

Old Testament Backgrounds: Introduction and Early Mesopotamian Geography

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Session 1

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Abstract

This course lecture introduces the foundational importance of historical, geographical, and cultural backgrounds for properly interpreting the Old Testament text. Dr. Donald Fowler explains the phenomenon of vertical transference, where modern readers mistakenly project Western cultural assumptions onto ancient scripture. By examining the physical terrain, climate evolution, and agricultural transition in early Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent, the lecture demonstrates how physical context clarifies biblical narrative and theology. Ultimately, historical geography provides a crucial lens for understanding divine revelation as it unfolded within real ancient human history.

Outline

I. Course Introduction and Methodological Foundations

A. Background and Purpose of the Course

1. Development of class notes from Dr. Herb Bess at Grace Theological Seminary
2. The core premise: Scripture cannot be optimally understood apart from its ancient context
3. Analogy of the U.S. Constitution requiring European historical context for full comprehension

B. Defining 'Old Testament Backgrounds'

1. Not an exhaustive history of the Ancient Near East (ANE)
2. Israel as a small regional player surrounded by major empires
3. Selective focus on key backgrounds that dramatically illuminate the text
4. Current 'Golden Era' of background studies and commentary resources

C. Hermeneutical Guardrails and Pitfalls

1. The text as the primary subject ('the dog') and backgrounds as secondary ('the tail')
2. Avoiding 'Parallelomania' (Sandmel) and artificial background construction
3. Addressing the problem of 'Vertical Transference' (tunnel vision/Western projection)

D. The Nature of Divine Revelation

1. God inspired real human authors operating within real ancient cultures and educational backgrounds
2. Comparison of literary styles (Epistle to the Hebrews vs. Johannine epistles)

II. History, Culture, and Contextual Disciplines

A. The Value and Character of Sacred History

1. History as peace, culture, and divine intervention rather than mere battles and dates
2. Rejection of anti-historical existentialism; the Old Testament narrative as personal and foundational

B. Interdisciplinary Contextual Drivers

1. Geography: Essential physical setting for biblical events
2. Culture and Law: Interpreting Mosaic laws within ancient social structures
3. Religion: Understanding neighbor theology (e.g., Baal/Canaanite religious systems)
4. Economics: Crucial yet often overlooked aspect of ancient life

III. Historical Limits and the Preiterate Period

A. Methodological Starting Points and Historiography

1. Genesis 1–11 as theological reality vs. artifactually unrecoverable history
2. Post-flood world and the absence of early urban artifactual evidence
3. Literature as the essential key for constructing written history

B. Transition from Agricultural Villages to Urbanization

1. Post-flood agricultural life preceding city formation
2. Invention of early writing (~3200 BC) and development of literate technology
3. Early town settlements (e.g., Jarmu in the Zagros foothills, Jericho in the Jordan Rift)

IV. Topography and Geography of the Fertile Crescent

A. The Fertile Crescent Overview

1. Green arc along the Mediterranean through Syria down to Mesopotamia
2. Arid interior of the Arabian Desert
3. Climatic shifts post-9000 BC leading to village settlement along river systems

B. West-to-East Topographical Zones

1. Mediterranean Sea: Primary source of environmental moisture
2. Coastal Plain: Narrow fertile strip along the coast
3. Central Mountain Range: Running north-south through Israel and Syria
4. Jordan Rift Valley: Major geological fault line forming a fertile river rift
5. Transjordan Mountains: Plateau catching remaining atmospheric moisture
6. Great Arabian Desert: High, dry rain-shadow zone
7. Mesopotamian Floodplain: Rich agricultural basin formed by river deposits
8. Zagros Mountains: High eastern boundary extracting moisture and feeding Mesopotamian rivers