

Dr. Donald Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Lecture 1, Introduction and Early Mesopotamian Geography

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This is Dr. Don Fowler in his teaching on Old Testament Backgrounds. This is session 1, Introduction and Early Mesopotamian Geography.

Good morning. My name is Donald Fowler. I teach at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, and we're doing the course Old Testament Backgrounds. Many years ago, when I was a young seminary student, I entered into a class at Grace Theological Seminary taught by a man who would turn out to be my professor and my friend and my colleague, Dr. Herb Bess.

I took this course, I didn't have the faintest idea what this course was about, but I was almost immediately captured by the material. It was so new and so informative I was hooked right from the start. So, I remember my response to the course at the end was that it was absolutely wonderful.

What was that? Well, I was laughing because it was wonderful, but I didn't understand a lot of what was going on because there were no class notes and there was no real organization. And so, all I remember is everything that was said was just fascinating, but it was disorganized. Well, a few years after that, I was invited to join the faculty.

It's very funny to someone like me, but the very first thing I can remember about my position on the faculty was when my dear friend and colleague said to me, would you put together class notes for this class? Because he knew it needed to be organized. So, we're following that organization in my class notes, which are called Old Testament Backgrounds. It's a concept that exists on the basis of the fact that you really can't understand the biblical message very well unless you understand the setting in which it was written.

Somehow, we have this perspective about the Bible that any child can read and understand. Well, there is, of course, a sense in which that's true, but there's another strong sense in which it's not true because the fact of the matter is there's a lot going on in the Bible that can't be understood unless we effectively enter into their world. So that leads me to search for a metaphor or an analogy that I could use to introduce the contents of this class to you.

If I were to pick up the United States Constitution, let's pretend for the sake of example that I knew nothing about world history; literally, all I did was find an

ancient manuscript called the United States Constitution. I could read that. I think I could understand a fairly high percentage of it, but I certainly couldn't understand it optimally unless I understood why the document was there.

I would need to know things like the early Americans who came here from Europe. I would need to know European history so that I could understand that European history produced the document we call the United States Constitution because the political and religious events were behind the formation of that. I could understand the various things that were in the Constitution better.

So, my point is that if I don't understand the context of a document, I'm limited in my understanding of the document. So that's what this course is trying to achieve. It's trying to help people understand the context of the scriptures, particularly the Old Testament, since we might say some things about the New Testament, but not very much.

So, we're beginning this class by talking about Old Testament Backgrounds. It's fascinating when you start shining the nuanced lights of history onto the text of the Old Testament, how it changes the message, how it brings things into focus, and how it makes the content or how it makes the meaning so much clearer, many times so much more exciting. So, our goal is to do that.

So, as we get ready to start, let me make a couple of observations. The term backgrounds is a bit slippery. The course is not a course in ancient Near Eastern history.

All we will do is give a rough outline of ancient Near Eastern history so that you can see the flow of history into which we insert the chapters of the Old Testament. Israel was a small country, a hundred miles from north to south, surrounded by very powerful neighbors. So just as you wouldn't go to the Americas, South America, Central America, or North America, and try to write a history of the Americas from the perspective of Nicaragua or Honduras, so you wouldn't want to try to approach the history of this time period from the perspective of Israel, because Israel was such a small player, with the rare exception of the period of David and Solomon.

So, we need to understand the flow of ancient Near Eastern history so that we can insert the various historical segments that make up the Old Testament. So, it's not an ancient Near Eastern history course. In my early years of teaching, I taught in a college where I taught a class called Ancient Near Eastern History.

There we did a history of the ancient Near East, not Old Testament backgrounds. Old Testament Backgrounds is kind of a unique course. It's been associated with me in my ministry for 40 years now because I teach it in a way that is perhaps unique to my use of the materials.

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. We can't possibly show you all of the backgrounds from the ancient world as we approach the biblical text.

It's just not possible. What we will do is engage selectively with key backgrounds, which I think you'll see really change our understanding of the Old Testament text. So, we're in a golden age right now for background studies.

I'm in my 40th year of teaching now, start ready to start it. And when I started out, I can tell you there was virtually nothing in this whole field of backgrounds. Now we have a whole commentary on the Old Testament in light of the backgrounds published by Zondervan Press.

We actually have a study Bible now published by Zondervan Press called the Backgrounds Study Bible. We also have Backgrounds to New Testament, published by Zondervan and edited by Craig Keener. We have multiple other commentary sets or volumes that bring to our attention how our understanding of the biblical text changes when we know our backgrounds.

It's a golden era. However, it seems like we're destined to suffer this perplexing fate. The more information we have, the more questions are generated, not the least of which is answering the question, what makes a background a background? There is simply no answer to that question that everyone will agree with.

One person's background is another person's myth. So, we are not going to find all the backgrounds we can, but what we're going to do is just selectively cherry-pick as many important things as we can get into a class in order to cast light on this issue of backgrounds. Let me say something else about it.

I am old enough to remember a saying, but I don't know if it was around long before I came into existence. It goes like this: The tail doesn't wag the dog. In other words, the dog is the critter, not the tail.

I think the same is true with the Bible. The Bible, if you allow the metaphor, is the critter. It's the dog.

It's the animal. Backgrounds is the tail. It's so easy to get things distorted, and backgrounds can take on a life of their own.

And frankly, this happens more than I wish. We want to avoid that. It's easy to make backgrounds the subject rather than the biblical text.

So, we want to avoid that if we can and turn our attention toward backgrounds that instead help colorize the text. It's hard to do, trust me. There's a lot of disagreement over this issue of how to use backgrounds.

So, it's just one of the controversies that are plaguing us today. How do you actually use backgrounds? What is a background? To some people, backgrounds are like the poor. They're everywhere.

So, we want to avoid the problem of what Samuel Sandmel wrote about back in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, maybe 60 years ago. He wrote an article about parallelomania. There was a time period back in the 1920s when American scholarship began searching for similarities between the biblical world and the Bible.

That search took on a life of its own, to the point that backgrounds were created that weren't really there. We'll talk about that when we get to the Newsy materials here later. So, one of the problems that we have is that there literally is no scholarly rubric to which people can agree when we start saying this is a background.

So, this is a very personalized thing. It's my understanding of what the Ancient Near Eastern materials are about as they color the text. And I hope you'll enjoy it with me.

If you don't agree with me on everything, that will be fine. The truth of the matter is, over the course of teaching for 40 years, I've changed my mind so many times I feel like the equivalent of a chameleon. So, if you don't agree with me, that will perhaps be a present thing and later on your view will change.

When we look at the biblical text, the biblical text suffers from what my professor, Dr. Best, called the problem of vertical transference. Now this graph, which I trust you can see, is a graph that has two component parts to it. The one is signed kind of like a spyglass, a tube.

And try to pretend that we are looking through that spyglass onto the pages of the Old Testament, or it's the world in which Revelation was given. Now, this is not a telescope we're looking at, but a tube. And the problem with tubular vision is you can only see a very small part.

You can see the cursor has highlighted this. You can only see a very small part of the Ancient World. So, when here in this graph, the top of the tube represents what modern people know about the world of the Old Testament.

And as you can see, as it's projected onto the much wider circle, we don't know very much about the world of the Old Testament. And because of that, we suffer from what my professor, who probably got this somewhere else, called the problem of vertical transference. To put it in the vernacular, tunnel vision.

This is what we do to the Old Testament. And this is particularly true, I think, for those of us from the West. Because in the West, it's as if we think that the new Jerusalem is Washington, D.C. All things must be understood from the prism of North America.

Well, what we're trying to point out is, 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. So that's part of the trouble. Modern Westernism, which we project onto the pages of the Old Testament.

And if I could say something that I hope won't cause anybody to be overly concerned since we're just beginning. Part of this tubular problem is, since we all know the message of the New Testament, it's pretty easy to project that onto that blue world that we're looking at in the graph. So the point that I would like to make is just as the New Testament needs to be understood first in its world, so the message of the Old Testament is the same.

We must understand better the world of the Old Testament. Now, this is like a forbidding journey that we're on because, friends, we're never going to get there. We're never going to understand if you would allow, the world of the Old Testament.

It's too big. It keeps changing as we find new material. So, what I thought I knew 40 years ago has been greatly changed by what I have learned in these last 40 years, along with everyone else.

It's a constantly changing cognitive domain. We'll never get there, but boy, I would love it if I can infect you with the enthusiasm that I was infected with by my professor. Even if we never get there, I hope you have a great time as we journey together.

You're constantly learning and there's always new material. So, this is one of the great problems we face as we look at the Old Testament. I could talk about this literally for hours.

I better make myself move along. As God spoke the words of the Old Testament, or for that matter of fact, the New Testament, he inspired humans to write. This is one of the other theses that we need to consider.

The first of the theses was we need to understand the world of the Old Testament. The second thesis is that we need to understand that God used real people in the real world with real knowledge to write these books that are divinely inspired. So, I call this the inspirative work of God.

As you can see, the line of revelation goes from God, who is, of course, he is in some important way, the author of every word. And yet, he miraculously used ordinary human beings in supernatural ways so that ordinary sinful people were enabled to write words that were divinely inerrant. So, this line of revelation passes through real people, human beings, men, perhaps some women, we don't know for sure.

But what that means is as an implication that every author in the Bible is a person who is represented by the culture of that person's time period and that person's education. Let's illustrate with an example we know. There's a lot of controversy about who wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews.

There's not as much controversy about who wrote the Johannine epistles. Whoever wrote the epistle to the Hebrews had a better education than whoever wrote John. Well, we think we know who wrote John's epistles. The point is that the Greek in the epistle to the Hebrews is magnificent, highly literate Greek, whereas John's epistles read very simply.

So, it's important for us to realize that just as we need to know the world of the Old Testament, to the degree we can recover it, we need to know the culture, the presuppositions, the education, the knowledge, the religious knowledge, the history of the world of that ancient author. To the degree that we can reproduce the ancient author, we then can also help colorize the black and white of a biblical text that is not rooted in the ancient world. The end result, I trust you'll agree, is an inspired book.

But the inspired book is an inspirational work that starts out in a real world. A real world, the world of the ancient Near East, real people, the real people who wrote the books of the Bible, all of that means that we need to know backgrounds. Now, forgive me if I'm sipping coffee at your expense; it's eight in the morning, and so here, I'm going to be finishing this cup of coffee; it'll perhaps help me to think more clearly.

So, here's where we begin then with our thoughts on what the title of our course indicates. My methodology would be methodology largely rejected by some because I'm here to show you how the world of the Old Testament can colorize the message of the Old Testament. We're not going to look at that world in some totally coherent way, and we recognize that to some degree. I will propose to you what I think are backgrounds, and you can then advance your own study to determine whether or not those backgrounds are legitimate or not.

One of the ways that we can start is to remind ourselves that what we're doing is looking at a course that is primarily a history course, and I'll just give you a wild guess. I'll say half of the material is historical, half of the material is theological. But the moment you use the word history in today's world, that has so much baggage,

half of my audience out there would just glaze over the minute I use the word history.

I know that's true because half of my students glaze over the minute I use the word history. I came across this quotation by an author, Sebastian Hafner, in *The Meaning of Hitler*. He wrote this about Hitler and his era.

History, and that is the second error in such dictatorial statements, does not consist solely of fighting. Both nations and classes have lived over much longer periods in peace with one another than at war, and the means by which they achieve this peace are at least as interesting and worthy of historical research as are the factors which, from time to time, lead them into warlike clashes. Well, what Hafner's comment reminds us is, just as you can't study World War II without the background to it, in other words, how did Adolf Hitler come to be the person he was? We're still struggling to understand certainly why he hated the Jewish people so much. I have read three biographies now of Joseph Stalin.

They are so enlightening in explaining why Stalin murdered tens of millions of people. You need to approach history as bigger than just talking about important battles, or worse yet, on a high school level where history can so oftentimes be taught strictly from the perspective of dates and dates that have to be memorized and names, and it all just gets jumbled together. So, in an anti-historical climate, which is, I fear, the current spawn of existentialism, we seem to me to be in a culture that is preoccupied with its own navel.

We're presuming that what God did in the past is every bit as important as what God is doing in the present. So, the past is actually a study of what God is doing in the present. So, in an anti-historical climate, what value then is the study of history? Well, I happen to enjoy reading history, so any and all history is interesting to me.

But when we're reading the Bible, history is not a record of just battles and events. It's a record of divine intervention into the human narrative. That I believe is sacred, because not only did God intervene in the human narrative, but he moved the human narrative toward a goal.

And I believe God is intervening in the human narrative today as well, and you and I, if we're born-again Christians, are part of the movement of human events toward the climax that God has set for human beings. So, what value, then, is the value of history? Well, it's the value of our place in the grand narrative. I firmly believe, if you allow me, I passionately believe that the story of the Old Testament is our story, just as the story of the United States of America is our story.

Just as the story of Virginia's history is my story as a native of Virginia now, all of that has a personal quality to it, and history is and should be profoundly personal. But it

must be anchored in the reality that God intervenes, and it is his desire to work in the human narrative. So, our course is primarily history, but there are other important factors, and I'm going to talk this morning about the factor of geography.

There's a game that used to be popular. I don't think it's played nearly as much anymore, but it was called Trivial Pursuit. Have you heard of that game, Trivial Pursuit? I really like the game, because I like what some people think is trivia.

I have come to believe, if you'll allow me somewhat facetiously, that Trivial Pursuit, played with a modern generation, is a game that will never end because nobody will ever get the geography questions. We seem to be a culture that is totally disinterested in geography and culture and economics, and yet Hafner's quotation that I mentioned above leads us to the inevitable necessity of knowing how geography plays just a tremendously important role in how the Bible story is presented. If we don't know the geography of the world of the Bible, it's going to limit our ability to understand the Bible.

Equally important is trying to learn as much about the culture as we can while we do this class together. You know, when a modern reader starts reading through the Law of Moses, he or she can easily become really disturbed, because there are all kinds of laws about slavery, for example. There are all kinds of laws about sexuality that are seemingly bizarre.

And so, we draw conclusions, I think prematurely, about we like those laws or we don't like those laws. But friends, you have to understand the culture of the world in which God gave his revelation to know how to think your way coherently through those laws. We need to know geography, we need to know culture, we need to know religion.

Not just the religion of the Bible, but the religion of its neighbors. You see, the problem is when you're reading the prophets, they presume that you know about the competitive religious traditions. They presume you know the theology of Baal.

They presume you understand Canaanite religious thought. When they're attacking these competing systems, they presume that we know it. Well, we have the ability now to talk about it coherently, but we still live in a world where there's far too little knowledge about the religious beliefs of the neighbors of the Israelites.

Then, of course, there is one of my favorite, but the areas where I think I'm least knowledgeable about, and that's the area of economics. Economics plays a huge role in the biblical record, but we know very, very little about it. Just as we need to know these kinds of things to understand the world in which we're living, so we need to understand these to understand the message of the Bible.

I mentioned to you an important volume; it's actually a multi-volume set by Jack Sasson, the fine Jewish scholar. It's *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*. This is probably the greatest concentration of material on ancient Eurasian studies that I know of.

It's been republished by Hendrickson Press. To those of you who decide that you're like me, you're captured by this subject, and you want to start adding things to your library, this would be an important thing to add. It's a terrific book, and it's a wonderful repository that explains in massive detail many of these subject areas and many more besides them.

Some introductory qualifications we dealt with as we looked at the graphs already were the problem of vertical transference. I can tell you, friends, that this problem of vertical transference is so pervasive that you'll think I'm exaggerating, but I'm telling you the truth. The problem of vertical transference is so pervasive that to this very day, almost every time I open up the Bible, I go through a routine.

I stop myself. Before I read a word, I stop myself, and then I pause, and I say to my Lord, you know, I probably don't understand this passage correctly. Well, that's the humbling journey to avoid the problem of transference because if I think I know, I probably am imposing onto the text a meaning that may or may not be there.

So vertical transference is just a tremendous problem, and it comes in part because we read the Bible as if God wrote it personally to us. We have to figure out what the meaning was to the people to whom he wrote it. That will allow us to understand what it means to us today correctly.

So all of that is just introductory material to what I hope you will enjoy to be the most fascinating experience you may have ever had. Now, this is the Old Testament, of course, so you might be surprised when I ask the question, where do we start? We would think we would start with Genesis 1, but in actuality, if we're looking at backgrounds, we're trying to approach it from the perspective of evidence, and the whole world of Genesis 1 through 11 is a world that perished. It's a world that is artifactually not reproducible.

So, while we might study Genesis 1 and 2 as a theological text, it's impossible to study it as a historical text. Okay, let me just pause there before I get myself into trouble with my audience. I have the theological conviction that Genesis 1 and 2 are historical material.

There's lots of controversy today about how to understand Genesis 1 and 2. I think it describes how God created the heavens and the earth, but it isn't history in the sense that I can't retrieve it historically. We don't know exactly how many years ago Genesis 1 would have been, and we don't know anything about that world in the

sense that we know if the Genesis flood was global, as I think it was, then that world is destroyed. So, we really are not going to start, therefore, with Genesis 1 and 2, but that would lead us to ask the question, what about the immediate post-flood world? Because, after all, if we started with the flood, we would have to start with the presupposition that everything in the world was destroyed.

Even the topography of the earth would have been changed. For example, we know from Genesis 1 through 2 that the text tells us that there were four rivers in the Garden of Eden, and we know the two, the Tigris and the Euphrates, but the other two we don't know. Perhaps the flood changed the topography and those rivers are no longer there.

So, if we're not starting with the flood, then we would ask ourselves, what about the immediate post-flood world? Well, once again, see, there is enormous controversy about dating things artifactually, and I am not a scientist. Before I became a Christian in high school, I wanted to be a biology teacher. When I became a Christian, and I had taken enough biology courses that when I became a Christian, just three months before graduation, I went to a Bible college, and you can imagine my shock when I took a class in biology, and I literally knew more biology than my teacher.

Well, obviously, after high school, I didn't learn much biology, so I know very little science, and so the answering of the question about dates is largely a scientific question, and that's something that I can't answer. But what I can tell you is that it's all but impossible to arrive at a date for the flood simply because, for an indeterminate number of years, the cultures following the flood were thoroughly agricultural. There were no cities.

If there were no cities, then many of the things that we rely upon to recreate history were missing. If there was writing, we don't know about any of that. So the trouble is that in those centuries following the flood, we have an inability to extract the kind of artifactual evidence that allows us to write history.

For history to be written in a way that helps explicate the Bible, we need literature. Literature is the key that unlocks history. If all we have is artifacts, then we're somewhat limited in what we can get.

So, in my comment here, I mentioned that we cannot recover the historical realities of the flood. We can just believe the biblical message that it occurred. There was a time period when Sir Leonard Woolley thought that he found evidence of the biblical flood at Ur, and Ur is a great city in southern Mesopotamia.

And there was a great flood that hit Ur, and he found alluvial deposits as he was digging through the remains of Ur that were three meters deep. He dated this flood

as around 3500 BC, and then came to identify this with the Genesis flood account. In other words, he found what he thought was a local flood.

Well, we now know that he had found evidence of a great flood, but he did not find evidence of the biblical flood. That flood, I believe, would have been geological. And so, with that in mind, I would conclude that while studying the biblical text on the flood is an important exercise, if we want to insert it into a historical timeline, we're missing information to enable us to do that.

So, if we don't start with a flood, I ask the question, what about other features such as artifactual evidences, stratigraphy, and radiocarbon dating? Once again, I beg to explain to you that I am not a scientist. I am not able to interact with the phenomena of radiocarbon-14. But even if radiocarbon-14 had complete scholarly unanimity in understanding it, it would not allow us to create history that could colorize the text that we're looking at.

And what we're after is the world of the text as it explains the text, and that would be largely missing. So, as we make our way into these early steps of backgrounds, we're looking at a world in which we know beyond any shadow of a doubt, and it's a picture that is supplied by Genesis, that following the flood, when Noah and his family got off of the ark, they did what people do all over the world. They farmed.

They had a farm to eat. And we know that it would have taken centuries for the human population to have reproduced to the point that people would have begun to urbanize. We know from the material that before there were great urban centers.

We know there were small villages. But knowing how long the small village period was is a matter of some debate. So, dates range from 10,000 BC and upwards.

So, what we can say is that there were town settlements in the preliterate period. And so preliterate means before writing was invented. We know roughly, to just give a very rough date, the earliest forms of writing would have begun around 3,000 BC, maybe 3,200 BC.

And then it took centuries to develop the technology to write. It's not to say that Noah couldn't have written. We just don't know what Noah could have done.

So, the scenario is that after 9,000 BC, the climate in Mesopotamia began to change. And then this resulted in the early development of villages throughout the Fertile Crescent. Now, I need to give you a picture of the word Fertile Crescent because we're assuming that you know this word.

So, I'll show you what the Fertile Crescent looks like. This area that we're looking at is a map of what is variously called the Middle East or the Ancient Near East. It is the

same thing, just depending on which period of time we are evaluating it from, the Middle or the Near East.

But as you can see, there is a, if your eye can pick up on the color, there is a green half-moon that runs along the Mediterranean coast, goes north and then turns south. And if you notice, you can see that in the middle, we have a section that is brown. Now, what this is doing for us is showing what people refer to as the Fertile Crescent.

It's green because it's fertile. That is to say there's enough water to enable them to grow crops. But in the center of the half-moon or Fertile Crescent, as you can plainly see, it's brown, which is telling you that it's dry and really only rare forms of life can live in there because it's so inhospitable.

So that area of the green, the Fertile Crescent, comprises the modern-day area of, if I can just walk you north like this, this is the Sinai. If you can see my cursor, this little area in here is Israel. North of Israel is what we call Lebanon. North of Lebanon is Syria.

Today, one of the saddest human stories on earth is the story of Syria. Then we go east of Syria, and we come to modern-day Iraq. Iraq stretches all the way down to the Persian Gulf.

So, that listing of nations that I just gave is the Fertile Crescent. The area in between, the area of the Arabian Desert, has very little human life in it. So, this area is what we call the Fertile Crescent.

And what we know is that the climate began to change, which led to the development of villages in this region. Once again, I am not a specialist in this very early material, but I can tell you that we think that there was a slow drying out of the climate. And we know from the study of materials that in this whole region there has been moving at the speed of a glacier, very slow, there has been a drying out of this whole region.

The whole region of North Africa, the Middle East, has been slowly drying out for 30 years. Thousands of years. We know this because right in the middle of the Sahara Desert, we find examples where there are still crocodiles living in water holes.

In the Sahara Desert, people and archaeologists find remains of hippopotami and other animals that had copious water to have been able to live. So, there's been a general drying out, and I think that that is what has led to, come back to our chart, I think that is what has led them to this development of villages because humans were organizing themselves in proximity to the two rivers. Now, I don't know how well you

can see this graph, but I can tell you, on this map, there is a river on the west side called the Euphrates and a river on the east side called the Tigris.

And what we know is that when these villages began to develop, they naturally developed in proximity to the rivers because they had water. So, this is the change that brings the development of villages, and villages, of course, would lead ultimately to urbanization. So, this village period lasted for thousands of years, which, of course, makes sense.

It took millennia to develop the technology to develop true urban centers. So, this village period is long before everything before Genesis 12. When Abraham appears at the end of chapter 11 of Genesis and the beginning of chapter 12, we know that that's about, if the early formula for arriving at a date for him is correct, that was about 2100 BC.

Well, as you can plainly see, if the dates are correct that are assigned by radiocarbon 14 for these villages, these start out roughly 9000 BC and then continue on until perhaps 5000, 4000 BC when cities begin to develop. Among the earliest of these has been Jarmu in the foothills of the Zagros. So, radiocarbon dates that as early as 6750.

All of that is well before where we want to turn our attention in the class. So, if I can, I will move your attention to one little confusing point. If we were to go to the country of Israel, we have a city down in the Jordan Valley, or as it's more commonly called the Jordan Rift, called Jericho.

Radiocarbon 14 dates that city at 7000. It appeared to have the first wall, which was approximately 12 feet high and 5 feet thick. It also had a round battlement tower that was about 27 feet high.

So, as you can see if the radiocarbon 14 is correct, then it leads us to recognize that the earliest villages began in Mesopotamia about the same time Jericho began in what we call Israel. So, in other words, by 7000 and 6000 BC, human beings had succeeded in simultaneously spreading over what we would call the Fertile Crescent. So, you'll notice, however, that at least these early cities would be cities along the rivers.

Jericho is along the river. So, this was an important factor in why these cities develop. So, with that, I think what I would like to do is to move beyond my notes and ask you to take notice with me of the topography of the Middle East.

So, we're looking at a, this is in the class notes that all of you have access to. And what we're going to do is move from the top to the bottom and as you can plainly see, this area at the top would be what we would call the West. And that's the Mediterranean Sea.

Can you all spot where the Mediterranean Sea exists? We're going to go from the West to the East on horizontal terrain. So, we have the coastal plain, which has various names. That coastal plain is anywhere from a few miles wide to 20 miles wide.

And then we come to this central mountain range that actually runs all the way; if you can follow the cursor and we go north, can you all follow this mountain range that stretches along the coast of Syria, Palestine all the way up to modern-day Turkey? All right. That's called the Central Mountains in Israel, anyhow. And so, as you can see, this mountain range runs all the way north.

If you can follow my cursor, coming back south, you'll see that immediately to the east of the mountain range is a valley. This valley is fertile and has different names depending on which country we're in. This valley in the biblical record is called the Jordan Rift.

So, try to think of it a little bit like California. You know, in California you have a coastal plain. When you come west to east, you have a coastal plain.

Sometimes it's very narrow. Sometimes, it's not even there, like in the Big Sur region. But then, when you come east, you run into a mountain range.

But then, when you get to the east of the mountain range, for example, you have a valley, the San Joaquin Valley. And then the further east you go, the drier it gets. That topography is very similar to Israel.

So, for example, this rift area is very fertile and is watered by the Jordan River. And so, we're going to spend some time today working with this concept of the geography of this whole map. But then when we go further east, we come into another mountain range.

And these are referred to in Israel as the Transjordan Mountains. They're the mountains of both Jordan and Syria. So, the Transjordan Mountains, they run north-south on a parallel with the central mountain range over here.

As you can tell, we have a large plateau here of decidedly infertile land. If you allow me, I'm going to click back on my Word document to show you that this is the Great Arabian Desert. The Arabian Desert is largely the result of two phenomena.

In this whole region, the further south you go, the drier it gets, wherever you're at, whether it's North Africa or whether it's Israel or whether it's Iraq. The further south you go, the drier it gets. So that's one of the two factors about why it's dry, just because of the way the winds flow.

But the second reason is that this mountain range here is both the central hill country and the Transjordan Mountains; since the winds always prevail from west to east, then the moisture that is in those winds, when it hits those mountains, those mountains subtract the moisture. And that's part of why we have this Great Arabian Desert: because whatever moisture is in the wind is extracted by the mountains. So the Great Arabian Desert, as you can see, is a desert because it's also high ground, and there's so little rainfall here.

I'm sure there are times when they have no rain at all over the course of a year. But then we come east of that Great Desert region, and we come to the eastern part of the Fertile Crescent, which, as you can plainly see, is exceptional farmland. We'll talk about that more later on as well.

And this is fertile, not because it gets so much rainfall. It's fertile because a lot of this region in the earliest antiquity was created by flood deposits. We know this down here in particular in the south.

So, it's fertile soil that has been brought down and deposited, much like we have in the Louisiana Delta. Same phenomena. And so it's fertile because it does get a little bit of rainfall, but also because it has multiple rivers flowing down from this mountain range to the east.

These are considerably higher than the mountains on the western side of the Fertile Crescent. The mountains over there to the east, where my cursor is, are called the Zagros Mountains. Some of you might recognize the term Zagros in the word ziggurat.

A ziggurat is a high building, so called because it's tall. Zagros means tall or high, and so these mountains are called the Zagros because they're 9,000 and 10,000 feet high. Well, you see, when you have mountains that high, then they extract whatever moisture was higher up in the atmosphere, and then that moisture is extracted, and then it runs down into the great floodplain of Mesopotamia and creates, therefore, multiple areas that can be farmed because water flows through it in the form of these rivers.

So, this is a topography that we're going to talk about in two different sections. We'll start out by talking about the topography of Mesopotamia. I'll describe to you what that topography is.

I'll describe to you how that topography produces history. I'll talk to you about what that topography means to food production, and then we'll do the same for the topography of Israel since we need to understand that topography correctly as well. So, if I could just keep my cursor here on this map, I'll just walk quickly then from

west to east to show you quickly the zones before we start talking about the one particular zone.

So, the first, of course, is the Mediterranean Sea, which, of course, is crucial for producing moisture. So, the first land zone we come to is the coastal plain. The next zone that we come to is this mountain range that runs north and south all the way from Aqaba down here all the way up to Turkey.

The third zone, as you can tell, is that valley. I should tell you about this valley, the Jordan Rift. It's not visible on this particular map, but this valley runs all the way up into central Turkey.

It runs all the way into central Turkey. It runs all the way down like this to the south. It runs into Aqaba and the Red Sea, and then from the Red Sea it runs underground, that is at the bottom of the ocean.

It runs all the way south to central Africa. This valley that we're talking about is the largest crease on the surface of the Earth. That's one reason why in the Bible we read so often about earthquakes because the tectonic plates shift and cause those earthquakes.

And so, this valley, which is relatively small on the map, is part of the largest crease on the surface of the Earth. I should say not on the Earth because it's obviously underwater. So that's the rift.

Then we have this set of mountain ranges that are to the east of that. Then we have the Great Arabian Desert, which, of course, has very little human value. And then we have the fertile floodplains of Mesopotamia.

And then we have the Great Zagros Mountain Range, which separates Iraq from Iran. The Great Iranian Plateau is to the east of the Zagros Mountains. So, on this map, we have pictured for us the topography of biblical history in the Old Testament.

Well, for the most part, because when we get to the end of the Old Testament, the Greeks come into play. And as you can see on this map, Greece isn't there. So, I have other maps that I can show you regarding that because at the end of the Old Testament, the map changes to include this region here, western Turkey, and the area we call Greece today.

This inserts itself into the story of the Old Testament. That's the topography that we would like to look at today, and that's what this horizontal map is designed to teach us.

Okay, so I think what we'll do is we'll take a pause here, and then in a few minutes on our time here, we're going to come back and start with an analysis of the topography and food production and things like that of Mesopotamia. I think you're going to find this all very interesting. We rarely hear sermons on something like this because it's not really the text that we're dealing with as much as we're dealing with the geography.

But I think you're going to learn a lot if you'll be patient. Okay. Thank you for your attention.

This is Dr. Don Fowler in his teaching on Old Testament Backgrounds. This is session 1, Introduction and Early Mesopotamian Geography.