

Dr. Don Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 17, Kingship in the Ancient Near East, Audio Podcast Overview

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Hey everyone, welcome back. Ready for another deep dive? Today we're going way back to the ancient Near East. Oh, yes.

And kingship is obviously a huge theme in the Bible, but it can be easy to kind of just gloss over it and not really think about what it really meant back then. Right. So today we're going to use some really fascinating insights from a lecture by Dr. Donald Fowler, who's an expert in Old Testament backgrounds.

Yeah, his work is fantastic. So we're going to try to understand how people in the ancient Near East actually viewed their kings. Right.

What made a good king, what made a bad king, and how all of that ties into how the Bible portrays kingship. And this is one of those things that once you start to see it, it kind of changes how you read the whole Bible. It really does.

Yeah. So to jump right in, one of the first things that Dr. Fowler points out is that the Bible is actually really different from other ancient Near Eastern literature when it comes to how it talks about kings. Right.

So you'd think that the Bible would be all about, you know, God chose the king, the king is perfect, everybody bow down. But it's not like that at all. Well, yeah, that's what's so remarkable about the Bible.

It doesn't shy away from portraying kings, even the most revered ones, with all their flaws. Right. Like there's this real tension there, right? Absolutely.

Because on the one hand, the Bible says that, you know, kingship is a blessing from God. God promised David a dynasty, you know, a kingdom. Right.

But then, on the other hand, you see all these kings messing up. Yeah. Dr. Fowler argues that God promised kingship as a blessing to his people.

And he uses it as a tool to unfold his divine plan. But the way the Bible talks about kingship is so much more honest and realistic than a lot of other ancient Near Eastern cultures. It's like the Bible is giving us this behind-the-scenes look at what it's really like to be a king.

Exactly. And it's saying, you know, these guys are human. They make mistakes just like everyone else.

Take David, for instance. He's often held up as this ideal king. Right.

The man after God's own heart. Yeah. But the Bible doesn't sugarcoat his actions at all.

Adultery, murder, deception. I mean, it's all there. It's all there in the text.

Yeah. And that's a far cry from the kind of glowing propaganda that you see in, like, ancient Egyptian or Assyrian texts. Yeah.

I mean, those texts were often designed to glorify the king. Right. And reinforce his power.

And they would never talk about his flaws. No way. But the Bible actually critiques kings who fail to live up to God's standards.

It holds them accountable in a way that's totally unique for its time. So if David, with all his flaws, isn't the model of biblical kingship, then who is? Yeah. Well, Dr. Fowler makes this really interesting argument that it's actually Moses.

It's a really captivating argument. Right. Yeah.

Moses. I think the evidence is going to blow you away. Moses, the guy who parted the Red Sea.

I'm intrigued. No, lay it on me. Okay.

So think about Moses's story, right? He has one of the longest call narratives in the whole Old Testament. There's this huge emphasis on his divine choice. Right.

God appearing to him in the burning bush. Exactly. And how God empowers him to do all these amazing things.

Yeah. And that really echoes the stories of kings like Saul. Oh, interesting.

Yeah. I never really thought about it that way. But now that you mention it, it does have this kind of royal ring to it.

Right. Like God choosing and empowering his servant. Yeah.

And remember Moses's rod. Oh, yeah. The one he uses to part the Red Sea.

The one he uses to perform all those incredible miracles. Yeah. Well, Dr. Fowler suggests that it's not just a tool.

It's actually like a royal scepter. Wait, are you saying that even Moses's rod is making a statement about kingship? Exactly. It's like a divine counterpart to the scepter of Pharaoh.

Because in ancient Egypt, the scepter was the symbol of ultimate authority. Yeah. And the shepherd's staff was actually a hieroglyphic symbol for kingship.

So when Moses, who is a shepherd, carries this staff that God has given all this miraculous power, it's like he's directly challenging Pharaoh's authority. Yes, absolutely. It's amazing.

It's like the Bible is subtly undermining Pharaoh's power. Yeah. With every single miracle that Moses performs.

Yeah. Like every time Moses raises his rod, it's like a little jab at Pharaoh, saying, you know, my God is bigger than your God. Exactly.

My power comes from a higher source. It's brilliant. I love that.

I never would have picked up on that detail. Yeah. And that's just the beginning.

I mean, there's a ton of evidence pointing to Moses's royal attributes. Okay. What else yet? Well, for starters, he's the ultimate lawgiver, right? And that's like a classic royal metaphor.

Yeah. Kings make laws. Exactly.

And then there's this word mashak, which refers to anointing. And it's usually only used for Davidic kings. Oh, really? Elsewhere in the Bible.

And of course, Moses's closeness to God surpasses any other figure in the entire Old Testament. Right. He speaks to God face to face.

Exactly. Nobody else has that kind of intimacy with God. And we often talk about Moses's meekness.

But are you saying that even that has, like, royal connotations? Yeah. It might seem counterintuitive. Yeah.

But meekness was actually a recognized quality of kings in the ancient Near East. It signified that they had controlled power and that they could lead with restraint. It's like strength under control.

Exactly. Yeah. And Dr. Fowler even suggests that Moses might actually be called king in Deuteronomy 33.45. What? Where the text refers to Yeshua, which some scholars believe is a poetic name for either Israel or Jerusalem.

So you're saying that Moses was actually meant to be Israel's first king. Yeah. Dr. Fowler makes this really compelling case that Moses was intended to lead the Israelites into the promised land and rule from Jerusalem.

Okay. But if that was God's plan, then why didn't it happen? Why didn't Moses become king? Well, remember, Moses doesn't enter the promised land. Yeah.

He strikes the rock twice instead of once. Right. He's punished for that.

And God says, you know, you're not going to lead my people into the promised land. And Dr. Fowler suggests that this could be interpreted as a misuse of his royal rod. Oh, wow.

Right. His symbol of God-given authority. So it's like this cautionary tale about the responsibility and the consequences that come with leadership.

Exactly. Even the greatest leader can fall short. And the consequences can be huge.

Absolutely. And it's a sobering reminder that kingship, even when it's divinely ordained, isn't without its challenges and pitfalls. I mean, this is giving me like a whole new perspective on Moses and the Exodus story.

Yeah. It's not just about escaping slavery. It's about leadership and obedience and the importance of staying true to God's will.

It adds another layer to our understanding of God's plan. Right. Yeah.

Even though Moses didn't become king, his story sets the stage for the future kingship of David and ultimately points forward to the Messiah. That's so cool. But before we jump ahead to those figures.

Okay. Let's shift our focus to a very different kind of kingship. The rise of Assyria, the first hyperpower in history.

Assyria. I've heard they were pretty intense. Intense is an understatement.

Oh, boy. I mean, their kings weren't just powerful. They were terrifying.

Okay. I'm ready for this deep dive into Assyria. And their story is inextricably linked with the fate of Israel.

Listeners, buckle up. All right. So Assyria, this ancient superpower that everyone was terrified of.

It's hard to even wrap your head around just how big their empire actually was. Oh, yeah. It's truly mind-boggling.

Dr. Fowler really drives home the point about just how vast Assyria was, especially compared to tiny little Israel. Right. Because we think of empires as being big.

Compared to Assyria, Israel is just this little speck of dust. Imagine the distance from Charlottesville to Alta Vista. Okay.

That's roughly the size of Israel. Now picture an empire that spans thousands of miles. Wow.

Controlling the entire Fertile Crescent and beyond. That's insane. I mean, how did they become so powerful? What was their secret? Well, Dr. Fowler points to a few key factors that really helped Assyria rise to dominance.

Economic advantages, a unique psychological mindset, the ethnological pressures they faced, and even geography played a role. Okay. So let's break that down.

First, what kind of economic advantages are we talking about? Well, timing was on their side. Yeah. Assyria's rise coincided with the Iron Age.

Okay. And they just happened to be situated near some of the major iron deposits in Anatolia. So they had access to all this iron.

Plus, they had tons of timber resources. Okay. So basically they had the raw materials to build a powerful military.

Exactly. Iron for weapons, timber for chariots and siege engines. Oh, so they could out-produce and out-equip all their rivals.

It gave them a huge advantage. Okay. So they had the resources, but you also mentioned this unique mindset.

What made them such ruthless conquerors? Their whole worldview was basically built around warfare. Really? Their major deities were war gods. Oh, wow.

And they literally saw war as a religious act. So for them, conquering other nations wasn't just about power or greed. Right.

It was a form of worship. Almost like a sacred duty. That's kind of terrifying.

It is a pretty chilling thought. Yeah. Like their entire culture was geared towards war and conquest.

Exactly. And that creates a different kind of ambition. Right.

It's not just about grabbing territory. It's about fulfilling what they believed was their God-given right. Exactly.

It helps explain why the Assyrian kings were so unbelievably relentless in their campaigns. It's like nothing could stop them. Pretty much.

Okay. So we've got the resources, the mindset, but you also mentioned these ethnological pressures. What were those all about? Who were they up against? Well, they're surrounded by powerful rivals.

Okay. All vying for dominance. Like who? Well, to their south was Babylon.

Ah, Babylon, the OG empire. Right. Always eager to reclaim their former glory.

Dr. Fowler even describes Babylon as this permanent dagger pointed at the underbelly of Assyria. Yikes. That's a pretty vivid image.

So they were constantly looking over their shoulder, worried about Babylon. And then to the west were the Arameans, another formidable force. Yeah.

Okay. So basically Assyria was stuck in this pressure cooker. Exactly.

It was a conquer-or-be-conquered world. And they definitely chose to conquer. They did.

Okay. You also mentioned geography playing a role, and I'm curious about that because wouldn't natural barriers like mountains or rivers be helpful for an empire? You'd think so, right? Yeah. But in Assyria's case, it was actually the opposite.

Unlike some other empires that had natural defenses, Assyria was wide open, vulnerable on almost every side. So their lack of natural borders actually forced them to expand outwards for security? Precisely. They had to create their own buffer zone by conquering their neighbors and subduing potential threats.

It's like they had to conquer just to survive. In a way, yes. Their geographical vulnerability became a driving force behind their expansionist policies.

It makes you wonder if they ever felt secure even after conquering so much territory. That's a good question. It does seem like the more they conquered, the more they felt the need to conquer.

It's almost like this cycle of paranoia and aggression just fueled their empire. Speaking of cycles, all this makes me think back to our conversation about the Sea Peoples. Yeah.

Didn't they cause a lot of chaos and disruption in the ancient Near East, right around the same time that Assyria was rising to power? Is there a connection there? You've hit on a really interesting point. Remember, the Sea Peoples caused all this upheaval, toppled existing power structures, and created a massive power vacuum. Right.

So who benefited from all that chaos? Well, Assyria was perfectly positioned to step into that void and seize control. It's crazy how these seemingly unrelated events can end up shaping the course of history. It really is a classic example of how disruption can breed opportunity.

So the Sea Peoples, in their wake of destruction, inadvertently paved the way for Assyria to become the dominant force in the region. But that brings us to a crucial question. Yeah.

Where does Israel fit into all of this? Yeah, because now we've got this terrifying superpower on the rise, and Israel, this relatively small nation, right in its path. What happens when these two forces collide? Well, that collision, unfortunately for Israel, marks a period of immense pressure. Oh boy.

And ultimately tragedy. I have a bad feeling about this. Remember, Assyria's whole worldview revolved around warfare.

Right. Their kings proved their piety by conquering, by expanding their empire. Right.

And Israel, unfortunately, found itself in the crosshairs of this divinely ordained war machine. Okay. So we've got this unstoppable military machine that is Assyria with its sights set on expanding, and Israel is right in their path.

What happens next? It's not a happy story. The rise of Assyria marks a period of really intense pressure and ultimately tragedy for both the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel. Yeah.

I was afraid you were going to say that. I'm guessing those divinely ordained conquests didn't spare the Israelites. Unfortunately, no.

Assyria was all about proving its power and its god's power through military might. And Israel became a prime target. So did Assyria just roll in and take over? Pretty much.

The northern kingdom of Israel just couldn't withstand the Assyrian onslaught. They fell in 722 BC. That's awful.

It's just heartbreaking to think about what those people must have gone through. Yeah. It's a really pivotal moment in their history because the people were scattered.

They were lost to history. They became what we now refer to as the Lost Tribes of Israel. Lost Tribes of Israel.

Wow. Okay. So what about the southern kingdom, Judah? Did they fare any better against Assyria? Well, they held out for a while.

But remember, the Assyrian kings were relentless. They saw conquering as a religious duty. Right.

And eventually, Judah also faced the full force of the Assyrian war machine. King Sennacherib, one of Assyria's most powerful rulers, even laid siege to Jerusalem. He threatened to wipe them off the map.

Wait a minute. Didn't Sennacherib suffer some kind of miraculous defeat? You're right. I vaguely remember something about an angel wiping out his army.

You're remembering correctly. Okay. The story of Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem is one of the most dramatic episodes in the whole Bible.

He was literally on the verge of conquering the city when, according to the biblical account, an angel of the Lord struck down his entire army and forced him to retreat. Oh, wow. So a divine intervention, a last-minute save.

Does Dr. Fowler talk about that? He does. Okay. It's a really powerful example of God's protection of his people, even in the face of overwhelming odds.

But Dr. Fowler points out it's important to remember that this wasn't the end of the story. What do you mean? I thought the angel basically ended the Assyrian threat. Well, it certainly put a dent in Sennacherib's plans.

But Judah still wasn't out of the woods. Assyria is still a looming threat. Their kings continued to pressure the weakened kingdom.

It was only a matter of time before another empire, even more powerful than Assyria, would come along. Oh, boy. So who are the new contenders for world domination? Babylon.

You see, despite all of its power and might, the Assyrian empire eventually crumbled from within. They overextended themselves. Their cruelty made them a lot of enemies.

And eventually, the weight of their own empire led to its downfall. Wow. So even the mightiest empires can fall.

It's kind of poetic justice, isn't it? Yeah. This all-powerful empire brought down by its own ambition and brutality. A classic case of hubris.

Yeah. But as one empire falls, another one rises. And Babylon was ready and waiting to fill the void left by Assyria.

So this leads us to the Babylonian exile, right? The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. The Babylonian exile was a pivotal moment in Israel's history. It was a time of immense loss, a time of spiritual reckoning.

But it's also a testament to the resilience of the Israelites and their unwavering faith, even in the face of unimaginable hardship. It's incredible to think about everything we've covered in this deep dive. We've gone from the complexities of biblical kingship to the rise and fall of empires to the scattering of God's chosen people.

It's a lot to process. It is. The ancient Near East was a place of constant change and upheaval.

Yeah. But amid all the chaos, there are these threads of continuity, like the concept of kingship shaping the destinies of nations. Yeah.

What stands out to me is how different the Bible's view of kingship is. It's not about propaganda or glorifying power. It's about grappling with the realities of human leadership, the good and the bad.

Right. And pointing toward a greater hope, a different kind of gain. Yeah.

It really makes you think about leadership in our own time, doesn't it? What qualities should we be looking for? Are we drawn to leaders who wield power for their own gain, or those who demonstrate humility, justice, a genuine desire to serve others? Such good questions. It's amazing how these ancient stories can still challenge and inspire us today. So thanks for joining me on this deep dive into ancient Near Eastern kingship.

It's been an eye-opening journey. It has. And for our listeners out there, keep exploring, keep questioning, and keep diving deep.

You never know what treasures you might uncover. Until next time.