

Dr. Donald Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 13, People Groups: Habiru, Arameans 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 13, People Groups: Habiru, Arameans, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This lecture by Dr. Donald Fowler explores the origins of the Hebrew people, specifically questioning the connection between the patriarch Abraham and the Habiru, a socio-ethnic group mentioned in ancient Mesopotamian texts. **Fowler argues that while Abraham may have been perceived as a Habiru due to his outsider status, the terms "Habiru" and "Hebrew" are not synonymous.** The lecture further examines the origins of the Arameans, a crucial people group in Old Testament history, challenging the conventional understanding of their emergence and proposing a northern Mesopotamian origin for Abraham based on textual and geographical analysis. **This analysis considers the inconsistencies between the Hebrew and Greek texts regarding Abraham's origin, ultimately suggesting an Aramean ancestry for the patriarch.** Finally, the lecture sets the stage for a discussion about the Sea Peoples' Movement.

2. 11 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 13 – 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
n13.mp3**

3. Briefing Document: Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 13, People Groups: Habiru, Arameans

Okay, here is a detailed briefing document summarizing the key themes and ideas from the provided lecture excerpts by Dr. Donald Fowler:

Briefing Document: Old Testament Backgrounds - People Groups, Habiru, and Arameans

Introduction:

This document summarizes Dr. Don Fowler's lecture on Old Testament backgrounds, specifically focusing on the Habiru and Aramean people groups and their potential connections to the biblical Hebrews and the patriarch Abraham. Dr. Fowler challenges some common interpretations and proposes alternative theories based on textual and geographical analysis.

I. Habiru

- **The Question:** The lecture begins by exploring the connection between "Habiru" and "Hebrew," asking if Abraham is called a Hebrew because he was a Habiru.
- **Definition & Usage:** The term "Habiru" is found in Akkadian as early as 1800 BC in Mesopotamia and later in places like Nuzi and during the Amarna period. It also has a Sumerian counterpart, "Shara-igizi," dating back to the 3rd millennium BC (long before Abraham).
- Significantly, the term "Habiru" was **not used to describe an ethnic group**. Instead, it was a socio-ethnic term applied to various groups of people from different ethnic origins, who were generally "outsiders," living on the fringes of society or outside the law.
- Fowler uses the term "gypsy" as an analogy for how the term Habiru might have been applied.
- The term was used broadly across the ancient world, before and after the Exodus, including in Palestine.
- **Conclusion Regarding Habiru and Hebrews:** While some Hebrews *may* have been considered Habiru, it's incorrect to equate the two terms. "Some Habiru may have been Hebrews, but it is an absolute certainty not all Habiru were Hebrews."

- Fowler speculates that the similarity in sound between "Habiru" and "Hebrew" is a "phonetic accident," rather than a linguistic connection.
- He suggests Abraham was called a Hebrew because he "crossed over" from Mesopotamia to Palestine, not because he was part of a Habiru group. He posits, "I would suggest to you that Abraham was called the Hebrew because he crossed over from Palestine...I don't see any connection between the word Habiru and Hebrew."
- Dr. Fowler is skeptical of using the Habiru mentioned in the Amarna letters in 1370 BC as evidence of the Hebrews because their military activities seem significantly different from the biblical description of Joshua's conquest. "When the king of Jerusalem writes that Habiru is coming to send troops, what he says is the Habiru are coming to send, and the exact terminology is sent 10, 15 troops. That does not sound like an invasion by the Hebrews."
- **Final Thoughts:** The connection between "Habiru" and "Hebrew" is considered weak, and the lecture moves to a more important topic: the Arameans.

II. Arameans

- **Significance:** The Arameans are presented as critical for Old Testament study for several reasons:
- They are essential for understanding the origins of Abraham's people and the historical veracity of Genesis.
- They restrained Assyrian expansion for approximately 300 years.
- They were major opponents of Israel during the divided monarchy.
- The Aramaic language is used in parts of Genesis, Ezra, Daniel, and Jeremiah, and even in the covenant between Laban and Jacob.
- Jacob himself is described as a "wandering Aramean" (Deuteronomy 26:5).
- **The Problem:** A major challenge is that most scholars believe the earliest verifiable reference to the Aramean people dates to around 1100 BC (the time of Tiglath-Pileser I), while Genesis mentions Arameans in the time of Abraham (circa 2000 BC). This creates a chronological discrepancy.

- **Origins and Location:**The origin of the Arameans is obscure, with two main views. Some scholars place their origins in the deserts of Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia; however, a more conservative view suggests they were always in their homeland of Aram-Naharaim (Aram of the two rivers).
- Aram-Naharaim (or Padan Aram - "the field of Aram") refers to a specific region in upper Mesopotamia (Syria) between the Euphrates and Balak rivers, a fact corroborated by ancient Near Eastern documents long before 1100 BC. Fowler states, "This region in upper Mesopotamia, long before 1100 BC, this region had two names... Padan Aram... or Aram-Naharaim."
- The historical distribution of the Aramaic peoples during the period of the divided monarchy is pictured as being primarily located north of Israel.
- **Biblical References:**The Bible reflects a "consistent memory" of Aram through several mentions:
 - Abraham's brother Nahor has a grandson named Aram.
 - Isaac and Jacob marry daughters of Arameans (Betuel and Laban).
 - Laban speaks Aramaic when making a covenant with Jacob.
 - Deuteronomy 26:5 calls Jacob a "wandering Aramaean."
- The issue is not the existence of Aram as a place name, but rather the connection between the *place* named Aram and *ethnic* Aramaeans.
- Fowler states, "There's no dispute, there's no dispute, but that the name Aram was around long before the time of Tiglath-Pileser I. Padan Aram is on all of the ancient maps, Aram Naharaim is on the ancient maps, so we clearly indisputably without controversy have the fact that the name Aram appears on the maps fully a thousand years earlier than Tiglath-Pileser I in 1100 B.C."
- **Place Names and Ethnic Connection:**While the place name "Aram" is found in many ancient documents from the time, Fowler explains, "apart from what we read in Genesis, we don't have any evidence that Aramaean was a spoken language in the time of Abraham, nor do we have any archaeological evidences."
- The lecture raises the question of whether the place name Aram can be equated with an ethnic Aramaean group. The origins of the Aramaean people are linked to the Akhlame and the Sutu, and they are linguistically related to the Amorites.

III. The Origin of Abraham

- **The Problem of Ur:** Genesis 11 states that Abraham left "Ur of the Chaldees" to go to Haran, and then Canaan. The location of "Ur of the Chaldees" is a subject of debate.
- The traditional understanding places this Ur in southern Mesopotamia, a long distance from Haran. This creates a geographical problem, given the fact that, "If Abraham was traveling with hundreds of people... How could he possibly have crossed these rivers at least three times... It makes virtually no sense."
- However, the Hebrew text actually reads "Chasdu," not "Chaldees." The Greek Septuagint translation used "Chaldees," due to the prominence of the southern city of Ur known as Ur of the Chaldees at that time, while the translator was unfamiliar with the term "Chasdu". "In New Testament times, the world only knew of one Ur... and in the 3rd century B.C., that Ur was called Ur of the Chaldees."
- Fowler argues the term "Chaldees" is a late term referring to Aramaic-speaking peoples who came to southern Mesopotamia after 1000 BC. Therefore, if Abraham had come from the southern Ur in the time of Abraham, the text should have said "Ur of Sumer" not "Ur of the Chaldees" since the term Chaldee didn't exist at that time.
- **A Northern Ur:** Fowler suggests "Chasdu" is actually a Hebraism for Proto-Arameans. He posits that a better interpretation of the biblical account would suggest that Abraham came from an Ur in the north, linked to the earlier Aramean presence. "A better suggestion is that Chardu is a Hebraism for Proto-Arameans."
- Dr. Fowler presents several arguments for this claim:
- **Personal Names:** Three of Abraham's relatives (Serug, Nahor, Terah) share names with cities in the region of Paddan Aram in the north.
- **Geography:** The journey from the southern Ur to Haran seems improbable for a large group of people. Haran was a natural crossing point on the major trade route, making it a logical destination if Abraham had come from a city to the east of Haran. "Abraham went to Haran because it was the place where, when you were going from east to west, it was the place where you cross the river."

- **Biblical Passages:**
- Abraham sent his servant to Aram-Naharaim (Genesis 24), and that area was the place he sent for Isaac's wife. "He went to Aram-Naharaim, and notice in verse 10, he went to the city of Nahor."
- Isaac instructed Jacob to go to Paddan Aram (Genesis 28) to find a wife, again referencing the northern region. "In chapter 28, he says, go to Paddan Aram...from there, take a wife from the daughters of Laban."
- **Northern Aramean Connection:** The homeland of the patriarchs, according to Dr. Fowler, is in northern Mesopotamia, which corresponds with where the Arameans were found. "I think the evidence is very strong that Abraham was of Aramean extract... I would suggest the homeland of the patriarchs is in northern Mesopotamia, as is the Ur in northern Mesopotamia."
- **Archaeological Evidence:** The Ebla archives have yielded evidence of a village, likely Ur, in the north, although it is not certain whether this is the same Ur from which Abraham originated.

Conclusion:

Dr. Fowler concludes that while the Habiru have a weak connection to the Hebrews, the Arameans play a vital role in Old Testament history, with strong biblical and geographic evidence suggesting they are the ethnic origin of the patriarch Abraham, and that his origin was in a northern Ur. The lecture challenges traditional interpretations and emphasizes the importance of engaging with the text and historical evidence. He suggests the homeland of the patriarchs is in northern Mesopotamia, not southern Mesopotamia as is traditionally thought. The lecture then transitions to a preview of the Sea Peoples Movement.

4. Study Guide: Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 13, People Groups: Habiru, Arameans

Old Testament Backgrounds: People Groups, Habiru, and Arameans Study Guide

Quiz

Instructions: Answer each question in 2-3 complete sentences.

1. What is the primary question Dr. Fowler is trying to address regarding the term "Hebrew" and Abraham?
2. How does the term Habiru appear in ancient texts outside of the Bible?
3. Why does Dr. Fowler argue that "Habiru" does not equate to "Hebrew"?
4. Why are the Arameans considered more important to Old Testament study than the Habiru?
5. What is the chronological problem presented by the mention of Arameans in Genesis?
6. What two names are used to describe the region of upper Mesopotamia before 1100 BC, and what do they mean?
7. What linguistic problem exists with the translation of "Ur of the Chaldees," and what is the Hebrew word?
8. According to Dr. Fowler, why did the Septuagint translators use the term "Chaldees" instead of the Hebrew term?
9. What evidence does Dr. Fowler use to argue that Abraham came from an Ur in the north, not the south?
10. What conclusions does Dr. Fowler draw about the relationship between Abraham and the Arameans, and what evidence supports it?

Quiz Answer Key

1. Dr. Fowler is trying to determine if Abraham was called a Hebrew because he was a Habiru, exploring the possible connection between the terms and whether they refer to the same people. He questions if it was merely a phonetic accident that the terms sound similar.

2. The term Habiru is used in Akkadian texts throughout Upper Mesopotamia and Palestine, referring to people living on the fringes of society who were not part of any specific ethnic group. This usage predates the time of Abraham.
3. Dr. Fowler argues that "Habiru" is a socio-ethnic term, not an ethnic one, used for various groups of outsiders, while "Hebrew" refers to a specific people. He points out that the term Habiru was used long before Abraham and outside the borders of Israel.
4. The Arameans are considered more important because they are tied to the historical veracity of Genesis, restrained Assyrian expansion, represented a major ethnic factor in the divided monarchy period, and their language is used in parts of Genesis, Ezra, Daniel, and Jeremiah.
5. The chronological problem is that the earliest identifiable archaeological reference to Arameans is around 1100 BC, while Genesis mentions Arameans and the Aramaic language in the time of Jacob, which is centuries earlier.
6. The region of upper Mesopotamia was known as Padan Aram, meaning "the field of Aram," and Aram-Naharaim, meaning "Aram of the two rivers." These names were in use long before 1100 BC.
7. The problem is that the Hebrew text says "Chasdu," not "Chaldees," which is a later Greek term. The Hebrew text's term "Chasdu" is obscure, and translators chose "Chaldees" because of its familiarity.
8. Septuagint translators used "Chaldees" because the only Ur known in their time (3rd century BC) was the famous city of Ur that was then known as Ur of the Chaldees. They had no geographical knowledge of "Chasdu".
9. Dr. Fowler uses personal names of Abraham's relatives that match the names of cities in the north, the geographical problem of Abraham's difficult journey to Haran if he came from the south, and the biblical passages describing the places where Abraham's descendants sought wives.
10. Dr. Fowler concludes that Abraham was likely of Aramean extract, even if the word "Aramean" was not used in his time, and that the homeland of the patriarchs is in northern Mesopotamia. He argues that the text repeatedly suggests a relationship between the patriarchs and the Arameans of the north.

Essay Questions

Instructions: Answer each of the following questions in a detailed essay format.

1. Analyze the evidence for and against the identification of Abraham as a Habiru. Explain why Dr. Fowler concludes that the terms are likely unrelated, and what implications this has for understanding the origins of the Hebrews.
2. Discuss the complexities surrounding the origins of the Arameans. What evidence does Dr. Fowler present for their existence before 1100 BC, and how does he reconcile the biblical accounts with the archaeological evidence?
3. Examine the arguments Dr. Fowler makes for the location of Abraham's homeland in northern Mesopotamia rather than the traditional Ur in the south. How does he use the biblical text, ancient geography, and linguistic evidence to support his position?
4. Evaluate the role of the Septuagint in the confusion surrounding the location of Ur. Why does it lead to a misinterpretation of the Hebrew term "Chasdu", and how does this illustrate the challenges in translation and interpretation of ancient texts?
5. Based on the lecture, explore the implications for Old Testament study if the patriarchs' homeland is in northern Mesopotamia. How does this understanding impact the historicity of Genesis and the larger narrative of the Hebrew people?

Glossary

Akkadian: An ancient Semitic language spoken in Mesopotamia.

Amarna Period: A period in the 14th century BC, during which diplomatic correspondence was discovered at Amarna in Egypt.

Amorites: An ancient Semitic-speaking people from the Levant who occupied Mesopotamia and Syria.

Arameans: An ancient Semitic-speaking people originating in the Levant/Mesopotamia, of significant importance in Old Testament studies.

Aram-Naharaim: A region in upper Mesopotamia referred to as "Aram of the two rivers," often associated with the Arameans.

Chaldees/Chaldeans: A late-term describing Aramean-speaking people who settled in southern Mesopotamia after 1000 BC, as well as their southern location.

Chasdu: The Hebrew term used in Genesis for the place where Abraham originated, interpreted by some as a reference to a northern group of people.

Ebla Archives: Ancient texts discovered in Ebla (Syria) that provide valuable information about the ancient Near East.

Euphrates River: One of the two major rivers in Mesopotamia.

Habiru: A term used in ancient texts referring to various groups of people living on the fringes of society, not a specific ethnic group.

Hebrew: The language of the ancient Israelites, and also a term for the Israelite people.

Mesopotamia: An ancient region in Southwest Asia located between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

Padan Aram: A region in upper Mesopotamia referred to as "the field of Aram."

Septuagint: The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible.

Shinar: A Hebrew term for the land of Sumer, location of the Tower of Babel.

Sumer: An ancient civilization and region in Mesopotamia, a possible region in the biblical account.

Ur: The name of a city that was both a major city in Sumer and also a small northern village associated with the Arameans.

6. **F5. FAQs on Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 13, People Groups: Habiru, Arameans, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)**

FAQ on Habiru and Arameans in the Old Testament

7. **Who were the Habiru and what was their significance in the ancient Near East?** The term Habiru, found in Akkadian and Sumerian texts, was not used to describe a specific ethnic group, but rather a socio-economic class. These individuals were often on the fringes of society, living outside established legal systems and coming from various ethnic backgrounds. The term was used throughout the ancient world, including Mesopotamia and Palestine, both before and after the time of the Exodus. While some Hebrews may have been considered Habiru, the term should not be directly equated to the Hebrew people.
8. **Is there a direct link between the terms "Habiru" and "Hebrew"?** While it's possible that the term "Hebrew" in Genesis 14:13 is used because Abraham was perceived as a social outsider (Habiru), it's unlikely the terms are linguistically related. It appears that "Hebrew" and "Habiru" are distinct words that happen to sound similar due to phonetic coincidence. The lecturer suggests Abraham was called a Hebrew because he "crossed over" from Mesopotamia to Palestine.
9. **What is the significance of the Arameans in Old Testament studies?** The Arameans are of immense importance in the Old Testament. They represent the ancestral origins of the patriarchs, influenced the historical accuracy of Genesis, restrained Assyrian expansion for centuries, served as major opponents of Israel during the divided monarchy, and influenced the languages of several Old Testament books. Jacob is even referred to as a "wandering Aramean."
10. **What is the chronological problem concerning the mention of Arameans in Genesis?** The earliest clear archaeological reference to a people group called Arameans is around 1100 BC. However, Genesis mentions Arameans, the Aramaic language, and locations like Aram-Naharaim long before 1100 BC, as early as the time of Abraham (around 2000 BC). This discrepancy poses a chronological challenge to the historicity of the Bible.

11. **What are some of the terms used to describe the Aramean homeland, and where is it located?** The Aramean homeland, or region associated with them, was known by a couple of names: Padan Aram, meaning "field of Aram," and Aram-Naharaim, meaning "Aram of the two rivers." These terms refer to a region in upper Mesopotamia, in present-day Syria and Iraq, located near the Euphrates and Balikh rivers.
12. **How does the Bible repeatedly reference the Arameans?** The Bible often mentions Arameans as a people and location connected to the Patriarchs. Nachor, Abraham's brother, had a grandson named Aram. Isaac and Jacob married women from Aramean families (Betuel and Laban), Laban makes a covenant in Aramaic, and Jacob is described as a "wandering Aramaean." Genesis uses the term frequently both for place names and apparently for a people group.
13. **What are the arguments that suggest Abraham came from an "Ur" in the north, rather than the famous city of Ur in the south?** Several arguments support the theory that Abraham came from a northern Ur rather than the well-known Ur in the south. First, Abraham's relatives (Serug, Nahor, Terah) share names with cities in the northern region of Paddan Aram. Second, a journey from the southern Ur to Haran, where the Bible mentions Abraham went, would have required multiple river crossings and seems unlikely for a large group. Haran was a strategic river crossing point, making it likely Abraham would go there, but if he was coming from the South, it was out of his way. Third, the Hebrew text uses "Chasdu" instead of "Chaldees," which suggests a link to a northern Aramaic group and not the southern Chaldeans, who didn't appear until much later. Finally, when Abraham's servant and Isaac sent to get wives for their respective families, they specifically returned to the same place, the North, that the patriarchs came from.
14. **What is "Chasdu" in the context of Abraham's origins and how does it relate to "Chaldees?"** The Hebrew text in Genesis states that Abraham came from "Ur of the Chasdu," not "Ur of the Chaldees." "Chasdu" is likely a reference to a proto-Aramaic people group in the north, distinct from the later Chaldeans who settled in southern Mesopotamia. The English translation as "Chaldees" comes from the Septuagint which, in the 3rd Century BC, only knew of the city of Ur in the South that by then was known as "Ur of the Chaldees". The lecturer suggests the use of "Chaldees" is an interpretive translation rather than a transliteration because the Southern group was well-known at the time of translation and "Chasdu" was not.