

Dr. Donald Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 1, Introduction to Mesopotamia Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide Quiz, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 1, Introduction to Mesopotamia, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This is the first lecture from a course on Old Testament backgrounds, taught by Dr. Donald Fowler at Liberty University. **The lecture emphasizes the importance of understanding the historical and geographical context of the Old Testament to properly interpret its message. Dr. Fowler argues that neglecting the "backgrounds" leads to misinterpretations**, using the analogy of reading the U.S. Constitution without knowing its historical context. **He introduces key concepts like "vertical transference" (imposing modern perspectives onto ancient texts) and the challenges of defining what constitutes relevant background material.** The lecture then begins to explore the geography of the ancient Near East, focusing on Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent.

2. 15 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 1 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Old Testament → Old Testament Introduction → Old Testament Backgrounds).



**Fowler_OTB_Session
n01.mp3**

3. Briefing Document: Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 1, Introduction to Mesopotamia

Okay, here is a detailed briefing document summarizing the main themes and important ideas from the provided excerpts of Dr. Donald Fowler's "Old Testament Backgrounds, Lecture 1":

Briefing Document: Old Testament Backgrounds - Lecture 1

Introduction:

This briefing document summarizes the key themes and concepts presented by Dr. Donald Fowler in the first lecture of his "Old Testament Backgrounds" course. Dr. Fowler emphasizes the importance of understanding the historical and cultural context of the Old Testament for a proper interpretation of its message. He stresses that the Bible was written by real people, in a real world, with specific cultural and geographical contexts, and that neglecting these contexts limits our understanding of the text.

Key Themes & Concepts:

1. The Necessity of Context:

- Dr. Fowler argues that understanding the context in which the Old Testament was written is crucial for accurate interpretation. He uses the analogy of the US Constitution: one can read it, but to truly understand its meaning, one needs to know the historical and political events that led to its creation.
- "...you really can't understand the biblical message very well unless you understand the setting in which it was written."
- The course aims to illuminate the Old Testament text by shedding "the nuanced lights of history" on it.
- Without understanding the context, our reading of the Bible is "limited".

1. Old Testament Backgrounds as a Unique Discipline:

- This course is not intended to be a comprehensive history of the ancient Near East. Rather, it focuses on selectively exploring key background information that dramatically alters our understanding of the Old Testament.
- "I'm not interested in trying to show every background possible. What I'm interested in doing is showing my students how important background materials can change the understanding of the text in really dramatic ways."

- Dr. Fowler emphasizes that the field of background studies is currently in a "golden age" with numerous resources available, but this also leads to increased questions and disagreements about what truly constitutes a "background."
- The course is not about "making backgrounds the subject rather than the biblical text". Backgrounds should "colorize" the text, not become the main focus.

1. The Problem of Vertical Transference (Tunnel Vision):

- Dr. Fowler highlights the danger of projecting modern Western perspectives and interpretations onto the Old Testament, which he refers to as "vertical transference" or "tunnel vision."
- "To the degree that we project our world onto the world of the Bible, we're creating a tubular look that distorts the image of the Ancient World."
- He warns against assuming that the New Testament message should be the primary lens through which the Old Testament is understood. He stresses that the Old Testament needs to be first understood in its own world.
- He acknowledges that achieving a complete understanding of the Old Testament world is impossible due to the vastness of the subject and the ongoing discovery of new material. It is a "constantly changing cognitive domain."

1. Divine Inspiration and Human Authorship:

- God used real people in the real world, with their own cultures and perspectives, to write the books of the Bible. This is called "the inspirative work of God."
- "God used real people in the real world with real knowledge to write these books that are divinely inspired."
- This implies that the culture, presuppositions, education, and knowledge of the ancient authors play a part in their writings.
- The goal is to understand both the divine inspiration and the human element, which requires an understanding of backgrounds.

1. History as More Than Just Battles and Dates:

- History is presented not as a mere list of battles, dates, and names, but as a record of divine intervention in the human narrative.
- "History is not a record of just battles and events. It's a record of divine intervention into the human narrative."

- He emphasizes that the past (history) is relevant to the present, as a study of what God did in the past reveals what God is doing now and moving the world toward.
- The story of the Old Testament is "our story" and has a personal significance for believers.

1. The Importance of Geography and Culture:

- Geography plays a critical role in how the Bible story is presented. Understanding the topography of the Middle East is crucial.
- "If we don't know the geography of the world of the Bible, it's going to limit our ability to understand the Bible."
- Culture must also be understood, including the laws of the time, especially regarding areas that seem strange to the modern reader such as slavery and sexuality.
- The religious beliefs of neighboring cultures are important to understand the Old Testament.
- Economics is another area to research, but information is often lacking.

1. Challenges in Studying Ancient History:

- The earliest periods after the flood are difficult to reconstruct due to a lack of archaeological and written records.
- Early post-flood cultures were primarily agricultural, lacking the cities that often leave behind the artifacts necessary to reconstruct history.
- While radiocarbon dating is important, it does not provide a complete picture of the world relevant to the biblical text.
- Literature is key to unlocking history.
- The earliest forms of writing began around 3000 BC.

1. Early Mesopotamian Geography:

- The "Fertile Crescent" is a key geographic area, extending from the Mediterranean coast, north, and then south. It is green because of the available water.
- The Fertile Crescent includes modern-day Israel, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.

- The area is characterized by a gradual drying out, resulting in the development of villages near rivers.
- Early villages began forming in Mesopotamia around 9000 BC, and continue to be inhabited until cities developed roughly 4000-5000 BC.
- Jericho (in modern-day Israel) is an example of an early city dating back to 7000 BC, with its early walls and tower.
- The topography can be summarized going from west to east as: the Mediterranean Sea, the coastal plain, the central mountain range, the Jordan Rift valley, the Transjordan mountains, the Great Arabian Desert, the fertile floodplains of Mesopotamia, and the Zagros Mountains.
- Winds often push west to east and lose their moisture over the mountain ranges, leading to deserts.

Conclusion:

Dr. Fowler's lecture establishes a framework for understanding the Old Testament by emphasizing the critical role of historical, geographical, and cultural backgrounds. He cautions against imposing modern perspectives and promotes a holistic approach that considers both divine inspiration and human authorship. The lecture serves as an introduction to the complex and fascinating world of the ancient Near East and its relationship to the biblical text. He invites students to join him in this journey of discovery with the reminder that the learning will never end and that new information is always being discovered.

4. Study Guide: Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 1, Introduction to Mesopotamia

Old Testament Backgrounds Study Guide

Quiz

1. According to Dr. Fowler, why is understanding the context of the Old Testament crucial?
2. Understanding the context is critical because the Bible contains cultural and historical nuances that are not always apparent to modern readers. Without this understanding, a reader's interpretation may be incomplete and potentially inaccurate.
3. What metaphor does Dr. Fowler use to describe the relationship between the biblical text and its background material?
4. Dr. Fowler uses the metaphor of a dog and its tail to illustrate the relationship. The biblical text is the dog, the main focus, and the background materials are the tail. The background, like a tail, should serve to enhance our understanding without becoming the primary focus.
5. Explain the concept of "vertical transference" as described by Dr. Fowler.
6. "Vertical transference" refers to the tendency to impose modern Western perspectives and New Testament understandings onto the world of the Old Testament. This creates a distorted "tunnel vision" which obscures the authentic meaning of the original text.
7. What are the two theses Dr. Fowler presents regarding the Old Testament text?
8. First, the Old Testament needs to be understood in the context of the world in which it was written. Second, the books of the Bible are divinely inspired, but were written by real people with their own culture, education, and understanding.
9. Why does Dr. Fowler believe history is important to study?
10. History is valuable because it is a record of God's interventions in the human narrative. The past is a study of what God is doing in the present, and humans are part of a larger narrative leading towards God's ultimate plan.

11. Name three areas of study, besides history, that Dr. Fowler emphasizes as crucial for understanding the Old Testament?
12. Dr. Fowler emphasizes the importance of understanding geography, culture, and religion, including the religious traditions of the Israelites' neighbors. He also notes the importance of understanding the economics of the region.
13. What is the significance of the Fertile Crescent in the context of the Old Testament?
14. The Fertile Crescent is a geographically significant area due to its rich soil, plentiful water supply, and the presence of important rivers, which were crucial for the development of agriculture and early civilizations in the ancient Near East. This region provides the backdrop for many of the Old Testament stories.
15. What is the general climate trend in the region described by Dr. Fowler, and how does that affect human development in that region?
16. The climate in the region is slowly drying out over thousands of years. This drying trend led to the development of villages near water sources, particularly rivers, which were key to human organization and agriculture.
17. What is the Jordan Rift Valley, and why is it important?
18. The Jordan Rift Valley is a long, narrow, fertile valley located east of the central mountain range in Israel. It is important because it is watered by the Jordan River and is part of the largest crease on the earth's surface, making it a significant geographical feature in the region.
19. What are the general zones of topography that Dr. Fowler describes when moving from the West to the East across the map of the ancient Near East?
20. The topographical zones, moving west to east, are: the Mediterranean Sea, the coastal plain, the central mountain range, the Jordan Rift Valley, the Transjordan Mountains, the Great Arabian Desert, the fertile floodplains of Mesopotamia, and finally, the Zagros Mountains.

Answer Key

1. Understanding the context is critical because the Bible contains cultural and historical nuances that are not always apparent to modern readers. Without this understanding, a reader's interpretation may be incomplete and potentially inaccurate.

2. Dr. Fowler uses the metaphor of a dog and its tail to illustrate the relationship. The biblical text is the dog, the main focus, and the background materials are the tail. The background, like a tail, should serve to enhance our understanding without becoming the primary focus.
3. "Vertical transference" refers to the tendency to impose modern Western perspectives and New Testament understandings onto the world of the Old Testament. This creates a distorted "tunnel vision" which obscures the authentic meaning of the original text.
4. First, the Old Testament needs to be understood in the context of the world in which it was written. Second, the books of the Bible are divinely inspired, but were written by real people with their own culture, education, and understanding.
5. History is valuable because it is a record of God's interventions in the human narrative. The past is a study of what God is doing in the present, and humans are part of a larger narrative leading towards God's ultimate plan.
6. Dr. Fowler emphasizes the importance of understanding geography, culture, and religion, including the religious traditions of the Israelites' neighbors. He also notes the importance of understanding the economics of the region.
7. The Fertile Crescent is a geographically significant area due to its rich soil, plentiful water supply, and the presence of important rivers, which were crucial for the development of agriculture and early civilizations in the ancient Near East. This region provides the backdrop for many of the Old Testament stories.
8. The climate in the region is slowly drying out over thousands of years. This drying trend led to the development of villages near water sources, particularly rivers, which were key to human organization and agriculture.
9. The Jordan Rift Valley is a long, narrow, fertile valley located east of the central mountain range in Israel. It is important because it is watered by the Jordan River and is part of the largest crease on the earth's surface, making it a significant geographical feature in the region.
10. The topographical zones, moving west to east, are: the Mediterranean Sea, the coastal plain, the central mountain range, the Jordan Rift Valley, the Transjordan Mountains, the Great Arabian Desert, the fertile floodplains of Mesopotamia, and finally, the Zagros Mountains.

Essay Questions

1. Discuss the challenges and benefits of studying Old Testament backgrounds, considering the risk of "parallelomania" and the problem of "vertical transference" as discussed in the lecture.
2. Analyze how the geographical features of the Fertile Crescent impacted the development of early civilizations and the narratives within the Old Testament.
3. Explain Dr. Fowler's perspective on the historicity of the biblical text, particularly in relation to Genesis 1-11, and how that informs his approach to Old Testament backgrounds.
4. Evaluate the significance of culture, religion, and economics, in addition to history and geography, in deepening one's understanding of the Old Testament.
5. How does Dr. Fowler's approach to Old Testament backgrounds differ from a purely historical approach, and why does he believe his approach offers a richer understanding of the text?

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Ancient Near East:** A geographical and historical region encompassing the eastern Mediterranean and surrounding areas, including Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Levant. It is the context for the Old Testament.
- **Backgrounds:** The historical, cultural, geographical, religious, and economic contexts in which the Old Testament was written. Studying these provides greater understanding of the text.
- **Fertile Crescent:** A crescent-shaped region in the Middle East known for its fertile land and access to water. It includes areas of present-day Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan. This region was the cradle of many ancient civilizations.
- **Geography:** The physical features of an area, including its topography, climate, and natural resources. It greatly influences the development of societies.
- **History:** The record of past events, which can include battles, cultural shifts, and religious movements, and is important in understanding the Bible's historical context.

- **Jordan Rift Valley:** A significant geological depression that runs north-south, known for its fertile land and the presence of the Jordan River. It is one of the largest creases on the earth's surface.
- **Mesopotamia:** The ancient region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, often referred to as the "cradle of civilization." This area is the focus of the lecture.
- **Parallelomania:** The excessive and often uncritical search for parallels between the Bible and ancient Near Eastern literature or cultures, which can lead to invalid interpretations.
- **Stratigraphy:** The study of layers of soil or rock, used by archaeologists to establish the relative dates of artifacts and human activity.
- **Transjordan Mountains:** A mountain range running north-south along the eastern side of the Jordan River.
- **Vertical Transference:** The tendency to interpret the Old Testament through the lens of modern Western culture or New Testament theology, resulting in a misunderstanding of the original text.
- **Zagros Mountains:** A significant mountain range in eastern Mesopotamia, separating present-day Iran and Iraq. They are also part of a large area that was used for trade.

5. FAQs on Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 1, Introduction to Mesopotamia, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

FAQ on Old Testament Backgrounds

1. **Why is understanding the historical and cultural context of the Old Testament important?**
2. Understanding the historical and cultural context is crucial because the biblical text was written by real people within specific societies, cultures, and time periods. Just like trying to understand the US Constitution without knowing US and European history, you can't fully grasp the Old Testament's message without understanding the world in which it was written. The nuances, meaning, and intended audience are all tied to the ancient world. This understanding illuminates the text in dramatic ways and helps avoid misinterpretations by transferring modern perspectives onto it.
3. **What does the term "backgrounds" mean in relation to Old Testament study, and what is the aim of this course?**
4. "Backgrounds" refers to the historical, cultural, religious, geographical, and economic factors that shaped the world in which the Old Testament was written. This course aims to selectively explore these key background elements that significantly alter our understanding of the biblical text. It is not about exhaustive coverage of the ancient Near East, but rather about highlighting pivotal contexts that enrich and clarify the meaning of the Old Testament. The goal is not to make the backgrounds the main subject, but rather to use them as a lens to better understand the biblical text.
5. **How does the course approach the challenge of selecting which "backgrounds" are most relevant?**
6. There is no universally agreed-upon definition of what constitutes a "background." Instead, this course takes a selective approach, focusing on key historical, cultural, and geographical aspects that dramatically illuminate the Old Testament text. The course acknowledges that background studies are somewhat personalized and aims to present what the instructor believes are important backgrounds based on 40 years of study, not necessarily presenting all possible backgrounds. This approach avoids "parallelomania" – an excessive search for similarities that create false backgrounds.

7. **What is "vertical transference," and how does it affect our understanding of the Old Testament?**
8. "Vertical transference" is the tendency to impose our modern, Western perspectives onto the world of the Old Testament, thereby distorting its original meaning. It's like having a "tunnel vision" caused by a lack of historical and cultural context. This includes the tendency to project New Testament understanding onto the Old Testament as well. To understand the message correctly, one needs to understand the Old Testament in its own world, rather than seeing the ancient world through the prism of modern assumptions.
9. **How did the geography of the Ancient Near East influence the development of early civilizations and the biblical narrative?**
10. The geography of the Fertile Crescent, particularly the presence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, played a crucial role in the development of early villages and civilizations. These settlements flourished in areas with water, and the shift from agricultural societies to urbanization was influenced by this geography. The various geographical zones, including the coastal plain, central mountain range, Jordan Rift, and the Transjordan mountains, each had their own implications for human development and historical events. Understanding this geography helps shed light on the contexts and settings of biblical stories.
11. **What are the main geographical zones in the Middle East and their characteristics?**
12. The main geographical zones include: the Mediterranean Sea, a crucial source of moisture; the coastal plain, a relatively narrow strip of land; the central mountain range, which runs north-south and affects rainfall patterns; the Jordan Rift Valley, a fertile area watered by the Jordan River, and also the largest crease on the surface of the Earth; the Transjordan Mountains, located to the east of the rift; the Great Arabian Desert, a dry and infertile region; the fertile floodplains of Mesopotamia, abundant with water and nutrient rich soil; and the Zagros Mountain Range. These diverse regions impacted the development and flow of events, creating the stage for much of the Old Testament narrative.

13. How does the Bible, as a divinely inspired book, incorporate human authors and their cultural context?

14. The Bible is the result of God's divine inspiration working through real human beings in the real world. These authors, with their unique cultural backgrounds, education, and perspectives, shaped the expression of God's message. The style of writing, the terminology used, and the cultural presuppositions were all influenced by the authors' specific contexts. Understanding this relationship between divine inspiration and human authorship allows us to see a richness within the text that we might otherwise overlook.

15. Why does the course not start with Genesis 1-11, despite its theological importance?

16. While the course recognizes the theological importance of Genesis 1-11, it does not begin there from a background perspective because those events are not historically recoverable in a way that can illuminate the context in the same way later historical events and findings can. The world before the Flood is considered largely "artificially not reproducible" and doesn't provide the kind of historical data used in the rest of the course. The material evidence for pre-flood world is considered non-existent, preventing its study as history, though its theological importance remains intact.