

Dr. Don Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds,

Session 5, Religious Paganism

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Okay, so get ready, because today we are diving deep into ancient Near Eastern paganism. Ooh, sounds intense. It is.

It is. We're going to be looking at a lecture by Dr. Donald Fowler, who- I've heard of him. He's an expert on Old Testament backgrounds, and really what we're going to be trying to figure out is how the ancient pagans, how they viewed their gods, how they saw themselves in the world, and how all of that might give us a fresh perspective on the Old Testament, and maybe even some insights into our own struggles today.

I like it. Yeah. So we're not just talking about dusty old history here.

No, not at all. We're talking about timeless human desires and that search for control that we all have in a world that just feels so uncertain. Yeah, totally.

It's amazing how intertwined religion and power were in ancient Mesopotamia, and it's so different from how we tend to see those things today. Yeah. Back then, the king was a sacred figure, like a direct link to the divine.

I mean, that idea of a king as this magical figure, almost like a conduit to the gods, is something that really jumped out at me in the lecture. Yeah. You know, Dr. Fowler, he talks about this pattern of empires rising and falling, built around these all-powerful figures, like Sargon, for example, and the kings who came after him.

Right. Yeah. They built these incredible regimes.

They did. But they were ultimately unstable, weren't they? They were. And I think the reason they worked as long as they did was that the king was seen as successful.

Right. Like, he was able to give the people what they needed most, but when things went bad, the whole system just collapsed. Yeah.

Dr. Fowler gives the example of Shar-Kali-Sharri. Oh, interesting. The last king of the old Akkadian period.

Okay. His name actually means King of Kings. Oh, wow.

Which is really interesting because we see that same title, you know, used for Christ in Revelation. Right. But even with a name like that, you know, King of Kings, his reign was short; he wasn't effective, and his empire just crumbled.

It's like the more they tried to grab onto power, the faster it slipped away. But then we come to the Ur-3rd period, which Dr. Fowler calls the Sumerian Renaissance. Yes.

Almost like this last burst of brilliance for Sumerian civilization. Exactly. Like an Indian summer.

Yes, exactly. Of Sumerian civilization. And that's where we meet Shulgi, who takes this whole divine king idea to a whole new level.

Oh, yeah. He really embodies it. Yeah.

Shulgi is fascinating. Yeah. Because you can really see this idea of the king as God in him.

Okay. And one of the most interesting things Dr. Fowler points to is this collection of royal hymns. Hymns? Yeah.

They're all about Shulgi's, well, let's just say, passionate relationship with the goddess Ishtar. Wait, hold on. Yeah.

Are you telling me we're talking about, like, ancient erotic literature about a king and a goddess? Yeah. I got to admit, that's not what I was expecting to find in a lecture about ancient religion. So they actually considered this like sacred.

They did. It sounds shocking to us, I know. But- it does a little bit.

You have to understand, this wasn't just about Shulgi's ego or like him wanting to satisfy his own desires or whatever. It actually had a deeper purpose. Okay.

Now you've got me really curious. What was so important about a king getting it on with a goddess that they would write sacred literature about it? To understand that, we need to look at this idea of this sacred marriage ritual. All right.

Let's do it. Okay. I am ready to hear more about this sacred marriage.

Okay. Let's get into it. All right.

So in ancient Sumer, the king wasn't just a political leader. Right. He was a really important religious figure too.

Yeah. And one of the most crucial things he did was participate in this ritual called the sacred marriage. Right.

With the high priestess of Inanna. Yes. Also known as Ishtar.

Right. Yeah. I've heard of that.

Yeah. I mean, it was meant to be like a symbolic union between the king and the goddess, right? Uh-huh. But what did it actually mean for the average person living in the kingdom? Well, it was all about fertility.

Okay. Like for the whole kingdom. For the whole kingdom.

Okay. Yeah. So imagine living in a world where your survival depended on good harvests and healthy livestock.

Right. Yeah. Fertility was like everything.

Yeah. It was essential. Absolutely.

And the king- yeah. And his connection to the divine. Uh-huh.

They believed he could actually influence these things. Interesting. Through this ritual.

Okay. So this wasn't just some abstract ceremony they performed. No, no.

It was like directly tied to people's basic needs. Exactly. Wow.

And this is where Shulgi's military successes come in. Oh. Okay.

See, victory in battle was seen as a sign of Inanna's favor. Okay. Like she had chosen him.

Right. And given him her blessing, her power. So this made the sacred marriage ritual even more potent.

Okay. You know, ensuring a plentiful harvest and prosperity. For everyone.

Yeah. For the whole kingdom. It's pretty wild to think about.

Yeah. You know, today we tend to think of religion as something personal, like inward-focused. Yeah.

About, you know, seeking meaning or comfort. Mm-hmm. But for them, it was about getting concrete results.

Hold up. In a world that I'm sure felt very unpredictable and dangerous. Oh, absolutely.

Yeah. You know, you've hit on a key distinction that Dr. Fowler makes. Okay.

He talks about this idea of functional religion. Functional religion. Okay.

Versus aesthetic religion. Okay. So what does that mean? Well, he argues that ancient religion, it was all about control.

Okay. Like manipulating the forces of nature. Right.

Appeasing the gods. Right. And getting specific results.

Okay. You know, but modern religion, on the other hand, it often focuses on, like, the inner experience. Right.

Right. Those feelings of peace. Yeah.

Connection with something bigger than yourself. I get it. Yeah.

So it's like the difference between, you know, paying your bills and going to church. Exactly. For spiritual uplift.

Yeah. That's a great analogy. Right.

Yeah. Both involve belief systems, but they're serving totally different functions. Exactly.

Or think about the difference between, like, modern medicine and appealing to the gods for healing. Right. Yeah.

Both want the same result, right? Right. Good health. Good health.

Exactly. But the way they get there is completely different. It is.

Yeah. You know, ancient people didn't have our scientific understanding. Right.

So they relied on ritual and magic. Yeah. The favor of the gods.

Yeah. Trying to control, you know. The forces that shaped their lives.

Yeah. All the things they couldn't understand. It really makes you realize how much our worldview has shifted.

It really does. I mean, we're taught to believe in science, logic, personal responsibility. Hmm.

But the ancients, they saw cause and effect everywhere. And that cause was often in the divine. Right.

Right. Everything that happened, good or bad. Yeah.

It all had a supernatural explanation. Right. And that explains why religion was so powerful in their lives.

Yeah. It wasn't just about belief. Right.

It was about survival. Yeah. If you could just figure out the right rituals.

Yeah. The right offerings. Right.

The right way to please the gods. Yeah. You know, then you could change your fate.

And that brings us back to the king. Yes. He was like the ultimate magic totem.

He was the one with the most direct connection to the divine. It's like, it makes me think of voodoo or witchcraft. Yeah.

Where people believe they can, you know, influence outcomes through ritual actions. Mm-hmm. It's like that human desire to control our fate.

Mm-hmm. It's never really gone away. It's fascinating, isn't it? It is.

Even in our modern scientific world. Yeah. We still crave that sense of control.

We do. You know, we may not offer sacrifices to statues. Right.

Or perform elaborate rituals. Right. But we have our lucky charms.

Yeah. We read our horoscope. Right.

And we find comfort in routines and superstitions. Yeah. So you're saying that even though how religion looks from the outside has changed, those underlying human desires, you know, for control, security, or a sense of power in a world that just feels so chaotic.

Yeah. Those are still with us. I think so.

And that's why it's valuable to understand, you know. Ancient paganism. Yeah.

Ancient paganism. Yeah. It helps us see how these desires have played out through history, you know.

Right. How different cultures have dealt with them. Yeah.

That makes sense. Yeah. Okay.

So we've got this ancient worldview. Right. Where the king is divine, magic is real, and religion is about getting practical results.

Yeah. But how does the Old Testament fit into all of this? That's a great question. Yeah.

And Dr. Fowler has some interesting insights on that. Okay. He suggests that even the Old Testament reflects this ancient worldview in some ways.

Okay. You know, we see God promising blessings for obedience. Right.

Punishing transgressions. Yeah. Intervening in the lives of people and nations.

Right. Like when David took a census. Yes.

Against God's will. Exactly. And then a plague happens.

Or all those times God promises the Israelites prosperity. Right. And victory if they stay faithful.

Right. Exactly. So, yeah.

There are definitely some similarities. Yeah. But here's where the big difference comes in.

Okay. I'm listening. Paganism.

It emphasizes human control. Okay. Through manipulating the gods.

But biblical faith stresses God's sovereignty. Okay. And the need for obedience and trust.

So, it's not about us figuring out the magic formula or the right spell to get what we want. Exactly. It's about surrendering to a higher power.

Yes. And trusting in God's plan. Exactly.

So, it's not that the ancient Israelites were totally immune to pagan beliefs. But the biblical message offered a totally different perspective. Oh, did it? On how humans relate to the divine.

Exactly. And that's what makes it so interesting. Yeah.

Because of this difference in worldview. Yeah. This clash between human control and divine sovereignty.

Uh-huh. It plays out through the whole Old Testament. Wow.

Okay. But maybe that's something we could dive into more in the next part. Yeah.

Let's do it. Okay. It's wild to think about, you know? This tension between.

Yeah. Wanting to be in control like the pagans and. Yeah.

The biblical idea of just trusting and obeying. Right. It makes you wonder, though: are we really that different today? That's the big question, isn't it? Yeah.

Like, do we actually believe? Yeah. That we're not in control? It's like, what are our modern-day magic totems? You know? Right.

Right. What rituals do we cling to? What things do we do? Hoping that we can. Yeah.

Yeah. You know, somehow influence outcomes and get things to go our way. It's like we've traded in the old gods for like technology and science and self-help gurus and all that.

We think if we follow the right formula, you know. Uh-huh. If we work hard enough, if we optimize everything.

Yeah. Then we can achieve anything. We can control it all.

Yeah. And to be fair, like, human ingenuity has done incredible things. Yeah.

But there's also this danger in believing. Right. That we're totally in control.

That we can just engineer our own happiness. Yeah. That we can just make it all work.

That we can just make it all happen. Right. Because life- yeah.

Life has a way of throwing curveballs. It does. Right? Like pandemics and economies crash and relationships fall apart and we look- And suddenly, yeah, suddenly we realize- We're not in control.

Yeah. It's an illusion. It's like that illusion of control is just shattered.

Yeah. And that's where I think- okay. The ancient worldview and the biblical message- yeah.

They kind of come together- okay. In this really interesting way- because both of them recognize the limits of human power. Right.

You know, that uncertainty, that's just a part of life. Right. It's unavoidable.

Yeah. But they offer totally different responses. Okay.

Yeah. How so? Well, paganism basically says- Yeah. Figure out the rules.

Yeah. Manipulate the system. Okay.

Find the right magic- right. To make the universe bend to your will. Okay.

But the biblical message says something totally different. What's that? It says surrender. Surrender.

There's something bigger than yourself. Okay. Acknowledge your limitations.

Right. You know, find strength in something beyond yourself. So it's not saying that we should just give up.

No. No. Not at all.

Or just resign ourselves to fate. It's about- okay. It's about humility.

Okay. Recognizing that we're not actually the masters of the universe. Yeah.

It's about finding that balance, right? Exactly. Between striving and accepting. Yeah.

Between putting in the effort, but also recognizing that some things are just- out of our control. Yeah. I think you put it perfectly.

And maybe that's the most valuable thing we can take away from this. I think so. From this whole deep dive into ancient paganism.

Yeah. You know, it's not just about understanding this ancient culture or whatever. Right.

It's about looking at ourselves. Yes. You know, at our own desires.

Uh-huh. Our own anxiety. Our own magic totems.

And asking, what are my magic totems? Yeah. Where do I put my trust? Exactly. Wow.

Deep stuff. Yeah. That is a lot to think about.

It is. This has been an amazing deep dive. I really appreciate you- oh, of course.

Guiding us through this. It's been my pleasure. It's been really eye-opening.

It's fascinating stuff, you know? Yeah. And I think it's important for anyone listening- yeah. Don't underestimate the wisdom of the ancients.

Right. Like, their world was obviously different from ours. Yeah.

But the questions they were wrestling with. Yeah. Like, what is power? Right.

What is the role of religion? How do we find meaning? Right. Control in this chaotic world? Yeah. I mean, those are still the questions we're asking today.

They are. So keep exploring. Yeah.

Keep questioning. Yeah. And keep diving deep.

Couldn't have said it better myself. Right. Until next time, everybody.

Yeah. Happy pondering. Yeah.