

The Empire Next Door: Assyria

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Preacher: Jon Belz

[0 : 0 0] I want to welcome you to our new Sunday School series, The Empire Next Door, on the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and the Persians. And I want to introduce John Belt. He's a PhD candidate in the Assyriology program at Yale.

He does cuneiform, all those clay tablets and stuff like that. His dissertation is on a Mesopotamian underworld deity, whom he's looking at. So he's going to be presenting, and I'd like to open in prayer, and then we'll get started.

Father in heaven, we want to thank you for this opportunity to study the world of your word. We pray that, Lord, as we learn about the peoples and the empires who coexisting with your chosen people of Israel, that we would grow in knowledge of you and of your works, of your promises, of your grace and your mercy, God.

We pray that you'd give words to John. We pray that you'd open our ears. And, Lord, we pray that we would flourish and grow in this time together. And we ask this in the name of Jesus.

Amen. Amen. All right. Good morning, everybody. Good morning. I hope everybody's doing well. This room is so white.

[1 : 1 2] It's very bright. I love it. Okay. So I wanted to focus a little bit, obviously, on the thing that I study, because that seems sort of self-obvious. But in part because this is one of those things that, you know, we read the Bible, and in particular the Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible, and we very frequently run into all these different people groups like the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Hittites, the Moabites, all these different people groups.

And you're like, I didn't learn this in history class. I don't know who these people are. Right? You get to the New Testament. We know what Rome is. Right? Maybe we did a little class on Rome or something. You know, Julius Caesar gets stabbed at the Ides of March.

Right? But we don't really learn too much about these particular people groups. So it becomes a lot harder sometimes when we're reading the Old Testament to really get a sense of what's going on? What does this world look like exactly? And so what I want to do over these couple weeks that we're sort of going through stuff together is to kind of give a bit of a picture of at least a couple of these people groups, some of the ones that I'm the most familiar with at any rate.

So we're going to look this week at Assyria. And next week we will look at Babylonia. And then after Easter we'll take a look at Persia. They're all three of them sort of big superpowers of the geopolitical scene at that time.

[2 : 3 8] And so they're going to be sort of a window for us into getting a better sense of what the world looks like historically at that time period. And hopefully this will provide a little bit of a framework then that we can then go and sort of add more stuff to it.

All right. So where I want to start with just a little bit of, again, sort of framework kind of stuff. How are we going to think about this a little bit? And the biblical text obviously is very much centered on Israel and Judah and very much concerned with what happens in their history and what God does in their, in the events of their history.

But what we often miss is that they're actually fairly smaller nations within the larger sort of geopolitical picture. So it's sort of like when we read the Bible we might get the idea that like, especially when you're reading about like David and Solomon, that, you know, ancient Israel is sort of like, maybe they're like the U.S. of their day or at least the Great Britain of their day.

It's a little bit different than that. But there's more sort of like larger empires on either side of them. So you have Egypt, for example, which we know from pyramids and mummies and all kinds of fun stuff like that.

And then there's the areas that I focus on more here in Mesopotamia, such as Assyria, Babylonia, all these big empires. And they're really the superpowers of the day, right?

[4 : 24] These are your Americas and your Chinas and your Russias a little bit. Like these are the superpowers, right?

And the Israelites are very much sort of smaller states sort of stuck in between them, right? So this is something I think is, I want to start here because I think this is something that's really worth keeping in mind as we go through some of this stuff because it's very easy to read about, for example, the glory days of Solomon in 1 Kings and think like, oh my goodness, this guy, it's like, it's a superpower.

They've got, you know, all this stuff that they're doing and so forth. But it's sort of, it's more on a relative scale. Solomon was, had a much more of a golden age compared relative to what they were used to.

So he had maybe more attention from superpowers than the others did, but it wasn't necessarily counted among them.

So another thing I want to focus on in terms of framework is just the geographic significance of where Israel and Judah are.

[5 : 40] So this is a famous map from, I actually forget where that's from, but it's from some European, I think it's German.

It's German. Yeah. Okay. Yeah. That's something in German. It's from some German manuscript. But it's a map of the world, which has the three, or at least the, the Eastern hemisphere, which has sort of Europe, Asia, Africa, and then Jerusalem is right in the middle.

And so it's very stylized, right? It looks like a little bit of like a, like a three leaf clover or something, but, but it is, it does very much represent what we have here where, um, can everybody see the screen?

Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay. Good. Um, Israel and Judah very much function as sort of sitting on this land bridge that is sort of sits between, again, Europe is up here, up here, Asia is over here, Africa is right here.

And a number of international sort of trade routes and highways run through that area. So they're small countries, they're not superpowers, but the big superpowers are highly interested in what's going on there, um, and in who gets to control the comings and goings that go through that area.

[7 : 03] So that's often why there's international interest in where Israel and Judah are. Um, even though they themselves are not necessarily big superpowers.

So those are just some things I want to sort of set the stage with. I know this is like highly complicated iron age geopolitics for a Sunday morning, but, uh, I think it's a good place to start there.

Um, the other thing I'm going to just also sort of say as, as a bit of framework is that, um, the, the, the place where I'm focused, because we're focusing on Assyria, Babylonia and Persia.

In terms of the historical narrative of the Hebrew Bible, we're going to be focused on parts that are closer to the end of it, right? There's, we could focus further back on some different things like the Exodus and we could talk about Egypt.

We could talk about Canaanites with the conquest of Canaan. Um, there's a lot of things we, we, we could talk about in this series. Um, but I've, I've chosen to focus on the sort of the divided kingdom period after the reign of Solomon and sort of moving from there.

[8 : 12] Part of the reason for that is simply because that lets me work on these three big empires. And part of that is also because that's when we have the most historical sources that help us locate Israel and Judah relative to these empires, right?

We have, we have earlier references, but to be able to construct more of a historical narrative, we have more sources from this period. So I thought I'd focus there. Okay.

That's enough frameworking and caveats and so forth. Let's, let's get into it. So like I said, I want to start first with Assyria, which some people have called the first world empire.

Depends on how you define a world empire, but sure. Um, and I want to start Assyrian history with the late bronze age, which I know everyone is familiar with.

Um, this is again, sort of an arbitrary starting point, but we're going to start here around the time of, we'll go back to here a sec. Around the time of sort of the, the, the, the exodus, the conquest and the period of the judges, that's the late bronze age.

[9 : 22] Um, and this is a period that was characterized, um, by a sort of what some historians have called like a league of great powers. Um, think of like Europe before world war one a little bit, right?

You have all these sort of, these big sort of, uh, colonial superpowers that kind of, they have alliances with each other and they have these very uneasy relationships with each other. And they often fight proxy wars by getting like little kingdoms that they're, you know, that they have control over to fight each other, this kind of thing. And the, the, the main players on that stage are Egypt, Babylonia, Assyria, uh, Mitanni and Hati.

Hati being the place where the Hittites come from. Um, and around 1200 BC, you don't really have to remember this because around 1200 BC, which is before we start, this league begins to break up.

And we could do a whole section on why that happens, but we're not going to. Um, some of these states go into sort of a decline.

[10 : 30] They, they're sort of, they're sort of reduced in their power. Um, and other ones are, other ones completely dissolve, right? So Hati, for example, just dissolves.

That's not a, it's not a state anymore. Um, Egypt survives. Babylonia and Assyria survive. Mitanni doesn't make it either. So with the, with the decline of some of these greater powers, that begins to let, if we go back to, oops, if we go back to here, with the decline of these greater powers, these guys aren't hitting the gym so much, right?

They're getting a little weak. That gives a little bit more space for this guy to get to the, to the gym, right? To get to the exercise equipment. So with the, with the decline of these powers, and again, this is happening around the time of the conquest, the judges, and into sort of the, the early monarchy period.

So Saul and David, and part of the reason that they have sort of room to operate without having too much trouble from some of these larger empires is simply, is because of this fact, because that this larger system has kind of broken down.

Um, and so smaller states like, uh, the Davidic kingdom in Israel have more room to, to function without larger powers trying to sort of muscle in on their territory.

[11 : 53] Um, but where this connects with, with our first superpower, Assyria, is that like the others, Assyria kind of goes into a bit of a decline. Um, and they have some difficulties for a while.

They have a lot of trouble with Aramean nomadic invaders and stuff like that. Um, but they also end up becoming the first of these larger powers to really get their feet under them again.

And so by about the, by about the 900s, uh, so this is again, around the time of like, around the sort of David Solomon a little bit, maybe after that time getting into Rehoboam a little bit.

Um, Assyria gets its feet under it again and starts to, they figure that they should probably try to reclaim all the territory that they have, that they used to have several hundred years ago that they don't have anymore.

And so they, um, begin sort of what, what some historians have returned, like their sort of reconquest, right? Um, like in Spanish historiography, if you know the term like Reconquista for when the, um, the Spanish tried to go through and, and take back a lot of the Iberian peninsula from, um, who they, people they saw, that they, they saw as, as Muslim invaders, right?

[13 : 20] Um, my, my advisor has termed this the Assyrian Reconquista because he thought that was clever. Um, so this is where, let's go blank screen.

Hmm. That's unusual. Oh, you know what?

I don't have internet. That's why. I don't remember the guest password.

Okay. Oh, is anyone who's in Hawaii? Uh, what about, uh, 630 state?

Yeah, yeah, 630 state, try 630 state. No space? No space? No space? No space? No space? The guy with no money, memory remembers the password.

[14 : 27] 630 state? 630 state? S-T-A-T-E. Yeah. Sure. Oh, it works.

Okay. Okay. Excellent. All right. Good memory. Yeah. Okay. Sorry about that, everybody. There it is.

Yay. Now we've got the rest of the slides. Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay. That's good. Ah, that's better.

Okay. So what I want to do is try to divide Assyrian history up into sort of three periods.

And again, this is all really schematic. This is not, um, we could, people could, people have taught whole courses on just this. Um, so, and I don't want to, you know, have to have you write a

research paper or take a test or anything.

So we're going to stick to the basics. Um, and so I want to divide Assyrian history in the history of this Assyrian empire into sort of three stages. So the first is this initial sort of reconquest period.

[15:45] Um, also, sorry, something I should have said earlier. Um, what I'm going to, what we're going to try to, what I'm going to try to do is talk a little bit about Assyrian history and a little bit about Assyrian culture, and then we'll focus a lot more on sort of specific areas where it connects with the biblical text.

So I should have started with that. Um, so we have the first period, which is the, the reconquest. We then have, um, sorry, which I should focus on here.

Um, they sort of begin in this Assyrian heartland. Which is sort of, again, the, the area that they have been sort of restricted to after the downfall of these sort of greater, the sort of league of great powers.

And they begin pushing particularly westward to try to get to the Mediterranean Sea to control the coast. There's lots of good trade ports there. Um, and also pushing south into Babylonia.

Um, two of the most prolific and, and ruthless Assyrian kings of that, that initial reconquest phase were Asher Nasser Paul II and Shalmaneser III.

[16:57] Um, I won't expect you to remember those names. That's, that's okay. Um, again, there's, there's no quiz. Um, they have lots of fun names. We're going to get a lot of fun names in this series.

Um, we then get, after the reign of Shalmaneser III, we get a period that we call sort of the intermediate period of the, of the strong governors, it's sometimes called.

Um, because, um, a lot of governors of some of these different Assyrian provinces that were now created as they were taking more territory, these governors begin to act fairly independently.

Um, and so the, the king himself has less power, uh, and can't do as much as many of the things as he wants to do. Um, and so we call that period the period of the strong governors, where again, they're not, they're not doing a whole lot.

They're kind of just sitting with the territory they have. Um, and then the final period is what I've termed the imperial supernova. And this is essentially beginning with, um, one particular king, Tiglat-Pileser III, um, who decides that he's tired of these strong governors and basically, uh, puts in a number of different sort of administrative reforms that really limit their power.

[18:14] So one of the things that he does is he takes the provinces that they had and he divides them. Um, so he says, oh, you've got this huge territory. Well, now that's actually three provinces and you're only a governor of one of them.

And you're going to be two more governors. So you have a lot less individual power. Um, so, and he also campaigned extensively into, uh, into Syria and down here towards, and we'll get into where he actually interacts with the biblical text in a little bit.

Um, and he also becomes the first Assyrian king who conquers southern Mesopotamia here, which we'll get to later, Babylonia, um, and declares himself not only the king of Assyria, but the king of Babylonia as well.

Uh, another king in this imperial supernova that we want to pay attention to is Sennacherib, whose name we might also know from the Bible.

Um, he launches a number of different campaigns into Babylonia because even though he was nominally the king of Babylonia as well as Assyria, the Babylonians didn't think he was king of Babylonia.

[19:26] And the Assyrians will have a hard time controlling Babylonia throughout their history.

Um, and Sennacherib eventually sacks the city of Babylon, which he, many people were not okay with, not just the Babylonians, but there were also Assyrian factions that didn't like that he did that.

His son Esarhaddon, uh, becomes the first Assyrian king who launches campaigns into Egypt. Uh, it doesn't seem like he really was, I have it on this map that he's sort of, that they are controlling Egypt, but at this point Esarhaddon's campaigns seem to be more like raids.

Because Egypt was a very wealthy area and they figured they could go in, steal a bunch of stuff and get out. Um, and also it's very difficult to cross the Sinai Desert. So the logistics of that campaign was difficult.

So it was more of a raid. Uh, Esarhaddon also rebuilt the city of Babylon after his father Sennacherib had destroyed it. Um, and then his son, Ashurbanipal, who was the last great king of

Assyria, um, is mostly remembered for creating a giant library in the, in the capital city of Nineveh. Um, and it was the discovery of the, the ruins of that library, uh, in the mid-1800s that really gave birth to, to my field, Assyriology.

[20 : 45] Because that was the first major text group that we had that people said, hey, we should try to read these things. Um, and then the end of the Assyrian empire, which we'll also touch on a little bit next week when we talk about Babylonia, uh, is that after a number of several centuries of suffering under the yoke of the Assyrians, um, the Babylonians down here, am I the slide of this?

No? Okay. Hold on. Um, you know what? I'm going to do this way. I'll show you a little bit of my map from next time. This is the map of the, the, the end of Assyria.

The Babylonians, um, who again are just sick and tired of the Assyrians continually trying to take over them and, and keep them in their empire. They team up with another group called the Medes who live up here in the Zagros Mountains in what is today Iran.

And the two of them, um, launch a series of campaigns during a, during a particular period where Assyria was rather weak and, um, managed to destroy most of the capital cities in the Assyrian heartland.

Um, and we'll then talk about how Babylonia takes over from the Assyrians next week. Sneak preview. So that's the end of the Assyrian empire.

[22 : 12] Oh, those were the kings that I just mentioned. I should have showed that slide. And this is a picture of an Assyrian king from a, uh, palace wall carving. John, we have, there are some Assyrian, am I right in saying there's some Assyrian, uh, things on display at the Yale Art Gallery?

Or is that that one? Yes. So there are, um, if you go to the Yale Art Gallery and you go to the, the ancient art section off to the right there when you first go in, um, they have some wall carvings similar to this.

I thought I had a picture of them and I was going to have those up there so that you could see what you should go look for at the UOG, but, um, I didn't have a good picture of the whole thing.

So, um, they have, actually those, those are wall reliefs from the palace of Assyrian Assyrian, who was one of the, those first kings in the reconquest phase that I mentioned.

So I want to talk a little bit about, that's sort of a quick framework of Assyrian history, very, very brief summary of it.

[23 : 23] Again, you can read whole books on the topic. Um, I'm going to talk a little bit about their, their culture now. Um, and there's some fun pictures that we can look at, like me being scared of this giant stone bull.

Uh, this is in, um, Chicago, by the way. That's the, that's not where the palace was built. That's where they have the stone. The Assyrians didn't conquer Chicago. I'm going to make that clear.

Yeah. We don't think. So because of their sort of the, the, their very expansion, focus on expansion and their very expansionistic nature, the Assyrians had a very powerful military.

They were very militaristic. Um, my advisor who is, is German has described them as the Prussians of, of the ancient Near East. Um, so they were not only known for their militarism, but for their, their cruelty.

I mean, a lot of, um, different civilizations and states in, in the, in the ancient world were not necessarily known for being nice people. Uh, you can find all kinds of stories of cities being sacked and things like that.

[24 : 38] But, um, the Assyrians really made sort of, they were really proud about just how cruel and ruthless they were in some, in some senses. Uh, so for example, um, Asher Nasserpal, who's, um, again, reliefs are here at the Uwg and, um, um, was one of these kings of the, the, the Reconquista phase.

He has a, when he was sort of marching through his campaigns through this area right here, um, he has a lengthy inscription describing that in which he basically goes through and is like, and then we took this city and I took all the captured soldiers and I skinned them and I took all the governors and I impaled them and I rounded up all the young men and women and I burned them alive.

And he does this city by city. Um, not a very nice guy. Um, and again, this is, this is just something that the Assyrians were particularly known for.

And in some ways, uh, it seems that it was, they weren't just, I'm not going to say they were particularly, you know, mean, brutish people, but it was something that they did intentionally as a form of psychological warfare.

They figured that, uh, you could keep a place conquered if you scared them a lot. And so they would do a lot of terrible things. Uh, well, one thing I'll, I'll say again too about their, their sort of conquest and reconquest, um, thing is they, when they began their, what they viewed as a reconquest, a lot of the places that they were reconquering were places that never really thought that they were part of Assyria.

[26 : 18] So they would go into a place and say, you guys are rebels. You're not submitting to the king of Assyria. And those places would say, but like, we're an independent nation state.

Um, we're not part of Assyria. And the Assyrians would say, well, you guys are rebels and we're going to treat you like rebels because you won't submit. And so there was, um, uh, a bit of sort of a propaganda game going on there where the Assyrians tried to style everything as a, they tried to style it a bit as a defensive war, uh, in the sense that they were, all they were doing is just, they're just putting down rebels.

That's all they are. And these people, they, they rebelled. What do you mean they rebelled? Well, they wouldn't pay me tribute. Oh, okay. Um, so when you read their inscriptions, they, they focus very much on this fact.

Um, or what they see as a fact that these people are, are not just living their lives and that they're coming in as an outside force. They are simply, they're simply invoking the rule that's always been there or trying to restore the rule that's always been there.

One of the other sort of, um, things that they would do, uh, as a, as a sort of part of this sort of calculated frightfulness, as one historian called it, was, uh, a policy of mutual, what we call mutual deportation, which is, um, if they conquered people in this area, they would grab a whole bunch of people from that area and they would take them to this area and they would settle them there.

[27 : 58] And if they fought people here, they would grab a bunch of people from there and move them up there. And what that did was it basically, it broke up the ability for people to be able to stage any kind of resistance because they just lost a whole bunch of their own people.

And those people who'd been taken away were moved to a place that was no longer home for them. They didn't have home field advantage. Uh, and historians debate about just how extensive this shift of demographics was because they did this all over the near East, moving people around from one place to another to sort of make it easier to rule them.

Um, um, okay. So, one of the other things is that, um, since they were conquering a lot of this territory and what they really wanted from this territory was tribute and taxes.

Um, and they would take all this wealth, they would move it to the center, to the, to their heartland, to their capital cities. And they, they tended to use it for, um, well, the wealth was put at the disposal of the king, right, who then made sure that, like, all his supporters got paid.

And they also used it to build, um, really mind-bogglingly cool palaces, um, with giant, scary stone bulls in.

[29 : 23] Um, this is from, like I said, this is in Chicago now, but it's from Sargon II's palace. Um, and yeah, I mean, they had palaces full of artwork like this and statues like this.

And this, again, was, they used the wealth that they got from people to build these kind of things. And then they, in turn, used that as a further tool of empire.

So when you send a delegation to the Assyrians and you have to walk through a palace that has things like that in it, or these, these, this is from the, these are from the Louvre, um, in Paris.

And this is me trying to imitate this guy holding a lion cub. Um, I didn't have a cat, so I just held my bag like that. So, um, it would have been, um, a pretty awe-inspiring place.

And, uh, some of the, I don't have any good pictures of them, unfortunately, but some of the wall reliefs that were in these palaces were of conquests themselves. So they would be like, here is a depiction of us when we conquered that one city, and then we killed everyone inside.

[30 : 37] And if you're an emissary from another country, that would make you think twice about supporting a rebellion, or you'd go back to your home country and say, hey, I just saw depictions of all the things they do to the people who don't pay tribute, so we'd better make sure we have our tribute ready for next year.

So this was all, again, part of this sort of calculated frightfulness as a way of, as a method of wealth extraction. The Assyrian kings, uh, themselves were, as you can imagine, highly autocratic.

Uh, the king himself was viewed as the high priest of the Assyrian chief deity, Ashur. Uh, and in his inscriptions, uh, described about himself, where he talks about his campaigns, he's often, they often

would portray themselves as a sort of, like, idealized superman.

Right, so the Assyrian king will talk about, you know, I went into this mountainous territory, uh, with my armies, and the rest of the army started lagging behind because the territory was difficult, but me and my bodyguards, we went on ahead, and we met the enemy before the rest of the army got there, and we put them to flight, and the rest of the army showed up just as the battle was over, and this kind of thing.

Um, they really liked to try to convince you that they were the one who had single-handedly done everything. It was very much sort of a, a strongman kind of, um, aesthetic that they, they sort of, uh, uh, strove for.

[32 : 11] Um, I talked a little bit about some of these wall reliefs already. Um, there's four different Assyrian capital cities.

Um, their city of Ashur, which is also the name of their deity, and Ashur is also the word we get Assyria from, so Ashur is the name of the country, and it's the name of their city, and it's the name of their god.

Um, so that was their sort of main capital for a while, and throughout Assyrian history, it was sort of their religious capital. It was where their deity, Ashur, was centered.

Um, Ashur Nasapal II moved the capital to a place called Kalhu, um, which shows up in the, in the Bible as Kalach in a couple places. Sargon II built a capital city that he called Fort Sargon because he was a little fool of himself.

And then, um, Sennacherib moved the capital to Nineveh, which we also know from the Bible. Um, okay, so let's move on to some biblical connections.

[33 : 19] Um, there's a ton of places where all these different empires will show up in, in the biblical world. What I wanted to do, um, for each one is kind of just give some good places to start.

Where does this, where, where, how does what we just talked about line up with anything that's in the Bible? Um, and sort of going through chronologically, um, Shalmaneser III, who was one of these kings of the, oops, of the reconquest here.

Um, the last king that really sort of expands in the, in the reconquest before they get to the period of strong governors. When he's marching through a campaign around this area here in North Syria, um, we have, uh, an account in some inscription, in an inscription, uh, of a coalition of different smaller states, uh, including, um, an Aramean state centered in Damascus.

And, uh, King Ahab of Israel shows up there. Um, and they formed a coalition against the Assyrians, and they actually seem to have beaten them. So, Shalmaneser III's advance was stopped, um, by this coalition.

And the coalition broke up soon afterwards. They all started fighting with each other. But what's interesting is this episode doesn't, doesn't show up in the Bible. Um, so, um, what was I going to say on that?

[35 : 01] Yeah. So it's a reminder that there's a lot more things going on than what we have preserved in the biblical text as well. Um, but it's also interesting to think about this king that we know, um, uh, occurs in the Bible and is the guy that, you know, Elijah is yelling at all the time that, um, he went to war against the Assyrians.

Uh, a little bit later, some things we do have attested in the Bible. Um, our old friend Tiglap Pileser, the one who divided up the power of these strong governors so that he had more rule as an autocratic king.

Um, he, um, ends up coming down and annexing the Galilee, which was the northern part of the northern kingdom of Israel.

Um, and at the time he also destroyed Damascus, uh, because the Aramean state in Damascus and the northern kingdom of Israel were allies. So he did that.

And at that time, um, King Ahaz of Judah sort of, uh, started sending Tiglap Pileser tribute to keep him from sending a campaign there.

[36 : 14] Um, and we know this again in, in second Kings, it talks about this. Um. Um, the Assyrians just finished, finished destroying the northern kingdom of Israel in 721, which we have recorded in, in second Kings as well.

So we get this sort of effect where, well, let's go on to Sennacherib first. So, about 20 years later, our old friend Sennacherib, who moved the capital to Nineveh and destroyed Babylon, uh, comes down to Jerusalem and attempts to besiege it.

And we have a rather lengthy account of that in second Kings and, um, in which he doesn't manage to take the city because his army is destroyed. Uh, and we have in his own inscriptions, he also recounts this, this campaign, although he neglects to mention anything bad happening to his army. He talks about all the cities that he conquered on the way, and then he got to Jerusalem and he surrounded the city and Hezekiah was trapped in the city like a bird in a cage, and then he left. Think of that what you will. Um, so we get this picture. One thing I like to talk about in, in, before we hit these last two is that we, we get this, this image a little bit, as, as, as the history progresses and as we read through the book of Kings, we get, you can see the, the Assyrians sort of progressing, right?

[37 : 56] Again, Kings starts with the reign of Solomon and things are great and Solomon is super smart and all these different countries like send gifts and emissaries and things to him.

And, as things go on, the Israelites fight amongst themselves and you get a civil war. And Israel and Judah split. And then they get more and more wars with people like the Arameans and the Edomites and different people in this area here.

And slowly, slowly, slowly, slowly, you start to hear something on the horizon. And in the text, you can kind of see it as they get closer and closer and closer.

And I was going to say by the end of the book, they're there, but by the end of the book, it's the Babylonians who are there. So, I think this is, this is helpful for us in a way, too, that helps us sort of see some, some of the, the structure of what's happening in, in the book of Kings.

And the last two things I'll hit and then we'll move on to Q&A.; Is that the, the Assyrians also show up in a number of prophetic works.

[39 : 08] So, the fairly short prophetic book of Nahum consists almost entirely of oracles that celebrate Assyria's demise. So, after it falls to the Babylonians and the Medes, Nahum, like a lot of people around the Near East, was very, very happy about that.

And describes it as God's judgment on the Assyrians for all the cruelty that they inflicted on people. And, um, then of course we have Jonah, who is called to deliver a message to Nineveh, one of the Assyria's capitals.

And, um, and we all know that, you know, Jonah didn't want to go there. Uh, and it's, um, not hard to understand why. Especially when their kings are bragging about the things they do to their enemies, and God tells him to go and preach a message of mercy to them.

Um, um, I, I can't say I wouldn't have done the same thing, to be honest. Um, okay, so this is, I know this has been kind of a pretty quick sort of breeze through a lot of history and a lot of pictures of funny stone bulls and things.

Um, but does anybody have any questions or, or, yeah? Yeah, in the back. Where does, why was Manasseh in the middle of this?

[40 : 37] Which king was he dealing with? Yeah. So, Manasseh was, um, let's see. So, Manasseh was the son of Hezekiah, right?

And Hezekiah is the one who interacts with Sennacherib during his campaign. And so, um, Manasseh was, was king during part of Sennacherib's reign and part of Eserhaddon's reign, I believe.

And he, we have, we actually have records from both, I think, at least Eserhaddon and maybe Sennacherib, I can't remember now, but, um, of Manasseh sending them tribute. Yeah.

Could you go to the map that you have of Syria and Babylon? Yeah, that one there. Could you point out where Nineveh is? Sure. So, Nineveh is, like, right in here.

Okay, now, the question I have for you is, as we know, Jonah was swallowed by a large fish. Mm-hmm. And the fish, you know, vomited him out onto the shore.

[41 : 44] Mm-hmm. That's very north of any shore that I can see. Yeah. So, could you explain that? I always wondered about that. Yeah. So, one of the things that I think is really interesting with, with the book of Jonah is that it takes a very sort of international and, like, um, a very sort of global view of things, right?

Like, so he's living here in Israel and God says, go to Nineveh, which is over there. Right? And then he says, no. And he gets on a ship and he's going to Tarshish, which is out here somewhere, right?

And, and, and these are just, these, these happen in, in, in, like, a matter of sentences, right?

It's like one sentence he's here, one sentence he's on a ship headed this way. Right? And then he gets in the water and he's in the fish and then the fish spits him up on land. And then all of a

sudden, boom, a sentence later, he's in Nineveh. And this is, one of the things that I think the book of Jonah does well is it sort of, um, it, it presents things as sort of, um, um, moving very quickly across great geographic distances.

It's, I, I'm trying to think of it like another, sort of like a, like a, another like literary example. Maybe like the red line in Indiana Jones. Yeah, exactly. That's a great way to describe it.

It's like the, the red line in the Indiana Jones movies where you get, you know, there's a map and there's the red line showing where they're going. And there's like, you know, this sort of, um, semi-translucent airplane in the background, you know, so you know that they're traveling.

[43 : 09] So you're right. Like Nineveh is very far from the shore. Um, but the, the book of Jonah is very quickly having him travel that distance. Right? And I think it's part of the effect that the book is trying to have, which is this just with how big the world is, how small in some senses it is as well.

And the fact that, um, you're getting a little bit of, maybe a bit of sort of a God's eye perspective in that where, you know, God has no problem appointing it.

Like Jonah thinks he can run away from God, but God appoints the fish to swallow him, to spit him back up, God's watching him in Nineveh, God's watching him when he's in Israel, it doesn't matter. And so it, it, it makes it much smaller. You know, again, you, you can compare it, you can, you can contrast it a little bit with, you know, the much greater sense of distance that you get in say, like in, in the patriarchal narratives in Genesis where we'll have like Jacob traveling somewhere and it's like, and then he walked and he's camped here and he slept on a rock and had a dream of angels. And then he got up and walked some more. And we, we, we get all of the, all of the traveling there, which we don't get in Jonah. So it's quite a trip to how many miles would it be from the shore to the river?

[44 : 27] Um, I don't actually know. Um, I would, I would think that that would take a good, I don't know, week, two, it depends how much you travel and, and using what, but probably a good week or more.

Um, yeah, John. Do, do, do we have a sense as to what made them so militarily successful? Was it particular military technology that, that, that they had the advantage of? Was it administrative prowess? So they were able to do the logistics, were, were, you know, superior tactics or, or some sort of strategic, uh, insight.

Do we, uh, what, what gave the Assyrians seemingly the upper hand over, over their, their surrounding neighbors? Yeah. So I, I think there's a, there's a, there's a couple things that go into that.

One of them is, um, like I said, we had, part of the reason I, so part of the reason I started with the late bronze age is that these are all big superpowers. Assyria happens to be the first one of them that kind of gets things moving again, right?

[45 : 51] So it's sort of like you have a bunch of people running in a race, right? And they all trip and fall at the same time. And Assyria is the first one that gets back on its feet and starts running again. So even though Babylonia is also a strong runner, they're still on the ground trying to get up.

And since Assyria was the first one to get up and start running again, they've also kicking Babylonia to keep them from getting up as fast. So, so there's, there's, there's that. Um, they were also able to field a very, they were able to field a professional army, um, which a lot of places could, a lot of, you know, we think of armies as being very professional.

Armies were often conscript in the ancient world. Um, it took a lot of resources to fund a professional army and the Assyrians did that. Part of the reason they wanted tribute, then they had more money to spend on their army.

Um, and administratively as well, they also developed a lot of administrative, um, capabilities and logistical capabilities that allowed them to be able to do things.

They also developed, um, pretty advanced siege warfare. So we have in some of these wall carvings where they're attacking a city, you know, we see these big siege engines that they've built and they're coming up and they're knocking down parts of walls and they've got, you know, guys climbing up and trying to get over the, over the walls from these siege towers and stuff and stuff that we don't often think about until the medieval period.

[47 : 16] Where was the wheel invented? Wasn't it in Babylon or in Syria? That would be, um, well, so it would be this geographic area, um, but a long time before this.

A long time? Yeah. Um, weren't the Assyrians the first ones to use iron weapons? Yeah, so, um, that also may have played a role in it.

They, so this was around the time that iron begins to replace bronze and they may have been the ones who, maybe not the first people to use it, but certainly the first people to really sort of say like, hey, let's make sure everybody's got iron weapons and everybody's got iron armor in our military. Right? So they're, they're the first ones to really, yeah, it's, it's sort of like the machine gun around World War I. Right? Like people had been like, hey, look, this is cool.

You can make a gun that shoots lots of bullets. Right? But if you have a certain army that really manages to integrate that into its, into its military structure, that's, that's what you need.

[48 : 21] And the Assyrians were able to do that. Yeah, Tom. I've always been fascinated by the kind of failed invasion of Judah or conquering of Jerusalem.

And I just note that in the Bible, the Bible talks about a lot of miracles, but there's not a lot that are like a lot of miracles that are like geopolitical miracles where it's this international kind of event. And that's one of them. And it's fascinating to me that, you know, the emperor of Assyria is coming down at his inscription and he's killing everybody, skinning people, you know, all that horrible stuff and then doesn't do it to Jerusalem in, according to his own inscription, which, which seems to match up with the biblical account.

And I was wondering what a Syrian scholar suggests as to why this, why it failed. Like, what are the reasons? I mean, the Bible says God sent an angel and killed a bunch of people.

And that, I guess, from a biblical point of view, could angels take different forms? You know, who knows what's actually going on there? But what do scholars tend to suggest? What do you think?

[49 : 28] Yeah. Yeah. So there's a number of different things that have been suggested. Um, sticking closer to the sort of angel struck everybody dead, um, would be something like a plague.

Right. Which I think also, why couldn't an angel take the form of a plague? Right. You know, this is very common. Armies that are besieging cities, like throughout history, like disease is a problem. Right.

Um, so plague is one possibility that people look at. Um, some people have suggested, some historians have suggested as well that you could have had an army coming up from Egypt.

I don't buy that one personally. Um, historically much, you know, um, some people have suggested that, um, there may have been some problems going on at home and Sennacherib had to leave, but it would seem to me that, because they'd done that before and they were able to always leave some remaining contingent to continue a siege.

So why didn't they do it there? Um, there's a number of different theories. Some people think that, um, Hezekiah was able to pay Sennacherib because it does seem that, um, so the, the, there is a spot in Kings where, where Hezekiah pays Sennacherib a bunch of tribute and it matches up surprisingly well with what Sennacherib says he got in tribute from Hezekiah, um, after the fact.

[51 : 03] And so some people think that that may have happened after the siege and that Hezekiah got him to go away. But a vengeful, that, I also don't like that one because Sennacherib seems like such a vengeful guy.

I don't think he would care. Um, so there's a number of, I'm, I'm in the, speaking as a historian, I'm in the camp of people who says something happened.

Something, something happened to the army. Um. But the, uh, you mentioned plague and I'm reminded of the plagues of Egypt and how, and at least especially the final plague, an angel or some supernatural being carried that out, whatever it was.

But anyway, that's interesting. It's fascinating. Yeah. We had another question over here. I think somewhere. This is sort of, I don't know, maybe ignorance. Can you, can you say what the countries are today?

I know they can split up. Sure. You know, dividing up and so on. Yeah. So, Egypt is still Egypt, right? Um, where Israel and Judah are is currently where Israel and Palestine are today.

[52 : 14] Uh, Syria is right here. Not Assyria, just Syria. Yeah. And then here we have Iraq, Iran, Turkey. Those are sort of the main, the main ones.

And the northern part, uh, the northern part, what is that? In here? Yeah. This is Turkey today. The other part, over to the right part.

Oh, furthermore. There. Um, Turkey and then up into Armenia and Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan. This might be out of the, out of the period, but when, when does Partha come into it?

When does? Partha. Parthia. Parthia. Um, not till a bit later. Yeah. So, we're gonna, we're gonna hit, um, this, this series could be a lot longer.

We're gonna do Assyria, Babylonia, and the Achaemenid Persians. We could keep it going. We could do Alexander the Great and his successor states. And then after that, you get Rome on this side of the Near East and Parthia on this side.

[53 : 21] Okay. And we could keep going with that. Yeah. If we wanted to. Okay. Yeah. Who was the king during Jonah time? Um, we're not entirely certain.

It doesn't, it doesn't say anywhere in the book of Jonah. Jonah is mentioned in the book of Kings, but we also don't know exactly when he would have gone, like in terms of specific year, that he would have gone to Nineveh.

Uh, and during this, so he, he is probably in this intermediate period of strong governors. That's, I think if I remember correctly, that's around the time that he's mentioned in the book of Kings.

And the, the Kings in that era also rule for shorter periods of time. So we're not quite sure. That makes me think of a discussion I had with a friend one time, like, is there evidence for, like, a change in Assyrian policy after the supposed, well, the Bible says that Nineveh repented and like, as a whole city.

Um, none that I know of at any rate.

[54 : 42] Um, also how long did Nineveh stick around as a city after that? Well, down until the, this, cause this is, this is probably all happening before the Imperial Supernova.

Right. So Nineveh is there until the Medes sack it. So. Yeah, Tom, you had another question. How many different resources of information on, um, these different, um, empires do we have? Because those that do the conquering write the history a lot of times. So how, how do we, how can, how can we know what the, what, what the right perspective, what any, what the various perspectives, or we'll put it that way.

Right. Right. So this is, um, well, first of all, this reminded me too, I wanted to show, this is a copy of one of Sennacherib's inscriptions. Um, I think this is the, the text where he mentions his campaign to Jerusalem.

[55 : 52] Um, so we, we do have a lot of texts. Um, some of them are written from the Assyrian point of view. Some of them are Babylonian texts written from the Babylonians point of view.

Um, one of the things that also makes this time period, really interesting. And part of the reason I, I like this particular period of, of near Eastern history is that we're still in this ancient world, but because of things like the Bible, we're also getting a different perspective.

So we, aside from the Babylonians, we don't get a lot of perspective from the peoples who were sort of suffering these Assyrian conquests.

But because we have the biblical texts and we have accounts from the book of Kings and we have Nahum being really, really happy about the Assyrians being destroyed. Right.

Um, we're getting a little bit of the sense of, of how these people, how the, how the people who were on the other end of the Assyrian spears, basically, um, what they thought about things, how they felt about, how they tried to sort of navigate that world.

[57 : 01] So we have that, but this is, I mean, this is something ultimately that you have in, in a lot of historical periods. Right. Is, you know, oftentimes you have the sources of the winners and less so from the people who aren't the winners.

Yeah. There's another question in here somewhere. Yeah. Back there. You described a wave, you described the Assyrians as a wave kind of slowly coming south. Uh, and I know you said that there was a 20 year gap interval between the destruction of Northern Israel and the siege of Judah.

But like, is there like overall, how long did that wave take? Like, is this like from maybe the time when they, when the Judeans might first have heard that they might be under threat? Yeah.

So it takes a, it takes a while. I, I would, I would, I would call that wave sort of like a, an arc that you can see throughout the whole book of Kings.

Um, it's, it's something that, uh, it sort of, it happens bit by bit, right? You sort of, you hear that they're sort of out there, right?

[58 : 06] Again, Ahab heard enough about them that he joined a coalition against them. Right. And this is, this is 853. Right. So that's 150 years before Sennacherib actually makes it to the gates of Jerusalem.

So this is a very slow wave, but it's definitely happening. And even some of the earlier prophetic texts like Amos, for example, um, Amos preaches a lot of judgment on the Northern kingdom for the way that they treat the poor and the, the oppressed and the marginalized in their society.

Um, and he doesn't come out and say like, if you don't do this, the Assyrians specifically are going to come in and take you over. But he does seem to say like, something is going to happen.

Like God is not going to stand for this and we are not going to be able to, like, we are going to, to suffer if we do not, um, take care of each other.

Okay. So there does seem to be, even from the sort of earlier prophetic corpus, this idea that like there's danger on the horizon. The history is always written by the victor, right?

[59 : 15] I mean, uh, and I guess the Bible to a certain extent, uh, is some history in the Bible, uh, especially in the Old Testament. Um, we have different powers in this area, all writing about, uh, what has happened.

Um, based on reviewing the different powers and different history written by the different powers, how accurate would you say is the history in the Bible? Um, so we do get a lot of things where, like, part of the reason I bring up Sennacherib and his siege of Jerusalem is that that is one of these rare examples where we have a biblical text and a non-biblical contemporary text talking about the same historical event.

But there are a lot of things where we only have one text talking about them. Um, in general, I would say the, the, the biblical narrative, um, tracks pretty well with what we find.

Um, there's details that we can quibble about. But, in general, it's pretty good.

John, would you also say that, well, I mean, you mentioned this, but one of the issues is, like, I deal with this, uh, in early Christian history, too, is that so frequently, like, we have one voice speaking, telling us something, and then, and then whenever we have multiple voices, they don't always, they don't agree with each other.

[60 : 47] And so you have to, it's just like, if you, if you read some very, you know, kind of, like, propaganda today about one issue, and then the same issue from another perspective, you get these different, and you've got to figure out, okay, what's going on?

And, um, I, I think we can trust the, the biblical record. But the, teasing out, like, the Sinatra thing is a great example of that, where you have these different perspectives. Maybe that, you can make them agree.

I mean, you can make them completely agree. Or you can say, well, maybe, maybe the external record is, is a propaganda version, and the biblical record is more accurate.

Or maybe we can, we actually can reinterpret what the Bible is saying here, based on this other evidence. Mm-hmm. So instead of an angel with a big sword, maybe it's talking about a plague that the angel is initiating, like, happened in Egypt.

Yeah. And I'll say, too, to, so I agree with that 100%. And we'll say, to come back to this question, too, I think it also, it does depend on, um, it also depends on what part of the biblical corpus we're looking at.

[61 : 46] Right? Like, the Psalms, for example. The Psalms are poetry. So are the Psalms historically accurate? Well, they're, they're poetry. So, unless a, unless a, unless a poet, unless a poem is claiming to be, like, a poetic rendering of history, then it's hard to, to judge it on that, on that basis.

But in terms of the, the corpus we're looking at here, of looking at kings specifically, um, then I'd say, I would say, yeah, it's, it's pretty good.

Um, there's definitely, like, like, like Tom said, there's, there's things we can, places where we can sort of say, like, there's something that's more complicated that's going on here, there's something that, um, or there's sort of like, well, here the sources are at odds, and as a historian, I don't know what to do with them.

Um, but in general, I'd say it's pretty good. I have a question. Um, I, I don't know if it relates to the different time periods that you're talking about, but how did most people record, on what did they record the history on?

Like, I know there's papyrus written in the, you know, papyrus and pots, and what, what, what did they use to record their history on most of the time? Yeah, so part of the reason that we have so many sources from the Assyrians and the Babylonians and some of these groups is that they wrote, um, in this cuneiform script on clay.

[63 : 16] This is, they would impress this in clay, and then an object like this, they would then fire it in a kiln, right? So that's, that's as, that's as hard as your coffee mug at home, right?

So you bury that in the ground for 3,000 years, you can dig it up. It's still there, right? You're going to see it, yeah. Um, whereas if, if you write on papyrus or parchment or things like that or some form of paper, that doesn't last as well unless it's a really dry climate.

So part of the reason, for example, that, like, the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in those caves in Qumran is because that is one very, one tiny part of that area in, in Israel that is incredibly dry. Wow. And so if you, people could well have hidden, um, scrolls in caves all over the country, but only there would they survive relatively intact for 2,000 years.

Because of the climate. Because of the climate, yeah. Yeah. So one of the things that will happen, and we'll get to this when we get to the Persians, is that they begin to move away from writing records in cuneiform to writing in Aramaic inked on, on some form of parchment or papyrus or paper.

[64 : 30] Mm-hmm. And so all of a sudden our historical records start to drop off a little bit. And it's not that people weren't writing, it's that the writing medium didn't survive. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

And so, and we also have this problem, too, when looking at the ancient Israelites, because they probably wrote a lot, if they wrote historical records, they would have written them on something like papyrus as well.

But we don't have that. Right? And so we have a lot more contemporary sources from cultures like this, um, whereas we don't have, you know, an early copy of Deuteronomy, for example, because it just wouldn't have survived.

Hmm? Did the Assyrians write about their gods? Oh, yes. And was there anything about their theology that made it, you know, just apart from a competing god that's a foreign god that is the god of that king that made them particularly offensive to the Israelites?

I mean, you have that sort of direct head-to-head conflict. Yeah. Yeah. So this is our god, that's their god, but how are they different? Yeah. So they were, they were a polytheistic society.

[65 : 43] They had, um, one of the things with polytheism, and particularly as it, as we find it in Mesopotamia, is that you, you often get this case where you have, um, people will worship a bunch of gods, but sometimes a particular area or a particular city has a chief god or one particular god that's associated with it.

So for the Assyrians, it was the god Ashur. And Ashur was, again, sort of associated with their city itself and with their state itself. But they worshipped a whole bunch of other different deities as well. And, um, one of the interesting things is it doesn't seem that they, they didn't go into a place and say, you guys all need to start worshipping Ashur. They would let people keep their local religions. Um, but they did, and, and one of the other things that they did actually was they would go into a place and part of their, their campaign of psychological warfare and propaganda was to say, when they were winning, they would say, see, your gods want us to conquer you.

In fact, if you, in, in the book of Kings, there's a, an Assyrian official right before the siege of Jerusalem who comes up to the walls of Jerusalem and speaks to Hezekiah's officials and says, like, okay, don't let Hezekiah tell you that your god, Yahweh, wants to protect your city because we're winning.

[67 : 16] Clearly he's on our side. Clearly he wants us to take you over. So they would, they would say things like that as well. Was that kind of related to the king considering himself to be the chief high priest?

Like maybe not only of Ashur, but of, uh, did he consider himself the high priest of other gods of all the nations or maybe at least in the propaganda?

Maybe in a propagandistic sense. Yes. It's more so that they, they thought that, so Ashur was like, they believed was the chief god. Right. And so if Ashur is the chief god, well, naturally every, all the other gods are subordinate to him.

Um, and so he'll, of course, talk to that god and say, well, you know, I think my people should take over your city. And that god will say, yeah, of course, Ashur, that's a great idea. Yeah. And then that, you know, um, Ashur will tell the king and the king will go do that.

But it does also, because the king is so highly connected to the, the god Ashur as the sort of the, the high priest of Ashur.

[68 : 22] Or it also means that that, that king has, like, um, an incredible amount of autocratic power. Because it's not, he's not just, not just the head of the state, but the head of all of the, the sort of religion as well.

And those things, um, hard to, harder to disentangle sometimes in the ancient world. But, um, yeah. Makes for a convenient appeal to empire. Yeah, exactly.

In fact, so one of the, in the, the, um, one of the texts that describes, uh, an Assyrian coronation, for example, one of the things that the king had to swear to do was to expand the boundaries of Ashur. In all three senses, the, the city, the state, and the, and the god. Yeah, Tom. I just have a comment about Jonah, uh, that I, I think with this class and things like this helps me to grow in my faith.

Is, you know, you hear the story of Jonah as a kid, and it's about the whale. And then, and then you read it, and you're like, well, it's really about, like, this missionary. But then, you learn stuff like this, and you think, God is calling Jonah to this city that is horrific.

[69 : 38] That is torturing and murdering people. And God loves them. And he wants Jonah to risk his life to go there. And Jonah doesn't want to do it. Yeah. And God's having mercy on everybody.

He's having mercy on Jonah. He's having mercy on this city. Jonah's a sinner, too. I mean, he doesn't want to do what God wants. And it's about, and you, you get this beautiful picture of God's mercy that, for me at least, was, I realized this by learning stuff like we're learning in class today. Yeah. Yeah. I think, I love the book of Jonah. It's one of the things that I think, you know, he's a reluctant prophet, but he's also, he's an ironically good prophet.

Because, you know, I mean, you look at a career like Jeremiah, who gives these, like, long speeches to people, like, telling them, like, telling his own Judean, you know, fellow, his own fellow Judeans, like, guys, we've got to, like, get our act together.

And they throw him in a well, you know, like, nobody listens to him, you know. Jonah, like, doesn't do what God tells him to do, tries to run away, and ends up, like, ends up preaching to the sailors on the ship who instantaneously become, like, switch their, you know, deity allegiance to Yahweh.

[71 : 08] And then he goes to Nineveh, and he's, like, 40 days or the city's going to be overturned. And boom, instantaneously, everybody, the people, the king, the animals, everybody repents, you know.

And then he's grumpy about it, you know. And the way that the book ends, so first of all, he's also kind of, like, a bit of, like, an inversion of what we usually get from prophets.

But then on top of that, like, the ending of the book is so incredibly poignant where, like, Jonah's, you know, throwing a temper tantrum about his shade vine that has died. And God's, like, you care more about this vine than you do about this city that has all these people and animals in it.

And essentially what, where the book of Jonah sort of leaves the reader is essentially to say, if God called you to, if God called you to show mercy on your greatest enemy, you wouldn't do it, would you?

That's kind of where the book of Jonah leaves us. It's sort of, it's dripping in satire, and it just kind of sticks us with that.

[72 : 24] All right. I have kept us for a very long time. I'm willing to stay around and chat more, but I also understand there's service going on, and people have to pick up kids and whatnot.

So thanks for sticking around. Next week we'll do Babylonia. And like I said, I'll be here for a little bit, so. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.