

Dr. Ted Hildebrandt, Old Testament Literature, Introduction, Theistic Proofs Session 1, 6-min. Video Overview

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Welcome to The Explainer. So, we're going to tackle a really big question today. How in the world are we supposed to read and understand a text that's like 3,000 years old? Okay, let's just get this out of the way.

When you first crack open an ancient text like the Old Testament, it can be, well, a little jarring. Dr. Ted Hildebrandt puts it perfectly when he says you're going to be shocked. And, you know, he's right.

Because its world is just so, so different from ours. So, what's going on here? Well, the main problem is this massive gap. I mean, we're talking about events from 3, even 4,000 years ago.

That isn't just a time gap; it's a canyon. A huge chasm of culture, language, and just a completely different way of seeing the world that separates us from the people who first read this. So, the big question is, how do we bridge that gap? We can't just pick it up and read it like a new novel, right? That's not going to work.

What we need is a special kind of toolkit. Think of it like a set of three specific lenses that will help us see the text and the world through their eyes. Alright, let's grab our first tool.

This is the cultural lens. And the whole idea here is pretty simple, but it's absolutely crucial. The text was written for them, not for us.

And their culture was radically different. And what's so interesting is that the text doesn't try to force some alien way of communicating on its audience. No, it meets them right where they are.

It uses their language, their customs, their ways of talking. It's adapted to them. Okay, poetry is a perfect example.

For us, poetry usually means rhyming words, right? Cat, hat, bat. But ancient Hebrew poetry rhymes ideas. It's a technique called parallelism.

So you get a line like, "The heavens declare the glory of God. And the next line echoes it. The skies proclaim the work of his hands.

See? Heavens rhymes with skies. Declare rhymes with proclaim. It's this beautiful rhyming of thoughts.

And honestly, you'd completely miss that if you weren't looking for it. Okay, next up in our toolkit is the geographical lens. Now this is a big one.

You have to understand that in the ancient world, geography wasn't just, you know, a pretty backdrop for the story. No way. It was an active character.

It shaped everything: meaning, identity, the whole shebang. Yeah, you could almost say that geography itself is a language in this text. Where you were from said a ton about who you were.

So if we really want to get what's going on, we have to learn how to read the map, so to speak, and understand what all these different places really meant to them. I mean, think about it in our own terms, right? Someone from the hills of Tennessee probably sees the world a bit differently than someone from, say, downtown Boston, or New York City versus rural West Virginia. It's the same thing in the text.

Galilee was kind of the countryside, you know, where the Hicks lived. But Jerusalem, that was the big city, the capital. Just knowing that adds this whole new layer of meaning to the stories when characters move between these places.

And that brings us to our third and final tool, the literary lens. This one is all about recognizing that this text wasn't created in some kind of vacuum. The authors were using the literary tools and structures that were common, you know, that everyone was using back then.

This is so important because it grounds the text in actual history. It wasn't some bizarre book that just fell out of the sky. It was part of a real conversation happening at the time, using formats and styles that the original audience would have instantly recognized.

Get this: the entire book of Deuteronomy is structured almost exactly like a political treaty from the ancient Hittite Empire. How wild is that? Or think about names. The name Adam wasn't just a name they picked out of a hat.

In Hebrew, it literally just means man or humankind. They were embedding meaning right into the literary forms of the day. Alright, so we've got our three lenses: cultural, geographical, and literary.

And I get it, that might sound like a lot of homework. Which brings up a really important question. Why? Why go to all this trouble? Well, Dr. Hildebrandt has this fantastic analogy that really clears it up.

He says, imagine you're dating someone, but you only ever see them in one place, at work. That's it. Just in that work context.

The question is, do you really know them? The answer is, of course, no. You really get to know a person by seeing them in hundreds of different situations, right? How are they when they're stressed out? How do they act around their family, at work, at play, with their friends? Real deep understanding only comes from seeing someone in all these different contexts over time. And that, that is exactly what a text like the Old Testament is doing.

It's showing you its central character, God, interacting with tons of different people in all kinds of situations across a massive time frame. We're talking 1,500 years. So you see, the payoff for using these lenses isn't just about being a good student.

The goal is to get a truly complex and nuanced picture. It's about challenging our own simplistic ideas, what Dr. Hildebrandt calls our idols of the mind, so we can get a much deeper, richer understanding of who this character is. And when you start to see things this way, a bigger picture starts to emerge, a certain worldview from the text itself.

And one of the biggest ideas it puts forward is this concept of design. And it uses a really simple analogy to get us there. Okay, picture this.

You've got a room with, say, 110 chairs, all lined up perfectly in neat rows. Now imagine some giant comes along, picks up the whole building, and just shakes it like crazy, violently. Then he sets it down.

What are the odds, really? What are the chances that all those chairs landed back in perfect, neat rows? It's basically zero. You could shake that building a billion, trillion times, and all you're ever going to get is chaos, a total mess. Deep down, we all know this, right? It's just intuitive.

If you're hiking in the woods in New Hampshire, and you stumble upon a perfectly straight stone wall, you don't think, wow, a glacier must have dropped these rocks just so. No, you assume someone built it, an orderer. When we see order, especially complex order, our minds just automatically assume there was an orderer.

And that's the final provocative question the text leaves us with. If we see a hundred chairs lined up in a room, and we automatically assume someone arranged them, what should we conclude when we look at the universe, which has orders of magnitude more complexity and order than a classroom? Does that, too, point to a designer? Now that is something to chew on.