

Dr. Don Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 12, People Groups: Hurrians, Hittites, Habiru, 6-min. Video Overview

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Hello and welcome. Today, we're jumping into a bit of a historical detective story. We're going to be looking at some names you've probably heard a thousand times from the Bible: the Hittites, the Hebrews, and this other mysterious group, the Habiru.

And, as you're about to see, the real stories behind these names are way more complex and, frankly, more fascinating than you might think. So, let's get started. But first, we need to start with a really important warning from our source, Dr. Donald Fowler.

You know, it's so tempting to look at archaeology as a tool to just prove the Bible, right? But his point is that's actually a misuse of the evidence. The truth is, archaeology often makes the picture more complicated. It adds new layers and challenges what we thought we knew.

It doesn't just exist to give a thumbs up to our beliefs. And here's why. The scholar Ed Yamauchi came up with what he calls the six fractions to help us visualize this.

Think about it. An absolutely tiny fraction of all the stuff from the ancient world even survives to today. Of that, we've only found a fraction of the sites.

Of those sites, we've only excavated a tiny fraction. You see how this goes? By the time you get down to the fraction of evidence that's actually published and relevant to biblical studies, well, what we're left with is a very, very small piece of a giant puzzle. It's a great reminder to approach all of this with a lot of humility.

Okay, so with that in mind, let's open our first case file, the Hittites. They pop up all over the Old Testament, but the real question is, who exactly were they? See, the Bible just uses this one word, Hittite, as if it's one single group of people. But when we look at the historical record, it's a whole lot messier than that.

This single term actually covers several different groups who lived centuries apart in different places. So which Hittite are we talking about when we read the Bible? Well, historians basically break them down into three main buckets. First, way back before 2000 BC, you had the Hittites.

These were the original folks living in central Turkey. Then a new group of Indo-European people moved in and built the massive Hittite empire. We're talking a real superpower of the ancient world.

But around 1200 BC, that empire dramatically collapsed and the survivors formed a bunch of smaller city-states in Syria. We call them the Neo-Hittites. And knowing this completely changes how you read certain stories.

For example, in Genesis, Abraham buys a burial plot from a guy named Ephraim the Hittite around 2000 BC. So who was he? Maybe one of those original Hittites. Maybe an early imperial Hittite.

Now fast forward a thousand years, King David has a soldier in his army named Uriah the Hittite. Given that time frame, Uriah was almost certainly a Neo-Hittite from one of those Syrian city-states, probably serving as a mercenary. It's the same word, Hittite, but it's describing two totally different people from different worlds.

But the Hittites left behind more than just a historical puzzle. Digging through their ancient cities gives us something amazing. One of the earliest and most detailed looks at how ancient superpowers made international treaties.

This was a huge discovery for understanding how their world worked. And they had a formula, a very specific six-part structure they used almost every time. You start with a preamble, you review the history between the two kings, you state the main point, list all the specific rules, call your gods to witness the deal, and then you end with blessings if you keep the treaty and curses if you break it.

This was kind of the standard operating procedure for diplomacy back then. So why does this matter? Well, here's the mind-blowing part. Scholars realize this exact six-part treaty structure is the blueprint for the entire book of Deuteronomy.

It's not just a random collection of laws. The whole thing is written like a formal treaty, a covenant between God, the great king, and Israel, his people. And once you see that, it changes everything about how you read that book.

All right, let's close that case file and open up our next one. This time, we're looking at a word we all think we know, Hebrew. But where did that name even come from? The very first time it shows up in the Bible, it's used to describe Abraham.

Yeah, Genesis 14 calls him Abram the Hebrew. So why that name? What did it mean to the people hearing the story for the first time? Well, this has been a big debate, and it really comes down to a couple of main theories. Okay, so theory one is that Hebrew comes from one of his ancestors named Eber.

But there are a couple of problems with that. I mean, why pick Eber out of his whole family tree? And more importantly, the text calls him the Hebrew. You almost never stick the in front of a proper name like that.

But theory two connects the word to a Hebrew verb that means to cross over. Now this fits Abraham's life story perfectly, and it explains. He's not just some guy.

He's the one who crossed over. So according to Dr. Fowler, the best explanation is that the name Hebrew, *Ivri* in the original, isn't just an ethnic label. It's a title.

It describes his single greatest act of faith, leaving everything he knew behind, crossing the Euphrates River, and stepping into the unknown because God called him. He is, literally, the one who crossed over. And that leads us right into our final and, I got to say, most tantalizing case.

This is where things get really blurry, and a simple word opens up this huge, contentious historical puzzle. It all starts with a very intriguing similarity in language. So just look at these two words.

The Hebrew word we were just talking about, *Ivri*, and this other word that shows up in ancient Akkadian texts all over the place, *Habiru*. I mean, the resemblance is pretty striking, isn't it? So you have to wonder: is this just a coincidence, or is there a connection? So who were these *Habiru*, anyway? Well, it wasn't a nation or an ethnic group. It was more of a label for a social class.

They were the outsiders, the migrants. Sometimes they were hired soldiers. Other times they were seen as troublemakers or invaders.

They were this group of people living on the fringes of society all across the ancient Near East. Now here's where it gets really juicy. Archaeologists in Egypt uncovered a stash of ancient letters from the same general time period as Joshua's conquest of Canaan.

And in these letters, you have these panicked Canaanite kings writing to the Pharaoh, basically screaming for help. Their message? The *Habiru* are invading. You have to send us troops.

So this leaves us with this massive, really provocative question. Is it possible that the invading *Habiru* in these Egyptian letters were actually the conquering Hebrews from the book of Joshua? Could these letters be the outside proof of the conquest that people have been looking for? Some scholars say yes, absolutely. Others say, hold on, *Habiru* is a really broad term.

It's an unsolved mystery, and it sits right at that fascinating crossroads of archaeology, language, and the Bible. It's a perfect example of how sometimes history doesn't give us easy answers. It just gives us deeper, more interesting questions.