

Old Testament Backgrounds: People Groups, Habiru, and Arameans

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Abstract

This lecture by Dr. Don Fowler investigates the historical and ethnic identity of the Hebrews by evaluating the connection between Abraham and the Habiru, concluding that "Habiru" was a socio-economic designation for societal outsiders across Mesopotamia rather than a distinct ethnic group or nation. Dr. Fowler then addresses the chronological gap regarding the Arameans, whose archaeological record emerges around 1100 BC despite their prominent presence in early Genesis traditions. Finally, by examining linguistic, geographical, and biblical textual evidence—including the Hebrew designation "Chasdu" and the river-crossing route through Haran—he demonstrates that Abraham originated from a northern Mesopotamian Ur in Aram-Naharaim rather than the southern Sumerian city of Ur.

Outline

I. Introduction and Examination of the Habiru

A. Connection between Abraham, Hebrews, and Habiru

1. Querying if Abraham's designation as a "Hebrew" (Genesis 14:13) derives from the term "Habiru"

B. Historical and Geographical Attestation of Habiru

1. Usage in Akkadian texts during Rim-Sin/Warad-Sin periods in Mesopotamia (~1800 BC)
2. Appearance at Nuzi (~1500 BC) referencing individuals like Adiglat and Sinbalti
3. Frequent occurrence in the 14th century BC Amarna letters from Palestine
4. Sumerian counterpart Shara-igizi dating back to the 3rd millennium BC (a millennium before Abraham)

C. Socio-Ethnic Nature of the Term "Habiru"

1. Habiru was not a nation, tribe, or ethnic group, but a socio-economic status
2. Applied to transnational, fringe-of-society individuals and outsiders (analogous to gypsies)
3. Conclusion: Some Habiru may have been Hebrews, but not all Habiru were Hebrews

D. Linguistic Distinction Between Hebrew and Habiru

1. Phonetic similarity between Hebrew and Habiru is likely a linguistic coincidence
2. "Hebrew" likely derives from crossing over from Mesopotamia to Palestine ('Abar)
3. Amarna letter references (e.g., King of Jerusalem asking for 10-15 troops against Habiru) do not match Joshua's major military invasion

II. The Historical Significance and Problem of the Arameans

A. Crucial Importance of the Arameans in Old Testament Studies

1. Fundamental to understanding the patriarchal origins of Israel
2. Restrained Assyrian westward expansion for nearly 300 years
3. Major geopolitical rival during the Divided Monarchy
4. Linguistic impact: Portions of Genesis, Ezra, Daniel, and Jeremiah written in Aramaic
5. Patriarchal identification: Jacob explicitly designated as a "wandering Aramean" (Deuteronomy 26:5)

B. The Chronological Discrepancy

1. Critical/Archaeological consensus: Earliest explicit mention of ethnic Arameans occurs under Tiglath-Pileser I (~1100 BC)
2. Biblical record: Genesis places Arameans and the Aramaic language in the patriarchal era (~2000 BC)

III. Historical Toponyms and Geographical Distribution of Aram

A. Ancient Toponyms of Northern Mesopotamia

1. Padan Aram ("Field of Aram") in Upper Syria/Mesopotamia
2. Aram-Naharaim ("Aram of the Two Rivers" — Euphrates and Balikh)

B. Archaeological Evidence for "Aram" as a Place Name

1. Naram-Sin of Akkad (c. 2300 BC) mentions Aram in the upper Euphrates
2. Documented in Drehem archives (2000 BC), Mari texts (1800 BC), Alalakh tablets (1700 BC), and Ugarit (1400 BC)
3. Conclusion: Place names containing "Aram" existed a millennium prior to Tiglath-Pileser I

C. Current Scholarly State

1. Prof. Lawson Younger's comprehensive study on Aramean origins
2. Distinction between ancient place names ("Aram") and early non-archaeologically attested spoken Aramaic

IV. Resolving Patriarchal Origins: Northern Ur vs. Southern Ur

A. The Problem of Patriarchal Travel Routes (Genesis 11:27–31)

1. Traditional view places Abraham's birthplace at Ur of the Chaldees in southern Sumer
2. Route problem: Traveling from southern Ur to Canaan via Haran required unnecessary, complex river crossings across the Euphrates and Balikh with hundreds of people and livestock

B. Textual and Translational Analysis of "Ur of the Chaldees"

1. Hebrew text reads Ur Chasdu (or Kasdim), not the Greek "Chaldees"
2. "Chaldees" introduced via Septuagint (LXX) translators in 3rd century BC who only knew the famous southern city of Ur
3. In Abraham's era (c. 2100 BC), southern Ur was part of Sumer/Shinar; the term "Chaldeans" did not exist until after 1000 BC

C. Evidence for a Northern Origin of Abraham

1. Personal Name Arguments: Relatives Serug, Nahor, and Terah match names of ancient northern Mesopotamian cities near Padan Aram
2. Geographical and Logistic Logic: Haran served as a major river-crossing hub (cuneiform sign representing crossing barges) for journeys from east to west in the north
3. Biblical References to Homeland:
 - a. Abraham's servant sent to Aram-Naharaim / City of Nahor for Isaac's wife (Genesis 24:10)
 - b. Jacob sent to Padan Aram to Bethel's household for a wife (Genesis 28:2)
 - c. Ebla archives confirm the existence of a northern city named Ur
 - d. Joshua 24:2–3 places patriarchal ancestry explicitly beyond the Euphrates in Aram-Naharaim

V. Conclusion

A. Synthesis of Patriarchal Identity

1. Abraham originated from a northern Mesopotamian Ur in Padan Aram/Aram-Naharaim
2. Israelite forefathers possessed proto-Aramean or Aramean socio-ethnic extraction
3. Preserves the historical veracity and internal geographic consistency of Genesis