

Old Testament Backgrounds: Development of Cultural Essentials — Writing and Kingship

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Session 3

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Abstract

Dr. Donald Fowler examines the ecological and technological transformations that shaped the ancient Near East, beginning with deforestation and soil calcification (marl formation) in ancient Israel and Mesopotamia. He details the multi-millennial evolution of mud-brick technology from hand-shaped bread-loaf bricks to kiln-baked rectangular bricks used in monumental ziggurats and reflected in the biblical Tower of Babel narrative. The lecture highlights the pivotal progression of communication from complex cuneiform writing systems to the revolutionary alphabetic script, noting how its historical emergence coincided with divine revelation to Moses. Finally, Fowler introduces the early dynastic period and the Sumerian King List, illustrating how ancient sociopolitical structures transitioned from temple-centered life to hereditary royal governance.

Outline

I. Introduction and Topographical/Ecological Foundations

- A. Theological mandate of environmental stewardship (Genesis 1–2)
- B. Transformation of the "land flowing with milk and honey"
 - 1. Israel's central hill country and limestone dome geology
 - 2. Deforestation under King Solomon and destruction of root systems
 - 3. Formation of marl (calcified rock-like topsoil) over red terra rosa soil
 - 4. Erosion and post-biblical breakdown of agricultural hillside terraces
 - 5. Modern Israeli land reclamation and reforestation techniques
- C. Ecological degradation in southern Mesopotamia
 - 1. Soil salinization turning fertile agricultural land into moonscapes
 - 2. Illustrative example: Environmental deterioration around the ziggurat at Uruk

II. The Proto-Literate Period and Urbanization (3400–2900 BC)

- A. Emergence of new technologies driven by urban population growth
 - 1. Innovations: fast potter's wheel, new ceramic styles, cylinder seals, stone sculpture

2. Monumental architectural achievements and the origin of written communication
- B. Historical role and contributions of the Sumerians (Shinar)
 1. Multi-ethnic Mesopotamian landscape (Sumerians in south, Semites in north/central)
 2. Elevation of technical skills and foundational urban institutions

III. Development of Monumental Architecture and Mud-Brick Technology

- A. The Ziggurat and Temple Precincts
 1. Multifunctional institution: bank, university, government, and military center
 2. Symbiotic and interreliant relationship between the temple (cult) and royal palace (court)
- B. Two-Millennia Technological Evolution of Mud Bricks
 1. Early hand-shaped "bread-loaf" / oval bricks requiring heavy caulking (mud, straw, bitumen/tar)
 2. Plano-convex bricks (flat on bottom, rounded on top)
 3. Introduction of wooden forms (c. 2200 BC) enabling mass production of standardized bricks
 4. Invention of kilns for producing fire-baked bricks
- C. Historical Corroboration in Genesis 11 (Tower of Babel)
 1. Plain of Shinar identified with Sumer
 2. Biblical memory of baked bricks and asphalt/tar mortar unavailable in Canaan
 3. Rejection of ancient alien theories in favor of documented slow technological progression

IV. Development and Diffusion of Writing Systems

- A. Trade networks as the impetus for long-distance communication and scribal development
- B. Evolution from Pictograms to Cuneiform
 1. Clay/mud medium necessitating non-aesthetic, wedge-shaped impressions using triangular styluses
 2. Transition from pictograms to logograms (word signs) and syllabification
 3. Extreme system complexity (e.g., Old Babylonian's 598 signs and thousands of syllabic values)
 4. Professional scribal class and scribal schools centered around economic temple needs
- C. The Invention and Impact of the Alphabet
 1. Origins in Syro-Lebanon (c. 1700 BC) reducing writing to 30 or fewer phonetic symbols
 2. Universal system enabling rapid technology transfer and general literacy
- D. Divine Synchronization with Alphabetic Script
 1. Evolution of early Hebrew writing from pictographic symbols to squared script
 2. Historical alignment of Moses' Sinai revelation (c. 1446 BC) with alphabetic emergence
 3. Providential provision of an accessible written medium for divine scriptures

V. The Early Dynastic Period and Early Kingship (2900–2400 BC)

- A. Sociopolitical transition from temple-centered life to royal palace governance
- B. Rise of dynastic succession (hereditary transfer from father to son)

C. The Sumerian King List

1. Earliest historiographical record of dynastic succession
2. Pre-flood (antediluvian) section: 8 mythological kings across 5 cities ruling 241,000 years
3. Post-flood section: Divine lowering of kingship from heaven to the city of Kish
4. Cultural worldview of kingship as a divine gift to humanity