

Dr. Ted Hildebrandt, Old Testament Literature, Balaam; Deuteronomy: Covenant and Land Session 16, 6-min. Video Overview

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Alright, let's dive into a real-life historical detective story. We're about to crack open a cold case that's over two and a half thousand years old. The question we're asking today is a big one.

Was one of the most important books in the Bible actually an elaborate ancient forgery? So here's the central mystery we're tackling. For centuries, scholars have debated this. Was the Book of Deuteronomy really written when tradition says it was, or was it created hundreds of years later to pull off a massive deception? Okay, so let's set the stage.

The Book of Deuteronomy- this is a huge deal. It's got some of the most fundamental laws and ideas in the entire Old Testament, including the Ten Commandments. And for millennia, the story has been that Moses himself wrote it right around 1200 BC.

But what if that long-held tradition isn't the whole story? There's a pretty compelling counter-theory out there, one that scholars call the pious fraud hypothesis. So what is a pious fraud? Well, the theory goes something like this. Fast forward to about 620 BC.

A king named Josiah wants to make some big religious changes. To get everyone on board, his scribes supposedly create the Book of Deuteronomy from scratch, slap Moses' name on it to give it that ancient, undeniable authority, and then they discover it in the temple. Pretty clever, right? And this is what really puts it in perspective.

We're not talking about a small discrepancy. If the forgery theory is true, we're looking at a gap of more than 600 years. So how on earth could we possibly test a claim like that from so long ago? Well, like any good detective story, you have to look for clues.

And in this case, the crucial clue is hiding in a very unexpected place. The structure of old legal documents. We're basically looking for a textual fingerprint.

The idea behind this is actually pretty simple. Think about it. You can tell a car is from the 1950s just by looking at it, right? The tail fins, the chrome.

It's a dead giveaway. Well, historians can do the same thing with ancient documents because their structure, their blueprint, changed in very predictable ways over the centuries. So let's look at the two blueprints that matter here.

We've got one legal style from Moses' time, and a totally different one from King Josiah's time, 600 years later. On one hand, you have Hittite treaties. That was the gold standard for legal documents back in 1200 BC, during Moses' era.

On the other hand, you have Assyrian treaties, which were the common format 600 years later, during Josiah's reign. Same job, different designs. And this is where you can really see the fingerprints.

Look at the key differences. The older Hittite treaties from Moses' day always included a historical prologue, basically listing all the good things the king had done for you. And they had a whole section of blessings if you followed the rules.

Now look at the later Assyrian treaties. They dropped both of those. No prologue, no blessings.

Just straight to the curses for breaking the rules. Okay, so this is the moment of truth. If Deuteronomy was forged in Josiah's time, its structure should look like that Assyrian model.

But if it's genuinely from Moses' time, it should match the old Hittite one. Let's see what we find. And there it is.

The book of Deuteronomy has a long, detailed historical prologue talking about everything God has done for Israel. And it absolutely has a section of blessings. It is a perfect structural match for the older 1200 BC Hittite treaties from the time of Moses.

And it doesn't look at all like the Assyrian model from Josiah's time. You know, as Dr. Ted Hildebrandt, our source for this explainer, puts it, the evidence is pretty clear. The structure inside Deuteronomy is a huge point in favor of it coming from that earlier period.

I mean, think about it. It would be almost impossible for a forger in 620 BC to perfectly replicate a legal format that had been out of fashion for over 600 years. So what's the big takeaway here? What does cracking this ancient code really tell us beyond just this one book? Well, what's so cool about this is that it shows how we can use the text itself as a tool for investigation.

It moves beyond just debating theories and gives us a way to actually test them against these fingerprints left in the writing. Now, this is just one piece of evidence in a much, much bigger academic conversation, but it's a really powerful piece of the puzzle. And that really leaves us with a fascinating final thought.

If a text's very blueprint can hold these kinds of clues to its true age, what other massive secrets are just sitting there hiding in plain sight in the ancient documents that have shaped our entire world?