

Dr. Don Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 6, End of Royal Divinization, Amorites

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Welcome back, everyone. We're diving deep into ancient Mesopotamia today. We're going to be talking about powerful kings, mysterious rituals, and a group called the Amorites.

And they really changed the course of history. Our expert is here to unpack a lecture by Dr. Donald Fowler, who knows a lot about the Old Testament and its historical context. Get ready for some really interesting connections, because things are about to get fascinating.

You know, what always gets me about ancient Mesopotamia is how they viewed their kings. They weren't just like political leaders or anything. Right.

Yeah. It's so different from how we see things now. Exactly.

In ancient Mesopotamia, kings were seen as this direct link between the gods and humans. Like they could influence nature and even bring prosperity. It's this idea of divine kingship that really sets them apart, you know? So they actually believed the king could make the crops grow better or like protect them from disaster.

How do they think that worked? Well, they believed in something called sympathetic magic. The idea was that whatever happens here on Earth, like human actions, can directly affect the gods and what they do. One really important ritual was the sacred marriage.

The king would symbolically unite with a high priestess. And they didn't see this as just a ceremony. They believed it actually channeled divine power into the land, ensuring fertility and abundance, you know? Okay.

So let me get this straight. They're saying what happens here can influence the gods. That's pretty powerful stuff.

It is. And Dr. Fowler actually brings up a good point. He says this kind of magical thinking isn't as foreign as we might think.

Even today, you know, there are beliefs about good works and how that can influence God. That's true. I've heard that idea before.

So if these Mesopotamian kings were so powerful, why didn't this belief catch on everywhere? That's a really good question. Dr. Fowler talks about how geography and population size played a big role. This divine kingship thing really thrived in the East, you know, where they had these massive empires and a lot of centralized power.

But in the West, things were different. The terrain was much more rugged, and the populations were smaller. There wasn't really that same need for a single all-powerful figure to, like, hold everything together.

So the West had kings, but they weren't seen as like godlike in the same way. Right. It was more like sacred kingship.

They were chosen by God, definitely set apart and not to be messed with. Kind of like the story of David and Saul. Even though Saul wasn't a great king, David hesitated to remove him because he respected that divinely appointed role.

So even in the West, kings had a certain aura about them, even if they weren't gods themselves. But getting back to Mesopotamia, what happened to these all-powerful kings? Did people just stop believing they were divine? Well, it's interesting you ask that. Yeah.

Because there's this big turning point that happens around the time of Abraham from the Bible. Oh, I see where you're going with this. Exactly.

During what's called the Ur-3rd period, the Elamites sacked the city of Ur. This was a huge deal, and it really marked the end of widespread divine kingship in Mesopotamia. But it wasn't like a clean break or anything.

Some places like the city of Isin and the region of Elam still held on to that idea of divinized kings. And then, of course, you have Egypt, where pharaohs were seen as actual gods, like reincarnations of Amun-Re, the sun god. So it wasn't like everyone just woke up one day and decided kings weren't divine anymore.

It was more of a gradual shift, with some places holding on longer than others. Exactly. It's never that simple, is it? And kind of from the ashes of this declining belief in divine kings, you have a new power emerging: the Amorites.

Ah, the Amorites. Now this is where it starts connecting even more to the Bible, right? Absolutely. But before we dive into that, we need to be clear about something.

The term Amorite can be kind of tricky because it has multiple meanings depending on who's using it and when. So it's not as simple as saying Amorite means this one specific group of people. Right.

Think of it like this. It could be like saying someone is a westerner, referring to where they come from. Or it can be more ethnic, like referring to a specific group with shared ancestry.

It could even just be a general term for foreigners in Mesopotamia. Kind of like how people sometimes just say Mexican to refer to anyone from Latin America. I get it.

It's more nuanced than just a simple label. Exactly. But for us, what matters is how the Bible uses the term Amorite.

Okay. So let's stick with the biblical definition then. Who were the Amorites in that context? Well, in the Bible, the Amorites are connected to a group called the Hyksos, which means chiefs of foreign lands.

And here's the interesting part. The Hyksos were actually the first outsiders to conquer Egypt. Wait, they conquered Egypt.

That's huge. Egypt was this ancient superpower. How did they manage to pull that off? It's a pretty remarkable story.

And to understand how it happened, we have to unpack who these Hyksos really were. You see, there's this common misconception that Hyksos means shepherd kings. That comes from his interpretation by the Jewish historian Josephus.

So they weren't shepherd kings. What were they then? Well, the Hyksos empire, which stretched from Syria all the way down into Egypt, was actually Amorite in origin. They were fierce warriors, and they brought with them some pretty game-changing military innovations.

Okay, now I'm really intrigued. Tell me more about these Amorites and how they were able to topple empires. Well, for one thing, they were big, like physically larger than both the Egyptians and the Canaanites.

Archaeological evidence suggests that. Imagine the advantage in hand-to-hand combat. Yeah, like walking tanks.

But it wasn't just brute force, right? Oh, definitely not. They also had this impressive technology. They were masters of horse-drawn chariots.

Imagine you're an Egyptian soldier used to fighting on foot and suddenly you see these chariots thundering toward you. Yikes, that's got to be scary. I think I'd be running for the hills.

I think most people would. And it wasn't just the chariots. They also developed this thing called the laminated bow, much more powerful and accurate than traditional bows.

Instead of just one piece of wood, they used layers of wood and bone, giving them incredible range and deadly accuracy. So they're bigger, faster, and they can hit you from farther away. No wonder they were able to conquer.

What else made them such good warriors? Well, they were also skilled in close combat. They had this particular type of dagger, super effective. Remember, the Egyptians relied heavily on the mace, but the Amorite dagger was quicker and more versatile in close quarters.

It sounds like they had all the bases covered. Speaking of conquest, Dr. Fowler mentions the capture of Hazor. That city was really important strategically.

Right. Hazor was like the capital of the Hyksos Empire, a major stronghold. Capturing it was huge, especially because the Israelites, who were also in the region, didn't have those fancy Amorite weapons.

Hold on. They took this massive city without chariots or those super bows? How'd they do that? That's the million-dollar question, isn't it? Yeah. Brilliant strategy.

Overconfident Amorites or just plain luck. We may never know for sure, but what we do know is that capturing Hazor cemented the Israelites' place in the region. It really paved the way for their own kingdom later on.

It's like a David and Goliath story, but maybe David had some secret weapon we haven't discovered yet. But you know, it's interesting: the Amorites didn't just conquer and destroy; they also built things and innovated. Dr. Fowler talks about how their influence continued even after their initial conquests.

Oh, absolutely. If you look at the old Babylonian period, which lines up with those biblical patriarchs like Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, you see Amorite influence everywhere, especially with Hammurabi, an Amorite king who unified Mesopotamia. Hammurabi's code, right.

One of the most famous sets of laws from ancient times. Exactly. And it's amazing how much it shares with the laws in the Old Testament, especially in Exodus and Deuteronomy.

Not just the laws themselves, but the underlying ideas about justice and social order. For example, both the Amorites and the Hebrews had similar laws about interest rates, setting limits to prevent exploitation. So even though they were different cultures, they had similar ideas about fairness.

Yeah, exactly. And it wasn't just law. Babylon under Hammurabi went through this huge construction boom.

They built grand temples, expanded the city's canals, and brought a whole new energy to the region. Sounds ambitious. Anything else besides building and laws? Well, they also made some big advances in timekeeping.

Dr. Fowler points out that during this period, they developed a solar calendar, a major step forward from relying only on the lunar calendar. I can see how that would be important, especially for farming; knowing exactly when to plant and harvest would make a big difference. Absolutely.

A solar calendar aligns more closely with the sun cycles, which is much more practical for an agricultural society. So you have these Amorites, who are not only great warriors, but also builders, lawmakers, and innovators. They really shaped Mesopotamian culture.

It definitely challenges that simple image of them just being conquerors. Out of everything they did, what would you say is their biggest contribution? Hmm. From a legal standpoint, definitely Hammurabi's Code.

It gives us this incredible glimpse into how they saw justice, property, and social responsibility. You mentioned earlier that there are connections between Hammurabi's Code and the Old Testament. Oh yeah, for sure.

And that actually brings us to something really important for our next topic, the Jubilee. It was this fascinating economic practice in the Bible. Basically, every 50 years, all land that had been sold would go back to the original owner.

Wait, they just gave the land back. Why would they do that? Sounds almost too good to be true. It does sound pretty radical, doesn't it? But there's evidence suggesting something like the Jubilee might have existed even earlier during Hammurabi's time in Babylon.

So this idea of resetting land ownership wasn't unique to the Hebrews. Maybe it has Amorite roots. That's one theory Dr. Fowler presents.

It really makes you think about how ideas flowed between cultures back then. Was the Jubilee just the Hebrews adapting a Babylonian practice, or did it come about separately from this shared concern about fairness and preventing families from being stuck in debt forever? It's a question that's still debated. Well, I'm hooked.

Tell me more about this Jubilee. What was its purpose? How did it actually work? Well, the Jubilee, as it's described in the Old Testament, was all about preventing long-term economic inequality. Every 50 years, all the land would go back to the families who originally owned it.

It was like hitting a reset button on land ownership so families wouldn't get trapped in debt forever. That's pretty radical. I can't imagine that working today.

Was this actually something they did, or was it more like an idea? Well, scholars debate about that, whether it was ever fully put into practice or more of a guiding principle. But the main point is the idea itself. This focus is on social justice, making sure everyone has a fair shot.

Because without something like the Jubilee, you can end up with a few wealthy families owning all the land and everyone else struggles. It's like a safety net built into their system, keeping things a bit more balanced. Exactly.

It makes you think about how we deal with economic inequality today. Are there things we can learn from these ancient ideas? Could we adapt them to our world? Interesting question. We might not have a Jubilee, but are there policies that could do something similar, you know, prevent too much wealth from being concentrated in the hands of a few? It's definitely worth thinking about.

Now, going back to the Amorites for a second. Remember how we talked about those hints of debt relief in Hammurabi's code? Some scholars think those could be early versions of the Jubilee, suggesting that this concern for economic balance wasn't just a Hebrew thing. So these ideas were already circulating back then, influencing different groups.

Exactly. It shows how connected those ancient societies were, sharing and adapting practices. And even though we may never know for sure who influenced who, what's clear is they were dealing with some of the same issues we face today.

This whole deep dive has been amazing. We started with godlike kings, then explored the Amorites and how they changed everything from warfare to laws to even calendars. And now we're talking about economic systems meant to prevent inequality.

It makes you realize how connected we are to the past. I agree. And as we wrap up, here's something to consider.

If people thousands of years ago were already trying to create a fairer society, what does that say about us? About our potential to find solutions to our own challenges? Great point. Maybe we can learn a thing or two from the past, not by directly copying, but by being inspired by their creativity and commitment to building a better world. Thanks for joining us for this deep dive.