

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

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Ready for another deep dive. Today, we're going way back, like 3,500 years ago, to the ancient Near East. Wow.

Yeah. So we're talking like 1600 to 1200 BCE. Oh, okay.

Right after the Old Babylonian period kind of fell apart. Right. And we're going to be looking at three groups that you might have heard of before.

Okay. The Hurrians, the Hittites, and the Habiru.

Interesting. Yeah. And we're going to see if we can kind of figure out how their stories can help us understand the Old Testament better.

It's fascinating how these names just appear in the Bible, like Hittites and Habiru. Right. But how much do we really know about them? Yeah.

I mean, that's one of the things I love about doing these deep dives. Yeah. It's like we're like detectives going back in time and using all these ancient texts and ruins to try to put the pieces together.

Exactly. It's like a puzzle. Yeah.

And it's important to remember that we're not trying to, like, prove or disprove the Bible here. Right. It's not about finding Noah's Ark and saying, see? Yeah.

I told you so. Ha ha. Exactly.

Like even if we did find it, would it really change anyone's mind who's already made up their mind? Probably not. Right. Like Dr. Fowler had this great point in one of his lectures.

He said, "Archaeology can help illuminate the past." Oh, yeah. But it's not a substitute for faith.

Right. It can add context, but not necessarily proof. Yeah, exactly.

Okay. So to start this whole investigation off, let's set the stage. Okay.

So no more Babylonian superpower. What happens next? What happens in a power vacuum like that? Well, it gets kind of messy, like a bunch of different groups all jostling for power. It's a bit of a Game of Thrones situation, really.

Oh, I like that. Two of the big players that come out of this whole mess are the Kassites and the Hurrians. Now, the Kassites, they ruled Babylon for a good long while, but they didn't leave us much to go on.

What do you mean? Well, they left very few written records. It's like they wanted to keep their secrets. Yeah, it's frustrating.

Wow. A real historical cliffhanger. I know.

But luckily, the Hurrians were a little more chatty. Yeah. In fact, they might be the same group that the Bible calls the Hurriles.

Really? Yeah. And they came down from the Zagros Mountains, which are way up north. Okay.

And they spread out all over Mesopotamia. Gotcha. But here's the thing that made them really stand out.

What's that? They were most likely the first to use horses on a large scale in warfare. Whoa. That's a game changer.

Oh, absolutely. It's like suddenly everyone else is playing checkers, and they show up with a chess set. Yeah.

No kidding. It's like having this superpower that no one else has figured out yet. It's true.

I mean, just imagine being on the other side of that. Oh, yeah. Seeing these dust clouds on the horizon, and you think it's a sandstorm.

But then you realize, oh no, it's the Hurrians on horseback. Yeah. And at that point, you're probably thinking, I should have brought a bigger army.

Ha ha. Right. Basically, they were the ancient world's version of a tank division.

I love that comparison. They really were ahead of their time. They were.

And with that kind of military might, it's no surprise they built a pretty impressive kingdom. That's right. It was called the Mitanni.

Exactly. Mitanni. They controlled a big chunk of northern Mesopotamia.

And for how long? From about 1600 to 1400 BCE. Okay. So they had a good run.

They did. And get this. Their rulers' names suggest they might have actually come from Iran or even India.

Whoa. Hold on. So we're not just talking about a military powerhouse here.

Nope. We're talking about a melting pot of cultures too. Yeah.

That's fascinating. Right. Like, what were those cultural exchanges like? Yeah.

That makes you wonder what life was like in Mitanni back then. I know. But sadly, like all empires, even Mitanni eventually fell.

What happened? They got squeezed out by two other major players on the scene. The Hittites and the Egyptians. Oh, double trouble.

It was tough competition. Yeah. And there was even some intermarriage between the Mitannian rulers and the Egyptian pharaohs.

Whoa. Really? Talk about international relations. It was like a real-life soap opera, but with chariots and battles and stuff.

That's incredible. Okay. So we've talked about the Hurrians.

Now let's dive into these Hittites. Because if I remember correctly, Dr. Fowler mentioned that the word Hittite can be a bit confusing. Yeah.

It's actually a real headache because it can refer to like three different groups over a really long time. Okay. So break it down for us.

Who were the Hittites? All right. Well, first you've got the Hattians. Okay.

They were the original people living in central Anatolia. Which is modern-day Turkey, right? Exactly. Okay.

And they were there before 2000 BCE. So long before the Hittites we usually think of. So they're like the OG inhabitants of the area.

Yeah. You could say that. Then you've got the imperial Hittites.

These were the ones who came in later. They were Indo-European migrants, and they built this powerful empire. From when to when? From about 1700 to 1190 BCE.

Got it. So those are the ones who would have been around during, like, the Old Testament patriarchal period? Exactly. The ones that Abraham and his descendants might have run into.

Okay. That's really helpful to clarify. So we've got the OG Hattians and then the imperial Hittites.

Right. But you said there were three groups, right? So who's the third? Oh yeah. The third group is the Neo-Hittites.

Okay. So after the Hittite Empire collapsed around 1200 BCE, some of them went and formed these little city-states up in northern Syria. Gotcha.

But here's the thing that really messes things up. The Assyrians just used Hittite to refer to anyone living west of Assyria. Oh no.

So it's like they lumped everyone together. They did. Talk about a case of mistaken identity.

Yeah. It makes things super confusing. So when we're reading the Bible, how do we know which Hittites we're dealing with? Well, sometimes it's like trying to solve a riddle.

Like, take Ephron the Hittite. Remember, Abraham buys a burial plot from him in Hebron. It's in Genesis 23.

Oh yeah. So which Hittite was he? Was he a Hattian, an imperial Hittite, a Neo-Hittite? Who knows? We just don't know from the text alone. It's like the Bible is giving us these clues, but we don't have the whole puzzle.

Exactly. It's frustrating, but also kind of exciting. It is.

It's a mystery. Totally. And it's the same with Uriah the Hittite, Bathsheba's husband.

He lived around 1000 BCE, so he was probably a Neo-Hittite, right? Right. Most likely a Neo-Hittite mercenary, actually. Okay.

So these Hittites were basically everywhere and nowhere at the same time. It seems that way. All right.

So besides giving us a headache with their confusing name, what else did the Hittites leave behind? Oh, well, one of the coolest discoveries was the Hittite archives at Hattusha. Hattusha? Yeah. It was their capital city.

And they found all these clay tablets. What were on the tablets? Shopping lists? Oh, no. They were covered in cuneiform writing.

Oh, wow. Yeah. And guess what? The Hittite language was Indo-European.

Wait a minute. Like related to English? Yes. Like English, Spanish, Hindi, all part of this huge language family.

That's amazing. I know, right? And it was a Czech scholar named Bedrich Hrosny who finally cracked the code. So suddenly these ancient Hittites don't feel so ancient anymore.

Right. It's like finding out you're distantly related to royalty or something. It really makes them come alive.

It does. So what did these tablets tell us about the Hittites? Anything juicy? Oh, yeah. Definitely.

One of the biggest things they found were treaties. Treaties? Like peace treaties and stuff? Yeah. Agreements between different kingdoms.

But here's the really interesting part. These treaties weren't just random agreements. They followed a very specific structure.

Like what? It was like a six-part template, a kind of legal formula that everyone in the Ancient Near East used. Wow. So they all had this shared understanding of how these agreements worked.

It seems that way. And get this. You can see the same six-part structure in the Book of Deuteronomy.

Wait, seriously. You're saying the structure of these treaties is similar to what we see in the Bible? Yep. It suggests there was this common diplomatic language in the Ancient Near East.

That's incredible. Like they all spoke the same legal language. In a way.

Yeah. That's so cool. Okay.

So we've got the powerful Hurrians with their horses and chariots and the Hittites with their sophisticated treaties. Right. Now let's talk about the group that always seems to spark debate.

The Habiru. Ah, yes. The Habiru Enigma.

It's so tempting to just connect them with the Hebrews, right? It is. Especially when you see those letters from Canaanite kings to Egypt begging for help against the Habiru around the time of the Israelite conquest. Yeah.

Like, the timing seems perfect. It does. But Dr. Fowler made it seem like it's not quite that simple.

Yeah. He's right to be cautious. See, Habiru is actually an Akkadian word.

Yeah. And it doesn't refer to a specific ethnicity. So it's not like a bloodline? No.

It's more like a description of their social or political status. So more like a label than a family tree? Exactly. Think of it like the word rebel or outlaw.

It tells you something about how they lived. Okay. That makes sense.

So we can't just assume that every mention of Habiru means we're talking about the Hebrews. Right. It's more complicated than that.

So if they weren't an ethnic group, then who were they? What set them apart? Well, that's where we'll have to pick up in part two of our deep dive. Oh, man. Another cliffhanger.

Ha ha. Sorry. But we're going to delve into what Habiru really meant and explore all the evidence for and against their connection to the Hebrews.

All right. I can't wait. Sounds like we're about to unlock another layer of this ancient mystery.

Okay. So we're back and ready to tackle those Habiru head-on. Let's do it.

Last time we kind of left things hanging with this mystery, right? Like, who were these Habiru folks causing all this trouble in the ancient Near East? Well, to really get it, we got to understand what Habiru meant in Akkadian. Akkadian. Yeah.

It was like the go-to language back then. Kind of like English today, you know? Okay. Gotcha.

And it turns out Habiru wasn't about where you came from, your family, or anything like that. Okay. So not a shared ancestry thing.

Nope. More like a social class. Oh, interesting.

So like their place in society or maybe even like outside of it. You got it. Think of them as the folks living on the fringes, you know, like the outlaws, mercenaries, migrant workers, the kind of people who didn't fit in the neat little boxes everyone else had.

Okay. So were they seen as bad guys? Like villains? Or were they more like heroes? It's tough to say, really. Historians are still trying to figure that out.

Yeah. I bet. But one thing's for sure.

They were definitely linked to all this chaos and instability back then. Well, yeah. I mean, if I was a Canaanite king and I heard these Habirus were coming my way, I'd be freaking out too.

For sure. Especially with those letters they were sending to Egypt begging for help. Right.

And wasn't that around the same time the Israelites were supposed to be conquering Canaan? Exactly. Man, what a time to be alive. Talk about a historical drama, huh? Empires falling apart, new powers rising up.

Like the old rules just didn't apply anymore. It was a wild time. And those Habiru, well, they might've been pretty good at using that chaos to their advantage.

It's like they were masters of never letting a good crisis go to waste, huh? Yeah, something like that. But it still leaves us with this question. Were the Habiru and the Hebrews like the same group? Or is that just too simple? Too good to be true? It's tempting to make that connection, I know.

It is. But we've got to be careful about projecting our modern ideas onto the ancient world. Right, right.

We can't just assume Habiru equals Hebrew without some solid proof. So even though the timing lines up with the Israelite conquest, we can't for sure say those Canaanite kings were dealing with, like, a full-blown Hebrew invasion. Not without more to go on.

It's totally possible some Hebrews were part of the Habiru, or maybe the term was used more loosely for anyone shaking things up in Canaan. Man, it's like we've got this giant historical puzzle, but some of the pieces are still missing. That's part of the fun, though, isn't it? Yeah, I guess so.

It's like we're constantly discovering new things and having to rethink what we thought we knew. Okay, so if we can't definitively link the Habiru to the Hebrews, what's the takeaway here? What's the big so what? Well, for me, it shows just how important it is to understand

what words meant back then. Yeah, like not just reading them with our modern dictionary in hand.

Exactly. Words like Hittite and Habiru had layers of meaning that we might miss if we're not careful. Makes sense.

Words change over time, right? They do. And they can have all these hidden meanings and nuances. But it also makes me wonder: if the Habiru weren't necessarily the Hebrews, what does that tell us about the Israelites themselves, like their whole story of conquering Canaan? It definitely adds another layer to the story, doesn't it? It does.

Makes you think, were they facing a single enemy or was it more like a bunch of different groups, maybe even some Habiru in the mix? It's starting to feel less like a straightforward battle and more like a chaotic, everyone-for-themselves kind of thing. Exactly. And I think that's what makes the Bible so interesting.

It reflects that messiness of ancient life. Right. It's not just a clean-cut story.

It's all tangled up with real history. And that history, with all its twists and turns, helps us see the Bible in a whole new light. It's like we're getting this behind-the-scenes look at one of the most important periods in human history.

Totally. This has been an amazing journey so far, and I'm kind of bummed we're almost done. Aha! I get it.

But honestly, I'm leaving with so many new ideas and questions; it's kind of overwhelming. That's what we hope for. We want people to walk away from this wanting to learn more, to keep exploring.

Yeah. It's not about giving all the answers. It's about sparking that curiosity, that thirst for knowledge.

You got it. So before we wrap this up, any final thoughts for our listeners as they continue their own deep dives into the past? Just keep asking questions, keep digging, and never lose that sense of wonder. I love it.

The more we learn, the more we realize how much there still is to discover. It's a good reminder that the past isn't really gone. You know, it's always shaping who we are today.

It really is. And who knows, maybe one of our listeners will be the one to make the next big discovery. Now that would be something.

Can you imagine a headline saying, Deep Dive Listener Solves Ancient Mystery? I would love to see that. Me too. It could happen.

Well, on that note, I think we'll leave our listeners with that amazing possibility. Thanks for joining us on this deep dive into the Hurrians, Hittites, and the super enigmatic Habiru. It's been awesome exploring this stuff with you.

And until next time, keep those questions coming and keep diving deep. Happy exploring, everyone. All right, we're back.

And you know what? It's really amazing to think about how these groups that we don't hear much about, like the Hurrians and the Hittites and the Habiru, they really help us understand the world of the Old Testament in a new way. It's true. It's like we've been traveling through time, you know.

Totally. Picking up little pieces of their lives from those old texts and ruins. Right.

And even those treaties we talked about. Yeah, those were amazing. I'm still blown away by the fact that they had this specific structure.

Right. And that same structure shows up in the Bible, like in Deuteronomy. It's wild, you know? It really makes you think about how connected everything was back then.

It does. Like we tend to think of these ancient civilizations as being isolated, but they weren't. They were sharing ideas and practices and knowledge.

Totally. It was a real network of exchange. And the Habiru were right there in the middle of it all, weren't they? Oh, yeah.

They were definitely players in this whole historical drama. Even if we can't say for sure that they were the Hebrews. Right.

Their story just adds so much intrigue to the biblical narrative. It does. It makes you wonder if the Israelites were just one of many groups.

Yeah. All trying to find their place and survive in this really chaotic time. It makes those stories of conquest and settlement feel so much more real.

Absolutely. Like these weren't just names on a page. Right.

These were real people. Yeah. With real struggles and hopes and dreams.

Like facing incredible challenges. Yeah. And I think by understanding the world they lived in, we can appreciate those biblical stories on a whole new level.

For sure. It's like we've been given this amazing backstage pass. Totally.

To this pivotal moment in history. I know, right? Well, I have to admit, I'm a little sad that our journey is coming to an end. But honestly, I'm leaving with so many new insights.

Questions, too. Well, that's the whole point of the deep dive, isn't it? It is. It's not just about giving people information.

Nope. It's about inspiring them to explore further. Exactly.

To keep digging and discovering. So before we sign off, any last words of wisdom for our listeners? Well, I'd say never stop questioning, never stop digging, and never lose that sense of wonder. Those are great words to live by.

You know, the more we learn about history... Yeah. ...the more we understand who we are and where we came from. It's true.

It connects us to something bigger than ourselves. And who knows? Maybe one of our listeners will be the one to make the next big discovery about the ancient world. Oh, man.

Can you imagine? Right. That would be incredible. I can see the headlines now.

Deep Dive Listener Solves Ancient Mystery. That's a headline I would love to read. Me too.

All right. Well, on that note, I think we'll leave our listeners with that amazing possibility. Sound good.

Thanks for joining us on this deep dive into the Hurrians, Hittites, and the ever so enigmatic Habiro. It's been a pleasure exploring with you. And until next time, keep those questions coming and keep diving deep.

Happy exploring, everyone. Bye, everyone.