

Dr. Don Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds,

Session 11, Nuzi

6-min. Video Overview

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Welcome back, everyone. Today we're taking a deep dive into ancient archaeology. We're going to uncover how some clay tablets almost rewrite history, but then things took a turn like a detective novel.

Yeah, a real twist ending. It's fascinating to see how our interpretations of archaeology change over time, you know. It all depends on how we're looking at history.

That's true. So today's focus: these clay tablets, thousands of them, are called the Nineveh tablets. They were found in modern-day Iraq.

What made them such a big deal back in the 1920s when they were first discovered? Oh, they were huge, like a bombshell in the world of biblical archaeology. They seemed to unlock a whole new way of understanding those stories in Genesis, you know, about the patriarchs, Abraham, Jacob, and all that family drama. Okay, I'm already interested.

Sounds like they found the missing piece of the puzzle. Exactly. One of the most exciting things is that they had detailed records of adoption practices in Nuzi, and scholars saw these direct parallels between those and some events in Genesis.

Hmm, so like what? Give me an example. Sure, well, for example, take the story of Jacob working for Latham to marry Rachel. At first, scholars thought this was just like what they were seeing in the Nuzi customs, but later they realized that Nuzi adoption wasn't really about taking in orphans or creating families.

Wait, so if Nuzi adoption wasn't about family, what was Jacob really doing with Laban? That doesn't sound like a Bible story, I know. It wasn't. It was more like a legal thing, like a loophole to get around ancient laws about property.

Whoa, really? So they were using adoption to get around taxes or something? That's wild. It seems that way. That's one example of how our initial assumptions about the Nuzi tablets kind of led to some misinterpretations, and it was a big deal in the field, let me tell you.

So it wasn't really a missing puzzle piece; after all, it was more like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole. Ha, that's a good way to put it. And the shift in understanding, well, it was really fueled by scholars like Thomas L. Thompson and his book, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*.

It carefully debunked a lot of those supposed parallels between Nuzi and Genesis. So are you saying that the Bible is just a made-up story with no historical basis? Because I'm trying to understand all this. Oh, no, not at all.

The Bible is a complex text, layers of meaning, historical context, all of that. However, what the Nuzi tablets showed us was that we can't just assume there's this one-to-one correlation between ancient practices and what we see in the Bible. It's more nuanced.

Okay. I'm starting to see the bigger picture here. So if the Nuzi tablets weren't directly confirming the Bible's history, what was their significance? Where do they fit in? That's a great question.

They might not have directly validated the Bible, but they're incredibly valuable for understanding the ancient world in general- a window into legal practices, social customs, religious beliefs, things that were probably part of the backdrop for those biblical stories. Okay. So maybe not a direct link to the Bible, but still a way to understand the world it was written in.

Gotcha. Exactly. And you know, this realization led to a pretty significant shift in how scholars approach, well, both the Bible and the ancient Near East.

Okay. I'm all ears. What happened next in this archaeological detective story? Well, they started to move towards a more cautious approach.

It's called minimalism. And that's a whole other story. Minimalism.

Sounds a bit like simplifying your wardrobe or something, but I'm guessing it's a little more complicated when we're talking about archaeology, right? Yeah, you got it. Not about getting rid of your stuff. In biblical scholarship, minimalism means moving away from always trying to prove the Bible historically.

It's more cautious; it reminds us to watch out for our own biases when we interpret evidence. So instead of searching for direct connections between archaeology and the Bible, minimalism wants us to step back and look at the bigger picture. Exactly.

Explore the ancient Near East on its own terms. Understand its cultures, beliefs, complexities, all that, without forcing it to fit the Bible, like appreciating a piece of art for itself, not just for some hidden meaning. I like that analogy.

But what about, I mean, doesn't minimalism risk throwing out the baby with the bathwater? Surely the Bible has some historical grounding, doesn't it? That's a good point. Minimalism doesn't deny that. But it does say, hey, let's not jump to conclusions based on limited evidence.

OK, I see. So how did this minimalist approach change how scholars looked at those Nuzi tablets? Well, instead of direct commentary on the Bible, they started seeing them as a window into the Hurrian people, their world, valuable for understanding their customs, laws, structures, all that. Like the Nuzi tablets showed, fictive adoption wasn't about family at all, but about getting around inheritance laws like a legal loophole.

Wow, that's interesting. Totally changes how you'd understand some of those Bible stories. Absolutely.

And that's what's so cool about archaeology: it always challenges us to reexamine what we think we know and see the past in a new light. I'm starting to see how powerful these old clay tablets can be, not just, you know, dusty relics or, like, human stories, legal dramas, all that. Who knew ancient law could be so interesting? Like watching a historical soap opera, right? Right.

And we can piece it all together because of these discoveries. OK, so Nuzi gave us this whole new understanding, but then minimalism changed things again. Feels like we're on a roller coaster here.

It is a bit of a ha-ha, but that's how it goes with history. New discoveries, new perspectives- they all change our understanding. And Nuzi, it's a perfect example of how interpretations can shift.

So what's the takeaway for our listeners? What's the big aha moment? Nuzi reminds us that our presuppositions- what we already believe- really shape how we see evidence. Sometimes it leads us to the wrong conclusions, like looking through a smudged lens. Think you see clearly, but it's distorted.

Got to make sure our lens is clean, metaphorically speaking, before we start making conclusions about the past. You said it. And that's where critical thinking comes in.

Question our assumptions, consider different viewpoints, you know, admit what we don't know. True. Easy to get caught up in the excitement of a new discovery and see only what we want to see.

But it sounds like good scholarship. It needs a bit of skepticism, a little humility. Definitely.

Nuzi teaches us to approach both archaeology and the Bible with intellectual rigor and be open to surprise. This has been a really thought-provoking discussion. We've gone from Nuzi proving the Bible to a more complicated picture, and now to this minimalism and critical thinking.

It's a lot. And we're just scratching the surface. Archaeology is full of these twists and turns.

Every discovery could change everything we know. That's what I love about these deep dives. So where do we go from here? If Nuzi isn't about proving the Bible, what can it tell us about the ancient Near East? And how does that help us understand the Bible better? That's the million-dollar question.

Nuzi might not give us hard proof for specific events, but it shows us the world behind the Bible. Social stuff, legal stuff, cultural stuff, all of that. It's like a tapestry woven with threads of everyday life, legal battles, family drama, you know, the whole picture.

I'm seeing how these little play tablets can become so vibrant, like they're whispering secrets about the past, showing us a world we could only imagine. Exactly. And if we listen closely, we can really appreciate the complex history and culture that's all around the Bible.

So we've come a long way, haven't we? We started thinking the Nuzi tablets were like proof of the Bible, and now we see they paint this much bigger picture of the ancient world. And

that picture, even without those direct biblical links, can actually make the Bible come alive in a new way. Yeah, I'm starting to see that.

It's not just reading a book anymore. It's like stepping into a whole different world. Exactly.

Like, take the story of Jacob and Laban. Knowing about Nuzi adoption practices makes us think about that whole thing differently. It's not just a love story.

It's about legal stuff, economic strategies. Suddenly it's much more complex. It's like one of those historical dramas where you realize there's so much happening behind the scenes.

Right. And that complexity, it makes the Bible feel more real, more human. You know, these weren't just characters.

They were people living in a world with rules and customs we're just beginning to understand. Okay. So Nuzi, it's not a Bible proof, but more like a world-building tool.

Helps us imagine the setting so much better. I like that. And the more we understand that world, the more those themes in the Bible- the struggles, the messages- start to resonate differently.

So it's like, instead of trying to make the Nuzi tablets fit what we thought we knew about the Bible, we let them teach us about the ancient world. And then that new knowledge helps us understand the Bible in a new way. Exactly.

Knowledge isn't static, you know- new discoveries, new perspectives. They're always reshaping how we see both history and faith. This has been amazing.

I feel like we went from this black-and-white view to a full-color picture, all thanks to Nuzi. And that's the beauty of it. There's always more to discover.

Nuzi just gives us a glimpse into one corner of this whole ancient world. I'm definitely feeling inspired to keep learning. If a few clay tablets can change our perspective like this, imagine what else is out there waiting to be found.

And what other assumptions we might have to rethink. That's what makes this field so exciting. It's all about discovery, reevaluating, and getting a better, more nuanced understanding of the past.

So to everyone listening, next time you're reading a Bible story, take a second to imagine the world behind it. Think about the customs, the laws, the everyday lives of the people who were there. You might be surprised at what you find.

And remember, there's always more to learn. New discoveries and perspectives are waiting to be unearthed. Thanks for joining us on this deep dive into the Nuzi tablets and biblical history.

We hope you've learned something new about the power of archaeology and how our understanding of the past is always changing. Until next time, keep exploring, keep asking

questions, and keep your minds open to the wonders of history. And who knows, maybe you'll be the one to make the next big discovery that changes everything.