

Old Testament Backgrounds: Religious Philosophy of Paganism

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Don Fowler explores the religious philosophy of ancient paganism by analyzing the evolution and function of royal divinization in Mesopotamia. Contrasting modern aesthetic spiritual experiences with ancient functional needs, he explains how ancient peoples relied on cause-and-effect rituals, magic totems, and centralized royal authority to manipulate capricious deities for essential needs like fertility, prosperity, and longevity. Central to this system was the absolute monarch, exemplified by King Shulgi, who acted as a divine bridge and magic totem to secure divine favor for the realm. Ultimately, Fowler defines the core philosophy of ancient paganism as the human belief in controlling and manipulating the gods, in stark contrast to the Biblical theology of God's sovereign control and human obedience.

Outline

I. Introduction: Transition from Old Akkadian to Ur III Period

A. Historical Context and Over-Centralization

1. Review of Sargon's centralization and Naram-Sin's full-blown self-divinization
2. Shar-Kali-Sharri: The last king of the Sargonic/Old Akkadian period
 - a. Royal title meaning "king of all kings" (used of Christ in Revelation)
 - b. Ineffective 25-year rule weakened by Gutti infiltration and Elamite independence
 - c. Assassination leading to swift collapse and regional chaos
3. Paradigm of empire collapse due to over-centralization in a single monarch

B. The Ur III Period (Sumerian Renaissance / "Indian Summer")

1. Duration: ~100 years (c. 2100–2000 BC)
2. Founder: Ur-Nammu, known for his early law code and great Ziggurat
 - a. Ziggurat architecture: Higher elevation served as a bridge/ramp connecting heaven and earth, with the functional temple at the bottom
 - b. Death of Ur-Nammu in battle: Interpreted as divine displeasure in cause-effect worldview
3. Rise of Shulgi: Ur-Nammu's son ruling for 48 years as an absolute monarch

II. Extreme Divinization under King Shulgi

- A. Complete State Centralization and Monopoly
 - 1. Total kingly ownership of land and elimination of private property
 - 2. Triumph of Sargonic centralization over traditional Sumerian culture
- B. Five Key Evidences of Shulgi's Self-Divinization
 - 1. Omnipresent use of the divine determinative before his name in all texts
 - 2. Erotic royal hymnology linking Shulgi with the goddess Inanna (Ishtar)
 - 3. Regular ritual offerings made to Shulgi's statue placed in temples and sent across cities
 - 4. Posthumous ascension as a star in the heavens to explain mortal death
 - 5. Adoption of divine royal titles and use of Shulgi's name in legal oaths

III. The Sacred Marriage and Ritual Power

- A. Role and Evolution of Goddess Inanna/Ishtar
 - 1. Significance in Uruk and shift from temple governance to royal palace authority
 - 2. Requirements for the king: Military victory required to prove divine desirability
- B. Theological Function of the Annual Sacred Marriage
 - 1. Sexual union between king and high priestess designed to secure kingdom-wide fertility
 - 2. Transition of power from divine/female to human/male political authority

IV. The Core Philosophy of Ancient Paganism

- A. Functional Religion vs. Modern Aesthetic Religion
 - 1. Modern Western religion: Focuses on aesthetic elevation, feelings, and indoor acoustics
 - 2. Ancient Near Eastern religion: Strictly functional, focused on survival needs
 - 3. Daily threats to survival: Low life expectancy, crop diseases, locusts, and animal mortality
- B. Primary Objectives of Ancient Religion
 - 1. Fertility and agricultural prosperity: Survival rather than wealth accumulation
 - 2. Longevity and health: Attributed to divine favor rather than modern scientific/medical views
- C. Cause-and-Effect Mechanics and Magic
 - 1. Believed every effect required an actionable cause to prompt capricious deities
 - 2. The monarch acting as the primary "magic totem" (sympathetic magic) for the people
 - 3. Risk of centralization: Loss of authority when disaster struck and the king failed
- D. Ultimate Contrast: Paganism vs. Biblical Theology
 - 1. Pagan philosophy: Humans manipulate and control the gods through ritual and magic
 - 2. Biblical philosophy: Sovereign God is in control; human blessing comes through obedience and trust