

Dr. Don Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 4, Divinization of Kings, Audio Podcast Overview

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All right, get ready, folks, because we are going way back in time today. Ancient Mesopotamia, here we come. We're taking a deep dive into kings, gods, power struggles, you know, all that good stuff that, well, believe it or not, it still matters even today.

That's right, and we'll be exploring exactly how. Oh yeah, we'll be talking about kings who thought they were gods, chariot warfare. We might even get into some of the more, shall we say, interesting aspects of ancient Mesopotamian culture.

Temple prostitutes? Anyone? No. Okay, well, trust me, this is going to be fascinating. We're going to trace the evolution of kingship from its humble beginnings to absolute power, and we'll uncover how those echoes of power still resonate in our modern world, often in pretty unexpected ways.

Right. It's amazing to think about that shift from, you know, temples and priests calling all the shots to suddenly it's all about palaces and kings. So how did that happen? Where do we even begin with this transformation? Well, we have to start by understanding a fundamental change in how power was structured in these early societies.

So in the beginning, temples were the real centers of authority. Priests were the bigwigs because they were seen as the link, the go-between, between the people and the gods. Yeah, it makes sense.

I mean, back then you needed the gods on your side for everything. Right. Good harvests, protection from your enemies, as everything depended on the gods.

Exactly. But as cities grew, they became more complex, and the need for a different kind of leadership- a more centralized, more, well, human form of leadership emerged. That's where kings entered the picture.

So it's a shift from divine power to, like, a more earthly political power. Exactly. And to grasp just how monumental this shift was, we need to go back to a city called Kish.

Think of it as the birthplace of kingship. Kish. Hmm.

Doesn't ring a bell. Why is Kish so important? Well, the Sumerian king list, one of our oldest historical documents, tells us that Kish is where kingship first appeared. Oh, wait a minute.

A Sumerian king list. Yeah. That's like, what, a who's who of all the Sumerian royalty? Right.

A really fascinating document that lists all the kings of ancient Sumer going back thousands of years. And guess what? The very first city mentioned as having a king is Kish. Wow.

So Kish was like the first dynasty, the original king of the hill, so to speak. You could say that. And here's another interesting tidbit.

Even kings who ruled other cities centuries later would still claim the title king of Kish in their official inscriptions and stuff. Really? Why would they do that if they didn't actually rule Kish? It's not like putting king of Disneyland on your resume. It doesn't really mean anything, right? Well, the title king of Kish carried enormous prestige.

It was like the ultimate royal bragging right. Adding that to your name was a power move, a way of saying, hey, I'm a force to be reckoned with. Think of it like Roman emperors taking the title Caesar, even if they weren't actually related to Julius Caesar.

The name itself became a symbol of power and authority. Ah, so the name itself held power. That's fascinating.

But how much can we really trust this Sumerian king list? I mean, can we rely on something that old to be accurate? That's a great question and one that scholars have debated for ages. We have to remember that this isn't like a modern history book, right? It's more like a blend of history, mythology, maybe even some royal propaganda all mixed together. So a little bit of creative storytelling sprinkled in with the facts.

You got it. But here's the thing. Archaeological evidence actually supports some of the claims in the king list.

We found inscriptions from a king named Lugalsagasi who's mentioned in the list as a king of Kish. So it's not just a bunch of made-up stories. There's some real history woven into the narrative.

So it's like a historical puzzle, then. We've got to figure out what's fact and what's fiction. Exactly.

But the king list gives us these amazing insights into how ancient Mesopotamians view history, how they understood kingship. You see, to them, kings were the central figures in their worldview. And genealogies, those long, elaborate lists of ancestors, were seen as absolutely crucial for preserving history, for legitimizing their rule.

That's so different from how people see genealogies today. Like, most people just think they're boring family trees, you know? But back then, genealogies were like the ancient equivalent of super detailed historical records. It's how they wove together the story of their people, their lineage.

It connected them to their past, to their heritage. And get this, the Bible also uses genealogies to trace history and lineages. Wait, are you saying there are parallels between the Sumerian king list and the Bible? That's a connection I wouldn't have made.

Oh, absolutely. Think about those detailed genealogies in the book of Genesis, chapters 5 and 10. They trace the line of Adam-Noah all the way down to Abraham.

It's the same idea, using these family trees to tell the story of a people, their origins, their connection to a sacred past. That is really interesting. It makes you wonder how much these ancient cultures influenced each other.

So I've got kingship emerging in Kish, the power of names, and these cool parallels with the Bible. But how did these early kings actually cement their power? Was it all about having a fancy title and an impressive family tree? Those things definitely helped, but there's another crucial factor: warfare. To really control a region and its resources, you need military might.

Ugh, good old-fashioned military power. It's like a constant theme throughout history. So who were some of these early warrior kings? One dynasty that really stands out is the dynasty of Lagash.

They ruled a city-state that was constantly fighting with its neighbors, especially a city called Umma. They fought over everything: land, water rights, trade routes. It was a constant power struggle.

Sounds like the setup for some epic battles. Were they just using swords and shields, or was there some more advanced stuff going on? Oh, they had it all: swords, shields, spears. But this is also when chariots were first introduced to warfare.

Can you imagine seeing these thundering chariots charging at you for the first time? Absolutely terrifying. Yeah. Talk about a game changer.

Chariots would have given them a huge edge in battle. Did they leave behind any accounts of these battles, some ancient war stories? Oh yeah. To get a real sense of how brutal these conflicts were, you have to look at the Stele of the Vultures.

Stele of the Vultures. Okay, that sounds a little ominous. It is.

It's a victory monument put up by a Lagash king named Iannatum. He wanted to celebrate his triumph over the forces of Umma. It shows vultures feasting on the corpses of his enemies.

Pretty graphic. A stark reminder of the cost of war. Yikes.

Definitely getting a clear picture of that might-makes-right mentality back then. And here's what's even more interesting about the Stele of the Vultures. It includes one of the earliest examples of a formal treaty.

It lays out the terms of the peace agreement between Lagash and Umma. And get this, it even includes some chilling curses against anyone who dares to break the treaty. Curses like may your crops wither and die type of curses.

Exactly. And here's where it gets really interesting. This treaty format, with its stipulations and curses, bears a striking resemblance to the covenants we see in the Bible.

You know, like the Ten Commandments, the consequences for breaking God's law. This is an idea, right? A binding agreement with serious penalties if you violate it. Wow, that's amazing.

We're talking about ancient legal and religious ideas that are still relevant today. Absolutely. Which leads us to another fascinating figure, King Urukagina.

Oh, Urukagina. Okay, never heard of him. What's his story? He was a later king of Lagash, but he was a very different kind of ruler.

He's often called the Reformed King because he tried to actually curb the king's power. He wanted to give some authority back to the temples. Hold on, a king who wants less power? That just seems counterintuitive.

Most kings are all about getting more power, not giving it away. It does, doesn't it? But Urukagina, he saw just how powerful the kingship had become, and he felt that it was throwing things out of balance. So he tried to do things like limit taxes and reduce the influence of the state bureaucracy.

He even instituted a form of debt forgiveness, which was a pretty radical idea for his time. Debt forgiveness. Now that's something you don't hear about very often.

Even today, that's a pretty forward-thinking concept for an ancient ruler. It was. It might even be the precursor to the Jubilee Year described in the Bible.

You know, every 50 years, all debts were canceled. It shows that these ancient societies were grappling with things like economic inequality and social justice, just like we are today. Urukaginawas was definitely ahead of his time.

So he's like the ancient world's Robin Hood, taking from the rich, giving to the poor. So what happened to him? Was he, you know, hailed as a hero for his reforms? Well, unfortunately, his reign was cut short. A new power player was on the rise: Lugalzadze.

Lugal-Zage-Si. That name sounds like, well, a force to be reckoned with. He was.

Lugal-Zage-Si was the king of Umma, and he managed to defeat Lagash, conquer all of Sumer, and for the first time in history, create a unified kingdom. So much for Urukagina's attempts to decentralize power. Seems like Lugal-Zage-Si was playing a whole different game.

He was. He was incredibly ambitious, ruthless, and had this grand vision for a powerful, centralized state under his control. And here's where things take a really interesting turn.

Lugal-Zage-Si started doing something no one had done before. He began taking the titles of the city gods for himself. Wait a minute, you're saying he was claiming to be equal to the gods.

Talk about a power move. Did people just accept that? It's hard to say for sure how the general population felt about it, but his actions were a major turning point in the evolution of kingship. Remember, in Sumerian thought, each city had its own patron deity who was considered the real king.

By assuming those divine titles, Lugal-Zage-Si was basically declaring, I'm not just a king; I'm a divine ruler. He's blurring the lines between political power and religious authority. Now things are really getting interesting.

So we've got a power grab, a king claiming to be divine. I'm sensing this is just the beginning. Oh, you're right.

To understand how kingship reached its ultimate expression, we need to meet the man who built the first Mesopotamian empire, Sargon of Akkad. Okay, so we're on the edge of our seats here. We've Lugal-Zage-Si, this power-hungry king taking titles from the gods.

Now we're going to meet Sargon of Akkad, the empire builder. I'm sensing a connection here, right? Phil, listen, how does Sargon fit into this whole kings becoming gods thing? Well, Sargon wasn't exactly a god-king in the way that some later rulers would be. You know, he didn't go as far as, say, Naram-Sim.

But Sargon definitely laid the groundwork. He understood the power of religion, how to use it for his political goals. Okay, I'm intrigued.

Tell me more about the Sargon guy. What's his story? Well, his origins are a bit of a mystery, which just adds to his mystique. He starts as a nobody, rises to power, and becomes the most powerful man in Mesopotamia.

Talk about a story. Wow. Talk about an underdog story.

But was he really born into poverty? Legend has it he was the illegitimate son of a temple prostitute. And get this, as a baby, he was put in a basket and set adrift on the Tigris River. Hold on.

Baby in a basket? A river? That sounds familiar. Are we talking like a Moses situation here? Yeah, there are definitely some parallels there. You've got these babies in baskets and a sense of destiny.

But Sargon's story is much more shrouded in myth and uncertainty. We don't really know if his mother meant to abandon him or if this is all part of, you know, like a carefully crafted origin story to make him seem more chosen by the gods, so to speak. So a PR campaign from day one, huh? Right.

And it worked. Someone rescued Sargon from the river, and he eventually, well, he rose through the ranks, believe it or not, and became the cupbearer to the king of Kish. Cupbearer? That doesn't sound like the most direct path to building an empire.

How'd he go from serving drinks to conquering vast territories? He was ambitious, resourceful, and had a knack for seizing opportunities. So he ends up overthrowing the king of Kish and establishes himself as the ruler of Akkad, a city in central Mesopotamia. So now he's got his own city.

But how does he go from ruling Akkad to building an empire? What was his, like, secret weapon? Military genius, basically. Sargon was a brilliant strategist, a gifted leader, and a pretty ruthless conqueror. He put together this powerful army and launched a series of campaigns that eventually brought all of Mesopotamia under his control.

Sounds like he lived up to his name. Sargon does mean true king, right? It does. And he definitely proved himself to be a powerful king in terms of, well, both military might and political savvy.

But he was more than just a warrior. He was a shrewd administrator, a logistical mastermind, and a brilliant organizer. All qualities that were essential for keeping such a vast and diverse empire from falling apart.

OK, so it wasn't just brute force. He was smart about holding onto power. What were some of his strategies? How did he keep this massive empire together? He had a few tricks up his sleeve.

For one thing, he established garrisons- those were permanent military outposts- in all the cities he conquered. That meant his troops were stationed everywhere, ready to keep order and squash any rebellions. Smart move.

Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Exactly. And he also created a system of political hostages.

He'd bring family members of the ruling families from conquered cities to Akkad. Hostages. That's a little harsh, isn't it? It sounds brutal, but it was actually pretty effective.

If a city even thought about rebelling, their leaders knew their families would be in danger. High-stakes diplomacy, for sure. So we've got military might, strategic thinking, some, well, tough tactics to hold the empire together.

But let's not forget about the whole religion angle. How did Sargon use religion during his reign? Well, he was very smart about that. He knew that religion was a huge part of Mesopotamian life, so he incorporated it into his rule.

He didn't declare himself a god outright, but he did position himself as the key figure in the national cult. I see. So how did he do that? Well, one example is that he appointed his daughter, Enheduanna, as the high priestess of the moon god Nana in the city of Ur.

Pretty clever move, right? It gave him direct control over one of the most influential religious centers in all of Mesopotamia. So he's basically controlling the religious narrative. He's shaping people's beliefs about the gods through his daughter.

Exactly. He wasn't just ruling through military power. He was shaping how people thought about the divine.

Oh, and he also centralized the finances of all the religious institutions, making them dependent on the royal treasury. Consolidating power, centralizing authority, using religion to back it all up. It's like he's setting the stage for later rulers to actually claim divine status for themselves.

He definitely set a powerful precedent. And his grandson, Naram-Sim, would take Sargon's approach and really amp it up, becoming the model for a god-king. Here we go.

This is where the whole god-king idea takes off, right? Tell me everything. How did Naram-Sin pull off declaring himself a god? Did he just, like, announce it one day? Well, it was a little more nuanced than that, but not by much. He used this powerful combination of symbolic language, grand religious titles, and really striking imagery, all to elevate himself to divine status.

OK, I'm hooked. Give me some examples. What kind of symbolic language? He started adding the divine determinative to his name.

It was this special symbol, like a uniform sign, used to denote gods and goddesses in writing. By putting it in his name, it was like saying, hey, I'm not just a king, I'm divine. It's like adding god to your business card.

Anything else? Oh, yeah. He also adopted all these grandiose titles, like King of the Four Quarters. King of the Four Quarters? What does that even mean? It basically meant King of the Universe, a title that was normally reserved for the gods, you know, claiming universal dominion.

Shooting for the stars, literally. Aiming for the ultimate power, authority over everything. Any other examples? He also called himself the husband of Ishtar, the most important goddess in the Mesopotamian pantheon.

Whoa, marrying a goddess. Yeah. That's some serious ambition.

What was the significance of that? Well, this was a very clever move because it linked him to this really important ritual, the sacred marriage. Every year, the king would ritually marry a goddess, often Ishtar, to ensure the fertility of the land, you know, keep those good harvests coming, keep the people happy and the gods on their side. Ah, so it's not just about status.

There's a practical side to it, too. He's ensuring a good harvest, keeping the people fed. Exactly.

By claiming to be the husband of Ishtar, Naram-Sim basically made himself a part of this essential ritual. It just further reinforced his, you know, god-king image. So we're seeing a clear pattern here, right? Kings are grabbing more power than claiming divine titles.

And finally, you have a king like Naram-Sim just straight up declaring himself a god. It's a fascinating look at the evolution of power, how leadership was seen and legitimized back then. But I have to ask, why? Was it all just ego and ambition? I mean, those things definitely played a role.

Who wouldn't want to be worshipped as a god? But there's something more to it than that, something deeper. Okay, like what? Remember, in ancient times, religion and politics weren't really separate like they are today. The ancients believed that all power came from the gods.

So for a king to be seen as the ultimate authority, the top dog, he had to be seen as, you know, chosen by the gods, divinely sanctioned. So it's about more than earthly power. He's trying to tap into cosmic power, align himself with the very forces that control the universe.

Exactly. By associating themselves with the gods, these kings were legitimizing their rule in a way that their subjects understood and that resonated with them. It's a brilliant, if somewhat audacious strategy.

It is. And it would have a profound impact on the development of kingship throughout the ancient Near East, and as we'll see, even in the Bible. But that's a story for another time.

Okay, so we've gone from those early kings in Kish all the way to, like, full-on god kings like Naram-Sim. It's a crazy trip through history, but I got to ask: why does this even matter to us today? I mean, we're not living in ancient Mesopotamia bowing down to god kings, are we? Good point. Maybe not literally, no.

But the thing is, these ancient power dynamics, the ways leaders gain and hold on to power, those echoes, they're still around us today. Okay, I'm listening. Give me some examples.

How do these Mesopotamian kings from like thousands of years ago, how do they connect to our lives today? Well, think about how our governments work, even in democracies. We still have these powerful, centralized authority figures: presidents, prime ministers, even monarchs in some places. And these figures, no matter what their title is, still rely on a mix of political power, you know, symbolism, even how they come across in the media, to bolster their authority and influence people.

Yeah, I can see that. Modern politicians, they're masters of using imagery and rhetoric to connect with people on an emotional level. They know how to tell a story that really resonates with their audience.

Right. And just like Sargon used his daughter in Hedwana to control the religious narrative, modern leaders often use religious language, or they'll appeal to religious values, to shore up their support, to get people behind their policies. It's a way of tapping into these really deep-seated beliefs and values to create that sense of shared identity, a common purpose.

It's fascinating how these patterns from ancient history just keep popping up again and again in our modern world. Are there any other ways this ancient history connects to us today? Think about the stories we tell, you know, about our heroes and leaders. This whole idea of the chosen one, someone who comes from nothing and achieves greatness, it has its roots in those ancient stories about Sargon, his unlikely rise to power.

It's a story that's like embedded in our collective imagination. You're right. It's that classic underdog story.

And we love it. We're drawn to these figures who defy the odds. We see this everywhere in myths, movies, even political campaigns.

Exactly. And if we understand the roots of those narratives, if we trace them back to ancient cultures like Mesopotamia, it can give us a whole new appreciation for how those stories still shape how we see the world, how we perceive power and leadership. So when we're digging into these Mesopotamian kings, we're not just learning about some dusty old civilization.

We're learning about the nature of power, leadership, things that are still relevant today. Absolutely. And it highlights the importance of, you know, critical thinking.

We can't just accept claims of authority without question, whether it's from a politician or religious leader, or even an expert. We have to look at the evidence, consider different perspectives, and ask ourselves: whose interests are being served here? What's the real agenda? Right. We need to question our assumptions, look deeper.

We need to develop that healthy skepticism to help us see the world more clearly. That's it. And that's one of the best things about studying history, I think.

Yeah. It gives you that broader perspective on, well, the human condition. Yeah.

You start to see the patterns in how we behave, the good and the bad. It's a good reminder that, you know, we're not so different from the people who came before us. We're all part of this grand, ongoing human story.

I like that. We're all part of something bigger than ourselves. The story that's been going on for thousands of years.

And that leads me to my final thought for our listeners. What if kings really were gods? How would that change how people live, their beliefs, their full understanding of the universe? Would it be a utopia ruled by all-knowing, benevolent beings? Or would it be, you know, a dystopia where absolute power corrupts? Absolutely. I'll leave you to think about that.

Thanks for joining us on this deep dive into the world of ancient Mesopotamian kings. We'll catch you next time.