

Old Testament Backgrounds: Lecture 15 – People Groups: Philistines and Ugarit, Rise of the Monarchy

Author: Dr. Donald Fowler | Session 15

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Abstract

This lecture by Dr. Donald Fowler examines key historical and archaeological contexts shaping ancient Israel, focusing on the Philistines, the site of Ugarit, and the period of the Judges. It details how the Philistines achieved military superiority in Syro-Palestine through their early monopoly on iron-smelting technology and strategic settlement by Egypt. The lecture then highlights the monumental discovery of Ugarit, whose second-millennium B.C. cuneiform tablets revolutionized Hebrew grammar, vocabulary, and biblical poetic studies while illuminating Canaanite theology. Finally, Fowler re-evaluates the period of the Judges, refuting the concept of an ideal theocracy and demonstrating that this 350-year era was characterized by anarchy, apostasy, and tribal disunity that ultimately paved the way for the rise of the monarchy.

Outline

I. Introduction and Post-Exodus Philistines

A. Context within the Sea Peoples Movement

1. Philistines were a small fraction of a broader Aegean movement
2. Generic biblical usage of the term "Philistine" for Aegean tribes

B. Egyptian Strategic Settlement

1. Egypt settled Aegean vassals to protect the vulnerable 250-mile land bridge
2. Pentapolis settlement: Gaza, Gath, Ashkelon, Ashdod, and Ekron
3. Strategic garrisons guarding the Jordan Rift and Amman

C. Distinctive Cultural Traits

1. Superior Aegean pottery styles and craftsmanship
2. Anthropoid clay burial coffins reminiscent of Mycenaean death masks
3. Rapid absorption of local Semitic religious deities and practices

D. Military Dominance and Iron Smelting Technology

1. Early monopoly on iron smelting using bellows systems to increase airflow

2. Technical advantage of iron weapons over Bronze Age weaponry
3. Influence leading to the regional designation "Palestine" by the Romans

II. The Discovery and Archaeological Significance of Ugarit

A. Discovery and Geographic Advantage

1. Accidental discovery near Cyprus by a local farmer nearly a century ago
2. Major excavations led by French archaeologist Claude Schaeffer
3. Strategic placement at the crossroads of major maritime and overland trade routes

B. Language, Script, and Literary Significance

1. Early alphabetic cuneiform script consisting of 30 consonants
2. Semitic language closely related to Biblical Hebrew
3. Only major second-millennium B.C. tablet archive preserved in situ after site destruction

C. Impact on Biblical Studies and Hebrew Linguistics

1. Revolutionary clarification of Hebrew grammar, syntax, and poetic prose
2. Resolution of hapax legomena (rare words occurring once in the Old Testament)
3. Correction of early scholarly tendencies to alter Hebrew texts to fit Greek poetic forms
4. Re-interpretation of cultic terminology (e.g., Asherah wooden images vs. literal tree groves)

D. Illumination of Canaanite Religion

1. Primary source for understanding Canaanite seasonal and fertility theology
2. Historical caution against "pan-Ugariticism" (over-reading the Old Testament solely through Ugarit)

III. Re-evaluating the Period of the Judges

A. Socio-Political Realities of the Era

1. 350-year period marked by rural poverty, rustic settlements, and lack of monumental structures
2. Impact of the Sea Peoples Movement in creating regional political disruption
3. Complete lack of national unity; tribal cooperation occurred only in civil warfare (e.g., against Benjamin)

B. Literary and Legal Title Analysis

1. Original Hebrew title taken from opening words: "It came about after the death of Joshua"
2. Absence of a raised successor to Joshua due to Israel's chronic refusal to follow leadership
3. Absence of a formal political "office" of judge; leadership was localized and tribal-based

C. Refutation of the "Ideal Theocracy" Model

1. Origin of the term theocracy in Josephus to shift blame away from monarchy
2. Complete absence of core normative biblical terms in Judges (e.g., Torah, Tabernacle, Ark, Feast)

3. Near-total absence of terms like Prophet (once), Priest (corrupt), and Hesed/Hen (grace)

D. The Theological Purpose of the Book

1. Characterized as an era of total political anarchy and "World Upside Down" (WUD)
2. Cyclical pattern of apostasy, oppression, crying out, and deliverance—without true repentance
3. Demonstration of God's unyielding covenant faithfulness and grace
4. Historical function as a transition preparing Israel to accept centralized royal leadership under the Monarchy