

# **Dr. Don Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds,**

## **Session 11, Nuzi**

### **6-min. Video Overview**

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Alright, let's dive in. Today we've got a fantastic archaeological detective story. It's got everything.

Thousands of ancient clay tablets, the book of Genesis, and a huge scholarly mistake that somehow flew under the radar for nearly half a century. For decades, this was the question that had everybody buzzing. I mean, just imagine it: you find this treasure trove of documents that seems to be a direct window into the world of Abraham, Jacob, and Rachel.

It was this incredible promise that maybe, just maybe, we could finally confirm these ancient stories were historical fact. So, our story really kicks off back in the 1920s and early 30s. Archaeologists are digging around the ancient city of Nuzi, over in modern-day Iraq, and they find something absolutely amazing.

Thousands and thousands of cuneiform tablets. Now, these weren't grand royal histories; they were the everyday stuff. Legal contracts, family documents, things like that, from around 1500 BC.

And, well, they were about to cause a massive stir. Because you see, right away, the connection that scholars started to make seemed absolutely explosive. They thought they had stumbled upon the key to understanding all these puzzling social customs you read about in the book of Genesis.

And listen, this wasn't some fringe idea. For nearly 40 years, this was the mainstream view. You had the biggest names in the biblical archaeology world pointing to Nuzi as the ultimate proof.

Their argument was pretty simple. The unique social practices in Genesis were mirrored so perfectly in these tablets that the stories had to be historically true. And you can kind of see why they got so excited.

The parallels looked incredibly convincing. Take Abraham, for example. He's childless, and he talks about his servant, Eliezer, being his heir.

Well, wouldn't you know it, the Nuzi tablets talk about a custom where a childless couple could adopt someone to inherit their stuff? Or what about that bizarre story where Rachel steals her father's little family idols? Well, scholars pointed to Nuzi texts that seemed to show that having those idols was basically like holding the deed to the family property. It all seemed to fit together perfectly. But, like any good mystery, when people started looking a little closer, the whole thing began to unravel.

That explosive connection? It turned out to be a classic case of mistaken identity. So, problem number one, and it's a big one, was the timing. The stories about Abraham are traditionally set way back around 2100 BC.

But the Nuzi tablets? They were written around 1500 BC. That's a 600-year gap. I mean, using these tablets to explain Abraham's world is kind of like using a book from the Victorian era to understand life during the Middle Ages.

The timing is just all wrong. And it wasn't just the wrong time. It was also the wrong place and the wrong people.

Nuzi was almost a thousand miles away from Canaan, where the Genesis stories are set. Plus, the folks in Nuzi were Hurrians, a totally different ethnic group from the Hebrews, who were Semites. Honestly, these should have been massive red flags from the get-go.

So, okay, if these customs weren't the amazing parallels everyone thought they were, what was actually going on in Nuzi? The answer is pretty wild, and it all comes down to rethinking that whole adoption thing. What was really happening was something scholars call fictive adoption. And fictive is just a fancy word for, you know, fake.

See, in Nuzi, you weren't allowed to just sell off your family's ancestral land. So they came up with this brilliant legal loophole. A landowner would adopt a buyer.

Then this new son would give his father a very generous gift, which, of course, was just the sale price. In return, he'd get to inherit the land. It was a real estate deal dressed up to look like a family affair.

So, what's the smoking gun? How do we know for sure this was just a legal trick and not about building families? Well, it all comes down to this one single number: 48. Because the tablets show that one businessman, a guy named Tepeptila, was adopted by 48 different families. Now, unless this guy was the single most desirable son in the ancient world, it's pretty obvious what was happening.

He wasn't collecting families; he was collecting properties. This one fact just completely shatters the comparison to Abraham, who was worried about having a single heir, not closing 48 real estate deals. This all leads to the big question, right? How did so many smart, respected scholars get this so wrong for so long? The story of the Nuzi tablets is actually this powerful lesson about how we look at evidence and how easy it is to see what we want to see.

And there's a perfect word for this. Parallelomania. It's this academic trap where you get so obsessed with finding similarities, the parallels, between two different things that you start to completely ignore all the massive differences in time, place, and culture that actually make the comparison totally invalid.

You're basically forcing the puzzle pieces to fit. The scholar Dr. Donald Fowler put it perfectly. He said that starting with the wrong assumption, a wrong presupposition, is like looking through binoculars that are out of focus.

The evidence is right there in front of you, but everything you see is distorted because your starting point is already skewed. And in this case, those out-of-focus binoculars came from the goal of the biblical archaeology movement. Their aim wasn't really to understand Nuzi for its own sake.

They wanted to use Nuzi like a flashlight to prove the Bible was historically true. And when your only mission is to find connections, well, you're going to find them, whether they're really there or not. So what's the big lesson we can pull from this whole cautionary tale? The Nuzi case actually gives us a really clear roadmap for how to look at historical evidence the right way.

And frankly, it applies to way more than just ancient tablets. A better approach really comes down to two simple rules. First, context is king.

You have to try to understand an artifact on its own terms, inside the world that made it. What did this fictive adoption actually mean to the people in Nuzi? And second, if you are going to compare two things, you are responsible for explaining both the similarities and the differences. The minute you start ignoring the differences, that's a huge red flag that you've got a case of parallelomania.

And that really gets to the heart of it. The point of archaeology isn't just to go looking for evidence to prop up something you already believe. The real goal is to reconstruct the world of the past as accurately as we can, and to just let the evidence speak for itself.

You know, the story of the Nuzi tablets is such a great reminder that all of us look at the world through our own set of assumptions. And it leaves us with a really important question to ask ourselves. How are our own presuppositions, our own out-of-focus binoculars, coloring the evidence we see every single day?