

Old Testament Backgrounds: John 10 and the Law

Author: Dr. Donald Fowler | **Session** 9

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Shepherd, Kingship, John 10, Mosaic Law, Code of Hammurabi, Apodictic Law, Ezekiel 34, Covenant, Under-shepherd, Deuteronomy 17

Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Donald Fowler demonstrates how divine kingship serves as a unifying theological framework linking the Old and New Testaments. He reinterprets John 10 from a Christological perspective, showing that Jesus's declaration as the Good Shepherd is a direct claim to His identity as the shepherd God and true royal King of Israel. Fowler then compares the Law of Moses with ancient Near Eastern legal codes, such as the Code of Hammurabi, highlighting the Mosaic Law's distinctively ethical, propositional, egalitarian, and religious character. Ultimately, he asserts that biblical law-keeping is not legalism, but rather the natural covenantal expression of obedience and loyalty to God the King.

Outline

I. Introduction and Re-evaluating John 10

- A. Setting the Theological Context
 - 1. Connecting kingship to release of debts and economic covenantal systems
 - 2. Shepherd as a primary royal title throughout Old Testament scripture
 - 3. John's gospel agenda: proving Messiah is God incarnate who performs miraculous sign healings (e.g., John 9)
- B. Reinterpreting John 10: Soteriological vs. Christological Focus
 - 1. Traditional interpretation: a pastoral homily centered on human salvation (soteriological)
 - 2. Fowler's thesis: a Christological revelation of Jesus as the shepherd God of Israel
 - 3. Old Testament context: 'Shepherd' as a title applied exclusively to God or the Royal Messianic King
- C. Ancient Near Eastern Context of the Shepherd Title
 - 1. Royal designation across Near Eastern cultures (e.g., Pharaohs and Near Eastern kings)
 - 2. Jesus explicitly adopting royal shepherd language ('I am the good shepherd')

II. Deconstructing the Pastoral Metaphors in John 10

- A. Analysis of the Palestinian Wolf
 - 1. Western wolf vs. Palestinian wolf (solitary, ~20 lbs, non-pack animal)
 - 2. Unlikelihood of a shepherd fleeing from a 20-lb animal
 - 3. Canine killing behavior: instinctual pleasure killing of entire flocks
- B. Legal Requirements of Shepherds Under Mosaic Law

1. Proof of innocence needed when sheep are lost (producing ears and hooves)
2. A fleeing hireling forfeits legal proof and abandons accountability

C. Metaphorical Identifications

1. The Good Shepherd = Jesus as the true Royal King
2. The Hireling = Pseudo-kings (e.g., Herodian rulers) who fail to protect the flock
3. The Wolf = Threatening powers (e.g., Satan or oppressive authorities)

III. Theological Implications of Christ as Royal Shepherd

A. Climax of John's Gospel Strategy

1. Division among the hearers (claims of demon possession vs. miraculous signs)
2. Temple interaction during the Feast of Dedication
3. Jesus's declaration 'I and the Father are one' fulfilling Ezekiel 34 (New David and Yahweh as one shepherd)

B. Implications for New Testament Christian Leadership

1. Rarity of the term 'shepherd' for human leaders in the New Testament (only Ephesians 4:11)
2. Pastors as under-shepherds representing Christ
3. Primary mandate of under-shepherds: to protect and provide for the flock

C. Unifying Theme of Divine Kingship

1. Kingship of God moving through OT, NT, and Revelation (shepherding with a rod of iron)
2. Functioning as a cohesive rubric uniting all scripture

IV. Comparing the Law of Moses and Ancient Near Eastern Law Codes

A. Quantitative and Capital Offense Comparison

1. Overview of Code of Hammurabi (282 laws) vs. Mosaic Law (611–613 laws)
2. Hammurabi's heavy reliance on capital punishment for minor offenses
3. Mosaic Law's significantly lower proportion of capital offenses

B. Civil vs. Religious and Moral Foundations

1. Hammurabi: state-driven civil law lacking ethical depth
2. Mosaic Law: fundamentally religious and moral law treating crime as sin against God

C. Judicial Presumptions: Comparison of the Law of Jealousy (Numbers 5)

1. Hammurabi's ordeal: bound accused wife thrown into river (presumed guilty until surviving)
2. Mosaic procedure: sacred water and sediment oath (presumed innocent unless divine sign occurs)

D. Survey of Ancient Near Eastern Legal Codes

1. Ur-Nammu (c. 2100 BC) and Lipit-Ishtar (Sumerian)
2. Laws of Eshnunna (c. 1800 BC)
3. Code of Hammurabi (c. 1750 BC)
4. Mosaic Law (c. 1450 BC) as a late, culturally embedded divine revelation

V. Structural and Social Differences in Biblical Law

A. Apodictic vs. Case Law

1. Near Eastern precedent: strictly case law ('Shuma avilum' / if a man does X)
2. Mosaic Law: predominant use of apodictic / propositional law ('You shall / shall not')

3. Pre-emptive ethical standards established prior to violations

B. Social Stratification vs. Covenantal Equality

1. Hammurabi's class hierarchy: Avilum (free male landowners), Muskeinum (lesser class), Vardum (slaves), Women
2. Mosaic covenant: radical social equality where all members are brothers and sisters

VI. Divine Kingship as the Anchor of Covenantal Law

A. Law as the Instrument of Royal Authority

1. Near Eastern view of law as a divine gift given to/through kings
2. Israelite constitution in Deuteronomy 16–18 (Judges, Kings, Levites, Prophets)

B. The Biblical Model of Kingship in Deuteronomy 17

1. Context of 1 Samuel 8 vs. Deuteronomy 17 (office of king permitted, but restricted)
2. The King as a chosen brother, equal under God rather than elevated above the people
3. Four specific prohibitions for Israel's king:
 - a. Must not be a foreigner
 - b. Must not multiply horses (militarism)
 - c. Must not multiply wives (international political alliances)
 - d. Must not multiply silver and gold (materialism)
4. Solomon's historical violation of royal prohibitions

C. The King's Duty to Copy and Meditate on the Law

1. Personal obligation to write a scroll of the Mosaic Law in presence of Levites
2. Daily reading to foster humility and fear of the Lord
3. Royal legitimacy defined by covenantal obedience

VII. The Nature of Law-Keeping in Biblical Theology

A. Law-Keeping vs. Legalism

1. Misconception of law as inherently legalistic
2. Law as the written stipulations of covenantal relationship
3. Universal presence of law from Creation (Genesis 1–2 commands)

B. Law in the New Testament Context

1. Jesus as lawgiver (over 200 commands in NT; higher proportion per text size than OT)
2. Rejection of false dichotomy between law and grace
3. Obedience as the fruit, not the cause, of salvation ('If you love me, keep my commandments')

C. Conclusion

1. Divine kingship as the primary cohesive thread uniting scripture
2. Law-keeping as the natural expression of covenant loyalty to the King