

Lesson 6

Alexander's Rise to Power

Introduction

After Alexander son of Philip, the Macedonian, who came from the land of Kittim, had defeated King Darius of the Persians and the Medes, he succeeded him as king. (He had previously become king of Greece.) He fought many battles, conquered strongholds, and put to death the kings of the earth. He advanced to the ends of the earth, and plundered many nations. When the earth became quiet before him, he was exalted, and his heart was lifted up. He gathered a very strong army and ruled over countries, nations, and princes, and they became tributary to him. After this he fell sick and perceived that he was dying. So he summoned his most honored officers, who had been brought up with him from youth, and divided his kingdom among them while he was still alive. And after Alexander had reigned twelve years, he died. Then his officers began to rule, each in his own place. They all put on crowns after his death, and so did their descendants after them for many years; and they caused many evils on the earth.

– 1 Maccabees 1:1-9¹⁴

Throughout the 4th century BC, Persian dominance began to wane. By 380 BC, Egypt had completely liberated itself from Persian domination, establishing the 30th Dynasty. Despite attempts by Persian ruler Artaxerxes II and his Greek mercenary-backed forces to reclaim control in 373 BC, their efforts were only partially successful. A more decisive campaign in 343 BC, led by Artaxerxes III, successfully ended the sovereignty of the Egyptian pharaohs. However, the Persian Empire was struggling with its own internal strife, as revolts erupted across its territories. Despite Artaxerxes' efforts to reclaim Egypt, he failed to win over the hearts and minds of Egyptians or the people of Trans-Euphrates. His Greek mercenaries were not loyal to him, but rather motivated by expediency and economic gain. As a result, Artaxerxes was still viewed as a colonial oppressor, which meant that a significant portion of his empire was made up of unwilling subjects who resented Persian authority.

Artaxerxes III was poisoned by his chancellor or vizier, Bagoas in 338 BC. Bagoas also poisoned all of Artaxerxes' sons except the youngest, Arses, who he put on the throne. After three years Arses (a.k.a., Artaxerxes IV) planned on killing Bagoas, but he found out about the plot and killed the king, along with all his children. Bagoas then, in 336, installed Artashata (Darius III) as king. Artashata was the grandson of Darius II and had been serving as the satrap of Armenia. The new king, like his predecessor Artaxerxes IV, intended to eliminate Bagoas, but the eunuch discovered the plan. Darius III was quick to respond, demonstrating his preparedness for Bagoas' schemes. He had Bagoas poisoned by allegedly tricking him into drinking from the goblet that the eunuch had intended for him.

The Persian Empire was politically turbulent, culturally divided, and colonially repressive at the time of Darius III's accession to the throne. The dynastic crises of 338-336 BC and the switch to a collateral branch of the dynasty destabilized the empire as a whole. Darius III, who was originally a satrap, was not primed to become Great King and came suddenly to the position at the age of 44. Such volatility only increased the hunger of subject peoples for freedom, especially along the Mediterranean seaboard where the magnetic pull away from Persia was strongest.

Wholesale reform was needed to steady the administration and ingratiate the Persian regime once again with subject populations. However, the entire western portions of the empire now faced the Mediterranean and desired to squirm free of Persia's reins. One could argue, therefore, that by the time Darius came to the throne, the proverbial horse had already bolted. The brutal force of the Persian military was the only thing holding the empire together. If the Persian military were to suffer momentous defeats before any reforms could be implemented, Persia would lose hold of its entire empire.

While Persia was focused on internal strife and palace intrigue, the ascendancy of Macedonia had become apparent. Philip II, who reigned from 359 to 336 BC and was Alexander the Great's father, seized control of the Greek city-states of Pydna, Methone, and Amphipolis. He had also expanded his influence to include Thrace, Chalcidice, and Thessaly in his burgeoning alliance. His alliance's economic foundation was bolstered by the mineral wealth from the mines at Pangaeum, which provided the financial means to maintain a substantial permanent military force. Philip II was assassinated at his daughter's wedding celebration in 336 BC. With that came the rise of Philip's son, Alexander III. The formidable army built by his father would now be inherited by and serve under his son, Alexander the Great. Alexander would inflict fatal military defeats and unleash a cultural revolution that changed the course of history.

Alexander's Early Life

Alexander III of Macedon, more commonly known as Alexander the Great, was born to King Philip II of Macedon and his wife Olympias. As the heir to a kingdom that was on the rise in the ancient world, Alexander's early life was marked by royal privilege and the finest education available. His intellectual development was notably shaped by his tutor, Aristotle, one of the greatest philosophers of the age. Under Aristotle's guidance, Alexander was exposed to a wide range of subjects, from science and philosophy to the arts and politics, fostering a keen mind that would later prove instrumental in his conquests.

Alexander shared a close bond with his mother, Olympias, who was fiercely ambitious for both herself and her son. She instilled in Alexander the belief that he was destined for greatness, partly due to a divine favor she claimed they both possessed. This belief in their special relationship with the gods would later fuel Alexander's confidence as a leader and his sense of destiny.

By the year 340 BC, Alexander's capabilities as a leader were becoming apparent; he was appointed regent in his father's absence. His military prowess was put on full display in 338 BC when he commanded the left wing of the Macedonian army at the Battle of Chaeronea. Alexander's strategic acumen contributed to a decisive victory that allowed Macedonia to assert control over the Greek city-states, thereby solidifying the kingdom's power in the region.

However, the political landscape of Macedonia was tumultuous. In 337 BC, Philip II's decision to divorce Olympias and marry Cleopatra, the young daughter of a Macedonian noble, caused a personal and political rift. The following year, Philip II was assassinated under mysterious circumstances, leading to

speculation that Olympias and Alexander may have played a role in his death, though this remains a subject of historical debate.

In the wake of his father's death in 336 BC, Alexander ascended to the throne with the support of Macedonian senior generals, who recognized his leadership qualities and the legitimacy of his claim. His succession marked the beginning of an extraordinary era in which Alexander would expand the Macedonian Empire to unprecedented extents, a testament to his military genius and the groundwork laid during his formative years.

Alexander and the Fall of the Persian Empire

The campaign that would reshape the ancient world began under the vision and leadership of Alexander's father, Philip II. His grand strategy was to liberate the Greek cities under Persian dominion in Western Asia Minor and to avenge the sacrilege committed by the Persian emperor Xerxes some 150 years earlier, who had infamously set ablaze revered Greek temples. This mission was cloaked in the mantle of retribution and liberation, but it was also driven by the desire for plunder and the expansion of Macedonian territory, showcasing the complex motives of power, wealth, and vengeance.

In 334 BC, Alexander, embarked on this formidable expedition, commanding an impressive force of 40,000 troops, and supported by a fleet of 160 ships. His army crossed into Asia, marking the beginning of an aggressive and ambitious military campaign. In November 333 BC, the Greek and Persian armies met at Issus, a narrow strip of land between the sea and the mountains. The Greeks, vastly outnumbered, were met head on by the Persians. They managed to outflank the center of the Persian forces and find Darius III, who personally took the reins of a chariot and fled. Alexander pursued him into the mountains, but Darius left the chariot behind and disappeared on horseback.

Alexander seized control of the encampment of Darius, taking his family under his protection. With this pivotal victory, the territories of the Mediterranean coast, Egypt, and all of Persia were now effectively unguarded and awaiting Alexander's conquest. In a mere eighteen months of military engagement, the young Macedonian king had shattered the lingering influence of Persian power in the east, paving the way for the dominance of Western, Mediterranean influence to spread.

This swift and strategic dominance was so remarkable that it found its way into the biblical narrative, where Alexander's conquests were symbolically represented. In the Book of Daniel, he is portrayed as a winged leopard (Daniel 7:6) and as a vigorous "shaggy goat" (Daniel 8:5-7; 21) that charges with a conspicuous horn from the west across the earth, not even touching the ground as it strikes with ferocity at the "ram" symbolizing Persia.

Despite having no traditional entitlement to the region and having already surpassed the initial goals of his campaign by subduing Asia Minor, Alexander now faced a critical decision regarding his next moves in these newly accessible territories. For regions like Judah and Samaria, the unfolding events brought the prospect of regained autonomy. The pressing question that loomed was what course of action Alexander would choose to take with these lands now lying at his feet, ripe for his decision.

The Battle of Tyre

The momentum of Alexander's campaign continued unabated, and by the middle of 332 BC, his army was advancing along the Mediterranean coast. Alexander had his sights set on extending his conquests as far south as Egypt, showing an unyielding determination to carve out a vast empire. His swift and relentless push through the territories underscored not only his military genius but also the far-reaching aspirations that drove the young Macedonian king to seek dominion over a region that had once seemed beyond reach.

The cities of Phoenicia quickly yielded. Only one resisted: Tyre, a fortified island a half a mile into the sea. For generations, the Phoenician city of Tyre had established a vast array of colonies across the Mediterranean, with Carthage being the most renowned among them. Tyre's seafaring prowess had amassed enormous wealth for the city, making it a bustling hub for trade. Its geographical positioning and formidable natural defenses rendered the city nearly impregnable. Although Tyre had at times acquiesced to foreign rule, such as that of the Persians, it had never fallen to a military siege. Notably, Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon besieged Tyre for thirteen years between 585 and 572 BC. Despite subjecting the city to pressure and making them agree to certain conditions, he failed to capture it outright.

The Tyrians worshiped the deity Melqart, whom the Greeks associated with their own hero Heracles. Coincidentally, the lineage of Alexander the Great was said to be traced back to Heracles. Alexander's arrival in Tyre coincided with a festivity in honor of Melqart in February 332 BC. Part of the celebration involved a sacrificial ritual performed by the Tyrian king, Azemilcus. However, Azemilcus was absent, commanding the Tyrian navy within the Persian armada. Alexander's request to perform the pivotal sacrifice — a move that was tantamount to declaring himself ruler of Tyre — was met with staunch refusal by the Tyrian nobles, who reacted by executing his messengers.

Incensed, Alexander launched a relentless siege that lasted for seven months. He commanded his troops to construct a solid land bridge from the mainland to the island city of Tyre. During the siege, Alexander gained the support of many ships from the Persian navy that defected to his side and turned the tide against Tyre. The Tyrians mounted a fierce defense, but ultimately, Alexander achieved victory in July 332 BC. The aftermath was brutal: he executed many of the city's defenders, enslaved 30,000 of its residents, and, in a surprising act of clemency, he spared the life of King Azemilcus. The conquest of Tyre is a fulfillment of prophecy of Ezekiel in chapter 26.

The conquest of Tyre sent shockwaves through the surrounding region; a city once deemed invincible had fallen. Alexander's actions had not only altered the political landscape but had also transformed the physical geography by permanently connecting the island to the mainland, an alteration that persists to the present day. The magnitude of Alexander's feat prompted Darius to propose a peace offering that included control over the lands west of the Euphrates, Egypt, a substantial amount of gold, a royal marriage to one of his daughters, and an alliance, all in return for the safety of his captured family. However, Alexander rejected these overtures, setting the stage for another inevitable confrontation with Darius on the battlefield, as detailed by the historian Arrian.

Alexander's victory underscored that the nations and city-states of around the land of Israel could no longer maintain a stance of neutrality. Acknowledgement of Alexander's authority and submission to his rule were demanded. While his expectations were uncompromising, Alexander was also capable of showing mercy, as evidenced by the pardon he granted to King Azemilcus of Tyre. This act hinted at the possibility of Alexander's favorable treatment toward those who recognized his dominion.

In Tyre's Aftermath

According to the writings of Josephus, during the intense siege of Tyre, Alexander the Great called upon Jaddua, the high priest of Judah, to provide additional forces to bolster his military campaign. However, Jaddua, steadfast in his allegiance to Darius, declined Alexander's request. This writing aligns with the accounts of Arrian, who documented that while the siege persisted, Alexander led expeditions into the interior to subdue more territories and recruit further troops. Josephus recounts how Samaria seized the opportunity to ingratiate itself with Alexander, hoping for increased self-rule. In stark contrast to Jaddua, Jeshua, the governor of Samaria, swiftly aligned himself with the Macedonian conqueror, while Jaddua opted for a policy of seclusion.

The capitulation of Tyre, however, marked a dramatic shift in the political landscape. Alexander's approach to the coastal plain, coupled with the submission of the Philistine cities, left Jaddua in a vulnerable position. The high priest faced the grim prospects of losing his religious authority, the potential desecration of the Jerusalem temple, and the ascendancy of the Mount Gerizim sanctuary under the priesthood of his own brother, Manasseh—a turn of events that could have devastating implications for the prophetic heritage and the Davidic legacy. Compelled by the circumstances, Jaddua had to seek an audience with Alexander, aiming to negotiate terms that would ensure some level of protection for Jerusalem.

Historical records, including archaeology and literature, do not indicate that Alexander seized Jerusalem by force. Josephus describes a meeting between Jaddua and Alexander at a site called Saphein, near Mount Scopus. It is believed that Jaddua offered men to serve in Alexander's army, a gesture that may find indirect confirmation in the writings of Hecateus of Abdera. The subsequent years saw Jaddua continue as high priest, succeeded later by his son, suggesting that his diplomatic overture to Alexander had indeed been successful. Jerusalem emerged from the encounter intact, preserving its native institutions.

The entire region eventually recognized Alexander's rule, with the notable exception of Gaza. There, a eunuch named Batis held out against Alexander's forces, a resistance that was ultimately futile. Within weeks, Alexander's army breached Gaza's defenses, and despite an injury from an arrow to his shoulder, Alexander exacted a brutal retribution on Batis. In a manner reminiscent of the Iliad's Hector, Batis was bound by the ankles, though unlike Hector, he was still alive, and was dragged behind a chariot until his death.

Egypt and Beyond

Alexander the Great's military campaign continued with remarkable success, as he encountered no resistance upon his arrival in Egypt. The Egyptians, weary of Persian rule, welcomed Alexander as a

liberator and subsequently, in a harmonious fusion of cultures, he was anointed as their pharaoh. This marked a significant milestone in Alexander's conquests, as he assumed the mantle of an ancient and revered line of rulers.

In the autumn of 331 BC, specifically on October 1st, the stage was set for a pivotal clash at Gaugamela. Here, Alexander and his forces engaged in a monumental battle with the army of Darius III, the Persian Emperor. The conflict was intense and decisive, culminating in a resounding victory for Alexander. In the aftermath of this triumph, he was exalted with the title "King of Asia," signifying his dominion over the extensive territories that had once formed the heart of the Persian Empire.

Between 331 and 330 BC, Alexander's campaign maintained its momentum, as he proceeded to seize the key cities within Persia. One of the most symbolic acts of his conquest occurred when he set the royal palace at Persepolis ablaze, effectively signaling the end of the Persian Achaemenid dynasty. Amidst these conquests, in 330 BC, a twist of fate saw Darius III meet his end at the hands of his own subjects. With his dying breath, Darius implored Alexander to seek justice for his assassination—a request that Alexander fulfilled, further cementing his image as the rightful heir and continuator of the Persian royal lineage.

In 327 BC, Alexander's ambition led him to venture into the Indian subcontinent, what is now modern-day Pakistan. This campaign stretched over two grueling years, marked by fierce resistance and difficult terrain. Despite his persistence and military prowess, Alexander's efforts to subjugate this region were met with limited success. The campaign in India exposed the limits of his empire's expansion and the challenges of conquering a land so culturally and geographically distinct from his previous dominions.

By 324 BC, Alexander's extraordinary achievements and the aura of invincibility that surrounded him led some Greeks to bestow upon him divine status. This recognition of divinity among certain Greek factions was a testament to his unprecedented accomplishments as a military commander and monarch, blurring the lines between mortal leadership and god-like reverence in the eyes of his contemporaries.

Alexander's Death

In the late spring of 323 BC, Alexander the Great, still driven by the insatiable thirst for conquest that had defined his reign, set his sights on the Arabian Peninsula. The region was alluring for a variety of reasons, not least of which was its lucrative spice trade. Spices were highly prized in the ancient world for their use in cuisine, medicine, and religious rituals, and control over the trade routes and production centers promised substantial economic benefits.

Another factor that may have spurred Alexander's interest in Arabia was the region's religious landscape. The Arabs traditionally revered a pantheon limited to a few deities, and it is said that Alexander, having been acknowledged as a deity by some Greeks and Egyptians, was eager to achieve a similar divine recognition among the Arabian people. His ambition to expand not only his empire but also his divine status was characteristic of his larger-than-life persona.

However, Alexander's grand plans for Arabia were never realized. His relentless pursuit of glory came to an abrupt end when he fell gravely ill. On June 10, 323 BC, the conqueror who had reshaped the known

world succumbed to his ailment. The exact cause of his death has been a subject of speculation and debate for centuries. While some suggest that he may have been the victim of poisoning—a fate not uncommon in the cutthroat world of ancient power politics—others argue that natural causes such as malaria, exacerbated by the excessive consumption of alcohol and the accumulated toll of battle wounds and the hardships of his relentless campaigns, were more likely responsible for his demise.

Following his death, a dispute erupted over the final resting place of Alexander's body, a symbol of legitimacy and power for his successors. Ptolemy, one of Alexander's most trusted generals and later ruler of Egypt, ultimately seized the body and transported it to Egypt. There, in the city of Alexandria—a city founded by and named after Alexander himself—the body of the legendary Macedonian king was enshrined and remained for centuries, drawing visitors from across the ancient world to pay homage to the ruler who had once dreamt of an empire without end.

Who Was Alexander?

Alexander the Great was characterized by an insatiable drive and a boundless ambition that fueled his desire to achieve what no one before him had accomplished. He saw himself as a figure of destiny, set apart from ordinary mortals, with a divine mandate to conquer and rule. His vigorous pursuit of glory and his yearning to carve out a legacy that would endure through the ages were hallmarks of his personality.

He was known for his lavish generosity, rewarding his friends and allies with generosity and favoring those who willingly accepted his dominion. Yet, this same man could display chilling cruelty towards those who resisted his rule, suppressing any form of opposition with unflinching severity. Alexander's indulgence in alcohol was well-known, and when under its influence, his temper could turn volatile, often with violent outcomes.

Moreover, Alexander was a fervent advocate of Hellenism—the spread of Greek culture, language, and thought—across his empire. He championed the Greek way of life as a civilizing force, promoting its adoption throughout the diverse regions he conquered.

The reign of Alexander had profound and lasting effects on the ancient world, giving rise to the Hellenistic civilization. His conquests facilitated the widespread dissemination of the Greek language, which became the primary language for politics, economics, and intellectual discourse across Egypt, Syria, and beyond. This united disparate cultures and facilitated the exchange of ideas.

Greek philosophy, science, and literature found new audiences as they spread across the known world. The construction of Greek-style temples, gymnasiums, and theaters became commonplace, and as a result, educational standards in the East rose significantly, fostering an environment where learning and the arts could flourish.

The economic impact of Alexander's reign was also significant. The introduction of standardized currency under his rule simplified trade and commerce across the vast territories of his empire, contributing to a more interconnected and economically stable region.

In essence, Alexander's legacy was not only the creation of an empire that spanned three continents, but also the cultural and intellectual fusion that his policies promoted—a legacy that would influence civilizations for centuries to come.

For Class Interaction and Discussion

Lesson Outline

1. Introduction to Alexander the Great
 - The Waning Persian Empire and the Rise of Macedonia
 - Alexander's Early Life and Education
2. The Campaign against Persia and the Fall of Tyre
 - The Conquest of Egypt and the Battle of Gaugamela
 - The Campaign in India and the Limits of Empire
3. The Death of Alexander and His Legacy
 - The Hellenistic Civilization: Cultural and Economic Impact
 - Reflections on Biblical Prophecy and Alexander's Conquests

Thought Questions for Discussion

1. What qualities made Alexander the Great a remarkable leader, and how did his personal ambitions shape his conquests?
2. Discuss how Alexander's spread of Greek culture influenced the regions he conquered. Can cultural assimilation be seen as beneficial, coercive, or both?
3. Reflect on the role of education in the Hellenistic world. How did the establishment of Greek institutions like gymnasiums and theaters affect local populations?
4. Consider the political and military strategies Alexander used to expand his empire. What can we learn from his successes and failures?
5. How did Alexander's relationship with his mother, Olympias, influence his belief in his divine right to rule?
6. Alexander's encounter with Darius III at the Battle of Gaugamela was a turning point in his campaign. What does this battle reveal about Alexander's military tactics?

7. Evaluate the significance of Alexander's refusal of Darius's peace offer. What does this tell us about his vision for the empire?
8. Discuss the prophetic imagery of Alexander in the Book of Daniel. How do these biblical representations compare with historical accounts of his conquests?
9. Alexander's death left a power vacuum and led to the Wars of the Diadochi (Successors). How might history have been different if he had lived longer?
10. Reflect on Alexander's legacy. In what ways did his reign set the stage for the world as we know it today?

Final Encouraging Word: As we consider the life and legacy of Alexander the Great, we are reminded of the fleeting nature of power and the enduring impact of one's actions. Alexander's ambition and conquests reshaped the ancient world, but his untimely death also serves as a sobering reminder that human endeavors are often transient. May we strive to leave a legacy that honors God and uplifts others, remembering that true greatness is found in humility and service.

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¹⁴ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989.