt for centuries. It makes you wonder, right? What if the Persians had won? Would the world be completely different? It's a huge what-if in history.

Would Western civilization as we know it even exist? So even though the Persian Empire eventually declined, they still played a huge role in shaping the world. Oh, absolutely. I mean, their influence, it goes way beyond just battles and conquests.

OK, so besides trying to take over the world, what were their big contributions? Well, they were pioneers in so many areas. Administration, infrastructure, cultural exchange, you name it. OK, give me some examples.

Think about their satrapies, that system of provinces we talked about. It was incredibly innovative for its time. And their standardized coinage, that was a game changer for trade and economics.

Right, right. And the roads, the Royal Road, it's like they invented the concept of a highway system. Exactly.

They understood that to manage such a vast empire, they needed efficient ways to connect people and move goods and information. It's like they were laying the groundwork for a globalized world way before its time. Mind-blowing.

So what about their culture? What was their impact there? Oh, huge. The Persians were known for their exquisite art and architecture, their magnificent palaces, their vibrant religious traditions. Their influence spread far and wide, impacting cultures from Greece to India.

So it wasn't just about conquering and imposing their will on everyone. Not at all. The Persians were actually quite tolerant.

They encouraged cultural exchange and often adopted elements from the cultures they encountered. Really? That's pretty surprising for an ancient empire. I know, right? But they saw diversity as a strength.

They incorporated ideas from the Babylonians, the Egyptians, and the Greeks, creating this unique blend of traditions and styles. It's like they were masters of cultural integration. They were.

And I think there's a lot we can learn from that today. Yeah, about embracing differences and finding common ground. So as we wrap up our deep dive into the Persian Empire, what are some key takeaways? Well, I hope we've shown that the Persians were far more than just conquerors.

They were builders, innovators, and cultural ambassadors. And even though their empire eventually crumbled, their influence continues to echo through history. Exactly.

Their story reminds us that history is not just a collection of names and dates. It's a tapestry woven from the lives and experiences of countless individuals. And by exploring their stories, we gain a deeper understanding of our own place in the world.

It's like looking through a window into the past and seeing ourselves reflected back. In a way, yes. So I encourage you to keep exploring, keep asking questions, keep digging deeper into the past.

Because there's always something new to discover, right? A different perspective, a hidden connection. Well, this has been an incredible journey, uncovering the mysteries of the Persian Empire. I agree.

They left a lasting legacy, one that we're still grappling with today. Absolutely. It's been an honor to dive into their world with you.

And to our listeners, thank you for joining us on this deep dive. Until next time.