

Old Testament Backgrounds: Rise of Assyria

Author: Dr. Donald Fowler

Session 18

Sponsored by Biblecallelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Assyria, Ashurnasirpal, Shalmaneser, Qarqar, Ahab, Terror, Limmu, Arameans, Bit Adini

Abstract

This lecture by Dr. Donald Fowler explores the rise and expansion of the imperial Assyrian Empire from 911 to 612 BC, emphasizing its calculated policy of military terror and psychological intimidation to maintain control over conquered territories. It highlights key historical sources like the Assyrian king list and limmu (eponym) lists that provide precise ancient chronological anchors, while outlining the aggressive campaigns of monarchs such as Ashurnasirpal II and Shalmaneser III. Special focus is given to the historic Battle of Qarqar in 853 BC, where a massive western coalition led by King Ahab of Israel temporarily halted the Assyrian advance. Ultimately, the lecture contrasts human military strength and geopolitical alliances with divine sovereignty, illustrating that worldly power is fleeting before the purposes of God.

Outline

I. Introduction to Old Testament Backgrounds: Rise of Assyria

- A. Course context and background by Dr. Donald Fowler
 1. Taught approximately 75 to 100 times over 40 years
 2. Reflection on Assyria's horrific cruelty paired with immense historical success
- B. Geopolitical positioning of early Assyria
 1. Originally hemmed in by potent adversaries
 2. Vassalage to Mitanni ended through Hittite intervention (King Suppiluliumas)
 3. Key early kings: Shalmaneser I, Tukulti-Ninurta I (penetrated Persian Gulf, raided Carchemish)
- C. The Sea People's Movement as a historical turning point
 1. Destroyed Hittite power and created power vacuum
 2. Enabled Assyria to emerge as a major imperial power

II. Chronology and Historical Sources for Imperial Assyria (911–612 BC)

- A. The awakening of imperial power
 1. Reign of Tiglath-Pileser I (87th king, first long inscriptions, mentions Arameans)
 2. Two centuries of silence followed by Adad-Nirari I taking the throne in 911 BC
 3. Creation of supply dumps along campaign routes indicating long-term imperial strategy
- B. Primary extra-biblical literary sources

1. Assyrian King List
 - a. Three primary copies preserved
 - b. Traces 109 to 117 kings starting from Tudiya
 - c. Highlights the crucial historical function of genealogy in antiquity
2. Limmu (Eponym) Lists
 - a. Named each year after the king or high officials
 - b. Anchored by solar eclipse recorded during Ashurdan's reign (June 15, 763 BC)
 - c. Provides an exact consecutive timeline for ancient Near Eastern history

III. Imperial Expansion and the Policy of Calculated Terror

- A. Reign and expansion of Ashurnasirpal II
 1. Aggressive military campaigns from the Tigris to Mount Lebanon and the Mediterranean
 2. Construction of new royal capital at Kalakh (modern Nimrud)
 - a. Dedicated to god Ninurta
 - b. Massive palace covering six acres
 - c. Hosted 10-day banquet for 70,000 guests demonstrating unprecedented royal scale
- B. Systematic state terror as a political weapon
 1. Calculated intimidation designed to prevent rebellion and force capitulation
 2. Artistic depictions in Assyrian reliefs (muscular realism, worship of power)
 3. Specific torture methods documented in royal inscriptions and reliefs:
 - a. Flaying (skinning alive) of rebel leaders
 - b. Decapitation, displays of severed heads, and garlands around city walls
 - c. Building pillars covered in human skin, walled-in live captives, and impalement on stakes
 - d. Dismemberment, gouging out eyes, cutting off noses, ears, and limbs
 - e. Burning maidens and noble youths alive in fires
- C. Theological and biblical reflections on Assyrian brutality
 1. Comparison to modern totalitarian atrocities and terrorism
 2. Re-evaluating the Book of Jonah in light of centuries of Assyrian terror
 3. Understanding Jonah's reluctance and highlighting the radical scope of divine grace
 4. Complete and permanent collapse of Assyria (612–605 BC) due to universal hatred

IV. Administrative Evolution and Military Infrastructure

- A. Institutional development of empire
 1. Fortification of supply dumps into permanent garrisons
 2. Appointment of provincial governors serving as royal tax collectors
- B. Structure of the Assyrian military machine
 1. Professionalization of infantry, archers, and heavy war chariotry
 2. Distinctive attire, helmets, short/long garments, and high-mobility gear
 3. Role of eunuch court officials in imperial governance (identified by absence of beards, long hair, luxury garments)

V. Western Campaigns of Shalmaneser III and the Battle of Qarqar (853 BC)

- A. Shalmaneser III's westward push (858–824 BC)
 - 1. Subjugation of Bit Adini (House of Eden) and capture of Til Barsip
 - 2. Impact of Bit Adini's fall on galvanizing the western Aramean and Levantine states
- B. Formation of the Great Western Coalition
 - 1. Major alliance partners: Damascus, Hamat, Irqanata, and Israel (Ahab)
 - 2. Troop contributions: Total of ~50,000–60,000 infantry and 4,000 chariots
 - 3. King Ahab of Israel as the single largest chariot contributor (2,000 chariots, 10,000 infantry)
- C. Dynamics and historical significance of the Battle of Qarqar
 - 1. Unprecedented scale of military force in ancient world history
 - 2. Evidence for coalition victory / Assyrian setback:
 - a. Four-year gap (853–849 BC) before Assyria could launch another western campaign
 - b. Coalition held together through five consecutive major battles over 12 years
 - c. Absence of the battle from the biblical narrative (highlighting theological perspective over secular military pride)

VI. Theological Conclusion: Human Ambition vs. Divine Sovereignty

- A. Biblical portrayal of King Ahab's reign
 - 1. Ahab's secular success in international diplomacy and military coalition building
 - 2. Biblical focus on Ahab's conflicts with Arameans of Damascus and divine intervention
- B. Prophetic critique and the death of Ahab
 - 1. Warning of Micaiah the prophet against false prophetic flattery
 - 2. Random arrow shot by an unnamed Aramean archer guided by God to a seam in Ahab's armor
 - 3. Death of Ahab in his chariot despite disguised appearance
- C. Core spiritual lesson
 - 1. Human military might and strategic coalitions are ultimate failures apart from God
 - 2. Transient earthly glory (Qarqar) vs. eternal divine judgment and sovereignty