

Background Characters in the Old Testament Story and History

Lesson #1 for October 2, 2010

Scriptures: Genesis 39:6-12; Joshua 3:9-17; 1 Samuel 24:1-6; 1 Kings 12:1-16; Job 1:1-12.

1. The essence of history is stories. To a Christian it is His story. Jesus was a great storyteller. Many of His parables were actual stories told about experiences that were well known to His audience. "This [the story of the good Samaritan] had been an actual occurrence, and was known to be exactly as represented." (*RH*, January 1, 1895 par. 7; *Reflecting Christ* 229.4)
2. In the lessons for this series, we will focus on background characters in the Old Testament. Some of them were women, some power brokers, some merely servants, but some were royalty. They were living ordinary human lives. Sometimes, they were clearly doing what was right; sometimes, clearly what was wrong. But often, they were living lives on the border, and it was not always easy to tell whether they were right or wrong.
3. So, why were these bit players mentioned in the context of the whole great controversy? Did their lives really matter? Do we even notice them as we read through Scripture? We live in an age where people have grown accustomed to sound bites. We say, "Just give us the facts." Without taking time to listen to a lot of detail, we often make judgments. And often, we want to see whether something will actually work before we consider trying it. How do such people living in the 21st century judge our personal lives? Can we get them to pay any attention to bit players in an ancient drama?
4. When studying stories, letters, or almost any document, we must remember that it is the context which gives meaning to the words. Reading is bringing meaning to words. This means that when studying these Old Testament background characters, we must reconstruct the context as far as possible. Then, we must ask certain questions. Why was this story told in the Old Testament? Why was this particular character mentioned by name? What does his/her part add to the overall picture? What does the story add to our understanding of the great controversy? Why did the authors of these lessons choose these particular characters? What characters would you have chosen?
5. Our memory verse, 2 Timothy 3:16,17, reminds us that "Every inspired Scripture has its use. . . ." (*NEB*) Paul knew that there were other writings (*scripture* means "writing") going around that claimed to be inspired, but which were not. We know that when writing this passage, Paul was speaking of the Old Testament primarily. But, already by the end of Paul's life, Peter was referring to Paul's writings as Scripture. (2 Peter 3:16) So, who decided which books should be included in Scripture? In general, those writings which the people of the Christian churches found to be most useful and reliable ended up in our Bible. Apparently, Jesus recognized the existence of an Old Testament Canon in His day. (Luke 24:44 - The Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms)
6. While facts and statistics may be very important in our world today, they never move us as do stories. Furthermore, facts and statistics alone can never answer life's most important questions. While the Bible characters we will be studying may not always demonstrate sterling characters, nevertheless, they were real people in real stories relating to a real God. This is in stark contrast to our world today when even what we see on television is often dubbed or modified, and we can never be sure that we can believe even what we "see with our own eyes"!
7. In Scripture there are at least two plots in every story. A plot is a "succession of events that lead to a conclusion." A personal plot would mean something like a person is born, he/she lives his/her life, and he/she dies. But, when dealing with these biblical stories, there is also the story of the great controversy going on behind the scenes—God acting and the Devil

acting; it is not always easy to tell by looking at the foreground actions and story exactly who has the upper hand.

In the annals of human history, the growth of nations, the rise and fall of empires, appear as if dependent on the will and prowess of man; the shaping of events seems, to [500] a great degree, to be determined by his power, ambition, or caprice. But in the word of God the curtain is drawn aside, and we behold, above, behind, and through all the play and counterplay of human interest and power and passions, the agencies of the All-merciful One, silently, patiently working out the counsels of His own will. {PK 499.4}

8. An obvious case in Scripture is the story of Job. When we read Job 1&2, the separate plots are directly told. God and the Devil were in an all-out battle for the loyalty of the universe; Job was at center stage. Who is going to win this particular great controversy battle? God stated at the beginning that Job was a righteous man who could be trusted. The Devil claimed (Job 4:17) that God did not even trust His own angels—such as Lucifer—much less a feeble mortal human being! He asserted that Job could never be trusted and that the only reason he obeyed God was because God bribed him. Then, as the story unfolded, the Devil inflicted the worst kind of havoc on the life of Job. Finally, with God’s permission the Devil attacked Job himself. And what was the conclusion? In the depths of depression, Job said, “Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him.” (Job 13:15, *NKJV*) By the time we get to the end of the story, God was able to say triumphantly to Job’s accusers, “You did not speak the truth about me, as my servant Job did!” (Job 42:7,8, *GNB*) How often does God have the opportunity to make such a statement about any of us human beings? What about Moses? Abraham? Enoch? Elijah? Did Job ever learn who sent all that trouble? Many Christians today deny God’s ability to predict the future. But, Job’s story is one proof that God can. They believe that if God can foretell the future, that would destroy our freedom.
9. Read the story of Huldah in 2 Kings 22:11-20 and 2 Chronicles 34:19-28. Why was the Bible essentially unknown at that time? It is interesting to note that Huldah lived near the end of Judah’s history, about 20-30 years before the nation went into exile. At the time when the chief men of Israel were sent to consult with her, there were at least six other known prophets living in Jerusalem or the immediate area: Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Zephaniah, Obadiah, Habakkuk, and perhaps Nahum. Why do you suppose those leading men of the nation were sent to Huldah instead of to one of those other prophets—the male prophets? We know essentially nothing about Huldah. But, she must have been clearly recognized as a prophet in the Jerusalem area. We should note that God knew her name, her husband’s name, her address, her husband’s occupation, and He led those leading men to consult with her. We should note that there were several prophetesses in the New Testament. (Acts 21:9)
10. How are biblical stories different from other stories? Are they still relevant today? This story happened some 2600 years ago. Does a story which comes from the Bible have a different level of authority than a secular story? When we dig deeper into those biblical stories, do we discover things that are of real value? Does the Holy Spirit give us more help when we are trying to dig deeper? Do those stories help us in living our daily lives? Is it useful to recognize each and every time when God acts in human history? Why was it that in those times of crisis, God sent so many prophets? At other times, there apparently were none?
11. Consider the story of Ruth and Boaz. (Ruth 4:1,2) Review the story of Naomi. Why didn’t Ruth have a child by her first husband? If she had had a child, she would have remained in Moab. Why did Boaz go to the city gate of Bethlehem when he wanted to perform official business or make a verbal contract? Shouldn’t he have gone to the county courthouse or at least to the mayor’s office? There were no such institutions in his day. The city gate was a place where one had an opportunity to meet the most important people of the city as they were coming and going. There were no phones, no e-mail, no radio or television, and being at the city gate was

the best way to contact others in the area. This detail helps us to understand the situation at that time. Boaz knew how to handle business.

12. Read 1 Samuel 24:1-6. This was the first of two occasions when David had the opportunity to kill Saul but did not. Saul had been trying to kill David for almost 10 years! Saul knew—in fact, they both knew—that God had chosen David to be the next king. Saul was doing everything he could to prevent that from taking place. What was the Devil’s role in that interaction? Since the Devil knew that David was God’s choice to be the next king, he was determined to destroy him if at all possible. But, we learn a great deal about the character of David when we realize that on these two occasions, he did not take advantage of the situation and kill Saul. These stories quickly spread through Saul’s army and to the people of Israel and helped prepare the way for their later acceptance of David as king.
13. Read Genesis 39:6-12. Joseph had been a relatively spoiled young man in his father’s house. But, he was suddenly thrown into a completely different situation. As a slave he worked hard practicing the principles that he learned from his father and from God; and he quickly rose to be a master in Potiphar’s house. We know almost nothing about Potiphar’s wife. We do not know if she was young and attractive or older and not so good looking. We do not know whether she was motivated just by sexual desire or by jealousy because of Joseph’s position. There is at least one thing quite certain: if Potiphar had really believed her accusation against Joseph, Joseph would probably have been killed immediately instead of being thrown into prison. Joseph’s life was probably preserved by his determination to faithfully follow God’s advice.
14. In each of the two stories just mentioned, we have only the information which the writer chose to reveal. Does his view—recognizing that he was writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit—give us a biased report? If we knew every detail of each story, would we have a different opinion? When reading secular stories, does the bias of the writer become a major issue? Are sacred stories which are included in Scripture beyond that bias? The histories of the surrounding nations of those times never tell of mishaps/mistakes to/by their leaders!
15. All the way through history, we recognize that there are continually at least two plots going on. To what extent does the larger plot of the great controversy—over the character of God and His government—affect our individual daily lives? Does understanding the plot of the great controversy help us to give meaning to our lives? Are we certain that God has a wonderful plan for each one of us? Do our lives reflect God’s plan for us?
16. Think of the span of Joshua’s life. In his childhood and youth, he lived as a slave in Egypt. During the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, he apparently served as an assistant to Moses. Just before they entered the land of Canaan, he became Moses’ replacement. Joshua saw miraculous events take place. He had angels of the Lord appear to him on more than one occasion. And apparently, he had sufficient moral impact and force of character and leadership that the nation remained more or less loyal to God even through the ends of the lives of his associates.
17. Read Joshua 3:9-17. What did this miracle say to the children of Israel? Did they need this reminder of the fact that the God of their fathers who helped them cross the Red Sea was still active on their behalf? It is clear that as long as they precisely followed God’s directions, they were successful in virtually everything they did. But, it was not long until they were worshiping other gods and following the customs of the nations around them; the results were disastrous. (Judges 2,3) Finally, even the writer of Judges had to admit that God had essentially faded from their minds. (Judges 17:6; 25:25.) What does that tell us about the state of affairs at that time? They were intermarrying with the local people (Judges 3:3-7) and following their pagan religious practices. What does it say to us about compromise with the world in our day?
18. Read 1 Samuel 8:1-22. Unfortunately, Samuel seemed to be no better at raising sons than

was Eli, his predecessor. As faithful as Samuel himself had been, he did not seem to be able to pass those traits on to his children. That led to the very unfortunate demand by the people to have a king. What was so wrong with asking for a king? Who was supposed to be their real King? Who were they rejecting when they asked for a king?

19. The first king chosen for them was the kind of king for which they were looking. He was tall and handsome and appeared to be a good warrior. But, he obviously thought his own opinion was superior to that of God's guidance. When he found out that God had already chosen someone else to succeed him, he spent 10 years of intermittent madness trying to eliminate David.
20. Read 1 Samuel 31:1-7; 1 Chronicles 10:1-7; and compare 1 Chronicles 10:13,14. How would you explain 1 Chronicles 10:13,14?
21. Despite his foibles, the reign of David was the high point of Israel's history. The early years of Solomon, his son, were also a very high point. But, as Solomon turned away from following God's counsel and began to worship other gods following the pleadings of his many wives, things rapidly deteriorated until the disaster that came under his son, Rehoboam. (1 Kings 12:1-16)
22. The history of Israel, the northern kingdom, from that time on was an almost nonstop downhill slide into oblivion. The history of Judah was not much better, but there were some examples of kings who chose to follow God such as Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah.
23. Reading these stories, one would probably come quickly to the conclusion that God was a failure with His people. Many Bible stories are impossible to explain without some understanding of the great controversy. Is that why other churches have so much trouble with the Old Testament?
24. What is your understanding of the basic essence of the great controversy? In each of the stories that we will discuss and study this quarter, what was God's role? What was the Devil's role? Is it clear in your mind?
25. Review what you know about the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Have we had high points and low points in our history? How do you understand the following statement by Ellen White:

We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history. We are now a strong people, if we will put our trust in the Lord; for we are handling the mighty truths of the word of God. We have everything to be thankful for.—*General Conference Bulletin*, 1893, p. 24 (see *Life Sketches*, p. 196; *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 31; 3SM 162.3)

26. Is the Devil a good storyteller? Think of all the people in our day who are making millions of dollars from made-up stories. By reading such stories, are we blurring the line between truth and falsehood in our own minds? What are we doing to make sure that we do not blur that line?
27. For those who believe that there is merit in the great-controversy, trust-healing model of the plan of salvation, this series of lessons will be a great opportunity to test our reading of the Old Testament stories. How will you do? Can we be sure that God is at work in these stories?

© 2010, Kenneth Hart, MD, MA, MPH. Permission is hereby granted for any noncommercial use of these materials. Free distribution is encouraged. It is our goal to see them spread as widely and freely as possible. If you would like to use them for your class or even make copies of portions of them, feel free to do so. We always enjoy hearing about how you might be using the materials, and we might even want to share good ideas with others. So, let us know. Info@theox.org

Last Modified: August 22, 2010

Z:\My Documents\WP\SS\TG-Hart\SS-OTBackChar\SS-1-OTBackChar-2010_10_02-2010_08_12-Fin+.wpd