

Old Testament Backgrounds: Divinization of Kings

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Abstract

This lecture traces the historical shift in ancient Mesopotamia from temple-centered religion to palace-dominated imperial rule, culminating in the divinization of earthly kings. Dr. Donal Fowler examines key political and religious developments from early cities like Kish to the Akkadian Empire under Sargon and Naram-Sin. The discussion demonstrates how ancient Near Eastern historiography, royal titles, treaty formats, and iconography provide crucial background for understanding biblical literature. Ultimately, understanding ancient Near Eastern divine kingship allows modern readers to re-engage with the biblical metaphor of God and Jesus as divine kings.

Outline

I. Introduction and Foundational Concepts

- A. Epochal shift in human history: From temple-centered religion to palace-dominated kingship
- B. Importance of building foundational historical background for Old Testament studies
- C. Significance of the city of Kish as the origin of Mesopotamian kingship
 - 1. Discovery of the earliest royal palace in Mesopotamia at Kish
 - 2. Title 'King of Kish' as the premier royal title in the ancient Near East
 - 3. Strategic location of Kish within the capital district of southern Mesopotamia
 - 4. Historical validity of the Sumerian King List (e.g., Enmebaragesi and Gilgamesh)

II. Early Historiography and Biblical Connections

- A. Sumerian King List as the earliest form of historiography
 - 1. History centered around royal institutions rather than modern secular exhaustiveness
- B. Role of genealogies in ancient historical preservation
 - 1. Oral transmission and preservation of history through genealogical structures
 - 2. Parallels to Genesis 5 and 10 genealogies in Old Testament historiography
 - 3. Preserving royal lineage back to Adam and Eve as primeval king and queen
- C. Mesopotamian capacity for long-term historical memory

III. Rise of Mesopotamian Rulers and Political Innovations

- A. Dynasty of Lagash (Ur-Nanshe)
 - 1. Conflicts over water rights with the neighboring city of Umma
 - 2. Early military developments: Chariots and the phalanx formation

B. Eannatum and the Stele of Vultures

1. Creation of hegemony across Sumerian city-states
2. Early treaty format featuring stipulations and curses (preceding Mosaic law by 1,500 years)

C. Urukagina: The Reform King

1. Attempts to curb palace authority and restore temple prerogatives
2. Decentralization, tax reduction, and bureaucracy limits
3. Limited debt cancellation (early forerunner of the biblical Jubilee)

D. Lugal-zage-si of Umma

1. Defeat of Lagash and unification of Sumer with capital at Uruk
2. Usurpation of titles of local city gods (foreshadowing royal divinization)

IV. The Old Akkadian Empire under Sargon

A. Sargon's background and royal propaganda

1. Etymology of name ('true king') masking usurper status
2. Sargon legend: River abandonment and royal adoption (comparison/contrast with Moses)

B. Administrative and military innovations for empire maintenance

1. Imperial rule over diverse ethnic populations (Semitic ruler over Sumerians)
2. Garrisoning cities with loyal standing military forces (5,400 troops)
3. Dual administrative system (appointing Semitic officials alongside Sumerians)
4. Guaranteeing loyalty through royal family political hostages

C. Subordination of religion, economy, and culture to the palace

1. New royal title: 'King of Agade land'
2. Local taxation redirected to fund central standing army
3. Appointment of Sargon's daughter (Enheduanna) as High Priestess
4. Foundation of new imperial capital city at Akkad (Agade)
5. Scribe adaptation of cuneiform script from Sumerian to Akkadian language
6. Artistic shift to realistic, high-quality metallic portrait sculpture

V. Full Divinization of Kings under Naram-Sin

A. Naram-Sin as the first self-deified Mesopotamian ruler

B. Fourfold evidence of apotheosis

1. Use of the divine determinative sign (dingir/ilu) before his own name
2. Adoption of cosmic royal title 'King of the Four Quarters' (King of the Universe)
3. Claiming the divine title 'Husband of Ishtar' (appropriating Sacred Marriage ritual)
4. Iconographic representations on the Stele of Naram-Sin
 - a. Hieratic scale (king portrayed 2.5 times larger than other figures)
 - b. Wearing the horned helmet (traditional symbol of deity)

C. Linguistic and biblical connections: The Hebrew word Qeren (Charon)

1. Etymology meaning 'horn' or 'crown' (loanword origin of English 'crown')
2. Horns as primary symbol of divine strength and royal authority in the ancient world
3. Biblical idiom of 'exalting/anointing the horn' in Old Testament Psalms

VI. Theological Conclusions and Biblical Relevance

- A. Theological driving forces behind the centralization of power from temple to palace
- B. Biblical hedges placed around Israelite kingship to prevent divine centralization
- C. Re-engaging with the biblical metaphor of God and Jesus as Divine King