

Old Testament Backgrounds, Lecture 20: Demise of Assyria

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Keywords

Assyria, Sennacherib, Hezekiah, Rabshakeh, Lachish, Ashurbanipal, Zion Theology, Esarhaddon, Nineveh, Nebuchadnezzar

Abstract

This lecture examines the historical and biblical factors surrounding the rapid decline and ultimate collapse of the Assyrian Empire in the late seventh century BC. It analyzes King Hezekiah of Judah's ill-advised rebellion against Sennacherib, the taunting propaganda speech of Rabshakeh, God's miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem, and the subsequent development of Zion theology. The session further details the imperial expansions under Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal—highlighting Ashurbanipal's lasting legacy of establishing the ancient world's first great library at Nineveh—before concluding with the swift destruction of Nineveh and Assyria by the Medes and Babylonians.

Outline

I. Introduction to the Demise of Assyria

- A. Methodological perspective on studying ancient empires: grand scope spanning centuries
- B. Scope of Lecture 20: Concluding the Assyrian Empire and transitioning to the Neo-Babylonian era

II. Sennacherib's Campaign to the West (701 BC)

- A. Background and Hezekiah's coalition
 - 1. Removal of usurper Merodach-Baladan from Babylon by Sennacherib
 - 2. Hezekiah's shift from initial neutrality under Sargon to joining a coalition (Tyre, Egypt, Byblos, Arpad, Moab, Edom, Ammon, Ashkelon)
 - 3. Isaiah's prophetic warning against relying on Egypt (likened to a piercing reed)
 - 4. Hezekiah forcibly removes Padi, King of Ekron, who refused to join the rebellion
- B. Assyrian military advance and strategy
 - 1. Sennacherib captures Tyre, causing coalition members to flee
 - 2. Assyrian victory over Egyptian forces at Eltekeh on the coastal plain
 - 3. Divided army maneuver: Rabshakeh dispatched to besiege Jerusalem while Sennacherib commands coastal operations

III. The Siege of Jerusalem and Rabshakeh's Propaganda

- A. Rabshakeh's psychological warfare outside Jerusalem (Isaiah 36 / 2 Kings 18–19)
 - 1. Taunting Hezekiah's isolation and military helplessness
 - 2. Blasphemous assertions that Yahweh is powerless, citing historical conquests over all other national gods
 - 3. Delivering propaganda directly in Hebrew (Judean) to demoralize inhabitants on the wall
- B. Hezekiah and Isaiah's response
 - 1. Hezekiah's mourning in sackcloth and appeal to Isaiah the prophet
 - 2. Isaiah's divine oracle promising a rumor that will draw Sennacherib back to his homeland to be assassinated
- C. Divine intervention and aftermath
 - 1. Angel of the Lord destroys 185,000 Assyrians overnight (primarily military command and logistical personnel)
 - 2. Hezekiah surrenders heavy tribute (gold, silver, temple musicians, daughters, wives) to guarantee safety and prevent Sennacherib's return
- D. Theological and historical implications
 - 1. Purpose of deliverance: vindication of God's honor against blasphemy, not Judean righteousness
 - 2. Misinterpretation leading to flawed 'Zion Theology' (the false belief that Jerusalem could never fall)
 - 3. Devastating losses for Judah: 46 walled cities captured, 200,000 exiled, and Judean territory reduced by half
 - 4. Hezekiah's subsequent error in displaying temple treasures to Babylonian emissaries
 - 5. Lachish siege and relief reliefs in Sennacherib's palace illustrating Assyrian siege machinery and Judean deportations

IV. The Final Assyrian Rulers

- A. Assassination of Sennacherib (689 BC) and succession of Esarhaddon
 - 1. Sennacherib murdered by two sons; Esarhaddon returns from exile to secure the throne
 - 2. Esarhaddon rebuilds Babylon and expands empire into Lower Egypt (capturing Memphis)
 - 3. Continued conflict with Tirhakah, the Nubian Pharaoh of Egypt
- B. Reign of Ashurbanipal (668–627 BC)
 - 1. Peak territorial expansion: conquest of Thebes (No-Amun) in Egypt and sacking of Susa in Elam
 - 2. Suppression of rebellion led by his brother, Shamash-shum-ukin of Babylon
 - 3. The Royal Library at Nineveh

- a. Ashurbanipal's antiquarian passion and literacy in ancient Mesopotamian history
- b. Commissioning archaeological recovery and translation of Sumerian/Akkadian clay tablets into Neo-Assyrian
- c. Preservation of foundational ancient texts, including the Gilgamesh Epic
- d. Historical irony: an exceptionally brutal empire producing humanity's greatest library treasury

V. The Rapid Collapse of Assyria (639–609 BC)

- A. Scarcity of records and internal civil strife following 639 BC
- B. Capture of Ashur (614 BC) by Cyaxares the Mede
- C. Fall of Nineveh (612 BC) to combined forces of Medes and Nabopolassar of Babylon
- D. Final defeat of Assyrian remnants at Harran (609 BC) marking permanent end of Assyria and rise of Neo-Babylonian Empire