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Background Characters in the Old Testament

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Introduction Shadow Figures¹

Neither Bible history nor the history of the world is fully contained in statistics,² charts, or numbers. History usually is told through stories. Jesus Himself was a storyteller. He told His stories with great power too (Matthew 7:28; Matthew 13:3).

This quarter's guide is all about stories. But what may surprise you is what they are not about. They are not always about the famous "stars" of the Bible. They are not about Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah, Daniel in the lions' den, or David and Goliath. Instead, we will read about people who lived in the background. They are the people of the Bible that we often forget.

Our focus this quarter will be on background characters³ in the Old Testament. There are good guys in the stories whom we will meet. And then, there are not-so-good guys. Not much is written about either group of people. But enough is written about these characters for us to learn from them. And just who are they? They are power brokers,⁴ servants, and kings and queens.

These characters face problems in their stories that are not very different from the problems we face today. Their culture⁵ and background might be different from ours. But they, too, felt the pain of living in a world damaged (hurt) by sin. It is a world caught in the great war between good and evil. What makes this battle so difficult is that it is not always easy to know what is good and what is evil. This is because the line between them can seem blurry (unclear).

Often the lives of these background characters do not seem so important. Many of us may feel this way about our own lives. It is easy to think that in the big picture we are not important. But in the end, the Bible's background characters made it into God's master story. We can learn things from their stories that can help us write different and better stories for ourselves.

Of course, it is not always easy to pay attention to the supporting cast (characters in the background). When we read or listen to a story, we usually follow the most important parts and pay more attention to the main characters.⁶ That is common and easy to understand. This is why we are going to use this quarter to study the characters who have small roles in the Bible. By doing this, we hope they will give us a deeper understanding of the Bible.

1. shadow figures—people that can be seen only as shapes or outlines.

2. statistics—numbers that represent pieces of information (such as information about how often something is done or how common something is).

3. background characters—people in a story, book, or play who are not the most important characters (people) to that story.

4. brokers—people whose job is to help others reach agreements, to make deals, or to buy and sell property.

5. culture—the beliefs, customs, arts, and so on, of a particular society, group, place, or time.

6. main characters—people in a story who are the most important characters (people) to that story.

Unfortunately, in our modern world, we are losing our ability to pay attention. Too much action on the screen, too many quick cuts in a video clip, too much noise from the radio. We miss so much. And this is where the background characters—or the shadow figures—of the Old Testament can help us. We will study their stories carefully. As they speak to us from the pages of the Bible, we will discover (find out) the joy of learning new truths from God’s Word (Bible).

Finally, we will look over the shoulders of the Bible writers as they bring the supporting cast to life. As they do this, it is good to remember the power of our own lives and examples. More than anything else, people in the twenty-first century want proof that something works before they put time and effort into learning more about it. For example, our neighbors, friends, and family first want to know our life story before they want to know about our doctrines⁷ and beliefs.

Our stories can be powerful tools in our witness⁸ to others about what God has done for us. As with these background characters of the Bible, we can become part of the great story of salvation.⁹ We might not be famous or powerful, but we are still an important part of God’s great plan of salvation for all the world.

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7. doctrines—church beliefs.

8. witness—a statement of a person’s beliefs about God.

9. salvation—God’s plan for saving sinners from eternal (without end) death; the gift of eternal life.