

# Dr. Donald Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 10, Literature of Babylon 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 10, Literature of Babylon, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL**

This lecture by Dr. Donald Fowler explores the literature of the Old Babylonian period (roughly 1800-1600 BC), focusing on its connections to the Hebrew Bible. He examines the Mari tablets, a significant archaeological find containing letters and documents that shed light on prophetic figures and covenant language. Fowler challenges the common assertion that Old Testament prophets were primarily ecstatics, contrasting their ethical messages with the seemingly self-serving practices of religious functionaries at Mari. He also compares and contrasts the biblical flood account with Mesopotamian flood narratives, particularly the Gilgamesh Epic, highlighting both similarities and significant differences. Finally, the lecture emphasizes the importance of understanding the context of ancient Near Eastern texts to accurately interpret their meaning.

**2. 18 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of  
Dr. Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 10 – 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\_Sessio  
n10.mp3**

### 3. Briefing Document: Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 10, Literature of Babylon

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

#### **Briefing Document: Literature of the Babylonian Period and its Connection to the Old Testament**

**Subject:** Analysis of the Old Babylonian Period Literature (specifically Mari, Gilgamesh Epic) and its relevance to the Hebrew Bible.

#### **Introduction:**

This lecture by Dr. Fowler focuses on the literary output of the Old Babylonian Period (roughly 1800-1600 BC) and argues for its crucial significance in understanding the context of the Hebrew Bible. Fowler highlights the need to analyze *both* the similarities and differences between the ancient Near Eastern texts and the biblical text, cautioning against the pitfalls of “parallelomania” – a tendency to overemphasize superficial similarities. He specifically delves into the Mari texts and the Gilgamesh Epic, demonstrating how these texts provide important insights for interpreting biblical concepts such as prophecy, covenant, love, and hate.

#### **Key Themes and Ideas:**

##### **1. The Importance of the Old Babylonian Period:**

- Dr. Fowler identifies this period as a "golden age" for connections between the Hebrew Bible and its surrounding world.
- He emphasizes that this era is contemporary with the time of the patriarchs (Isaac and Jacob), making its literature highly relevant to biblical studies.

##### **1. The Mari Tablets:**

- Massive archaeological find: Over 20,000 tablets discovered in the royal palace at Mari, a port city on the Euphrates River. This makes it the largest single find of written material from the Old Babylonian period.
- Topics covered: These tablets deal with a wide array of topics, but are particularly important for their insights into prophetism.

- **Prophetic Functionaries:** Dr. Fowler specifically challenges the prevailing academic view that the religious figures at Mari were prophets because of their supposed ecstatic experiences. He argues that the similarities in ritualistic behavior do not equate to the prophetic role, as understood in the Hebrew Bible.
- *Quote:* "The functionaries at Mari may have been ecstasies, but it is a stretch to call them prophets."
- **Ecstasies:** Dr. Fowler explains the etymological meaning of "ecstasy" as "to stand outside oneself" and how this was perceived as a connection to the divine realm in the ancient world. However, he disputes that ecstasies was the core function of Old Testament prophets.
- *Quote:* "I am convinced that ecstasies is not the standard by which Old Testament prophets function."
- He posits that while OT prophets might experience visions, their core message was not about altered states of consciousness but an ethical message tied to the law.

#### 1. **Covenant Language:**

- Dr. Fowler stresses the importance of covenant language, a specific vocabulary used in the ancient world to describe relationships within a covenant.
- Terms like "father," "son," "brother," "love," and "hate" take on special meanings within a covenant context and need to be understood accordingly and not through modern emotive lenses.
- **Parity Covenant:** A covenant between equals, who would call each other "brother," exemplified by the relationship between David and Jonathan.
- **Suzerainty Treaty:** A covenant between a superior and an inferior, where the superior is called "father" and the inferior is called "son."
- *Quote:* "So, what happens is, because covenants are sacred, then they ended up using family terms to express the closeness that should have been there in a covenant."

#### 1. **Reinterpreting "Love" and "Hate" in Covenant Context:**

- Love in a covenant context, as demonstrated by the Mari texts, means *faithful obedience* to the terms of the covenant, not primarily emotional affection.

- *Quote:* "What it means in Deuteronomy 6 is that love really doesn't mean love. What it means is, you shall act completely faithful."
- Examples: Dr. Fowler cites Deuteronomy 6:5 ("love the Lord your God") and how it should be understood as a call for complete fidelity to the covenant, not just emotional feeling.
- Ashurbanipal's treaty: This provides an example where love means fidelity to the king and the covenant.
- Hate, in covenant context, often means *rejection or lack of covenant relationship*.
- Example: Malachi 1:2-3 ("Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated") is not referring to an emotional hatred, but the covenantal choice that God made.
- *Quote:* "Jacob, have I loved, and Esau, have I hated, doesn't mean love and hate. What it probably means is that God made his covenant with Jacob, and he didn't make that covenant with Esau."
- The saying by Jesus to "hate" your mother and father, interpreted as meaning that one must reject the traditional patriarchal societal structures in order to follow him.

#### 1. **The Gilgamesh Epic and the Babylonian Flood Account:**

- Dr. Fowler introduces the Gilgamesh Epic as an important Mesopotamian flood account, noting there are four main flood accounts in the region.
- He describes the epic's storyline, focusing on Gilgamesh's journey to seek eternal life from Utnapishtim, who survived the flood.
- Parallels with the Biblical Flood Account: Dr. Fowler acknowledges several similarities: a divine decision to destroy humankind by a flood, a chosen man being saved, the grounding of the boat on a mountain, and the sending out of birds.
- *Quote:* "The similarities are undeniable..."
- Differences: Fowler highlights significant differences such as the cause of the flood (human sin in the Bible vs. the noise of humans in Gilgamesh), the deceit of the gods in Gilgamesh vs. God's warning in the Bible, and the construction and seaworthiness of the respective boats.
- *Quote:* "...but the differences are substantial."

### Key Takeaways and Implications:

- **Context is Crucial:** The lecture strongly emphasizes the importance of understanding historical and cultural contexts when interpreting ancient texts, especially the Bible.
- **Nuance in Language:** Words, especially terms like "love" and "hate", do not always have the same meanings as in modern languages. Covenant language often requires a more nuanced interpretation.
- **Avoiding "Parallelomania":** While similarities between the Bible and other ancient texts exist and are expected, it's vital to recognize and explain the differences as well.
- **Critical Analysis:** Dr. Fowler encourages a critical approach to scholarship, particularly when dealing with parallels and perceived relationships between texts.

### Future Directions:

The lecture concludes by teasing the next session, which will focus on providing three possible explanations for the similarities and differences between the biblical and Mesopotamian flood accounts.

### Conclusion:

Dr. Fowler's lecture effectively positions the literature of the Old Babylonian period, with a special focus on the Mari texts and the Gilgamesh Epic, as crucial for understanding the historical and cultural context of the Old Testament. It also serves as a warning to avoid superficial analysis and engage with the nuances of language and historical context.

## 4. Study Guide: Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 10, Literature of Babylon

### Old Testament Backgrounds: Literature of the Babylonian Period

#### Study Guide

#### Quiz

**Instructions:** Answer the following questions in 2-3 sentences each.

1. What is the significance of the Old Babylonian period (1800-1600 BC) in relation to the Hebrew Bible?
2. Where is Mari located, and what was its importance in the ancient world?
3. What was discovered at the royal palace of Mari?
4. What is "ecstaticism," and why does Dr. Fowler disagree that it is a core concept of Hebrew prophecy?
5. How does Dr. Fowler use the example of legal language to explain covenant language?
6. How do parity covenants differ from suzerainty covenants?
7. According to the lecture, what does the concept of "love" mean in the context of a covenant, and how does Deuteronomy 6 exemplify this idea?
8. How does the lecture interpret God's "hating" of Esau in Malachi 1:3?
9. How does the story of the Gilgamesh epic relate to the Biblical flood account?
10. What are some key similarities and differences between the Gilgamesh epic's flood account and the biblical flood account?

#### Quiz Answer Key

1. The Old Babylonian period is considered the golden age for connections between the Hebrew Bible and its world because it is the time period of the patriarchs. This allows us to see the literary accounts of the period as important background and context for the Biblical text.
2. Mari is located in upper Mesopotamia on the Euphrates River. It was a significant port city, and the discovery of tablets at its royal palace has provided valuable insights into the time period.

3. Approximately 20,000 tablets were found in the royal palace of Mari, representing the single largest find from the Old Babylonian period. These tablets provide insights into various aspects of life, including royal life, Amorite art, and prophetism.
4. Ecstasism is a term derived from Greek, meaning to "stand outside oneself." Dr. Fowler believes that while some religious functionaries may have had ecstatic experiences, it was not a core concept of Hebrew prophecy or their central method for receiving messages from God.
5. Just as legal language has specific meanings that must be understood in a legal context, covenant language in the ancient world had specialized meanings that are different than our modern use of the same words, requiring a deeper understanding to properly interpret.
6. Parity covenants are between equals, often using "brother" as covenant language, whereas suzerainty covenants are between a superior and an inferior, using "father" for the superior and "son" for the inferior. These terms indicate the nature of the relationship rather than a familial tie.
7. In the covenant context, "love" means complete and utter faithfulness to the covenant terms rather than a primarily emotional response. Deuteronomy 6, with its emphasis on loving God with all one's heart, soul, and might, means acting in complete obedience to God's commands.
8. God's "hating" of Esau in Malachi 1:3 does not refer to a literal feeling of hatred, but rather to the fact that God chose to establish His covenant through Jacob and not Esau. It refers to the act of selection or rejection within the covenant.
9. The Gilgamesh epic, specifically tablet 11, contains a flood story that is similar to the biblical flood account. This epic's version is the story of Utnapishtim, who survives the great flood due to divine warning, creating a parallel to the Biblical story of Noah.
10. Key similarities include a divine decision to destroy humankind by a flood, a chosen man to survive, a flood that destroys the world, the grounding of a boat on a mountain, the sending out of birds, and humankind's new beginning, but significant differences are the causes of the flood, the secretive nature of the gods in the Gilgamesh epic, and the radically different design of the boat/ship, among others.

## Essay Questions

1. Discuss the significance of the Mari tablets in understanding the Old Testament, focusing on how covenant language from Mari helps to reinterpret our understanding of key biblical terms like "love" and "hate."
2. Compare and contrast the concepts of prophecy in the Old Testament and at Mari, focusing on Dr. Fowler's critique of the claim that Hebrew prophets were primarily "ecstatics."
3. Analyze the similarities and differences between the flood account in the Gilgamesh Epic and the flood account in the Bible. How might these similarities and differences be explained?
4. Explain how a deeper understanding of covenant language in the ancient Near East impacts our understanding of God's commandments in Deuteronomy.
5. How does the patriarchal structure of ancient society inform Dr. Fowler's interpretation of biblical passages about "hating" one's family and leaving one's father and mother?



## Glossary of Key Terms

- **Old Babylonian Period:** A time period from roughly 1800 to 1600 BC, considered significant for connections between the Hebrew Bible and its ancient Near Eastern context.
- **Mari:** An ancient port city on the Euphrates River where a large archive of clay tablets was discovered, providing significant insights into ancient Near Eastern culture and covenant language.
- **Ecstasism:** A state of being outside of oneself, often associated with trance-like or altered states of consciousness; Dr. Fowler argues it was not the norm for OT prophets.
- **Parallelomania:** The practice of finding too many similarities between different texts or traditions, often to the point of misinterpreting meaning.
- **Covenant Language:** Specialized terms used in the ancient Near East to describe relationships within a covenant. These terms take on different meaning from modern usage.
- **Parity Covenant:** A covenant between equals, using terms like "brother" to describe the relationship.
- **Suzerainty Covenant:** A covenant between a superior and a subordinate, using terms like "father" (superior) and "son" (subordinate) to describe the relationship.
- **Oracle Before Battles (OBB):** A request for divine guidance before a military conflict, commonly made to religious functionaries at Mari.
- **Gilgamesh Epic:** An ancient Mesopotamian epic that includes a flood account with similarities to the biblical flood story.
- **Utnapishtim:** A character in the Gilgamesh Epic who survives the flood and gains eternal life, comparable to Noah in the Bible.
- **Patriarchal Culture:** A societal structure in which men, typically fathers, held the primary power and authority.

## 5. FAQs on Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 10, Literature of Babylon, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

### FAQ on Old Babylonian Literature and its Relevance to the Old Testament

- **What is the significance of the Old Babylonian period (1800-1600 BC) for understanding the Hebrew Bible?**
- The Old Babylonian period is considered a "golden age" for connections between the Hebrew Bible and its world due to the wealth of literary materials discovered from this era, particularly in places like Mari. These texts provide valuable insights into the cultural, linguistic, and religious context in which the Old Testament developed. The time period roughly aligns with the patriarchs, such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, making it relevant for understanding the world they lived in.
- **What are the Mari Tablets and why are they important?**
- The Mari Tablets are a collection of approximately 20,000+ cuneiform tablets found in the royal palace of Mari, a significant port city in upper Mesopotamia during the Old Babylonian period. These tablets represent the largest single find from this period, and they offer a wide range of information, including diplomatic correspondence, administrative records, and insights into religious practices. They are particularly valuable for understanding the language and concepts used in covenants, prophecy, and other areas relevant to the Old Testament.
- **How did religious functionaries at Mari relate to the concept of ecstaticism, and how does this compare with Old Testament prophecy?**
- The religious functionaries at Mari were often thought to have entered ecstatic states to receive messages from the gods, particularly to give oracles before battles (OBB). However, while some scholars try to draw direct parallels between Mari functionaries and Old Testament prophets, the lecture argues against this equating the two. The lecture stresses that while some ecstatic experiences may exist in the Old Testament, this was not the norm for Hebrew prophets. Old Testament prophets were primarily concerned with ethical messages and the application of God's law, acting as royal advisors and counselors rather than primarily as those seeking out of body experiences or being caught up in the heavens.

- **What is covenant language, and how does it differ from typical usage of terms like 'father,' 'son,' 'love,' and 'hate'?**
- Covenant language is a specialized form of communication used in the ancient Near East to express the sacred nature of covenant relationships. In these contexts, terms like "father," "son," and "brother" do not necessarily refer to biological relationships but rather to hierarchical or parity relationships established by covenant agreements. "Father" and "son" indicated a relationship of superior to subordinate (suzerainty treaty), while "brother" indicated a relationship of equals (parity treaty). "Love" and "hate" in covenant language do not primarily represent emotional states but rather complete loyalty and faithfulness to the covenant or the rejection of it, respectively.
- **How does the lecture explain the phrase "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and might" in Deuteronomy 6 using covenant language?**
- In a modern American context, this verse would often be interpreted emotionally as "having deeper experience of God". However, using the context of covenant language, the lecturer argues that this phrase does not necessarily refer to deep emotional experience. Instead, it signifies that one is called to act with complete faithfulness and loyalty to the covenant with every part of their being. The love spoken of in Deuteronomy means complete obedience to the covenant and not merely strong feelings.
- **How does the lecture re-interpret the use of "hate" in covenant language, especially in passages where God says he "hated" Esau or Jesus says to "hate" your parents?**
- In covenant language, "hate" does not mean intense dislike but rather the rejection of a specific covenant relationship. When God says he "hated" Esau, it means he did not establish the covenant with Esau in the same way he did with Jacob. Similarly, when Jesus says to "hate" one's parents, it is not a call to despise them but rather a directive to not let family loyalty interfere with the commitment to follow him. It meant to reject the patriarchal model that prioritized the family and father over following the Messiah.

- **What are the main similarities and differences between the Babylonian flood story (Gilgamesh epic) and the biblical account of Noah's flood?**
- The similarities between the two accounts are quite stark; they include a divine decision to destroy humankind via a flood, a chosen man being told to build a boat, the earth being flooded, the boat grounding on a mountain, the use of birds to determine when the water receded, and the beginning of a new population. However, the lecture points out critical differences. The cause of the flood in the Bible is human sinfulness, while in Gilgamesh it was the noise of humanity. God's actions contrast with the actions of the gods. In the Biblical account, God has a covenantal promise and seal, while no promise is made in the Gilgamesh epic. The design and construction of the boat is different (the Biblical account depicts a seaworthy vessel, the Gilgamesh account, not so much).
- **How does the lecture propose that the similarities and differences between the flood accounts should be explained?**
- The lecture stops short of explaining the similarities and differences in the flood accounts. However, the lecturer teases three explanations that will be explored in a subsequent discussion. These explanations will help to make sense of the historical and textual relationship between these ancient accounts.