

People Groups: Hurrians, Hittites, and Habiru

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Abstract

This lecture explores the geopolitical background of the ancient Near East during the transition between the Old Babylonian and Egyptian/Hittite imperial eras, highlighting the migration and influence of non-Semitic groups including the Kassites, Hurrians, and Hittites. Dr. Fowler examines the chronological and biblical complexities surrounding the term "Hittite"—distinguishing between Hattians, Imperial Hittites, and Neo-Hittites—and demonstrates how ancient Hittite international treaty formats illuminate covenant structures in Deuteronomy and Joshua. The lecture further investigates the etymological origins of the term "Hebrew" (Ivri), evaluating theories regarding Eber, donkey drivers, and the verbal concept of "crossing over" as Abraham's defining act of faith. Finally, it addresses the academic debate connecting the biblical Hebrews with the Akkadian socio-political term Habiru attested in the Amarna letters.

Outline

I. Introduction and Methodological Limitations of Archaeology

- A. Methodological Warnings in Utilizing Ancient Near Eastern Materials
 - 1. Caution against using archaeology polemically merely to "prove" the Bible
 - 2. Maintaining academic objectivity and treating Near Eastern texts in their own right
 - 3. Archaeology as a contextual friend rather than a handmaiden of scripture
- B. Yamauchi's Six Fractions on the Limitations of Archaeological Evidence
 - 1. Only a fraction of archaeological evidence survives in the ground
 - 2. Only a fraction of possible ancient sites have been detected
 - 3. Only a fraction of detected sites have been excavated
 - 4. Only a fraction of any given ancient site is thoroughly excavated
 - 5. Only a fraction of excavated material is examined and published
 - 6. Only a fraction of published material directly contributes to biblical studies

II. Geopolitical Shift and Major Non-Semitic People Groups

- A. Geopolitical Vacuum Following the Collapse of the Old Babylonian Period (~1620 BC)
 - 1. Multi-century absence of a single Mesopotamian superpower
 - 2. Stage set for regional powers prior to the Exodus period
- B. The Kassites

1. Migration from the Zagros Mountains into Babylon
2. Longest ruling dynasty in Babylonian history despite sparse written records

C. The Hurrians and the Kingdom of Mitanni

1. Non-Semitic Indo-European migrants into Upper Mesopotamia (2400–2200 BC)
2. First historical references at Mari and expansion into Kizzuwatna (Cappadocia)
3. Kingdom of Mitanni (1600–1400 BC) as a dominant international superpower
 - a. Capital city Washukanni remains undiscovered
 - b. Military power boosted by large-scale introduction of horse warfare
 - c. Non-Hurrian leadership names suggesting Iranian/Indian aristocratic origins
4. Diplomatic relations with Egyptian Pharaohs (Thutmose III, Thutmose IV, Amenhotep III)
 - a. Royal marriage alliances involving daughters of Saustartar and Tushratta
5. Biblical identification with the Hurrites (Genesis and Deuteronomy)
6. Kingdom collapse following attack by Hittite King Suppiluliuma (~1370 BC)

III. The Hittite Civilization, Biblical Chronology, and Treaty Formats

A. Clarifying the Threefold Historical Identity of the Term "Hittite"

1. Hattians: Indigenous inhabitants of Central Asia Minor/Hattiland (pre-2000 BC)
2. Imperial Hittites: Indo-European migrants/Neshites establishing a major empire (1700–1190 BC)
3. Neo-Hittites: Syrian city-state confederacy following the Sea Peoples movement (1200–800 BC)

B. Biblical Test Cases and Chronological Ambiguity

1. Purchase of Sarah's burial plot from Ephron the Hittite at Hebron (~2000 BC)
 - a. Ambiguity: Original Hattian, early Imperial Hittite migrant, or broad Assyrian geographic designation ("Westerner")
2. Uriah the Hittite in King David's army (~970 BC)
 - a. Identified as a Neo-Hittite mercenary from northern Syrian city-states

C. Decipherment and Hittite Cuneiform Archives

1. Excavation of capital Hattusha by Bedřich Hrozný and identification of Indo-European language
2. Dual script usage: Cuneiform (administrative archives) and Hieroglyphic (artistic/monumental)

D. International Covenant Treaty Structure

1. Six compositional characteristics identified in Hittite treaties
 - a. Preamble (identifying the author/king)
 - b. Antecedent History (historical prelude detailing past relations)
 - c. Statement of Substance (future covenant relationship)
 - d. Specific Stipulations (obligations and laws)
 - e. Invocation of Gods as Witnesses

- f. Curses and Blessings (consequences of disloyalty or loyalty)
- 2. Biblical applications: Covenant formulary in Joshua 24 and Deuteronomy
 - a. Mendenhall, Klaus Baltzer (*The Covenant Formulary*), and Meredith Kline (*Treaty of the Great King*)
 - b. Covenant format as a widespread ancient Near Eastern international tradition

IV. Etymology and Biblical Meaning of "Hebrew" (*Ivri*)

- A. First Biblical Occurrence in Genesis 14:13 ("Abram the Hebrew")
- B. Evaluation of Scholarly Explanations
 - 1. Ancestry from Eber (Genesis 10:24)
 - a. Objections: Relative obscurity of Eber compared to Shem/Peleg; presence of the unprecedented definite article (*Ha-ivri*) on a proper noun
 - 2. Albright's Akkadian hypothesis ("Donkey Driver / Mule Skinner")
 - a. Objections: Lack of scholarly adoption and failure to explain why the name persisted across generations
 - 3. Verbal Root Theory (*'Abar* - "To Cross Over")
 - a. Explanation: Abraham's defining act of faith in crossing the Euphrates/Balak rivers and leaving his homeland
 - b. Grammatical alignment: Explains the prefixing of the definite article (*Ha-ivri* = "the one who crossed over")

V. The Habiru Problem and Archaeological Evidence

- A. Definition of *Habiru* as an Akkadian Socio-Political/Geopolitical Term
- B. The Amarna Letters (~1370 BC)
 - 1. Correspondence from Canaanite vassal kings (e.g., Jebus/Jerusalem) requesting Egyptian military aid against Habiru incursions
- C. Scholarly Debate and Evangelical Arguments
 - 1. Appeal to Amarna letters as archaeological proof of the Joshua conquest
 - 2. Methodological caution: Distinguishing socio-political classification from ethnic/linguistic identity before equating *Habiru* with *Ivri*