Dr. Donal Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Lecture 2, Topography of Mesopotamia and Israel

This is Dr. Don Fowler in his teaching on Old Testament backgrounds. This is session 2, Topography of Mesopotamia and Israel.

Welcome back to our second session. We went a little long on that first one, so we'll try to limit it from here on into something less than an hour. What we want to do is to try to make a simple point that the structure of the earth, the topography of the earth is created by God, at least from the perspective of the Bible. In that perspective in the Bible, God is the creator, but it follows, therefore, that he works out his plan through the topography, through the creation of this world.

It's well worth our time, and I trust you'll agree with me. It's well worth our time to study the topography. In this hour, we'll divide our thoughts between two topographies: Mesopotamia and Israel. Mesopotamia, of course, is much larger than Israel.

It's the source of the great powers of the ancient Near East. The greatest civilizations would have begun here first, and so what we would like to do is to point out to you several different things of some consequence. As you can see, the green area is large and is able to be farmed, but it'll surprise you because in that area that we're looking at, all the way from the foothills of modern-day Turkey, Armenia, all the way south, the rainfall varies the further south you go, it tends to be drier, so it varies from about 16 inches of rain a year to 8. Well, you really can't farm on the basis of 16 inches of rain.

So because of that, even though the soil is very fertile, they don't have adequate rainfall to farm. So, what that meant is that in antiquity, most of the farming was done close to the rivers. They could transport water from the river onto the land that they were living on and do simple farming that way.

However, as these cities began to enlarge and become more numerous in their population, they needed more land to farm, and that's when human beings caught on to the idea of irrigation. So, what I'm going to do is to go to the board here in our classroom and just draw you a simple little picture of how this irrigation kind of worked. So, if you have the river, and the river is working like this, but you have the city here, well, what they did is they dug irrigation ditches.

In these irrigation ditches, the community would work together to dig a large ditch, and then they would sublet from the main irrigation ditch; they would sublet smaller streams like this, and thereby, they could increase the amount of area to be much

larger than the original central ditch that the city would have developed. So, what this led to is what scholars refer to as a river-tine culture. It's a culture that's built around rivers, and this is the way it was in the Middle East because there's not adequate rainfall, and yet there's copious land.

So, in both Mesopotamia, modern-day Iraq, as well as Egypt, the civilizations revolved around the rivers, and they had to be irrigated. And so, in Mesopotamia, they dug these ditches, and the ditches led to the ability to farm much larger amounts of land. And so, we are making two points right now.

One is that there is inadequate rainfall but plenty of water. Two, the soil is very fertile, but the only way to make it farmable is irrigation. As a result, this led to and fostered the phenomenon of urbanization and the development of cities.

In order to farm larger and larger amounts, people would apparently collect in these urban centers and then communally join in to enlarge the amount of territory that could be farmed. This led to the development of numerous larger cities in this region, all brought on by the important reality that this was some of the best topsoil on the surface of the earth. The topsoil came from the Zagros to the east and to the Anatolian Plateau to the north.

This led to such successful farming that it was not until the modern era, when human beings learned to make chemical fertilizer, that we were able to match and exceed the bushels per acre that they were getting in this virgin soil—soil that had never been planted. This turned their culture into an economic dynamo.

What it meant was that they had something that was exceedingly rare. They had a surplus of food. This reality really altered human history.

We'll talk about that more as we move into this lecture of geography and Mesopotamia. There was plenty of farmland. The soil was incredibly fertile.

They had surplus food, which reminds us to return to our chart about vertical transference. In our culture here in America, it doesn't really cost that much money to buy food.

Now, I'm not a big eater personally, but I can live on less than $20 a week for food. My wife can tell you that. It's not difficult at all.

Food is cheap in America, but it was not that way in antiquity. In modern terms, food is a major factor in the family budget.

It costs a lot of money in their world. This meant that the Mesopotamian basin had an enormous geopolitical advantage since it could produce food and ultimately use it

as an export or trade factor. Not only was the soil fertile, but they could trade because of the rivers.

Those two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates were able to be used to ship food upriver or downriver. And that led to the development of civilization. And so, this is a major factor showing you how topography produces history.

The earliest civilizations developed here because of topography. And the earliest political global entities, the powers, developed because of this surplus of wealth. So that's an important factor, and it leads us to... Let me introduce it to you; I call it a litany.

I'm not sure what the term is, but I'd like to write it out for you on the board here if you'll let me. It goes like this. We're going to call it topography.

The topography requires irrigation. There's not enough rain, great soil, not enough rain. Irrigation, however, requires a communal effort.

So, in Mesopotamia, irrigation leads to urbanization. In other words, only urban centers could produce the manpower to create enough irrigation for humankind to prosper. Urbanization, I'm going to draw my arrow here but write it down like this.

Urbanization politically leads to centralization. In other words, the sociology of the great urban centers required a change in political format, which is very important in the Bible.

And that change I'm going to put down here in its own category in big letters: kingship. As we work our way through this discussion of topography, you can see in Mesopotamia that the topography led to the development of urban centers, which required a different political system.

And that system led to kingship. And kingship, I would submit to you, you don't have to agree, of course, but I would submit to you to think about kingship as the single most important revelatory metaphor for the being of God. Kingship starts very early in Mesopotamia.

It starts out relatively late in Israel. Okay, so we'll talk about that as well. So what I was then pointing out to you is that the soil is very fertile, but the topography requires cooperation.

Cooperation leads to new socialization. And that, of course, led to the development of kingship. So that's an important factor.

Let's go back to our map and talk a little bit more about the geographical realities of Mesopotamia. Mesopotamia, if you could think of it in a metaphor like a woman's womb, Mesopotamia is a geographical region that is self-contained. Here's what I mean by that.

When we look at the map of Mesopotamia, we see to the west, you all can see to the west you have the virtually impassable Arabian Desert. What that does is it effectively guarantees the western border of the whole region. It will never, ever be invaded from the west.

When you look at the map to the north, you have the heavy mountain ranges that separate Anatolia, modern day Turkey, from Mesopotamia. So, it makes it difficult to move from north to south. Now, humans can do that, but it's not easy.

So, it has a natural protective barrier. By no means is it hermetically sealed to the north, but it's a natural protective barrier to the north, those mountain ranges. When you go to the east, you have the Zagros Mountains.

The Zagros Mountains, especially in the tall sections of it, are very difficult to go from east to west or west to east. Then when we go to the south, you see you have the Persian Gulf. So, what that does is it creates a physical matrix for the birth of empires.

It is a natural topographical phenomena that this self-contained region would ultimately come to be politically united and result in empires. So, with that in mind, what we have as we look at all of this then is a region in which it is a food-producing dynamo. So, let's talk about then some of the peculiar properties of this Mesopotamian region.

They've got lots of food, but they're missing some really crucial factors for human development. One, they have virtually no timber. Human beings have relied on timber on wood for building their civilizations in ways that we don't really know much about.

We just go to Builders Mart or to Lowe's or someplace and buy our lumber. The fact of the matter is that all the way from the Atlantic Ocean to the Ural Mountains in antiquity was a stretch of unbroken timber. Over the millennia, humans have deforested the vast majority of that region.

What do they do here in a culture in which there is no timber? It's a floodplain. There's no timber except palm trees, date trees, and things like that. Well, they built out of mud because that's what they had.

They had not a lot of rock, just mud. So, what that meant is they were hampered by the lack of timber. Secondly, there's no metal.

The closest metal deposits on that map are to the north up in Anatolia, where there is iron. But of course, it'll be thousands of years before human beings can figure out how to melt iron. Copper deposits are scattered throughout, but there's no copper, no metal of any consequence, in all of that floodplain.

So that meant some of the essentials of human culture were missing and seems to have been one of the factors that resulted in long-distance trade. And that long-distance trade made its way up and down those rivers, and so the Mesopotamians had plenty of food. Their neighbors had some of the other things that their culture lacked, like metal and timber.

Because of those rivers, long-distance trade became plausible. So, it's a region that is uniquely sealed off, enabling it to become politically unified and powerful, but it's a region that has its own particular climate and topography. So, when we start in the northern part, it's wetter and cooler in the winter.

When we make our way to the south, it gets drier and warmer the further we go. Many American GIs can tell you about this phenomenon because so many ended up fighting in Iraq for such a long period of time. And so that's Mesopotamia.

And so let me make this point then. As you can tell in my presentation, it is a region that is a region to itself. The empire is first developed here, one after the other, for 2,000 years.

But it is a region that, at least for travel purposes, is connected to the Fertile Crescent. And so, if we go up to the top of the map, you can see that the area at the top is green. And so, human beings can trade east-west across this region.

It's dry and not particularly easy to travel. But travel can occur and did occur from west to east and from east to west, but not until a bit later. So, this is the first half of our discussion.

What it's going to tell us is that the great empires would develop in Mesopotamia, and that those empires would affect, ultimately, the country that we are most interested in, albeit a very small country, Israel. So, what we're going to do is to turn our attention to the west and take a look at the unique geography of Israel and point out to you that it is connected, therefore, by land routes that human beings can travel in, and so east can meet west, west can meet east. However, it is a radically different topography for multiple reasons.

So, what I would suggest to you about this topography is it's not incredibly fertile. It has some regions that are fertile, but they're localized. These valleys are fertile, but for the most part, it's rocky.

In antiquity, it was forested. As a matter of fact, virtually everyone has heard of the Cedars of Lebanon. The Bible talks about them repeatedly.

Well, these are cedars that are now almost extinct. They've been almost cut down to the last cedar. But that's cedars in this higher mountain region right here.

In Israel, there were no cedars, per se. There were mostly oak trees. But in antiquity, this region had trees, which enabled them to be able to make the kind of things that human beings can do with lumber.

You know, it has escaped my attention, but it came back to me. Since I can't rewind the tape, if I could just take you back with me to Mesopotamia for a brief moment, I clean forgot to mention to you there was a problem in Mesopotamia. And it's a problem that is of monumental proportions in world history.

And the problem is when these fields were fertilized with the water from the rivers, over the millennia, this created an ecological problem of the first order. In this water, coming mostly, but not exclusively, from up here in Anatolia in modern-day Turkey, the mineral deposits in that water were extreme. As a matter of fact, we've all heard of the Dead Sea in Israel and how things don't live in it because it's so mineral-laden.

Well, when you go up into modern-day Turkey, there are lakes, large lakes, which are far more saline than the Dead Sea. So, these mountains, which come up, release minerals that these two rivers bring down. Those minerals are in that water.

And so, when that water is used to irrigate, every year the irrigation occurs, a deposit, we'll call it saline, a saline deposit occurs and harms the soil. Now, had they understood what was happening, they could have at least slowed down what's called the salinization of the soil. The way we crop in our country is called row cropping.

Mostly, that's the way farmers function today because of modern machinery. Row cropping means that the farmer creates a little mound, and then, using modern equipment at the top of the mound, he digs a hole here, or the machine digs a hole, and then the seed is planted up here. All right? Well, they didn't row crops in antiquity.

They are irrigated by flooding. And so instead, the ground was flat, the seeds would have been put in the ground and then the water was distributed in flood fashion over the ground. What that meant is that the soil that could have been protected this way was subject to salinization.

As a matter of fact, when people go into southern Mesopotamia today or southern Iraq, they oftentimes come up with the question of why anybody would fight over this. Well, we know, at least in the northern part of Iraq, that's because of oil. But when you look in southern Iraq today, the soil is... there's very little that's green. And that's the direct result of millennia of salinizing the soil by this irrigation process.

And so, it's an important geological reason explaining why the civilizations that were so great ultimately declined and shifted first east to Persia and then west to the Mediterranean. This was a major factor in the loss of power because every year, mathematically, crop production was less effective until, over the course of millennia then, the fecundity of the soil was greatly reduced. So, this problem of salinization of the soil has turned the crop, the farmland, into... As a matter of fact, the top of the soil now is so hard that in the winter months, when it does rain, you look at the landscape and you see water everywhere.

And people who are traveling there think that they've got plenty of water when, in reality, the water is there because it can't effectively percolate through that salinized dome. Thus, we have this problem that I'm speaking about, and it led ultimately to the demise of Mesopotamia as the central area for the power of the world along with other shifting patterns. So, forgive me for leaving that out and we'll go back to Israel and explain to you this region over here.

As you can see, therefore, the soil isn't very good but it is forested, or at least it was. And there is some metal deposits, although not a lot. Most of the copper deposits came from the island of Cyprus up here.

Our English word copper comes from the name Cyprus. If you look at the consonants copper and Cyprus, the consonants are the same. So, this region does not have that good topsoil, but it can sustain populations.

It does have forests, which means it can use them to build homes, as well as things like ships or weapons. And it has moisture. As a matter of fact, the further north you go, the wetter the region.

The further south you go, the drier. The further east you go, the drier. So, if we look at a map of Israel and see the rainfall, then we get a map that shows us this literally incredible variation in rainfall.

I am no expert on the surface of the earth, but I would not be surprised that there is no place on the surface of the earth in which 100 miles can make the difference that it does in Israel. In other words, you may not be able to see it, but on the map, I can tell you that the blue regions represent 60 inches of moisture a year. Now, as you can tell, I trust those are mountainous regions.

As a matter of fact, this is Mount Hermon, which is almost 10,000 feet high. But because of the height, regions right here get, that's about two and a half times the amount of rainfall that we get here in Virginia. You can see that a larger region is in this; I'm not sure; I think that's kind of a yellow.

This is over 40 inches of rain a year. That's almost twice what we get in Virginia. And then, as you can see, as you go further south, in the differing shades of brown, the brown goes from about 30 inches of rain a year to maybe 20.

So, as you can tell, this whole region that makes up the core of Israel gets adequate rainfall for cropping. See how the further south you go? So if we were to show you what tiny distances we're talking, from right here, which is Lake Hula, down here to Beersheba, is roughly 100 miles. In 100 miles, you go from 60 inches of rain to 10.

Isn't that just astounding? Here, you only have about 70 miles from the coast, where you're getting 30 inches of rain a year, to the Jordan Rift, where you're getting 10 inches of rain a year, all in the space of just 50 or 60 miles. So, what it tells us is two principles that cover the topography of Israel. The further north you go, the wetter it is.

The higher you go, the wetter it gets. So, Israel is on this utterly unique phenomenon of what some scholars call a rain line. As you can tell, the rain line passes roughly through the country.

So, if you are south of the rain line, which functions on a north-south line, if you're south of that rain line, then there's adequate rainfall. But if you're north of the rain line, excuse me, I misspoke myself, north of the rain line, there's adequate rainfall. South of it, there may or may not be adequate rain.

That rain line passes roughly through the middle of what we call Israel. All right? So we're learning some things about the topography. We're going to learn some things about food production here that make Israel different as well.

In Mesopotamia, in their food production, it's a grain-driven agriculture, growing almost exclusively wheat and barley and some vegetables. In Israel, it's a different topography, which means they have different crops. To be sure, they grow wheat and barley, but that'll only grow effectively where you have decent topsoil.

When we look at Israel, what we have is a culture of mountains, which means that growing vines is not only possible but preferable. The phenomena of the hills is such that crops like we think of cannot be effectively grown except in the valleys. But the mountains are almost perfect for growing grapes.

And so grapes do not like a lot of moisture, and they don't like excessive heat, which is why in both Mesopotamia and Egypt, there was a complete lack of growing grapes. But when it comes to Israel, it's the perfect climate for that. The winds often blow from the Mediterranean Ocean, and they bring cooling breezes with them.

And at night, that deposits dew, which is the way grapes like to receive their moisture. That's the reason why when you're reading your Old Testament, you read about dew in very favorable terms. It's never pictured, as far as I can remember, in negative terms.

So, it creates a whole different crop culture. And so in Israel and the regions to the north, Lebanon, it's a region able to grow two things. Olives and grapes.

Both of which have the phenomenal ability to provide for people year round. By that what I mean is the grapes can be dried and turned into raisins, which means you have those with you all winter. And so that means you can have fruit all winter in Mesopotamia they didn't have that.

So, raisins provide fruit for the winter months. Secondly, olives are an enormously important benefit to their culture because the olive tree produces a lot of fruit, and the olive can be eaten or turned into oil. Oil was a vital part of their culture for both religious reasons since it was used to anoint humans in spiritual and religious rites and, more importantly, for cooking and lighting purposes.

You know, olive oil would. So, these two crops created a different culture and a different lifestyle. This meant that this region had a culture that was completely different from or largely different from that of Mesopotamia.

The climate is different. They can actually have winter because of the height. As a matter of fact, one of the most amazing things about Israel that I can tell you firsthand is if we come to our map up here, and if you find the top of the Dead Sea, and you go west, you come to Jerusalem.

You see, where Jerusalem is on an east-west line, almost perfectly situated with the top of the Dead Sea. And if you look at that, you can see that from Jerusalem down to the Dead Sea is roughly 12 to 15 miles. I have been there personally when there are 12 inches of snow in Jerusalem, and you go 10 miles down into the Jordan Rift, and they're growing bananas.

Because the Jordan Rift is 1,000 feet below sea level, Jerusalem is 2,500 feet above sea level, so where else on earth are we going to find a place where in such a short distance we have that kind of topographical change? This results in a different climate and a different topography. By the time we get down here in this region, it is largely called the Negev, and it is largely flat. The coastal plain is flat.

The topography of this region is north-south, as hill country. We have the great Jordan Rift, which can be used for farming, and then we have the mountains.

One of the most interesting stories about God's people is, with rare exception, the story of Israel. It's the story of a people who were not united. When they left Egypt, they left fractured.

They were a group of disconnected tribes. Multiple times, Moses has to plead for God to save him because they're ready to kill him. When they get into the actual country of Israel from the desert, ultimately, they don't cooperate.

They don't unite. We read immediately in Joshua's time that they were fractured only in the period of the united monarchy, a period of about 100 plus years where they were ever united. Well, friends, one of the reasons then why they were so disunited, by no means the only reason, but one of the reasons why they were so disunited was because of the topography.

It made it very difficult to travel in this region. You had different regions, which led to different lifestyles. In just a short region, they had different language dialects. It made it difficult to communicate because of the different.

One of the Israelites' handicaps was geography, which did not lend to unification. And so, it was a wildly diverse topography with tremendously different climates. Down along the coast and in the Jordan Rift, it's what we call subtropical. When we get into the central hill country, it's a whole different climate.

So, what that meant is that it's a region that is not just naturally united. So, with that, what I would like to do is to explain to you about this Fertile Crescent phenomenon and trade. God put his people of all the places on earth, this is not one of the places that I would have expected that God would have deposited his people.

Topographically, why on earth would God have put the Israelites there? Well, I think that there are a number of theological reasons that make this important. One is because, theologically, when you read the Old Testament in particular, God is putting Israel in a topographical region for the purposes of dependency. In other words, God seems to know that to have a proper relationship with God, humankind needs to learn that it is dependent upon him.

Well, by putting his people in this part of the world, Israel is dependent upon God in very special ways. Two in particular. One, I've already mentioned to you, the rain line passes right through the middle of the country.

So, all God has to do, I don't of course know how he would do this, but all he would have to do is just move the rain line and there will be famine in much of Israel. All he has to do to bless Israel is to move the rain line south and the whole country can get adequate rainfall. It's in a wildly varying rainfall distribution zone.

I think that that's because God was building into his people, Israel, the requirement that to receive his blessing, they needed to be obedient. When you read in, particularly the book of Deuteronomy, Deuteronomy makes it very clear that the way that they were to relate to God successfully was to be obedient to the laws that God gave, and if they were, then God would bless them. On the other hand, if they were disobedient, the scriptures reveal that sometimes whole chapters are given over to describing the curses where God lists out all of the curses that he will send from which he will choose some to send upon Israel.

And so, the blessings and the curses are so easy to distribute in this part of the world whether you're 20 miles north or 20 miles south. That's an important factor as we think about the Bible because it reminds us that God wants us to be dependent upon him rather than dependent upon ourselves. This is a very practical problem that we face in the modern world because, in a modern world, we can make our lives work in such a way that God, I think, put his people in this region because it's a region that they would have to depend upon him in special ways.

God could show himself to be generous by rewarding them for obedience, and he could show himself to be firm by punishing them for their disobedience. However, that's not the only reason why the topography of Israel is worth noting. The second topographical region that I draw to your attention is the land bridge where the cursor is pointing out. This little 100-mile region is the land bridge that connects three continents.

All three continents have to go north or south through what we call Israel. That made this region one of the most strategic pieces of geography on the entire surface of the earth in both ancient and modern times. There was no way for the Egyptians to go north, which was the only way they could go.

There was no way they could go north without going through Israel. During the period of the great Mesopotamian empires, particularly the Assyrian empire, there was no way they could get to the last piece of ground to conquer. That piece of ground was Egypt.

There was no way they could do that without going through Israel. That meant this tiny piece of real estate was surrounded by incredibly powerful neighbors. Let's see if I can illustrate.

In modern-day geographical terms, I think there are about four to five million Israelis. When you go south, if my memory is correct, there are 70 or 80 million Egyptians. That's a perfect picture of the hopeless condition that the Israelites were in, surrounded by a much more powerful entity to the south of Egypt or to the east, the great Mesopotamian empires in the case of the Assyrians followed by the Babylonians followed by the Persians, all of these were populations far greater than Israel.

So, what that meant is that God has put his people into a place that is utterly strategic, surrounded by powers that are permanently greater than them. As a matter of fact, that same reality made its way into today's modern world because with the digging of the Suez Canal, this region, for hundreds of years several hundred years, was the most strategic place on earth. At one time two-thirds of the shipping of the international shipping on the surface of the earth at one time two-thirds of this passed through the Suez Canal.

So, even in modern times, Israel is among the most it is in the area of the most strategic regions on earth. Back in the fifties, the powers of the world had their fingers on the nuclear button over the Suez Canal. At one time, the Israelis had conquered all the way across the Red Sea into Egypt, and President Eisenhower said to them, in no uncertain terms, to turn around and go back.

It is such a strategic region. But one of my favorite parts of the story is to draw your attention to the fact that this region is theologically significant because I think God put his people here in part so that they could be the witness that he intended Israel to be to the whole world. By sitting on the crossroads of three continents, Israel is in a position to share the news about God like few other places on earth.

And it's not an accident in Old Testament times long before Christianity that God ordered missionary effort on the part of Jonah. Jonah was told to leave Israel and to take the gospel over here to northern Mesopotamia. I use the word gospel anachronistically.

It's in New Testament terms but it's the news about God. It's the good news that if Nineveh will repent God will forgive them. So, when we look at this topography we can see that Israel was perfectly situated to be a witness about God to the entire ancient world.

The Egyptians are 200 miles to the south. Assyria is 600 or 700 miles to the north. Israel was ultimately in a position to be a witness to regions far to the south.

It's not an accident that in the reign of Solomon, the Queen of Sheba hears about what God is doing in Israel. And she sends diplomats and arranges a meeting to come and see with her own eyes. So, what I would suggest to you as we study topography

is that this region is theologically important because God intended for his people to become witnesses to the world of that era.

Lest I anachronize my course, can I suggest to you it's not an accident that Christianity emanated from this region? There's a sense in which Christianity began in Jerusalem, and in Jerusalem, the Gospel spread to Judea and then to Samaria. And then to Antioch up here in the northern part of the region.

From Antioch, it also spread down into northern Africa in the person of the Ethiopian eunuch. By the time that little thirty-year window of time ends in the Book of Acts, Christianity has spread all the way to Rome. This is a geographical centerpiece for God's plan in Antiquity in both the Old and the New Testament.

Maybe it will serve that purpose in the months and years to come. Who knows how God's plan will work out. But when we study the Bible, topography is central to how God's plan works in regard to the world.

I think a plausible case can be made for God having put His people here because He intended for them to be a witness to the entire world. Now that's a happy thought. But before I finish this part of my lecture I want to just mention one thing about the topography of Israel.

I'm not sure how much time we have left at this hour, but what I'll do is just introduce it to you, and then we'll start with this and then finish up the next hour. Human beings have had a tortured relationship to the earth. It seems as if our prosperity is oftentimes at the expense of the earth.

So, what I would like to talk with you about is this phenomenon. I hope before you die, I hope you'll be able to go to Israel. It just utterly changes your ability to understand your Bible.

But when you go, I'm pretty sure that you will look at the country and say what the American G.I.s said when they went to Iraq. Why would anybody fight over this? You'll look at the region and wonder why this whole country doesn't have as much good farmland as one county in central Illinois. Now, what I would like to do is talk about that phenomenon with you in our next session.

Thank you for listening carefully and we'll pick this back up in the next lecture.

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