

Dr. Donald Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 5, Religious Paganism Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide Quiz, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 5, Religious Paganism, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This lecture from Dr. Donald Fowler's "Old Testament Backgrounds" course explores the religious philosophy of ancient paganism, focusing on the concept of royal divinization. It traces the development of centralized power in Mesopotamian empires, using the reigns of Sargon, Naram-Sin, and Shulgi as case studies to illustrate how kings increasingly claimed divine status. The lecture analyzes Shulgi's unprecedented self-deification, highlighting evidence from royal hymns and religious practices. Finally, it contrasts the pagan belief in human control over the gods through magic and manipulation with the biblical emphasis on God's sovereignty and the importance of obedience and trust.

**2. 14 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of
Dr. Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 5 – Double
click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the
Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link
there (Old Testament → Old Testament Introduction → Old
Testament Backgrounds).**



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3. Briefing Document: Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 5, Religious Paganism

Okay, here is a detailed briefing document summarizing the main themes and important ideas from the provided lecture transcript by Dr. Don Fowler on the Religious Philosophy of Paganism:

Briefing Document: Religious Philosophy of Paganism in the Ancient Near East

Overview:

This lecture explores the core concepts of paganism in the ancient Near East, particularly as it relates to royal divinization and its impact on the understanding of power, religion, and the relationship between the human and the divine. Dr. Fowler emphasizes the importance of understanding this ancient pagan model to interpret the Old Testament and to recognize its potential influence on contemporary thought. The lecture traces the development of centralized power and its connection to religious practices, culminating in an analysis of how these concepts shaped the daily lives and beliefs of the people.

Key Themes and Ideas:

1. Centralization of Power and Royal Divinization:

- The lecture traces a progression from Sargon, who centralized power without claiming divinity, to Naram-Sin, who fully embraced self-divinization. This culminates in the Ur III period with Shulgi, who took divinization to an unprecedented level.
- Dr. Fowler notes that centralized empires tend to collapse suddenly when the leader becomes ineffective because all power is concentrated in one person. He uses the fall of the Sargonic empire, the Assyrian, Old Babylonian, and Persian Empires as examples.
- The Ur III period, also known as the Sumerian Renaissance, represents a period of renewed Sumerian power and culture before the dominance of Semitic peoples.

1. Ur-Nammu and the Ziggurat:

- Ur-Nammu, founder of the Ur III dynasty, is known for his law code and the construction of a large ziggurat.

- The ziggurat is not a tower to reach heaven but a structure meant to connect heaven and earth, with the temple being at the bottom, serving as the place where the deity comes down, while the ramps facilitated this transition.

1. **Shulgi's Extreme Divinization:**

- Shulgi, Ur-Nammu's son, ruled for 48 years and was an absolute monarch. During his reign, the king owned all land. He represents the triumph of Sargon's centralized power.

- Shulgi's self-divinization is unprecedented in Mesopotamian history.

• **Evidence of Shulgi's divinization:**

- He used the divine determinative before his name in all written texts, making it clear he was a deity. "He made it crystal clear to the whole world that he was deity."
- Royal hymnology, specifically erotic literature between himself and the goddess Ishtar/Inanna.
- Regular offerings were made to his statue, treated as if he were an incarnate god, with statues being moved around for worship.
- After his death, he was declared a star in the calendar, signifying his ascension to heaven and immortality.
- His royal titles were those of gods, and his name was used in contracts as if he were a god, replacing the oaths that were traditionally sworn by the gods.

1. **The Sacred Marriage Ritual:**

- The sacred marriage between the king and the high priestess of Inanna was a crucial annual event intended to bring fertility to the entire kingdom.
- This ritual evolved from temple-centered power to palace-centered power with the king as the central figure, solidifying male leadership.
- The king's success in battle validated his desirability to Inanna, which legitimized his position as divine consort, and thus guaranteed the ritual's success. "In order to assume his role as Inanna's consort, he must perform successfully on the battlefield. His victory there makes him desirable to Inanna..."
- This sexual union was thus the theologically monumental event of the calendar year.

1. **Functional Nature of Religion:**

- Ancient Near Eastern religion was primarily functional, focusing on achieving specific outcomes like prosperity, fertility, and longevity rather than solely on aesthetic or spiritual experiences. "Religion was designed by the ancients to work, to create, to bring about."
- The ancients lived in a precarious world with disease, famine, and unexplained death, motivating them to find means to control their fate through religious practices.
- This contrasts with modern Western religion, which often prioritizes aesthetic experiences and personal spiritual elevation.
- Dr. Fowler emphasizes that the ancient view of well-being was "100% heaven-oriented." They viewed prosperity and longevity as direct results of divine actions, not in terms of individual actions, as is often the focus in modern western thought.

1. **Cause and Effect and the Role of the Gods:**

- The ancients understood the world in terms of cause and effect, where any effect (good or bad) had a cause.
- They believed all good things, such as prosperity, longevity and health, came directly from the gods. Therefore they tried to understand how to please the gods so they would cause those outcomes.
- Religion in this world was understood as functional - it was how one unleashed the cause to get the desired effect.

1. **Manipulation and Control of the Divine:**

- The core of paganism is the belief that humans can control the gods through manipulation. "Paganism says you are in control of the gods because you can manipulate them to do what you want."
- The goal was to identify what pleases, angers, or can be used to "buy" the gods' favor. They tried to figure out the cause of the effect they wanted, so they could cause it.
- This contrasts with a Christian worldview where God is in control, and humans receive blessings through obedience and trust.

1. Magic and the Totem:

- Magic in the ancient world was seen as the intersection of the divine and human, not as trickery or deception as is often viewed today.
- The king was the "magic totem," seen as a living image capable of bringing prosperity to his people, with sympathetic magic being the belief that the correct person performing an action could bring about the desired effects.
- This centralization of religious function in the king also meant that when he failed, his power also crumbled.

Quotes of Particular Importance:

- "Not paganism in our world, paganism in their world. And so, it's one of the most important concepts of our time together because when you read the pages of the Old Testament, the Israelites were really drawn; they were tempted, apparently, in powerful ways, by the Canaanite model."
- "By centralization, what I'm talking about is the centralization of power in a person. What happens when you're profoundly centralized is these empires collapse like that, suddenly."
- "The meeting place was really at the top, but the purpose of the top was to get the deity to come down to be able to enter into the temple."
- "In essence, when you look at all of this, what it tells you is that Shulgi does not reflect the culture of the Sumerians. In this kind of behavior, the culture of Sargon has triumphed. The centralization of power in the king and the ownership of all the land by the state is the triumph of Sargon the Great."
- "He made it crystal clear to the whole world that he was deity."
- "In order to assume his role as Inanna's consort, he must perform successfully on the battlefield. His victory there makes him desirable to Inanna, who is at her core a goddess of war."
- "Religion was designed by the ancients to work, to create, to bring about."
- "They knew they weren't in control, and so their concept was 100% heaven-oriented."
- "What paganism says, basically, is that you, as a human, are in control of the gods."

Implications and Connections:

- The lecture provides crucial context for understanding the Old Testament, where the Israelites were often tempted by the surrounding pagan cultures.
- The concept of the functional nature of religion in the ancient world helps to illuminate the significance of specific rituals and practices.
- It suggests that modern Western concepts of spirituality differ dramatically from ancient thought in the Near East.
- The lecture lays a groundwork for understanding the concept of magic in the ancient world and its connection to the role of the king as a powerful intermediary with the divine realm.
- The concept of paganism as the desire for control through manipulation is a useful contrast to a theology that believes God is sovereign, not humans.

Concluding Thoughts:

Dr. Fowler's lecture offers a deep dive into the religious philosophy of paganism in the ancient Near East. By examining the historical development of royal divinization, the role of the sacred marriage, and the functional nature of religion, he provides an understanding of the ancient worldview and contrasts it with modern religious thought. This briefing document is meant to serve as a foundation for further study into the influence of pagan thought on the ancient world and beyond.

4. Study Guide: Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 5, Religious Paganism

Religious Philosophy of Paganism: A Study Guide

Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2-3 sentences each.

1. How did Sargon and Naram-Sin differ in their approaches to centralization and divinization?
2. What is meant by "over-centralization," and what were the consequences of this phenomenon in ancient empires?
3. Why is the Ur III period considered the "Indian Summer" of Sumerian civilization?
4. How did the ziggurat function as a bridge between the earthly and divine realms, according to ancient Mesopotamian beliefs?
5. Why was the death of a king in battle a significant theological issue in the ancient Near East?
6. What evidence did Shulgi use to support his self-divinization, and why was it unprecedented?
7. Describe the significance of the sacred marriage ritual in Sumerian society and how it changed power dynamics.
8. How was religion in the ancient world different from many modern religions in terms of its primary purpose?
9. Why was the concept of cause-and-effect central to the ancient understanding of religion?
10. What, according to the lecture, is the core belief of paganism, and how does it differ from a Christian worldview?

Answer Key

1. Sargon centralized power but did not claim divinization, whereas Naram-Sin, his descendant, engaged in full-blown self-divinization. Sargon's centralization was a new model, and Naram-Sin elevated the king's status even further by claiming to be divine.

2. Over-centralization refers to the concentration of power in one person, leading to sudden collapse when that leader proves ineffective; when the leader is unable to maintain control, there is no other source of authority and the empire quickly falls apart.
3. The Ur III period is called the "Indian Summer" of Sumerian civilization because it was a final, brief flourishing of Sumerian culture before the Semites came to power, similar to a warm spell before winter sets in.
4. Ziggurats were structured with ramps to allow deities to descend to their temples at the bottom; the top of the ziggurat was for the deities' meeting, and the ramp provided a way for gods to connect with the temples below.
5. In the ancient world, a king's death in battle was seen as evidence that he had displeased the gods, which undermined his divine authority; it was considered self-condemning and would bring defeat to the people.
6. Shulgi used the divine determinative before his name, wrote erotic hymns for Ishtar, had statues made of himself for worship, was declared a star in the calendar after his death, and used divine titles and names, showing unprecedented divinization.
7. The sacred marriage was a ritualistic sexual union between the king and a priestess, which was meant to ensure the fertility of the land and the renewal of life. It marked a shift in power from female deity to the king as her chosen husband.
8. Religion in the ancient world was primarily functional, focused on achieving prosperity, fertility, and longevity; in contrast, many modern religions often prioritize spiritual elevation and aesthetic experience.
9. Ancient peoples believed in a cause-and-effect relationship between their actions and the gods' responses. Therefore, they thought religion could help create causes that would bring about the desired outcome, such as the favor of the gods.
10. Paganism at its core believes that humans can control and manipulate the gods to achieve their desired outcomes, whereas a Christian worldview posits that God is in control and that blessings come through obedience and trust in Him.

Essay Questions

Instructions: Write an essay addressing each of the following questions using the lecture material.

1. Analyze the factors that led to the centralization of power in ancient Mesopotamia, using examples from the lecture and discuss the effects of this phenomenon on both the structure of the political state and the religious life of the people.
2. Compare and contrast the religious practices of the Sumerians during the Ur III period with the religious practices that had previously been in place, as the professor discussed the rise of divine kingship and the function of magic in that shift.
3. Discuss the role of kingship in ancient Mesopotamian religion, explaining the process by which kings were divinized and the implications of that shift on both society and on the conception of the divine.
4. Explain the concept of religion as a functional entity in ancient Mesopotamia. How did this differ from modern religious practices? Include a discussion of the ancient understanding of prosperity and longevity in your response.
5. Critically evaluate the main points of paganism in the context of the lecture. How do pagan beliefs differ from a Christian worldview and what are the implications of each for understanding the purpose of religion?

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Centralization:** The concentration of power and authority in a single entity or person, such as a king or ruler.
- **Divinization:** The process by which a person, usually a ruler, is declared or believed to be divine or god-like.
- **Guti:** A group of people that infiltrated and weakened the Akkadian empire, contributing to its decline and dissolution.
- **Ur III Period:** A period in ancient Mesopotamian history marked by the rule of the Third Dynasty of Ur, also known as the Sumerian Renaissance.
- **Ziggurat:** A massive stepped tower in ancient Mesopotamia with religious significance, designed to connect heaven and earth.
- **Sacred Marriage:** A ritualistic sexual union between the king and a priestess of Ishtar, believed to ensure fertility and prosperity for the kingdom.
- **Ishtar/Inanna:** The Sumerian and Akkadian goddess of love, fertility, and war, central to the sacred marriage ritual and other religious practices.
- **Royal Hymnology:** A body of literature that praised and celebrated the king, often including erotic content when celebrating his relationship with the goddess.
- **Divine Determinative:** A symbol placed before a name to indicate divine status.
- **Magic Totem:** An object or person believed to have supernatural powers and the ability to act as an intermediary between the human and divine realms.
- **Sympathetic Magic:** The belief that like actions produce like results or that a person can influence something by acting upon a representation of it.
- **Paganism:** A broad term that refers to polytheistic religious beliefs and practices outside of Abrahamic religions, often focusing on human control and manipulation of the gods.
- **Cause-and-Effect:** A principle that implies that everything that happens has a reason behind it, often as a result of human actions in relation to the gods, instead of chance.

5. FAQs on Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 5, Religious Paganism, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

FAQ on Pagan Religious Philosophy in the Ancient Near East

- What is meant by "centralization" in the context of ancient Near Eastern empires, and why is it significant?** Centralization, in this context, refers to the concentration of power in a single person, typically the king. This is significant because when all authority rests with one individual, the empire becomes incredibly vulnerable to instability and collapse if that leader is ineffective or removed. A key aspect of the pagan worldview is the understanding that all good things come from the gods. With all the centralized power within the king, their relationship with the gods dictates the prosperity of their people, which is all the more reason why the king needed to maintain his image of favor from the gods. The rapid collapse of various empires, like the Old Akkadian, Assyrian and Old Babylonian Empires, illustrates the fragility of over-centralized power structures.
- How did the concept of royal divinization evolve in the ancient Near East?** Royal divinization evolved from kings like Sargon, who centralized power but did not claim divinity, to figures like Naram-Sin, who asserted full-blown self-divinization. This trend reached a pinnacle with King Shulgi of the Ur III period, who not only claimed divinity but also had his name used with divine determinatives, was the subject of erotic hymns, had his statue worshiped, was declared a star after death, and used divine titles. This divinization was meant to enhance the king's authority and function within the religious belief system of the time.
- What was the function of the ziggurat in ancient Mesopotamian religion?** The ziggurat was not primarily designed as a place for people to reach the heavens; instead, it was constructed to act as a bridge between the divine and earthly realms. The temple was located at the base of the ziggurat, and the multiple ramps were designed for the deity to descend from the heavens and enter into the temple, where the deity would inhabit a statue and, in that condition, receive worship and magically consume offerings. The ziggurat facilitated the interaction between gods and humans through the concept of a divine descent.

- **What was the significance of the "sacred marriage" ritual involving the king and the goddess Inanna (Ishtar)?** The sacred marriage ritual, a physical union between the king and the high priestess of Inanna (Ishtar), was a vital event believed to bring fertility and prosperity to the entire kingdom. The ritual evolved from the Uruk period where the king, representing Dumuzid, would engage in a sacred union with Inanna. This act was not merely symbolic but was thought to have a direct impact on the well-being of the land and its people, with the king's ability to achieve victory in battle deemed essential as a validation of Inanna's love for him, thus proving his fitness for the ritual.
- **How did the ancient Near Eastern concept of religion differ from modern Western understandings of religion?** Unlike modern Western religion, which is often aesthetic, aimed at spiritual elevation, and personal, religion in the ancient Near East was primarily functional and pragmatic. It was designed to manipulate or control the gods to bring about desired results, such as prosperity, fertility, and longevity. This function-based approach focused on securing tangible benefits, whereas modern religion often emphasizes personal spiritual experiences or aesthetic worship. The functional aspect meant they believed they could influence the capricious deities, unlike the modern notion that God is in control and bestows blessings based on His nature.
- **What did the ancients believe about the relationship between cause and effect, and how did this affect their religious practices?** The ancients firmly believed in a cause-and-effect relationship, where every effect had a discernible cause, which they usually tied to their deities. This belief greatly influenced their religious practices, as they sought to identify and manipulate the causes that would bring about their desired effects (prosperity, fertility, and longevity). They were not as apt to consider chance as the reason why things might happen, unlike the modern way of thinking. Consequently, they saw religion as the means through which they could control or appease the gods to achieve these goals.

- **What is "sympathetic magic," and how was it used in the ancient Near East?**

Sympathetic magic is the belief that through some action or ritual, one can manipulate the natural course of events. This is usually accomplished using totems as a point of intersection between the divine and human world. In the ancient Near East, sympathetic magic was practiced through various rituals, such as creating an image of a desired outcome, often harmful to others, speaking magical words over it, and then destroying the image, with the belief that this would bring about the desired outcome. The king was seen as a "magic totem," as the representative of the people who could manipulate the deities to get the desired outcomes for his people.

- **What is the fundamental difference between paganism and Judeo-Christian beliefs, as discussed in the context of this lecture?** A core distinction highlighted is the contrasting idea of who is ultimately in control. Paganism posits that human beings are in control, capable of manipulating the gods through various means (rituals, offerings, kings' actions) to achieve desired outcomes. In contrast, the Judeo-Christian perspective is that God is in control and that only through obedience, trust, and faith can humans receive His blessing. In paganism, humanity holds the power, in Christianity, God does.