

Dr. Donald Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Lecture 11: Nuzi

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Session 11

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Abstract

This lecture by Dr. Donald Fowler examines the methodological challenges of using ancient Near Eastern archaeological finds to interpret biblical texts. He analyzes the similarities and differences between Mesopotamian and biblical flood accounts, cautioning against quick assumptions of direct literary borrowing. Dr. Fowler then focuses on the Nuzi tablets, showing how mid-twentieth-century scholars misapplied Hurrian 'fictive adoption' customs to the patriarchal stories in Genesis due to faulty presuppositions and parallelomania. Ultimately, he argues that ancient artifacts must be understood within their own cultural context rather than forced to serve as apologetic proof for the Bible.

Outline

I. Introduction and Methodological Conundrum in Background Studies

- A. Navigating similarities and differences between ancient Near Eastern literature and the Bible
- B. Evaluation of three proposals for explaining flood account parallels
 - 1. Hypothesis 1: Hebrew borrowing from Mesopotamian accounts
 - a. Chronological complexity and differences (e.g., specific dates and timeframe data in Genesis vs. Gilgamesh/Atra-hasis)
 - b. Unlikelihood of Moses borrowing written or oral pagan traditions
 - 2. Hypothesis 2: Mesopotamian borrowing from Hebrew accounts
 - a. Geographical distance (600–900 miles) and Moses' location
 - b. Chronological impossibility (Mesopotamian written accounts predate Moses by centuries)
 - 3. Hypothesis 3: Shared historical memory with distinct transmission
 - a. Both traditions remember a historical flood event
 - b. Biblical account preserved under divine inspiration; Mesopotamian account distorted by mythology

II. The Nuzi (Nuzu) Tablets and "Parallelomania" in Patriarchal Studies

- A. Archaeological background of Nuzi
 - 1. Located near the Zagros Mountains; excavated by ASOR (1925–1931)
 - 2. Discovery of thousands of tablets from the Old Babylonian period
- B. The classical use of Nuzi tablets (E.A. Speiser, Anchor Bible Genesis)

1. Critical scholars used Nuzi texts to argue for patriarchal historicity (1930s–1970s)
2. Re-interpreting Genesis narratives through Nuzi legal customs
 - a. Abraham's relationship with Eleazar interpreted as adoption
 - b. Jacob and Laban narratives re-explained as Laban adopting Jacob
 - c. Rachel's theft of the teraphim (family gods) interpreted as land ownership deeds
- C. Flaws and critique of the Nuzi parallels
 1. Textual absence: Genesis never states or implies Jacob was adopted by Laban
 2. Disenfranchisement: Adoptive status revoked upon the birth of natural sons (Laban had sons)
 3. Misinterpretation: Teraphim were not title deeds to land property
 4. Diagnosis of "parallelomania" (Samuel Sandmel): Imposing external finds onto the biblical text

III. Historical Context of Biblical Scholarship and Archaeological Presuppositions

- A. The pattern of archaeological sensationalism and headline-seeking
 1. Historical instances: Flood deposits at Ur (Woolley), Ebla archive claims regarding the divine name
 2. The temptation to achieve fame by claiming direct biblical correlation
- B. The rise of critical scholarship and evolutionary models of religion
 1. Post-Reformation shift demanding historical and scientific proof for theology
 2. Darwinian evolution applied to religion: Graf, Kuenen, and Julius Wellhausen
 3. The JEDP hypothesis (Jahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomist, Priestly)
 - a. Assumption of religion evolving from primitive simplicity to complex theology
 - b. Skepticism toward Old Testament historical accuracy
- C. The Albrightian era of "Biblical Archaeology"
 1. W.F. Albright's reaction against rigid Wellhausian skepticism
 2. Use of archaeology to demonstrate historical plausibility of biblical settings
 3. Influence on mid-20th century scholars applying Nuzi texts to Genesis
- D. The shift to Minimalism in the 1970s
 1. Thomas L. Thompson's *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives* (1974)
 2. Rejection of Albrightian parallels and the emergence of Biblical Minimalism

IV. Flaws in Applying Nuzi Tablets to Genesis Narratives

- A. Geographical mismatch: Nuzi is 800–1,000 miles removed from Canaan/Genesis settings
- B. Chronological gap: Nuzi tablets (~1500 BC) vs. Patriarchal period (~2100 BC or 1800–1700 BC)
- C. Demographic difference: Nuzi population was Hurrian (non-Semitic), not Semitic
- D. The reality of "Fictive Adoption" at Nuzi
 1. Prohibition against selling land circumscribed by legal subterfuge
 2. "Adoption" used as a financial mechanism to transfer land (e.g., Tehip-Tilla "adopted" 48 times)
 3. Fictive adoption offers no valid comparison to literal adoption customs in the Old Testament

V. Conclusion and Core Hermeneutical Principles

- A. Wrong presuppositions inevitably yield wrong conclusions
- B. Ancient Near Eastern tablets must be interpreted first within their original cultural context
- C. Sound background methodology requires explaining both similarities and differences