

Old Testament Backgrounds: Shepherd King

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Session 8

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Don Fowler examines the royal significance of the "shepherd" title in ancient Near Eastern culture and its application across biblical texts. He demonstrates how ancient kings adopted the title of shepherd not as a pastoral reference, but as a prominent royal epithet signifying the sovereign duties of provider and protector. Fowler traces this theme from Mesopotamian release decrees and Isaiah's servant songs to Psalm 23, Ezekiel 34, and Jesus's self-revelation in Luke 4 and John 10. Ultimately, the lecture reveals how Jesus integrated the royal shepherd background and messianic release ministry to claim divine authority and establish an eternal kingdom.

Outline

I. Introduction and the Prophetic Adaptation of the Release Concept

A. Background on the Ancient Near Eastern Release

1. Sabbatical and Jubilee release concepts in Leviticus 25
2. Israel's failure to observe the release and prophetic critique (2 Chronicles 36:21)

B. The Prophets as the Conscience of Israel

1. Function of prophets as mediators and successors to Moses
2. Bridging the gap when the law's release provisions were unfulfilled

C. Isaiah's Royal Adaptation of Release Vocabulary

1. Isaiah 42: The Servant of the Lord bringing justice and setting prisoners free
2. Isaiah 61: Proclaiming liberty (deror) to captives and the favorable year of the Lord
3. The servant motif as a royal title rather than an anti-royal concept
4. Ancient Near Eastern royal imagery: kings picturing themselves as slaves/servants to deities
5. The Messiah (anointed one) as the royal servant instituting a unique royal release

D. Jesus's Fulfilment of the Release in Luke 4

1. Jesus reading from Isaiah 61 in the Nazareth synagogue
2. Greek term *aphesis* merging spiritual salvation and debt release

3. Merging the messianic healing ministry (giving sight to the blind) with royal debt release
4. Audience reaction and rejection of Jesus's claim to royal kingship

II. The Shepherd Metaphor as an Ancient Near Eastern Royal Epithet

A. Linguistic and Cultural Matrix of "Shepherd"

1. Association of "shepherd" with royal release decrees in ancient Mesopotamia
2. Transition from literal pastoral imagery to official royal title
3. Ubiquity of the shepherd title among Mesopotamian, Akkadian, Babylonian, and Egyptian kings
4. Tim Laniak's *Shepherds After My Own Heart* and the documentary record of royal titles

B. Core Functions of the Shepherd King

1. Provider: Supplying sustenance, land, water, and well-being to subjects
2. Protector: Defending subjects from physical harm, enemies, and injustice

C. Modern Cultural Parallel

1. Transformation of the word "pastor" (Latin for shepherd) into an official leadership title

III. God as the Shepherd King in the Old Testament

A. Creation and Patriarchal Narratives

1. Genesis 1–2: Implicit depiction of God as King, provider, and protector in Eden
2. Genesis 48:15: Jacob's blessing over Joseph's sons ("the God who has been my shepherd all my life")
3. Genesis 49:24: Juxtaposition of "shepherd" and "rock" as complementary royal terms

B. Reinterpreting Psalm 23 through Royal Imagery

1. Misconceptions of Psalm 23 as purely pastoral
2. Comparison with the royal inscription of Assyrian King Tukulti-Ninurta I
3. Part 1 (vv. 1–3): God as Provider (green pastures, quiet waters, path of righteousness)
4. Part 2 (vv. 4–6): God as Protector (rod and staff as royal implements, table prepared before enemies)
5. Historical context: Defeated kings placed beneath the conqueror's table (e.g., Adonai-Bezek)
6. Exegetical connection: Pamela Milne's thesis on Exodus/wilderness vocabulary in Psalm 23

IV. Prophetic Predictions of the Messianic Shepherd

A. Micah 5: The Ruler from Bethlehem

1. Messianic prediction of a ruler from Bethlehem Ephratah
2. First overtly messianic use of the shepherd verb/title

B. Ezekiel 34: Allegory of the Shepherd

1. Critique of unfaithful leaders/shepherds of Israel
2. Promise of a single Davidic Shepherd ("my servant David")

3. Unification of the coming Davidic Shepherd with God's personal presence

C. Zechariah 9–13: The Smitten and Suffering Royal Shepherd

1. Zechariah 9:9: Royal entry into Jerusalem on a donkey (humble yet sovereign king)
2. Zechariah 10–13: The smitten shepherd figure who undergoes suffering
3. Historical parallels with Maccabean royal entries and palm branch welcomes

V. New Testament Fulfilment in Jesus Christ

A. The Triumphal Entry in the Gospels

1. Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a colt as the royal Shepherd-King
2. Public recognition of royal status (Hosanna, palm branches)
3. Pilate's inscription on the cross: "King of the Jews"

B. Eternal Provision and Protection

1. Contrast between temporal earthly kings and Jesus's eternal reign
2. Provision of the Bread of Life and spiritual freedom
3. Protection extending to eternal life

C. Jesus as the Good Shepherd in John 10

1. John 1: Jesus as the Word made flesh, the new Moses, and God incarnate
2. John 9: Healing of the blind man as the direct setup for the Good Shepherd discourse
3. John 10: Jesus fulfilling Ezekiel 34 and Isaiah 61 as the divine Shepherd-King