

# Dr. Donald Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 11, Nuzi and the Genesis Narratives 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 11, Nuzi, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL**

This lecture by Dr. Donald Fowler examines the relationship between the biblical flood narrative and Mesopotamian flood accounts, exploring three potential explanations for their similarities and differences: borrowing by the Hebrews, borrowing by the Mesopotamians, or a shared memory of a real event with varying degrees of accuracy. The lecture then focuses on Nuzi tablets discovered in the 1920s, initially used to support the historicity of Genesis' patriarchal narratives through parallels in adoption practices. However, Fowler critiques this approach, arguing that such interpretations often stem from flawed presuppositions, ignoring significant differences in time, place, and culture, and urging a focus on understanding ancient Near Eastern cultures in their own contexts before applying them to biblical interpretation. He highlights a shift from "biblical archaeology" aiming to illuminate the Bible to "Near Eastern archaeology" prioritizing understanding ancient cultures independently.

**2. 10 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 11 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Old Testament → Old Testament Introduction → Old Testament Backgrounds).**



**Fowler\_OTB\_Session  
n11.mp3**

### 3. Briefing Document: Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 11, Nuzi and the Genesis Narratives

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

#### Briefing Document: Old Testament Backgrounds - Lecture 11: Nuzi

##### Overview:

This lecture focuses on two main areas: the relationship between the biblical flood account and Mesopotamian flood stories and an analysis of the Nuzi tablets and their use (and misuse) in interpreting the patriarchal narratives in Genesis. The lecture emphasizes the challenges and potential pitfalls of using ancient Near Eastern (ANE) materials to understand the Bible, particularly the danger of "parallelomania" and the importance of understanding the context of ANE sources.

#### Part 1: The Flood Accounts

- **The Conundrum of Similarities and Differences:** Dr. Fowler begins by highlighting the similarities between the biblical flood account (Genesis 6-9) and Mesopotamian flood stories like the Gilgamesh Epic and the Atrahasis Epic. However, he notes that these similarities are also matched by significant differences. This presents a challenge for interpretation: "The problem is that similarities are often matched by dissimilarities. As we discuss using ancient Near Eastern materials to illuminate the Bible, we face the problem of how to deal with undeniable similarities as well as differences."
- **Three Proposals and Their Problems:**
- **Biblical Borrowing:** The idea that the Hebrews borrowed their flood account from Mesopotamia is considered unlikely for several reasons:
- **Chronology:** Moses, writing around 1400 BC in Egypt/Sinai, would have difficulty accessing Mesopotamian written texts, which at that time would have been restricted to professionals.

- **Oral Transmission:** While oral transmission is possible, it is unclear why Moses would borrow from a pagan source that conflicted with the theological message in Genesis. "So, it's possible that Moses had heard about the flood account, but it's difficult to understand why Moses would have borrowed from a document that was so paganistic if he believed anything that was in the story that we have in Genesis 6-9."
- **Theological Issues:** The biblical flood account is theologically distinct and much shorter than the Mesopotamian versions, and has a more complex chronological structure. The biblical account has 5 dates and refers to 6 different periods of days.
- **Mesopotamian Borrowing:** The idea that Mesopotamians borrowed from the Bible is also considered improbable:
- **Chronology:** Mesopotamian accounts predate the presumed time of Moses's writing. "So, Moses is writing two to three hundred years after the written editions of Atra-hasis and the Gilgamesh Epic, so how would that work chronologically?"
- **Geography:** There is a spatial challenge to the idea that Mesopotamians could have borrowed from the Hebrews who, at the time of the flood and Moses, had not yet even entered that area.
- **Shared Memory of a Real Event:** Fowler proposes a third option: Both accounts stem from a common memory of a real, large-scale flood event in Mesopotamia. He suggests that: "both accounts, the biblical account, and the Mesopotamian account, remember the same event," and that "through divine guidance or inspiration, Moses was led ultimately to a correct memory of that flood, whereas the Babylonians also perhaps remembered the flood event but got it distorted with mythology and other historical inaccuracies." This proposal seeks to explain both similarities and differences.

- **The Problem of Borrowing:** Dr. Fowler emphasizes that while borrowing is possible, cultures as geographically and chronologically distant as Israel and Babylon make it less likely. He also points out that even if later borrowing by Israel during the Babylonian exile is possible, there is no hard evidence of that. “Certainly, there is the possibility that something like that could have happened, but I would caution my audience to understand that while Israel was in exile in Babylon, and Israel could have been influenced by such documents, there is no hard evidence that that happened.” He concludes by stating that “all over the fertile crescent, there was a tradition of a great flood that destroyed the world of that era.”

## Part 2: The Nuzi Tablets

- **Discovery and Initial Enthusiasm:** The Nuzi tablets were discovered in the late 1920s and early 1930s by the American School of Oriental Research. These tablets, filled with adoption stories, led scholars to attempt to illuminate and prove the historicity of the patriarchal stories in Genesis. “From 1935 until the early 70s, it was quite fashionable in scholarly circles to argue for the historicity of the patriarchal stories in Genesis on the basis of similar customs at Nuzi.”
- **Classical Use of Nuzi Materials (and its Problems):** Scholars, particularly Ephraim Speiser, initially used Nuzi to explain Genesis stories:
- **Abraham and Eleazar:** The adoption of Eleazar was inferred from Nuzi practices, although the Genesis text doesn’t say Eleazar was adopted.
- **Jacob and Laban:** The Jacob-Laban story, especially Rachel stealing the teraphim, was interpreted through the lens of Nuzi adoption practices. The idea that Laban had adopted Jacob, and that the teraphim were legal documents for ownership of land was an explanation that arose from the interpretations of Nuzi tablets and were applied to the Genesis texts. This was ultimately rejected because the Bible does not portray Laban adopting Jacob. Also, “it’s a misreading of the Nuzi documents to argue that the teraphim are the evidence, provide legal evidence of land ownership.”
- **The Problem of Parallelomania:** Fowler argues that Nuzi parallels were often forced onto Genesis, ignoring key differences. “It’s a case of parallelomania. It’s imposing artificial current finds onto the pages of the Bible.” He highlights that this was a case of extracting the Nuzi story and imposing it onto the story of Genesis.

- **The Problem of "Special Glasses":** Dr. Fowler criticizes the tendency to interpret the Bible through the lens of the latest archaeological finds. This "special glasses" approach means that every tablet discovery leads to reinterpretations of the biblical text without first understanding the context of the archaeological find itself.
- **Shift in Scholarship:** The scholarship from the 1970's to the 1980's rejected the use of the Nuzi tablets to prove the historicity of Genesis, with Thomas Thompson's work being a substantial challenge to earlier interpretations. The shift moved away from "biblical archaeology" to "Near Eastern archaeology", and with it came a change in presuppositions.
- **Historical Context:** Fowler explains that Western scholarship was influenced by the rise of science, Darwinian evolution, and German critical scholarship (Wellhausen's JEDP theory). These factors led to a skepticism about the historical reliability of the Old Testament. "Unless ancient Near Eastern material can be cited to prove the historical reality of a story, then the story in the Bible was assumed not to be true."
- **Albright's Influence and Subsequent Shift:** The archaeologist W.F. Albright challenged the extreme skepticism of Wellhausen and attempted to reconcile archaeological findings with the Bible. His "biblical archaeology" approach aimed to show the historical accuracy of the biblical narrative, but his students later revised the approach. After his time and his students' work, a new era of "minimalism" began.
- **Problems with Nuzi Parallels:** Fowler points out that the parallels between Nuzi and the Patriarchal narratives are problematic for several reasons:
- **Wrong Place:** Nuzi is located in the Zagros Mountains, a considerable distance from the world of Genesis.
- **Wrong Time:** The Nuzi tablets date to around 1500 BC, hundreds of years later than when Abraham was living.
- **Wrong Population:** Nuzi was inhabited mainly by Hurrians, not Semites, and their cultural practices differed significantly from those of the Old Babylonian world.
- **Fictive Adoption:** The adoption practices at Nuzi were not genuine adoptions but rather "fictive" or fictional adoptions, a legal subterfuge to circumvent land ownership laws. Therefore, the Nuzi adoption practices should not be used to interpret literal adoptions found in the Bible.

- **Correct Presuppositions:** Fowler argues that the correct presupposition when interpreting ANE materials is that the purpose is first and foremost to understand the culture and context in which the tablets were written, not necessarily to explain the Bible. He concludes, "the primary purpose of archaeology is not to find things that explain the Bible, much as we like it when things like that happen. The point of archaeology is to reproduce the world of that time period, to reproduce our understanding of that world."
- **Hermeneutical Principle:** The lecture concludes with a key hermeneutical principle: the wrong presuppositions lead to wrong conclusions. Nuzi is a clear example, where early scholarship was wrong. "Virtually everybody in North America agreed with the Albrightian approach. Forty years after the 1970s, absolutely no one believes a thing on what we were taught about the impact of the documents at Nuzi upon the book of Genesis."

#### **Key Takeaways:**

- Be wary of "parallelomania" when using ANE sources to interpret the Bible; explain both similarities and differences.
- Understand the context of the ANE sources: place, time, population, and cultural practices.
- Recognize and be aware of your own presuppositions.
- The primary purpose of archaeology is to understand the ancient world, not to find proof for or explanations of the Bible.
- Be open to revising interpretations of the Bible based on new evidence, but be cautious of new discoveries.

This briefing document summarizes the critical points in the lecture. Dr. Fowler's emphasis on the importance of careful hermeneutics and contextual understanding when studying ANE materials remains relevant for anyone working with these ancient sources.

#### **4. Study Guide: Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 11, Nuzi and the Genesis Narratives**

## Old Testament Backgrounds: Nuzi and the Flood Accounts

### Quiz

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

1. What are the three proposals to explain the similarities between the biblical and Mesopotamian flood accounts?
2. What are some of the chronological discrepancies that make it difficult to argue that the biblical account borrowed from Mesopotamia?
3. According to Dr. Fowler, what is a more plausible explanation for the similarities and differences between the biblical and Mesopotamian flood narratives?
4. What organization excavated the Nuzi site and when were these excavations conducted?
5. What was the "classical use" of the Nuzi tablets in relation to the Book of Genesis?
6. Give one specific example of how the Nuzi adoption stories were imposed on the biblical text of Genesis.
7. Why did scholars eventually reject the use of Nuzi tablets to support the historicity of the patriarchal stories in Genesis?
8. What is meant by the term "parallelomania" as Dr. Fowler uses it?
9. Explain the impact of Darwin's theories on Christianity, particularly regarding the interpretation of the Bible.
10. What is "fictive adoption" as practiced at Nuzi and why does this invalidate its use as an explanation for biblical adoption stories?

### Answer Key

1. The three proposals to explain the similarities between the biblical and Mesopotamian flood accounts are that the Hebrews borrowed from Mesopotamia, that the Mesopotamians borrowed from the Hebrews, or that both accounts are remembering the same event. Dr. Fowler rejects the first two, arguing that borrowing is unlikely.
2. The chronological discrepancies include the fact that Moses, writing around 1400 BC, would have been writing 200-300 years after the Mesopotamian accounts



already existed. Additionally, he would have been writing in Egypt or the Sinai, making it difficult to access those written records.

3. Dr. Fowler proposes that a real global or regional flood occurred and that both accounts remember the same event. He suggests that Moses was divinely guided to remember the correct version, while the Mesopotamians distorted the memory with mythology and other inaccuracies.
4. The American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR) excavated the Nuzi site from 1925 to 1931. They were able to identify the tell they were excavating as Nuzi.
5. The "classical use" of the Nuzi tablets involved interpreting certain patriarchal stories in Genesis through the lens of similar customs found in the Nuzi texts, such as adoption practices. Scholars used the Nuzi tablets to argue for the historical validity of the Genesis narratives.
6. The story of Jacob and Laban was reinterpreted using Nuzi texts by suggesting Laban had adopted Jacob, and that Rachel's theft of the teraphim gave Jacob a legal claim to Laban's land. This imposed Nuzi customs onto a story that makes no mention of such customs.
7. Scholars rejected the use of Nuzi tablets because the claimed parallels were created by scholars themselves, not supported by textual evidence, and because the teraphim were not used to prove land ownership. Furthermore, Nuzi's population was Hurrian not Semitic, and the dates for these documents and the Genesis stories are too far removed.
8. Parallelomania, as used by Dr. Fowler, refers to the practice of imposing artificial similarities from archaeological finds onto the biblical text. It emphasizes similarities while ignoring crucial differences.
9. Darwin's theories presented a scientific alternative to the biblical view of origins, challenging the Bible's authority. This led to many churches and scholars abandoning the Bible's accuracy and resulted in a need to prove the Bible through archaeological and scientific means.
10. Fictive adoption, practiced in Nuzi, was not true adoption but a legal strategy to circumvent the law against selling land. By "adopting" someone, land could be sold indirectly, and this was not reflective of the literal adoptions discussed in the Old Testament.

## Essay Questions

**Instructions:** Please answer each of the following questions in a well-developed essay format.

1. Compare and contrast the three proposals offered to explain the similarities between the biblical and Mesopotamian flood accounts. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each, as presented by Dr. Fowler.
2. Analyze how the Nuzi tablets were initially used to interpret the patriarchal narratives in Genesis. What was the "classical approach" and how did later scholarship challenge and ultimately reject this approach?
3. Discuss the impact of Darwinian thought and German higher criticism on the interpretation of the Bible. How did these movements contribute to a skepticism toward biblical historicity and what was the response to that skepticism?
4. Explain the concept of "fictive adoption" at Nuzi and how it demonstrates the dangers of reading ancient texts anachronistically. Why is it a good example of poor hermeneutical practices?
5. Discuss the shift from "biblical archaeology" to "Near Eastern archaeology." How has the primary focus of archaeology changed, and what hermeneutical principles have become more prevalent as a result of this change?

## Glossary of Key Terms

- **Atra-hasis:** An ancient Mesopotamian epic that includes a flood story, offering a parallel to the biblical flood account.
- **Biblical Archaeology:** An approach to archaeology that focuses on finding archaeological evidence to confirm or illuminate the biblical narrative, a practice which has become less common in contemporary archaeology.
- **Critical Theory:** An approach to the study of the Bible that often analyzes its texts from a literary and historical point of view that has an impact on theological and spiritual interpretation.
- **Elohim:** A Hebrew word for God, often used in the Old Testament to refer to the divine. It is also associated with the 'E' document of the J-E-D-P theory.
- **Fictive Adoption:** A legal fiction or sham adoption practiced in Nuzi, designed to circumvent laws against selling land; not an actual adoption.

- **Gilgamesh Epic:** A Mesopotamian epic that contains a flood story with striking similarities to the biblical account of Noah's flood.
- **Hurrians:** A non-Semitic population group who inhabited the region of Nuzi and did not typically follow the customs of the Semitic people of the area.
- **J-E-D-P Theory:** A theory proposing that the first five books of the Old Testament (the Pentateuch) were compiled from four different sources or traditions of texts over time. The letters stand for (J) Yahwist, (E) Elohist, (D) Deuteronomist, and (P) Priestly.
- **Minimalism:** An approach to the interpretation of the Bible that emphasizes the minimal historical interaction between the world of the Bible and its texts, often questioning the historicity of biblical narratives.
- **Nuzi Tablets:** Thousands of cuneiform tablets discovered at the site of Nuzi, providing insights into daily life and legal practices in the ancient Near East.
- **Old Babylonian Period:** A historical period in Mesopotamia from approximately 2000 to 1600 BC, known for its rich cultural and literary achievements.
- **Parallelomania:** The tendency to find artificial parallels between archaeological discoveries and the biblical text, often overlooking significant differences.
- **Teraphim:** Clay images of portable deities, also known as family gods. They were often kept in homes and, at one time, were thought to be land ownership documents.
- **Ugarit:** An ancient city-state in modern-day Syria, known for its rich archaeological finds, including cuneiform tablets that shed light on the language and culture of the ancient Near East.
- **W. F. Albright:** A prominent American archaeologist and biblical scholar, who initially promoted biblical archaeology, believing archaeological evidence supported the biblical narrative, but his views came to be questioned.
- **Wellhausen:** Julius Wellhausen was a German biblical scholar who applied the concepts of Darwin's evolutionary theory to the study of religion and biblical texts, developing the J-E-D-P theory.

## 5. FAQs on Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 11, Nuzi, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

### FAQ: Exploring the Old Testament in Light of Ancient Near Eastern Texts

- **How do scholars approach the striking similarities between the biblical flood narrative and Mesopotamian accounts?**
- Scholars have proposed various explanations, including borrowing, divine intervention, and a shared memory of an actual event. The idea of direct borrowing from Mesopotamia to the Hebrew account is unlikely due to chronological and theological considerations, such as Moses, who would have lived before the written accounts we have today of Atrahasis and Gilgamesh, writing in a time when writing was only for the experts and was not a widespread knowledge. Also, theologically, it is difficult to understand why Moses would borrow from a paganistic source. Conversely, the idea that the Mesopotamians borrowed from the Hebrews is challenged by the timeline and geographical distances. The most plausible theory, according to the source, is that both traditions derive from a common memory of a real flood event. In this theory, the biblical account may have been divinely guided towards a correct memory while the Mesopotamian accounts were distorted by mythology and cultural differences.
- **What are the Nuzi tablets, and what is their significance for Old Testament studies?**
- The Nuzi tablets are a collection of thousands of cuneiform tablets excavated at the ancient city of Nuzi, located in the foothills of the Zagros Mountains. Discovered in the early 20th century, these tablets primarily detail the daily life of the Hurrian people, including legal and economic transactions. Scholars in the mid-20th century used the Nuzi tablets to argue for the historicity of some patriarchal narratives in Genesis based on similar customs they found, particularly regarding adoption practices. However, this approach was later discredited due to its flawed methodology and lack of rigorous analysis.

- **How did scholars initially use the Nuzi tablets to interpret the stories in Genesis, and why was this method eventually rejected?**
- Initially, scholars used the Nuzi tablets to draw parallels with patriarchal narratives in Genesis, particularly those involving adoption, such as the story of Abraham and Eleazar, and the Jacob and Laban stories. Scholars read into these Genesis stories that Jacob was adopted by Laban, and that Rachel stole the teraphim, which were considered to be like a legal document proving ownership of land. These connections were made because the Nuzi tablets contained many adoption stories. These interpretations were eventually rejected as flawed because there was no evidence in the Genesis text of Jacob being adopted, there was a misinterpretation of the function of the teraphim in the Nuzi tablets, and because of the Nuzi peoples' cultural distance from the Semitic world of the Old Testament, making parallels implausible.
- **What is 'parallelomania,' and how does it relate to the use of ancient Near Eastern materials?**
- "Parallelomania" is the practice of imposing modern interpretations or finding superficial similarities between ancient Near Eastern materials and the Bible without considering context or significant differences. It involves the use of ancient Near Eastern sources like a 'dynamic flashlight' to cast light on the biblical world, thereby focusing on only the similarities without considering the differences. The source used the example of finding the flood deposits at Ur to be "biblical evidence" of the flood, and made it very well-known. This term applies to scholars who focus on similarities and ignore the differences. It's a flawed methodology that has been used repeatedly by scholars who are "finding" evidence to back up their presuppositions. It's a good example of bad methodology in that it imposes contemporary interpretations onto ancient texts without proper context.

- **What is the significance of the shift from "biblical archaeology" to "Near Eastern archaeology" and how does it relate to the Nuzi tablets?**

The shift from "biblical archaeology" to "Near Eastern archaeology" represents a fundamental change in the field's approach. Biblical archaeology, which dominated in the first half of the 20th century, aimed to use archaeological findings primarily to support the Bible's historical claims, and used the ancient texts like a flashlight to cast light upon the world of the Bible. By contrast, Near Eastern archaeology focuses on understanding the history and culture of the ancient Near East in its own context, using all available evidence to reconstruct the ancient world of the people from that era, and not as something that merely "proves" the Bible. The Nuzi tablet fiasco helped to demonstrate that archaeology's main purpose should be to study the culture that the artifacts came from.

- **How did the philosophical climate, especially Darwin's theory of evolution, influence the way scholars approached the Old Testament in the early 20th century?**
- Darwin's theory of evolution significantly challenged traditional interpretations of the Bible by providing a scientific alternative to divine creation. This led to a trend in which scholars applied evolutionary principles to religion, proposing that biblical religion also evolved from simple to complex forms over time. Wellhausen, Graf, and Keenan applied Darwinian principles to the bible by forming the J-E-D-P theory of biblical composition, in which they claimed the bible developed over time and was never a true, historical text. This created a critical and skeptical approach toward the historicity of the Old Testament. These theories created skepticism that swept the Western world and created an atmosphere where the Old Testament was not regarded as a true, historical text.

- **What was the influence of W.F. Albright on biblical studies and the use of archaeological evidence?**
- W.F. Albright was a highly influential archaeologist and scholar who pushed back against the extreme skepticism that stemmed from Wellhausen's J-E-D-P theory. While not an Orthodox Christian himself, he argued that archaeological finds frequently supported a sympathetic connection to the biblical stories, suggesting that the Bible fit fairly well into its world. He promoted using ancient Near Eastern materials to illuminate the biblical world, rather than dismissing it. He had students who were greatly influenced by his approaches, and went on to teach at many of the major schools, but his approach was eventually deemed to be not the best way to study archaeology. His legacy lies in his promotion of the importance of the ancient Near Eastern context of the biblical text.
- **What specific caution does the source offer concerning the use of backgrounds to interpret the Bible?**
- The source emphasizes that when using ancient Near Eastern materials as backgrounds for interpreting the Bible, it is crucial to prioritize understanding those materials within their original cultural context before attempting to find connections to biblical narratives. Furthermore, all interpretation must account for both similarities *and* differences between the two cultures to avoid flawed conclusions. The source also pointed out that it's important to understand that wrong presuppositions lead to the wrong conclusions. The case of Nuzi is a prime example of how the wrong assumptions can lead scholars to misinterpret ancient documents.