

Old Testament Backgrounds: Theology of Kingship

Author: Dr. Donald Fowler | Session 16

Sponsored by Biblelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Kingship, Abrahamic Covenant, Davidic Covenant, 1 Samuel 8, Solomon, Judges, Monarchy, Ancient Near East, Canaanite Syncretism, Corvée Labor

Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Donald Fowler examines the theology of kingship in the Old Testament, demonstrating that human monarchy was not an inferior divine afterthought, but a foundational promise within God's covenantal plan originating in Eden and the Abrahamic covenant. He explains how the Israelite request for a king in 1 Samuel 8 became sinful not because kingship itself was evil, but because Israel demanded an authoritarian leader 'like all the nations' rather than a vassal ruler subject to God's law. The lecture contrasts God's ideal for a sacral king with Israel's historical descent into corruption, pagan syncretism, and over-centralization under Solomon. Ultimately, the study illustrates how the Old Testament monarchical narrative lays the theological groundwork that finds its ultimate fulfillment in the divine kingship of Jesus Christ.

Outline

I. Introduction to Old Testament Backgrounds: Theology of Kingship

- A. Purpose of studying Old Testament background: illuminating the text and honoring God
- B. Kingship as one of the most critical background concepts across Old Testament narratives
- C. Correcting misinterpretations of Judges and 1 Samuel regarding the divine ideal

II. Kingship in the Broad Biblical Narrative

- A. Kingship rooted in creation and the Garden of Eden
- B. King as the unique servant and sacral agent of God in Ancient Near Eastern perspective
- C. The unifying role of Biblical Covenants (Walther Eichrodt and Dick Averbeck framework)

III. The Four Key Promises of the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12, 15, 17)

- A. Progeny: Countless descendants (Genesis 1–2 connection; fulfillment beginning in Exodus 1)
- B. Land: Promised territory stretching from the Euphrates to the Brook of Egypt
- C. Global Blessing: Israel as a dynamic light to the nations (Isaiah and Acts connection)
- D. Kingship: Royal lineage promised to Abraham's descendants (Genesis 17)

IV. The Progressive Development and Continuation of Covenants

- A. Sinaitic (Mosaic) Covenant: Addressing progeny and movement toward the promised land
 - 1. Moses as the initial royal/vassal leader

- 2. Dynastic transition from Moses to Joshua
- 3. Anarchy and stiff-necked rebellion during the era of the Judges
- B. Davidic Covenant: Institutionalizing dynastic succession through David's line
- C. New Covenant Fulfillment: Ultimate continuation in Jesus Christ as Son of David and King

V. Historical Background to 1 Samuel: Deterioration of Priest and Nation

- A. The theological message of Judges: Consequences of no king and lack of divine obedience
- B. Preparation in Judges 19–21: Civil war, destruction of Benjamin, and Gibeah as Saul's hometown
- C. Corruption of the priesthood in 1 Samuel 1–3
 - 1. Tabernacle reintroduced as a central focal point
 - 2. Corruption of Eli's sons (Hophni and Phinehas) practicing Canaanite fertility rituals
 - 3. Misuse of the Ark of the Covenant as a magical pagan battle totem
 - 4. Defeat by the Philistines, death of Eli's sons, and exile/return of the Ark

VI. The Request for a King in 1 Samuel 8

- A. Immediate triggers for the elders' request
 - 1. Advanced age of Samuel
 - 2. Unauthorized appointment of Samuel's corrupt sons (Joel and Abijah) in Beersheba
 - 3. External military pressure from the Philistines
- B. The true nature of Israel's sin in requesting a king
 - 1. Kingship itself was divinely intended and promised to Abraham
 - 2. The sin lay in demanding a king 'like all the nations' (Deuteronomy 17 warning)
 - 3. Rejection of divine vassalage in favor of human authoritarian self-reliance
- C. Divine warnings regarding pagan-style monarchy
 - 1. Establishment of a standing draftee army and military aristocracy
 - 2. Royal confiscation of ancestral land to reward royal servants
 - 3. Imposition of heavy taxation for administrative and royal upkeep
 - 4. Forced corvée labor during summer months

VII. The Golden Age and Demise under Solomon's Rule

- A. The United Monarchy period (1050–931 BC): Saul, David, and Solomon
- B. Solomon as the quintessential 'king like all the nations'
 - 1. Political alliances via foreign marriages (300 diplomatic wives) leading to idolatry
 - 2. Religious syncretism merging Yahwism with Canaanite cults (Baal)
 - 3. Administrative gerrymandering of 12 non-tribal districts to erase traditional boundaries
 - 4. Proliferation of state bureaucracy and massive wealth/gold accumulation
 - 5. Enslavement of Canaanites and forced corvée labor on Hebrews for building projects
 - 6. Influx of pagan political/religious ideologies via international trade
 - 7. Satellite revolts, loss of tribute, and heavy taxation burden
- C. Legacy: Demise of over-centralized bureaucratic monarchy and transition to Divided Kingdom