

Old Testament Backgrounds: Lecture 17

Kingship in the Ancient Near East

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Session 17

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Donald Fowler examines the theological and historical significance of kingship in the Old Testament as contrasted with the royal propaganda of the ancient Near East. He demonstrates that rather than David or Saul, Moses serves as the supreme biblical prototype of righteous leadership, divinely chosen, called, enabled, and functioning as Israel's true ideal king. The session also addresses the post-Solomonic return to tribalism and the rise of Assyria as history's first global hyper-power, outlining the economic, psychological, ethnological, and geographical factors that propelled its imperial expansion. Ultimately, Fowler highlights how God orchestrates massive geopolitical entities and world history to fulfill His covenantal promises made to Abraham and Israel.

Outline

I. Introduction and Purpose of Kingship in Divine Revelation

- A. Kingship as tied to God's integrity and covenantal promises
 - 1. Promised as a blessing to Abraham and his lineage
 - 2. Serves as a central, revelatory metaphor for understanding God
- B. Critique of Modern Scholarly Views (e.g., Walter Brueggemann)
 - 1. Secular/critical view: Centralized power viewed solely as royal propaganda
 - 2. Biblical contrast: Scripture reveals flawed, accountable human leaders rather than idealized propaganda

II. Biblical Foundations of Kingship Prior to Saul

- A. Creation and Patriarchal Promises
 - 1. Genesis 1–2: Adam and Eve portrayed in royal/quasi-royal terms
 - 2. Genesis 14: Melchizedek of Salem as priest-king and type of Christ
 - 3. Genesis 17:6 & 35:9–12: Covenant promises to Abraham and Jacob that "kings shall come forth from you"

4. Genesis 49:10: Specific prophecy of royal line through the tribe of Judah

B. Kingship in the Book of Judges

1. Absence of a king identified as key cause of moral and political chaos

III. Moses as the Supreme Model and Prototype of Biblical Kingship

A. Divinely Chosen, Called, Enabled, and Privileged (Exodus 3–4; Numbers 11; Deuteronomy 34)

1. Divinely chosen and called: Divine call narrative mirrors and surpasses ANE royal calls
2. Divinely enabled: The Holy Spirit resting on Moses and transferred to Joshua
3. Divinely privileged: Unmatched intimacy with God ("face to face")

B. Textual Evidences and Royal Echoes of Moses' Kingship

1. The Shepherd's Rod: Royal scepter countering Pharaoh's royal serpent emblem
2. Etymological basis: The root Mashach connected with Davidic royal anointed lineage
3. Representative of God: Functioned as "God to Pharaoh"
4. Lawgiver and Sovereign: Sovereign lawgiving as primary ANE royal function
5. Deuteronomy 33:4–5: Moses explicit designation as king in Jeshurun
6. Royal terminology: Royal vocabulary of shepherd ("led," "fed," "herded"), "meekness" (royal virtue), "servant" (royal title), and carrying Israel in his bosom (parallel to Hammurabi)
7. Honor and Countenance: Bestowal of hod (royal honor) on Joshua and Moses' shining face

C. Moses' Disqualification and Theological Lessons

2. Homily for all future kings: High standard of theological accountability before God

IV. The Division of the Monarchy and the Rise of Ancient Hyper-Powers

A. Failure of Solomon and Return of Tribalism

1. Post-Solomonic fracture under Rehoboam into Northern (Israel) and Southern (Judah) kingdoms
2. Re-emergence of deep tribal jealousies echoing the Book of Judges

B. Geopolitical Overview of Successive World Empires

1. Assyria: The world's first true "hyper-power," controlling the entire Fertile Crescent, Anatolia, and Egypt
2. Neo-Babylonia: Nebuchadnezzar's empire ruling the Fertile Crescent (smaller than Assyria)
3. Persia: Largest ancient landmass empire stretching from India to Europe
4. Alexander the Great and Rome: Subsequent Hellenistic and Roman hyper-powers

C. Divine Sovereignty over Global Empire

1. Contrast between tiny Israel (100-mile territory) and massive 2,000-mile hyper-powers
2. God using world hyper-powers to advance His global redemption plan stemming from Genesis 12

V. Four Key Factors Explaining the Rise of Assyria as a Hyper-Power

A. Economic Considerations

1. Subartu/Assyria proper: Sufficient agricultural baseline combined with decline of southern Mesopotamian fertility

2. Iron Age proximity: Strategic access to Anatolian iron deposits and Zagros timber

B. Psychological Considerations (Worldview and Religion)

1. Pantheon of war deities (Assur) making war an act of core religious devotion

2. Royal holiness measured by annual military campaigns ("holy war" concept)

C. Ethnological Factors

1. Constant existential threats from hostile neighbors

2. Southern threat: Babylon as permanent rival dagger aimed at Assyria's underbelly

3. Western threat: Aramean expansionist kingdoms forcing "conquer or be conquered" dynamic

D. Geographical Exposure and Imperial Expansion

1. Vulnerable northern extreme position on Caucasian migration land-bridge

2. Lack of natural boundaries required aggressive expansion outward in all directions for security

3. Sea Peoples Movement (c. 1200 BC) created political vacuum enabling Assyria's ascent