

Dr. Don Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds,

Session 5, Religious Paganism

6-min. Video Overview

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Alright, welcome to The Explainer. Today, we're diving into something truly fascinating. I mean, it's one of those things from history that sounds just bizarre to us today.

Kings who didn't just rule their people, but who claimed they were literally gods walking the earth. So this quote you're seeing, it's from historian Dr. Don Fowler. And he's talking about this Mesopotamian king, Shulgi, from way back, like over 4000 years ago.

And get this, this guy wasn't just a powerful ruler. No, he had a statue of himself put in the temples right next to the statues of the actual gods. And people would bring it offerings as they would to any other deity.

I mean, he took self-worship to a completely different level. Okay, so our modern brains, we hear that and immediately think, wow, what an ego, right? Just a case of supreme arrogance. But what if I told you this wasn't just about his ego? What if it was actually a core function of his society, a really serious religious and political move? And that, of course, brings up the million-dollar question.

Why? Why would anyone do this? So to really get a handle on the why, we first got to understand the how. I mean, how did he even pull this off? Let's dig into the actual evidence for King Shulgi's, well, his extreme god complex. This is all happening during what historians call the period, which is around 2100 BC in ancient Sumer.

And the evidence is, it's just wild. It's overwhelming. First off, whenever his name was written, it had this special symbol next to it, a symbol that was only used for the names of gods.

That's a pretty big tell. Second, he had a whole library of, believe it or not, erotic poetry written all about his sexual relationship with Inanna, the goddess of fertility. Wild stuff.

Third, as we said, people were worshiping his statue. Fourth, when he finally died, the official story was that he went up into the heavens and became a star, just like the other gods. And last but not least, his name started being used to make legal contracts binding.

You know, like, I swear by the gods and by King Shulgi, that was a job only the gods did before him. Okay, but here's where it gets really, really interesting. To understand any of this, you have to understand the world Shulgi and his people were living in.

And let me tell you, this was not some peaceful, stable utopia. Not even close. It was a world of constant, terrifying danger.

And that context, it changes everything. I mean, archaeologists have looked at skeletal remains from back then, and the story they tell is brutal. The average person, if they were lucky, might live to be 50.

50! Just think about that. A world where making it to what we'd call middle age was a huge accomplishment. And the danger started right from birth.

We think that something like half of all children died before they even turned five. Can you imagine? That kind of loss was just a normal, expected part of life for them. And on top of all that, every single day you're living with this gut-wrenching fear that your crops could just fail.

A drought could hit, a flood could wipe everything out, a swarm of locusts could literally eat your entire food supply in an afternoon, your animals could all just drop dead for no reason. Or hey, a neighboring city could decide to attack, and there was no safety net, no insurance, no government aid. One bad break and you and your family were done for.

Toast, as they would say. And this, right here, is the absolute key to their entire mindset. See, we tend to walk around thinking we're in control, right? We have plans for our careers, our health, our finances.

They knew, with a certainty that we can barely imagine, that they were not in control. They felt totally powerless in a world that felt actively hostile. And they desperately, desperately needed to find some way, any way, to get a little bit of control back.

So, in a world like that, where you feel completely out of control, what do you do? You look for a tool. And for them, that tool was religion. But this was a religion with a very specific job to do.

And it's probably radically different from how you think about religion today. You see, their religion was functional. It wasn't about aesthetics or feelings.

Think about it. A lot of people today go to a church or a temple looking for a spiritual experience, right? A feeling of peace or a sense of connection. They went to their temples looking for results.

Real, tangible results. Their religion was a tool designed to make something happen. To make it rain, to make the crops grow, to make sure their animals were fertile.

It wasn't about inner peace. It was about pure survival. It's like they saw the whole universe as this giant, complicated machine full of levers and buttons.

And they believed that if they could just figure out the right combination, the right ritual, the perfect sacrifice, the correct prayer, they could pull a lever and force the machine to give them what they wanted. So for them, religion wasn't really about faith. It was the user manual for reality.

Okay, so if religion is the user manual for this giant machine, then the king? He's the ultimate tool. He's the super user. In this whole cause-and-effect system, a king who is also a god becomes the most powerful lever you could possibly pull.

And the central ritual, the one that basically powered the whole kingdom, was something called the sacred marriage. Now this wasn't just some ceremony. This was the theological engine of the entire state.

And it was, well, it was a physical, sexual union between the king and the high priestess of Inanna, the goddess of war and, crucially, fertility. And again, this was not just symbolic. They believed it literally worked.

It was a formula. Step one, the king has to go out and win a big battle. This proves to Inanna, the war goddess, that he's a worthy, desirable partner.

Step two: he then performs the sexual union with her priestess. And that physical act, they believed, was the magic trigger. It would guarantee fertility and prosperity for the entire kingdom for the next year.

The crops would grow, the animals would have offspring, and the people would be healthy. It all hinged on this. And that right there perfectly sums up the king's real job.

He wasn't just a political leader. He was a living, breathing magic totem. A supercharged human being who could actually reach across the veil and interact with the divine world to get stuff done here in the real world for everybody.

He was the only one who could really make the machine work. So all of this leads us to the absolute core difference, the fundamental conflict between this ancient pagan way of seeing the world and the biblical worldview that would eventually come along and challenge it. I mean, challenge it to its very foundations, and it all boils down to one simple question.

And here it is. This is the heart of it all. The pagan worldview, at the end of the day, is a system built on human control.

It's the idea that if you have the right rituals, the right magic, you can manipulate the gods to get what you want. The biblical worldview comes along and flips that completely on its head. It says, no, God is in control.

And humanity's job isn't to manipulate; it's to trust. It's a seismic shift from religion as a tool to religion as a relationship. So look, their whole system of god-kings and sacred marriages and magic rituals, it sounds pretty out there to us, but it was actually a deeply rational response to living in a world of constant fear and uncertainty.

It was their technology for control. And that really makes you stop and think, doesn't it? What are the magic totems, the systems of control that we rely on in our own lives to deal with that terrifying little voice in the back of our heads that whispers, maybe, just maybe, we aren't really in control either?