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How to Read the Bible

Part 4

by Walter F. Specht

The reading of the Old Testament may appropriately begin with the first book, called Genesis. The name is derived from a Greek word meaning, among other things, "origin" or "birth." Genesis is the book of origins. It tells of the origin of the world, plant and animal life, mankind, marriage, the Sabbath, evil on this planet, nations, races, languages, etc. In the opening words of this great document it does not speak of God as an abstraction, but as a God who acts. "In the beginning God created." Its emphasis on God's creating activity stresses the truth that God is the

ultimate source and explanation of the universe and of man. Man does not have an independent existence. His life is dependent upon the originating and sustaining power of God.

God is not only the creator and sustainer of the universe, but He is set forth in the Bible also as the Lord of history. History is the stage on which God has revealed Himself to mankind. The beginning of this revelatory history is in the book of Genesis. There we are told that God chose Abraham to be the father of a people through whom His purposes were to be carried out in the world. "I will make of you a

great nation," God promised, "and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (Gen. 12:2). He also promised to give him and his descendants "all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession" (Gen. 17:8). That promise was, in turn, renewed to the patriarchs Isaac (Gen. 26:3, 4), and Jacob (Gen. 28:13, 14), and the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel. The final chapters of Genesis do not picture the Israelites in Canaan, but in the land of Egypt.

After finishing Genesis it would be well to continue with the account of the sacred history of God's chosen people as recorded in Exodus and Numbers and other historical books. Exodus opens with the enslavement of the Hebrews by the Egyptians. The

Exodus comes from a Greek word meaning "going out."

name of the book comes from a Greek word meaning, "going out." Through the unparalleled leadership of Moses, the divinely chosen "man of God," the Lord rescued His people from the "iron furnace" of Egypt, "with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm" (Deut. 5:14). By this great act of deliverance and redemption God made Himself known to Israel (Ex. 6:6, 7). These emancipated slaves were led to Mt. Sinai, where God entered into a covenant relationship with them, and where the laws governing their life and worship were promulgated. On condition of their faith and loyalty to Him, and obedience to His law, their Redeemer-God offers Himself and His resources as a permanent relationship. They were to be set apart from all people as God's own special possession, the crown jewel of God. It was a summons not merely to privilege, but to the task of representing God's character to the world. While they willingly accepted the conditions of the covenant, they did not long abide by them.

The sad story of their repeated distrust, rebellions, and failures is recorded in the book of Numbers. The meaning of the Hebrew name of the book, "in the wilderness," is descriptive of its contents. It covers the sad

wilderness wanderings of the chosen people from Sinai to the borders of Canaan, lasting some 38 years.

It is worthwhile also to read the three farewell discourses of Moses, delivered on the plains of Moab, just before his death, which are embodied in the book of Deuteronomy. Here is oratory at its highest and best by a great man, now 120 years of age. The purpose of the messages he gave was to inspire intelligent loyalty to their covenant-God, through a review of His providential guidance in their past history, and through an exposition of the principles of the holy precepts He had given them.

Shortly before Moses' death, Joshua was publicly inaugurated as the new leader of God's people (Num. 27:18-23). The book of Joshua gives an account of the conquest and settlement of the land of Canaan. It closes with two farewell messages in which Joshua strongly appeals to the people "to cleave to the Lord" (Josh. 23:8), and "serve him in sincerity and faithfulness" (Josh. 24:14).

Unfortunately, after Joshua's death the Israelites forgot the covenanted promises they made. They neglected their religious heritage and compromised their faith with the paganism of their neighbors. As the result, the Lord allowed foreign powers to invade and oppress them. But when they turned to God in repentance, He raised up deliverers for them in the person of the judges. The book of Judges presents the repeated cycle through which the community passed: failure, oppression, repentance, and deliverance.

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Samuel was born in answer to the earnest prayers of a godly woman, Hannah, who vowed that if God would give her a son, she would dedicate him to God and His service. Samuel's father was a priest, but Samuel was reared and trained for the priesthood by Eli. While a mere lad he was called to be a prophet of God. He was one of Israel's great prophets of the early period and was also made a judge. But

when he became old, the people demanded that they be given a king. Samuel felt grieved and rejected, but God commanded him to yield to the popular demand and anoint Saul as the first Hebrew king. After Saul's rejection because of his repeated failures, Samuel anointed David to head the monarchy, though he did not ascend the throne until after Saul's death.

David's psalms have exerted an unmeasurable influence on the religious life of both Jews and Christians.

David had been Saul's court musician and is designated "the sweet psalmist of Israel" (2 Sam. 23:1). We remember him today primarily for his religious poems. Seventy-three of the Psalms in our Old Testament have superscriptions which attribute them to David. He has thus exerted an unmeasurable influence on the religious life of both Jews and Christians.

The two books of Kings may be divided into three parts. The first eleven chapters of 1 Kings give the history of the Hebrew monarchy from the last days of David to the death of Solomon. 1 Kings 12:1 to 2 Kings 17:41 give the history of the divided kingdoms from the disruption of 931 B.C. to the fall of Samaria and the end of the Northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. The remainder of 2 Kings (chapters 18 to 25) gives the history of the Southern kingdom of Judah from Hezekiah to the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. and the Babylonian Exile. These books also give us the story of two giant prophets who ministered primarily to the Northern kingdom—Elijah (1 Kings 17:1-19:21; 2 Kings 2) and Elisha (1 Kings 19:19-21; 2 Kings 2-13).

More than half of the material in the books of Chronicles parallels the history given in other books, particularly the books of Samuel and Kings. In dealing with the kings of the divided monarchy, however, they confine their attention to the successors on David's throne in Jerusalem, i.e., the kings of Judah, down to the Babylonian Exile.

Into this historical framework the prophetic and some of the poetic books need to be fitted. It is customary for the prophets in their writings to tie their prophetic ministry in with the reigns of the kings of Israel and/or

Judah. It is, therefore, advisable to read them as they fit in with the story of redemptive history. The greatest of the Hebrew prophets, Isaiah, for example, was called to the prophetic office near the close of Uzziah's reign in Judah and carried on his work for more than half a century. Jeremiah, another giant among the prophets, prophesied during the last days of Judah and witnessed the fall of Jerusalem and the Exile. Ezekiel and Daniel were prophets to the Jews in Babylonian captivity. The spiritual value of these prophetic writings is beyond computation. Their messages still speak today.

We get some insight into the condition of the Hebrews in exile from the historical portions of the book of Daniel and from the book of Esther during the Persian period. The story of the return of some of the exiles to Judah and the reconstruction of the city of Jerusalem and the temple is given in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The work was fostered by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. Our English Old Testament closes with the book of Malachi. It was written at a time when the priests and people had become apathetic, self-complacent, and cynical.

The Old Testament contains a whole library of religious classics of great literary beauty.

The Old Testament contains a whole library of religious classics of great literary beauty. These books, particularly in the Greek form, molded the religious ideas and vocabulary of the writers of the New Testament. Some of the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith, such as the doctrine of God, are firmly based on Old Testament teachings. No Christian can afford to be ignorant of the Old Testament. These books did not have their source in "the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pet. 1:21). They are, therefore, "profitable for teaching, reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16).

All Bible references are taken from the Revised Standard Version.