

Old Testament Backgrounds: End of Royal Divinization, the Amorites

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Donald Fowler explores the shift in ancient Near Eastern religious thought from divine kingship and sympathetic magic toward sacral kingship, primarily driven by geographical and demographic factors in the West. Following the collapse of the Ur III dynasty, the Amorites emerged as a dominant historical power, establishing vast political influence across Mesopotamia, Syro-Palestine, and Egypt where they were known as the Hyksos. Through military innovations such as horse-drawn chariots, laminated composite bows, and bronze daggers, the Amorites reshaped ancient Near Eastern warfare and political structures. Ultimately, Amorite culture during the Old Babylonian period established profound linguistic, geographical, social, and economic parallels with the patriarchal narratives of the Hebrew Bible.

Outline

I. Introduction to Ancient Near Eastern Religious Thought and Kingship

- A. The Pagan Worldview vs. Modern Religious Thought
 - 1. Central concepts: Control, manipulation, and sympathetic magic
 - 2. Human attempt to bridge the chasm between the human realm and the divine realm
- B. The Role of the King in Ancient Religion
 - 1. Centralization of religious and cosmic functions in the monarch
 - 2. Sacred marriage ritual (e.g., with the high priestess of Ishtar) to magically ensure agricultural and land fertility
 - 3. Kings acting as grantors of prosperity, health, and longevity through cause-effect magical thinking
- C. Israelite Vulnerability to Canaanite Religious Models
 - 1. Susceptibility to sexual fertility rites and sacral prostitution (kodshah)
 - 2. Modern subtle parallels in cause-effect thinking (attempting to manipulate God through good works)

II. Transition from Divine Kingship to Sacral Kingship

- A. Decline of Divine Kingship in the Western Semitic Region
 - 1. Topographical and demographic influences: Smaller populations, smaller cities, and rugged terrain hindered massive centralized empires

2. Western kings were never regarded as divine beings

B. Distinguishing Divine Kingship from Sacral Kingship

1. Sacral kingship: Kings uniquely chosen, set apart (holy), and anointed by God (e.g., Saul and David)
2. Removal from office reserved solely for God, preventing human deposition

C. End of the Divinization of Kings in Mesopotamia

1. Collapse of the Sumerian Ur III Dynasty (c. 2050 BC) following Elamite invasions
2. Isolated exceptions: Isin and Elam; unique Egyptian concept of incarnate divinity (pharaohs as incarnations of Amun-Re)

III. Historical Rise and Identity of the Amorites

A. Background and Chronology of the Amorites

1. Chronological alignment with Abraham (Ur III period, c. 2166 BC)
2. Disunity in Mesopotamia leading into the Old Babylonian Period

B. Three Primary Designations of the Term "Amorite" (Amurru)

1. Geographical perspective: "Westerners" from Syro-Palestine (modern Syria/Lebanon)
2. Ethnic perspective: Mentioned in Akkadian texts (c. 2350 BC), prompting wall construction; migration to Turkey and Mesopotamia
3. Socio-economic perspective: Broader usage to describe any foreign immigrant

C. Biblical Usage of the Term "Amorite"

1. Occurs 86 times in the Old Testament (mostly in the first seven books)
2. Used ethnically for specific groups and geographically for mountain inhabitants (contrasted with coastal Canaanites)

IV. The Hyksos Empire and Amorite Military Superiority

A. The Hyksos Connection in Egypt

1. Hyksos as an Egyptian term meaning "Chiefs of Foreign Lands" (mistranslated by Josephus as "Shepherd Kings")
2. First foreign rule of Egypt (c. 1800–1600 BC), establishing a vast empire spanning Syria-Palestine to central Egypt

B. Factors Behind Amorite/Hyksos Military Supremacy

1. Physical size: Averaged half a head taller (approx. 6 feet) than Egyptians and Canaanites
2. Chariot warfare: Introduction of horse-drawn chariots replacing donkey-drawn carts
3. Advanced archery: Invention of the laminated composite bow (wood, bone, glue) offering superior range and velocity
4. Hand-to-hand weaponry: Introduction of effective bronze daggers overcoming Egyptian stone maces

C. Biblical and Historical Memory of the Amorites

1. Biblical recollection in Amos 2:9 (described as tall as cedars and strong as oaks)

2. Conquest of Hazor under Joshua (Joshua 11:10): Destruction of the massive Amorite capital city without advanced weaponry

V. The Old Babylonian Period and Hammurabi

- A. Emergence of the Old Babylonian Empire (c. 1800–1600 BC)
 1. Political fragmentation (Isin-Larsa period) balanced between multiple rival kings
 2. Power shift following the death of Shamsi-Adad of Mari
- B. The Reign and Legacy of Hammurabi (c. 1776 BC)
 1. First Babylonian king to unify all of Mesopotamia
 2. Architectural achievements, canal construction, and calendar development (moving toward solar tracking via Venus tablets)
 3. Promulgation of the Code of Hammurabi (largest and most famous ancient law code)

VI. Parallels Between the Amorite/Old Babylonian World and the Hebrew Patriarchs

- A. Linguistic Parallels
 1. Amorite and Hebrew as closely related West Semitic sister languages
 2. Personal names and place names reflecting common roots
- B. Geographical and Social Parallels
 1. Northern Mesopotamian sites (Haran, Serug, Nahor, Terah) matching patriarchal ancestral names
 2. Tribal military muster customs (e.g., Mari parallels to Judges 19 concubine division)
- C. Economic Parallels
 1. Crown land ownership, artificial patronage, and royal loyalty systems
 2. Financial laws: Legal definition of usury set at 20% interest in both Hammurabi's code and Mosaic law