

Dr. Don Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 3, Cultural Essentials: Writing, Kingship, Audio Podcast Overview

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All right, so today we're diving deep into ancient Mesopotamia. We're using excerpts from a lecture by Dr. Donald Fowler. He's a scholar of the Old Testament, and in this lecture, he talks about the beginnings of writing and the rise of kings.

And what's fascinating is that we're going to uncover how these seemingly separate things are actually connected. Like, did you know that even the landscape itself played a role? Really? Yeah. That's interesting.

Yeah. Like, you know, he actually talks about that. Yeah.

Dr. Fowler. He talks about driving through modern-day Israel and being struck by how different it is from how it's described in the Bible, the land flowing with milk and honey. Yeah.

I always pictured it as like rolling hills and fruit trees everywhere. Right. It's actually quite barren.

A lot of rocks. Rocks. So it wasn't always like that.

No. It turns out that over thousands of years, deforestation led to the soil degrading. And without the trees to hold things together, you get this hard layer on top.

Oh. Oh. It's called marl.

Marl. So that's got to make it pretty tough to grow anything. Yeah.

Exactly. Basically choked out the fertile soil. He even describes watching a bulldozer in Jerusalem scraping away this thick layer of marl to get to the good stuff underneath.

It makes you wonder if folks back then had any idea what that deforestation would lead to. Yeah. So we've got this tough landscape, right? And now imagine trying to invent a writing system.

But instead of a simple alphabet, you've got thousands of symbols to learn. Thousands. Each with multiple meanings.

Wow. Talk about information overload. That's cuneiform for you.

The writing system of ancient Mesopotamia. Cuneiform. Yeah.

Okay. So how did that even work? I mean, how do you go from like simple pictures to actual writing? Well, it all started with pictograms. Simple pictures representing objects or actions.

Okay. I can see that. But it got complex pretty fast.

Like for example, the symbol for head. Okay. It began as a simple drawing of a head.

But over time it became more stylized and abstract. Eventually, it looked like a bunch of wedge-shaped marks. Oh, interesting.

And all this was written on clay tablets. Wow. Using a stylus.

So not a lot of room for artistic expression there. So, like cave drawings. Not quite.

Cuneiform was definitely more advanced, but still very challenging. Yeah, I bet. I mean, imagine memorizing thousands of intricate symbols.

Right. Really, only a small group of scribes could do that. Most people couldn't read or write at all.

That's wild. Okay. So we've got this tough landscape.

Yeah. This super complex writing system. Right.

And around the same time, there's another major development happening. What's that? The rise of kings. Oh, right.

Mesopotamian cities were getting more complex, and the old ways with temples being the centers of authority just weren't working anymore. Like kings were a necessary invention. Yeah.

You could say that urbanization and population growth demanded a different kind of leadership. And there's this fascinating document called the Sumerian King List. Sumerian King List.

It records dynasties going all the way back to, well, they claim before the flood. Before the flood. How long are we talking about? Well, according to the King List, eight kings ruled for a total of, get this, 241,000 years.

241,000 years. I mean, that's got to be longer than, well, a lot of things. Most scholars think that part of the King List is largely mythological.

Right. But it's interesting that they wanted to connect their kings to this ancient, you know, pre-flood world. It's like they were trying to give their kings legitimacy by saying, hey, we've always had kings, even before the world as we know it existed.

Exactly. That's a powerful statement. Yeah.

And what's fascinating is how the King List presents kingship as a gift from the gods. Oh, wow. A divine mandate to rule.

Pretty different from our modern democratic ideals, wouldn't you say? Oh, yeah, definitely. You never hear politicians today saying, hey, vote for me. The gods told me to run for office.

No, never. But in the ancient world, that claim carried a lot of weight. It makes you realize how deeply religion was intertwined with politics back then.

Absolutely. Yeah. And that's a crucial thing to keep in mind when we're reading the Old Testament, where kingship also plays a major role.

Right. Okay. So we've got these ecological challenges, this super complex writing system, and then the rise of kings seen as divinely appointed.

It's a lot to take in, but I'm starting to see how these things connect to the biblical narrative. Oh, yeah, definitely. It's more to uncover, though, right? Oh, absolutely.

Yeah. In the next part, we'll dive deeper into the implications of all this and explore how they set the stage for the world of the Old Testament. Okay.

So last time we left off talking about that Sumerian king list, which honestly sounds a little far-fetched with kings living thousands of years, but where does the more believable history begin in the king list? Well, after the flood narrative, it gets more interesting. The first thing the gods do after the flood is give kingship to humanity again. Really? So they're not even worried about folks rebuilding or anything? Nope.

Straight back to power. It's all about who's in charge. Seems that way.

And according to the king list, kingship was first given to the city of Kish. Kish? Wait, wasn't that a real city? Yeah. And for a while, scholars thought that this part was made up, just like the pre-flood stuff, but archaeologists actually found evidence of Kish.

Wow. It was a big deal in early Mesopotamia. So maybe there's some truth to this idea that Kish was the first city with a king after the flood.

Possibly. It's kind of like suddenly this ancient document becomes a lot more real. Yeah, totally.

It's like you have this old text and then bam, you find proof. It's not just a story. It reminds us that even in these ancient texts, there can be real history mixed in with myths.

Right. Like piecing together a puzzle. Exactly.

You have these bits and pieces, fragments of text and artifacts, and you've got to figure out how they all connect to understand the past. It's a challenge, but it's fascinating. Absolutely.

So even if we're skeptical of the king list, it still tells us how ancient Mesopotamians saw leadership. Oh, absolutely. And that idea of kingship being a divine gift, it's not just in Mesopotamia either.

It pops up in lots of other ancient cultures too. It makes you think about how that belief would affect a whole society. It would change everybody.

Like if you truly believed your king was chosen by the gods, wouldn't you be more likely to obey them even if you didn't like their decisions? I think so. It definitely adds another layer of authority. Right.

And challenging that authority would be a lot riskier. For sure. Yeah.

That's way different from how we see leadership now. Totally. Imagine a politician saying they're chosen by God.

Right. People would laugh. But in the ancient world, that claim had real power.

Right. And that context is so important when we read the Old Testament because kingship is a huge deal there too. The Bible is full of stories about kings.

Exactly. Good kings. Bad kings.

Kings who follow God. Kings who rebel. It's like a whole drama.

And Dr. Fowler's point is that all this focus on kingship isn't just random. Okay. He argues it's central to God's plan revealed in the Bible.

That's a bold statement. How does he back that up? Well, he points out that the line of kings in the Bible eventually leads to the Messiah. Right.

Descended from King David. Exactly. It's all connected to this idea of a future king.

Ruling with justice and righteousness. Exactly. So even though we might not think about kings the same way as ancient Mesopotamians.

Yeah. It's clear that kingship is a huge part of both their history and the Bible's narrative. Absolutely.

So we've got these ecological challenges, this super complex writing system, and then the rise of kings as divinely appointed. Yeah. It's like we're putting together a bigger picture of the ancient world.

Right. Which helps us understand the context of the Bible better. Absolutely.

Is there anything else Dr. Fowler talked about that connects to all of this? There is. It's a fascinating connection he makes between the invention of the alphabet and the story of Moses and the Ten Commandments. Yeah.

Wow. We'll dive into that next time. That sounds intriguing.

I can't wait to hear more. All right. So you mentioned a connection between the alphabet and Moses.

Yeah. Dr. Fowler points out something really interesting about the timing. The alphabet was invented around 1700 BC, which is just a few centuries before the traditional date for the Exodus.

Oh, so around the time Moses got the Ten Commandments. Yeah, exactly. So it makes you think, is there a reason for that timing? Hmm.

Interesting. Dr. Fowler thinks that God might have waited. Waited.

Yeah, for the alphabet to be invented before giving his word in writing. So instead of using cuneiform with all its complexity, God chose a writing system that was much easier to learn and to spread. That's the idea.

It's like God wanted everyone to be able to read it. Not just a select few. Right.

And you can't deny the impact the alphabet had on the spread of knowledge. Including the Bible? Absolutely. Because of the alphabet.

Yeah. The stories and laws and prophecies could be written down and shared with so many more people. Makes you wonder what would happen if it had stayed as cuneiform.

Right. How different things might be. Totally.

It's like this tiny thing, an alphabet. But it changed history in such a huge way. It really shows how everything's connected, you know? Totally.

So the ecological stuff, writing, the rise of kings- they all played a part in shaping the world the Bible came from. Exactly. So when we read those stories about kings and prophets, we've got to remember that bigger historical context.

It's like you're seeing the ancient world with new eyes. Right. And you start to appreciate how complex those texts really are.

Absolutely. This has been such a fascinating deep dive. It has.

We went from barren landscapes to kings chosen by gods. Yeah. And everything in between.

It's amazing how all these pieces fit together. They give us a better understanding of the ancient world. Totally.

So if you had to pick one thing you want listeners to take away today, what would it be? I'd say this. The Bible wasn't written in a vacuum. It was shaped by history, by real events.

When you read those stories, think about all the things that led up to them. Like the empires and the invention of writing. Yeah.

And how human choices played a part. Maybe even divine action. Possibly.

It'll give you a whole new level of meaning. Absolutely. Well, thanks for joining us on this deep dive into ancient Mesopotamia.

It was my pleasure. I love exploring these connections. I think that's a great place to wrap things up.

Until next time, keep those minds curious. And always dive deep.