

LIVING LESSONS

From the Pages of the Bible



VOLUME 1

Old Testament Personalities

SAMUEL



Illustration by G. Dore

About 1140 B.C., when God still ruled Israel through judges, there was a Levite named Elkanah who had two wives. One, Hannah, was favored of her husband, but had no children. The other was Peninnah.

Each year the family journeyed to Shiloh to worship the Eternal. This is where Joshua, about 300 years before, had placed the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant containing the Law of God. And each year Peninnah would chide Hannah for having no children.

Praying for a son

When the time came once again for the trip, Hannah was provoked to tears.

While at Shiloh, she prayed earnestly to God for a son, vowing that if God would grant her petition, she would make the child a Nazarite, dedicated to serving the Eternal all the days of his life (see Num. 6:2-8). And as she silently prayed, Eli the priest thought she was drunk, for she was moving her lips but making no sound (I Sam. 1:13).

He rebuked her, but she explained her grief. And Eli said, "May the God of Israel grant you your prayer." That day Hannah went out from the tabernacle with complete faith that God would give her a son. And God did.

She named the child Samuel (meaning *asked of God*), and when he was weaned, about 3 years old, she took him to Eli. There he grew up ministering to the Eternal God (priestly duties). He wore the linen garment of a priest, and each year his mother made him a new coat.

Eli's wicked sons

Now Eli was not a young man. He had already judged Israel nearly 30 years and had given most of the administrative duties over to his sons, Hophni and Phinehas. But they were corrupt.

Whenever the people came to make an offering, Hophni and Phinehas took the best portion of the meat for themselves. The leftovers

were presented to God. They also committed fornication with the women who served at the door of the tabernacle.

Eli scolded them about their behavior, but he was too old and weak to administer discipline. They paid no attention. By the law of Moses, they should have been taken out and stoned to death for polluting the tabernacle and sinning against God.

God sent a prophet to Eli, condemning him for allowing his sons to behave so wickedly. The man prophesied that Eli's priestly line would be destroyed except for a remnant, and that Hophni and Phinehas would die on the same day. In the place of this Levitical line, God would raise up a new priest, one who would be faithful.

God speaks to Samuel

Samuel was yet a child, but he was loved by both God and the people he served. Unknown to him, he was being groomed by God to take over the priesthood after Eli's death.

What happened next was remarkable, indeed. God had not spoken directly with men for many years, and even the word of a prophet was rare. But now He spoke directly to young Samuel (I Sam. 3:1-4).

God called to Samuel just after he and Eli had gone to bed for the night. Upon hearing his name, the boy thought Eli was calling and ran to his room. But the old priest told him he hadn't called and sent him back to bed. This happened twice more before Eli realized the voice may have been from God. He advised Samuel to await God's message.

The lad did as he was told, and the Eternal God came and stood by his bed. There He pronounced again the punishment on the house of Eli. He told Samuel that Eli had sinned by not taking action against his own sons, and now nothing could make the house of Eli clean (verse 14).

In the morning Samuel obediently related to Eli all that had happened. Eli simply said, "It is the Eternal: let Him do what seems good to him."

Through the years that followed, God continued to appear and speak to Samuel in Shiloh, and the young man grew to adulthood holding God's word in high esteem. All Israel

knew he was appointed to be a great prophet.

Philistines capture the ark

Now the Philistines were oppressing Israel and slew about 4,000 men in one battle. Bewildered, the elders of Israel asked Hophni and Phinehas to carry the ark of God into battle, hoping this would give them the victory.

But the Philistines won the battle, captured the ark and slew Hophni and Phinehas (on the same day, as prophesied). When Eli heard the tragic news of the ark, he fell over backwards off his bench and broke his neck. He died at 98 years of age, leaving Samuel in charge of the priesthood.

The Philistines, after rough treatment by God, eagerly sent the ark back to Israel seven months later (see I Sam. 5 and 6). After a brief and unfortunate stay at an Israeli town called Beth-shemesh, the ark was taken to Kirjath-jearim, to the house of Abinadab, where it remained until the time of King David.

Samuel preaches repentance

The Philistines had now oppressed Israel for about 20 years, and the people lamented to God for deliverance. (Samson evidently had just begun his own private war against them in the southwest.)

Samuel knew God had shown Israel no mercy because of the wickedness of both the people and the priesthood under Eli. The people were bowing down to the false gods, Baalim and Ashtaroth, and the priests had made a mockery of the office, intent only on serving their own pleasure (I Sam. 7:3-4).

So Samuel spoke to all Israel. He told them to *change* — to purge the land of false gods and to turn to the Eternal God, serving Him with all their hearts. Then, he said, God would deliver Israel from the Philistines.

The people obeyed Samuel and destroyed their idols.

Then he called all Israel to Mizpeh for prayer. He spoke before the people and poured water out upon the ground before God as a symbol of His Holy Spirit (see John 7:37). Then the people fasted and prayed, repenting of their national sins. They

SAUL'S BLESSING (opposite page) by Samuel marked God's choice of the first king of Israel. From I Samuel 9, 10.

God told Samuel to do as the people requested, saying, “They have not rejected you, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them” (I Sam. 8:7). So on that day, the people rejected God as their king.

began to serve God once more, and He heard their prayers.

The Philistines sent a great army toward Mizpeh, intending to smash any possible uprising, but God sent powerful thunder and lightning directly into the Philistine camp. They were thrown into confusion and defeated.

This marked the first military victory for Israel in 20 years. They even recaptured some of their lands along the Mediterranean Sea. The Philistines didn't dare to fight against God's people as long as Samuel governed.

Samuel, in the meantime, worked tirelessly serving all Israel. He traveled a regular circuit — from Ramah, his home, to Bethel, Gilgal and Mizpeh — each year to make judgments for the people. For God was king in Israel, and Samuel was his administrator (I Sam. 7:15-17). As long as the people obeyed God, there was no oppression by the Philistines or Amorites.

God's government rejected

Samuel served Israel long and well. Besides making his circuit every year, he also apparently taught a group of prophets at Geba (I Sam. 10:5, 10). He was dedicated to keeping the people directed toward God.

As he grew older, however, the rigorous duties of his office were more than he could handle alone. He made his two sons, Joel and Abiah, judges in the south of Israel, but they began to misuse the office by taking bribes and polluting justice.

Worried about the future, the elders began to wonder who would rule after Samuel's death. He couldn't live forever, and his sons were corrupt. There was also some fear about a possible invasion by Nahash, king of Ammon.

Up to this time — from Moses to Samuel (nearly 400 years) — Israel had been a *theocracy*. God had been their king. When they served Him, times were good. When they disobeyed and served other gods, He

abandoned them to foreign oppression. Now many of them began to reason that it was time to have a *monarchy*, a human king of their own who would provide constant protection against anyone at any time who threatened their security.

The elders, lacking faith in God, decided this was in the best interests of all Israel. So they met with Samuel to make their request official. He knew what they wanted was wrong, but prayed to God about it.

God told Samuel to do as the people requested, saying, “They have not rejected you, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them” (I Sam. 8:7). So on that day, the people rejected God as their king.

Through Samuel, God told the people what to expect under a human king. Their young men would be made into soldiers and laborers for the government. Their daughters would be drafted into service as military cooks and suppliers.

There would be heavy taxes to maintain the government and armies. Their servants and animals would be taken for any work the king desired, and eventually the people would all end up servants to the government. Then they would cry out because of oppression, expecting God to hear.

Nevertheless, the people refused to listen to Samuel, and were promised a king.

Samuel establishes the monarchy

God, in reviewing all Israel, told Samuel that a young man named Saul, of the tribe of Benjamin, would be king. Through a series of events, Saul was introduced to Samuel and anointed. Later, at a great public gathering, Saul's office was confirmed.

Some didn't like the choice and openly spoke out against it. But later, after God gave Saul his first military victory, Samuel called another meeting of all Israel, and all the tribes were united under Saul's leadership.

At this meeting, Samuel also made his very moving farewell speech to the people (I Sam. 12). He pointed out that God, when He had been their king, had always served them faithfully. And so had Samuel administered fairly.

He also told them they had behaved foolishly in wanting a human king, but if the people and the king obeyed God, all would be well. Disobedience, however, would surely bring God's wrath.

Then, calling on God to confirm his speech, he asked for thunder and rain. Black clouds suddenly gathered in the heavens. Thunder clapped, and it poured down rain.

The people were amazed and frightened of both God and Samuel, for it was the dry season, harvest time, and what they were seeing was a miracle. They admitted their sin. Yet they wanted Saul as king and asked Samuel to pray to God on their behalf.

Now Saul was humble in God's sight at first, but later he repeatedly sinned and disqualified himself from being king. While he yet held office, God chose the young shepherd, David, as his replacement. Samuel anointed him as God's chosen king when he was but a youth. It was years later, after the death of Saul, that David took control of the kingdom officially.

His last years

Samuel continued to judge Israel during this transition from a theocratic government to a monarchy. He worked hard to make the new government a success, consulting God at every turn. After the anointing of King Saul, he even wrote a book about how the kingdom ought to be run, for the benefit of both the king and the people (I Sam. 10:25).

Samuel died during the reign of Saul, and all Israel mourned him. He was buried at his home in Ramah, the last judge of Israel and faithful to God all the years of his life.

Jonah was one of the most successful spokesmen God ever used, but he failed to appreciate his commission because he resented what God was doing through him.

Among the people God has called to thunder His messages to a rebellious mankind, the prophet Jonah may be unique throughout history.

Not necessarily because he, a lone Israelite, was sent to warn a large gentile city of God's coming punishment. Not because of his 72-hour adventure inside the belly of the great fish. And not because his book is the only one among the minor prophets that records a prophet's activities rather than his prophecies.

All these facts make Jonah singular enough, to be sure. But the most outstanding thing about Jonah is that, among all biblical prophets, he was *successful* in his mission. At Jonah's preaching the ancient metropolis of Nineveh repented of its sins and caused God to spare it, the Assyrian capital, from destruction.

Just as incredible, though, was Jonah's great anger and bitterness over this very success. Jonah never wanted to fulfill God's commission in the first place, and all the while God was working through him, he resented it. In Jonah's experience are several lessons for God's people today.

Jonah's mission

Jonah prophesied in northern Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II (792-753 B.C.). He foretold Israel's territorial expansion to roughly the area held during the time of David and Solomon (II Kings 14:25).

Israel was enjoying relative prosperity at the time, but it didn't mean God was pleased with the nation. The Israelites, God's elect group, and often blessed at other nations' expense, had sinned worse than the people God drove out of the promised land before them and had failed to be the good example God wanted them to be to the world. But Israel was not to escape retribution for its covenant

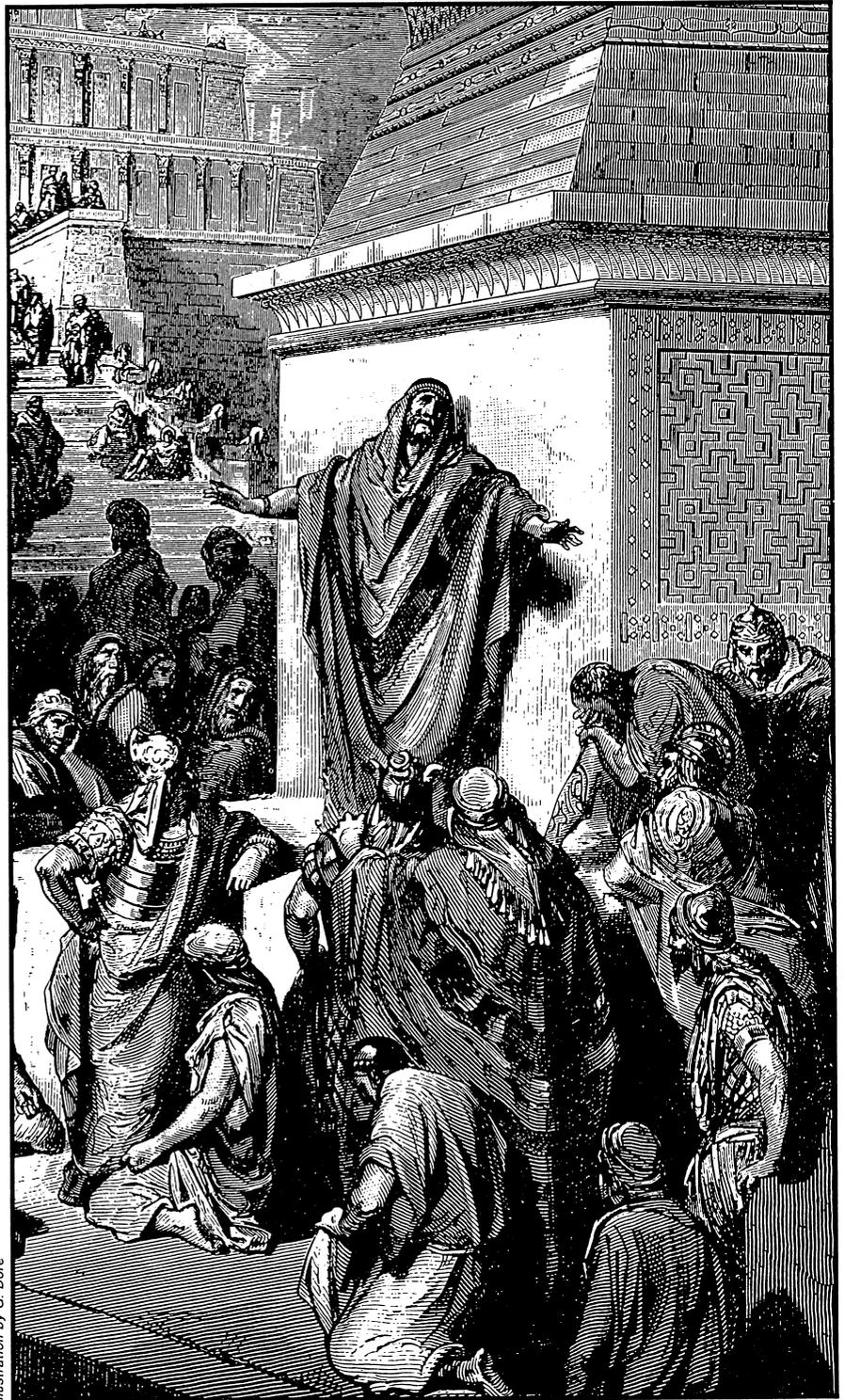


Illustration by G. Dore

JONAH

the Reluctant Prophet

breaking. God intended to use a Mesopotamian power to humble His nation (Amos 2:6-16, 5:27).

It was at this time that God commanded Jonah to pronounce His judgment on Nineveh. The son of Amittai may have suspected that God was going to use Assyria to chasten Israel. If Jonah's warning from God caused the Assyrians to repent and be spared, he would be instrumental in his own nation's downfall. So Jonah rebelled against God's every instruction, not seeing that the Creator had an overall plan in mind. Jonah didn't believe God knew what He was doing.

Jonah didn't trust God

God commanded Jonah to cry against Nineveh because of its evils, but Jonah went in the opposite direction on a ship bound for Tarshish. God continued to work with the reluctant prophet by sending a great wind to batter the vessel at sea. As the ship appeared to be headed for tragedy, the men aboard began to cry to their various gods for protection.

They roused Jonah, who of all things was asleep, and urged him to do likewise. When they cast lots to learn whose fault the tempest was, Jonah was singled out. Desperately, they asked him what to do to calm the raging waves.

And it appears Jonah would rather have died than do what God asked. He replied that they should cast him into the churning waters. How hopeless Jonah's rebellion had left him.

The mariners tried to row the ship to land, but in vain. They finally did as Jonah said they should and threw him into the deep. Even they realized that this act had been planned by Israel's God, and they asked the Eternal not to lay Jonah's fate to their charge (Jonah 1:14).

And God was working out a grand purpose. He had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was to remain in the creature's belly for three days and three nights. Later, in His own wicked generation, Jesus Christ would give only this sign of Jonah to prove He was the Son of God. After His murder, Christ was to be buried three days and three nights before being resurrected (Matt. 12:39-40).

This outstanding series of God-ordained events must have sobered Jonah somewhat, for he thanked God for rescuing him from what would have been a watery grave (Jonah 2:1-9). God then caused the fish to expel Jonah out onto dry land.

God again told Jonah to preach at Nineveh. By this time the prophet should have sensed that God's will was going to be done one way or another. Perhaps dejected, Jonah went on his way to the city.

God's anger turned

One of the most spectacular events recorded in the Bible followed. At Jonah's announcement of Nineveh's imminent fall, the entire community — from the king to the least beast in the herds — put on sackcloth and began fasting. The king ordered that every Ninevite abandon his violent ways, "Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?" (Jonah 3:9).

And though Jonah's message had been final, "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown," God saw how the Assyrians reacted and didn't overthrow them. God is not willing that any human should ever perish, and Christ recognized the Assyrians' repentance as real (Matt. 12:41).

Success! Jonah's effort had helped avert the destruction of one of the world's largest cities. Did he jump for joy and praise God for such a miracle?

Unfortunately, no. Jonah still failed to see that God's will, whatever it is, must be done. Instead he sat outside Nineveh, moping over what had happened.

Jonah missed the point

It was hot that day. So God, to teach Jonah a lesson, prepared a gourd to spring up and shade him, and the prophet was glad. But the next morning God prepared a worm to smite the gourd and make it wither. Then when the burning sun and the vehement east wind tormented Jonah, he wished he could die.

When God asked him if his anger was justified, he sneered, "I do well to be angry, even unto death" (Jonah 4:9). The book of Jonah ends with God explaining to the sullen prophet that everything had turned out well.

"Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right and their left hand: and also much cattle?" (verses 10-11).

Jonah had fulfilled God's plan. The Creator didn't have to destroy the populous Assyrian capital. But Jonah may never have gotten the point.

A lesson in trust

Jonah didn't understand that God really loves all mankind, not just Israel. God's ultimate goal is to bring all humans into His family. Israel failed to pioneer in that respect.

True, God did use Assyria to carry Israel's northern 10 tribes into captivity in 721 B.C. (to find out where those so-called "lost 10 tribes" went, write for our fascinating free booklet titled *The United States and Britain in Prophecy*). But Jonah failed to see God's overall plan. He refused to believe God could and would work everything out for the best and balked at delivering the message God gave him.

We must realize our insignificance compared to God. We were created to fulfill His will, and we will only be happy by doing so cheerfully, not in an attitude of doubt and resentment (1 Cor. 10:31, Rev. 4:11). God's people today have been given a message to deliver to a doomed world. And that message—mankind's ultimate hope—has far greater import than did Jonah's announcement 2,700 years ago.

Whether we're taking care of the large or small responsibilities in our daily lives or going forward in faith worldwide to announce the coming Kingdom of God, we should understand that our calling is a great privilege.

We must follow wherever and however God leads.

Then we won't be like Jonah, the reluctant prophet, who performed a unique mission for God but never appreciated his calling. He didn't put his heart into the work before him. It was Jonah, not God, who didn't know what he was doing.

Toward the end of the period of Judges (c. 1130 B.C.), about 50 years after Gideon, God punished Israel at the hand of the Philistines. He allotted the enemy 40 years to exact tribute (Judg. 13:1).

But God also planned a deliverer.

Birth of Samson — a miracle

God chose to bring a champion out of the tribe of Dan. He sent an angel to visit the barren wife of a man named Manoah, promising her a son. She was warned, however, that during her pregnancy she should abstain from wine, strong drink and any unclean food (Num. 6:2-8, Lev. 11), for the child would be a Nazarite unto God.

She was told that the youth should never have his hair cut or his beard shaven; and he would grow up to challenge the Philistines and begin to throw off their yoke of oppression.

The woman immediately ran and told her husband these things. But he was skeptical. He prayed to God to send the angel again, and God obliged. This time, as before, the angel appeared to the woman. She asked him to wait while she went and found her husband. So the man then heard the message with his own ears.

Manoah's wife conceived, just as the angel had said, and bore a son. They called him Samson (meaning a "ray of sunshine"). And God was with him from birth.

A Philistine bride

When Samson was about 20, he went to Timnath, a city of the Philistines. There, infatuated by a beautiful young woman, he asked his parents to get her for his wife. But they discouraged him, saying he should marry a girl of Israel.

God, however, intended to use the woman to provoke Samson against the Philistines. And so the preparation for marriage began.

On a subsequent trip to see his future bride, Samson was attacked by a lion. Reacting suddenly to defend himself, he slew the animal with his bare hands, as if it had

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SAMSON



Illustration by G. Dore

been a tiny lamb. No one could have been more surprised than Samson. He kept the thing a secret, however, even from his parents, for he knew the supernatural strength must have come from God.

Later, when visiting the young woman again, he stopped to look at the carcass of the lion. He saw it had been taken over by a swarm of honey-bees, and they had filled the chest cavity with honey. He took out several pieces of the honeycomb and saved some for his mother and father. Still, he didn't tell them where he got it.

The wedding day arrived, and Samson's family made a feast at the bride's home. But when the Philistines saw the intended groom — a stranger with a mass of curled hair, accompanied by a host of relatives — they were suspicious of trouble and sent 30 young men to the banquet pretending to be guests.

Samson, a bit aggravated by their presence, challenged them with a riddle, "Out of the eater came forth food, and out of the strong came forth sweetness" (Judg. 14:14). He gave them seven days to solve it. If they failed, he would receive 30 shirts and changes of clothing. If Samson lost, he would furnish them each a shirt and change of clothing.

They agreed.

Three days of the wedding feast went by, and the young Philistines had no answer. On the seventh day, they became desperate to save face as well as their shirts. They took the bride to one side and threatened to burn her and her father's house, ac-

curring her of inviting them to the wedding just to bilk them out of their possessions.

Frightened, she pressured Samson with tears for the answer. He re-

fused; but she persisted, saying he didn't love her or else he would tell her. The seventh day of their honeymoon became an agonizing harangue. Finally, toward sunset, he gave in and told her the answer.

She immediately passed it to the young men, and they triumphantly told it to Samson.

He knew his wife had betrayed him and simply replied: "If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have solved my riddle" (verse 18). Meaning, of course, they had pressured the answer from his new wife.

God's spirit then directed him to the Philistine city of Ashkelon, where he slew 30 men to avenge himself, taking their garments to pay his debt. Then he angrily went home to Israel, leaving his bride behind.

The rebellion begins

A few months later, having cooled down, Samson took a gift and visited his wife's home, intending to solve their differences (Judg. 15:1). To his surprise, he found his father-in-law had given her to another man.

Now he was really angry, especially at the young men of Philistia. He decided to avenge himself by burning the Philistines' grain fields, for it was harvest time.

He began by catching jackals (foxes). When he had 300, he tied their tails together in pairs with a lighted torch between them and sent them running through the fields. His plan took considerable time, but the damage was devastating.

The Philistines, hearing that Samson did this in anger because his wife had been given to another, burned the young woman and her father to appease his wrath.

But this provoked Samson all the more. He slew many of them in vengeance and then left for refuge in Judah.

By now the Philistines were in arms against him. They brought an

army to Judah to take him captive. Fearful, the men of Judah talked Samson into giving himself up and took him bound to the Philistines.

On the return to Philistia, however, God's spirit filled Samson with supernatural strength. He broke his bonds, picked up the fresh jawbone of an ass and slew a thousand of his captors. The rest fled in terror. God then gave him water to drink from a cleft in a nearby rock.

This slaughter began a 20-year period when Samson single-handedly protected southern Israel against the Philistines. The chain of events leading to this personal wrath were: Samson's attraction to the Philistine girl, an attacking lion, the honey, the marriage, the riddle, the betrayal of his answer, his anger, the loss of his wife. It is a remarkable example of God's hand in human affairs.

Samson, grieved by his unfortunate experience with marriage, never took another wife. He began, instead, to seek the company of harlots, which led to his ultimate downfall.

Once in Gaza, while he visited a harlot, the Philistines locked the city gates, intending to wait and kill him in the morning.

He knew their evil scheme, however, and left the house at midnight. In his escape, he tore the heavy gates — posts and all — from the walls, carried them out of the city and stood them on a hill facing toward Israel.

Delilah

The woman who finally brought Samson down was Delilah (meaning "coquette"). She lived in a town on the main highway between Israel and the coast of Philistia. She was beautiful, immoral and devilish. But Samson loved her. Whether she was Israelite or Philistine isn't known, and doesn't matter, for her first loyalty was to money.

She was offered 1,100 pieces of silver by the Philistine elders if she could find the source of Samson's strength (Judg. 16:5).

So with the promise of a generous reward, she appealed to his masculine ego and displayed a bondless curiosity about the source of his physical power. She asked him, "Is there anything you can be tied with that you cannot break?" He told her "sev-

en leather bow strings, still wet" would hold him.

On his next visit, he fell asleep, and she bound him with new bow strings. There were Philistines hiding behind the curtains to see what would happen. She shouted, "Wake up, Samson, there are Philistines here!" And he broke the bonds like scorched thread.

Delilah pretended her feelings were hurt. She chided him, saying, "You don't really love me or you wouldn't lie about your strength!"

This little game continued through two more episodes. He told her rope, never used, would bind him. But the same thing happened. Then he told her if the seven locks of his head were woven together his strength would leave. While he slept, she tried this also, but to no avail. Yet she kept wearing his resistance down with talk of mutual love and honesty.

Finally, just as his wife had worn him down in his youth — pressing him for the answer to his riddle — Delilah's feigned emotions and persistence paid off. Samson told her the truth, and she knew he spoke the truth from the heart. The strength was from God, but because he was a Nazarite from birth. If his hair were cut, the vow would be broken and his strength lost.

Taken captive

Delilah immediately called for the elders of Philistia, and they came with the money. She induced Samson to fall asleep on her knees and summoned a man to cut the seven locks from his head (evidently he had his hair divided into seven curls or braids because of the great length). Then she tied his wrists and woke him as before. But God had left him, and he had no strength.

He was taken captive. The Philistines plucked out his eyes and led him away to Gaza. There he was put into prison and bound with brass chains to a gristmill — a humiliating servitude for the champion of Israel.

But as Samson toiled day after day, grinding grain and praying silently to God, the hairs of his head grew back. The Philistines either didn't notice or didn't think it posed a threat.

Then one day there was a great

celebration in honor of Dagon, the Philistine fish god. All the lords of Philistia were gathered together — several thousand of the leading men and women. They praised Dagon for subduing Samson and ridding them of their fiercest enemy. And when they were feeling especially festive, because of the wine, they insisted that Samson be brought from the prison to entertain them. They wanted to ridicule him publicly.

His final triumph

Samson was led into the courtyard by a young lad, and the crowd roared its approval, mocking his humiliating condition. He was positioned on a platform facing his audience on the ground level, with 3,000 additional spectators seated above them on the roof. They all ridiculed him, forcing him to provide entertainment.

Samson knew the stage where he stood contained the support for the upper level, as this was a common method of construction. But, not knowing where the pillars were, he asked the lad for permission to momentarily rest against them. The boy unwittingly obliged. Upon feeling them with his hands, Samson prayed to his Creator for renewed strength, repentant for allowing Delilah to come between himself and God.

Taking hold of the two pillars, he asked to be avenged of his eyes, willing to die with the Philistines. And God gave him strength.

In one last honorable effort, he bowed himself against the pillars with all his might. They twisted, buckled and fell. The roof collapsed with a roar, hurling the 3,000 screaming spectators to their deaths, crushing those below.

Samson himself died beneath the falling debris. But he killed more of the enemy on that one fateful day than he had in all his previous years.

His brethren, hearing what had happened, came and took his body. They buried it in the family sepulcher near his father, in his homeland.

He died at about age 43, having judged Israel for 20 years.

Samson was celebrated as a great champion in Israel; but more importantly, an example of faith toward God (Heb. 11:32), even to his death.

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RUTH

During the time of the Judges, a man named Elimelech and his wife Naomi left Israel to dwell in Moab because of a famine. They had two sons, Mahlon and Chilion.

Now God had preserved Moab from the armies of Israel in the days of Moses and Joshua, because Moab was the inheritance of Lot, the nephew of Abraham. And though King Balak hired Balaam to curse Israel, still Israel didn't fight against them. The Moabites had long ago rejected the God of Abraham and Lot, how-

ever, and worshiped the false gods Chemosh and Baal.

But after Joshua's generation had died, Moab's fat King Eglon exacted tribute from Israel through military force (Judges 3). He and his army held the upper hand for 18 years, until God raised up Ehud to defeat them in battle (Judges 3:30) about 1350 B.C.

Now, once again, there was a degree of peace, and Elimelech was able to leave Bethlehem, Judah, and live in this neighboring country east of the Dead Sea without fear of ill

treatment from its inhabitants.

However, before long he died, leaving Naomi alone with her two teenage sons. And in spite of careful upbringing by Naomi, they fell in love and married Moabite girls, which was contrary to God's instructions for Israel. Mahlon married Ruth (meaning a 'woman friend'). Chilion married Orpah.

More family tragedy

But tragedy struck the family twice more. Both of the sons died.

Naomi, in her grief, decided she



should return to Bethlehem. For the family had been gone more than 10 years, and the famine was over.

In spite of hardships, Naomi had set her daughters-in-law a wonderful example of courage, faith and obedience to her God. They loved her dearly. And when she set out to leave, they were so concerned for her welfare they decided to go with her to Israel.

Naomi advised them to stay among their own people, saying she couldn't provide either of them with another son of marrying age, and they would surely find happiness with a new husband in Moab.

Ruth leaves her homeland

Finally, after much embracing and many tears, Orpah heeded her mother-in-law's advice and returned to her people and her gods. But Ruth wouldn't be persuaded. She spoke those now famous words that melted Naomi's heart: "... Entreat me not to leave you, or to return from following after you: for wherever you go, I will go; and where you lodge, I will lodge: your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16, paraphrased).

Naomi saw Ruth's conviction and simply stopped trying to change the young woman's mind. They continued on to Bethlehem, intending to live together on the family parcel of land.

Once inside the city, the townsfolk could hardly believe their eyes. "Was this really Naomi?" Having left Bethlehem more than 10 years before, with a husband, two sons and some financial means, she now returned a weary, impoverished woman with a Moabite daughter-in-law. This was anything but a triumphant return.

She said, "Call me not Naomi [meaning *pleasant*], call me Mara [bitter]: for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the Lord has brought me home again empty" (verses 20-21).

Gleaning barley

They had returned to Bethlehem about harvest time, and since they had no food, Ruth volunteered to go into the fields and glean grain. It was the law in Israel that some of the crop should be left by the

threshers in the field for the poor (Leviticus 19:9-10).

So she took her place with the poor, following after the reapers, stripping the kernels of barley off the scattered stalks left lying in the fields. By pure chance (or was it divine direction?), she entered a portion of land that belonged to Boaz, a relative of Elimelech.

Boaz was in Bethlehem at the time, but when he returned he immediately spotted her as a stranger and inquired of his foreman who she was.

Upon learning this was Naomi's daughter-in-law, and knowing of the hardships they had suffered, he went over and welcomed her to his field. In fact, he told her not to glean in any other field. He suggested she stay among his own workers for protection. She could drink from his well and glean all she wanted.

Bowing, she asked why such favor. And Boaz told her he had learned of her hardship, of her loyalty to Naomi and her courage in leaving her own people to become one of Israel. He also expressed his confidence that the God of Israel, whom she had come to trust, would reward her for her actions.

Ruth humbly thanked him for showing such kindness to a foreigner.

Then Boaz, without letting on that he was a near relative of her dead husband, invited her to eat the noon meal with his reapers. This unprecedented hospitality showed the workers that Ruth, though a poor widow, was someone special to Boaz.

She ate, but carefully saved a portion for Naomi. And when she returned to the field, Boaz instructed his reapers to purposely leave stalks of grain for her — even handfuls — and to let her glean among the sheaves if she chose.

Naomi gets an idea

Ruth worked until evening, then threshed out her grain — nearly a bushel! She took it home to Naomi, along with the food from lunch.

Surprised at Ruth's good fortune, Naomi asked where she had gleaned. And when told the field belonged to Boaz, she exclaimed: "May God bless him, for he had not forgotten to be kind to both the living and the

dead! . . . the man is a relative to us, one who has the right to redeem" (Ruth 2:20). For in Israel, if a man died without legal male heirs, the next of kin had the first right to purchase (redeem) his dead relative's property to keep it in the family. If the relative left a widow and no male heirs, his close kinsman was expected to take the woman for his own wife and raise up a legal heir for his dead brother (Deuteronomy 25:5-6).

So Naomi, when she saw the special consideration Boaz had shown Ruth, began to sense that God was possibly working something out in their favor. She told Ruth to continue in the fields of Boaz, working alongside his maidens. She wanted him to get better acquainted with Ruth, to see that she was a hard-working, virtuous and physically attractive young woman.

Ruth, always careful to be a good pupil, followed Naomi's advice faithfully. She gleaned with the other women in Boaz's field continually until the reaping was over. They undoubtedly saw one another often, in the fields and at the noon meal.

A proposal for marriage

By the end of the harvest, Naomi was convinced Boaz had more than just a passing interest in Ruth. Yet, he had taken no action toward redeeming the property and wife of Mahlon, her dead son. Naomi probably reasoned that his age held him back. For Ruth was much younger. Boaz, being a considerate man, probably felt she deserved a younger husband.

Naomi, however, felt sure that with the proper encouragement Boaz wouldn't hesitate. She contrived a plan. She knew Boaz was working late at the threshing floor, and this might afford just the right opportunity to nudge him toward marriage.

She took Ruth aside and had a mother-daughter talk. She explained her concern for the young woman, telling her she should be married and have the security of a home, a family and children. She also told her how this might be accomplished, rehearsing for Ruth the laws of redemption in Israel. She had observed Ruth's great respect for Boaz over the past weeks and asked her what she thought of becoming his wife.

Ruth evidently had no objection.

Naomi told her to bathe, put on perfume and her best clothing and go to the threshing floor. There she was to remain hidden until Boaz had stopped his work and had finished his meal and wine. He would then make a place to sleep on the straw, for during the threshing season he worked long hours and didn't bother going home at night.

After he fell asleep, Ruth was to go and lie at his feet, covering herself with the edge of his blanket. Naomi assured her that this was symbolic of his rights as a near relative and was proper in every respect. Boaz would know what to do from there.

Ruth left and did all that Naomi said. She quietly slipped under the blanket at Boaz's feet, careful not to awaken him. He had drunk a good portion of wine and had gone to bed feeling merry after a long day's work. He was sleeping soundly.

About midnight, however, he awoke, frightened by the sudden realization that someone was sharing his bed. He gathered his thoughts and sat up. Then, peering at the form near his feet, he realized it was a woman.

"Who," he asked, "are you?"

Ruth replied, "I'm Ruth your humble servant: spread your protection over me as your husband, for that is your right as a next of kin" (Ruth 3:9).

Boaz was elated and deeply impressed. He said, "Blessed are you of the Eternal, young woman; you have shown more kindness now than at the beginning, for you haven't sought a husband among the young men." Boaz immediately recognized this was a request to raise up an heir for Naomi to keep the line of Elimelech alive in Israel, but he also knew it was a demonstration of Ruth's affection for him.

He told her, however, there was a relative of even closer relation to Elimelech, who had a greater right than himself. If that relative wouldn't exercise his right, then certainly Boaz would. He would settle the issue before the city elders, for they knew by her example that she was a virtuous woman.

He told her to lie at his feet and rest until early morning, then she should slip away before the workers

arrived to avoid possible gossip about a woman being at the threshing floor all night.

So at daybreak they arose. He gave her all the barley she could carry and sent her home to Naomi. He waited to instruct the workers about the day's chores, then left for Bethlehem to settle the business regarding the family of Elimelech.

Boaz buys a wife

Ruth was anxious, as you might well imagine. For she hadn't known about the other kinsman. Who was he? What kind of man was he? There was a possibility she might end the day married to a man she had never seen. But because of her fine character and concern for her mother-in-law, she was willing to do what was required to furnish the family an heir.

Naomi told her to sit down and relax. There was nothing to do but wait patiently. Boaz, she knew, wouldn't rest until the business was settled.

Now it was custom for the men of Israel to conduct such business inside the main city gate. Here, in the presence of respected witnesses, contracts were made, debts paid, proclamations delivered and important events discussed. Here is where Boaz waited, watching for the other near relative to Elimelech.

When he saw him, he hailed him and mentioned there was business to discuss. He also gathered 10 responsible men who sat down to witness the proceedings.

Then Boaz explained that Naomi, the widow of Elimelech, had no heirs and now wished to sell her land. The near kinsman had the first right, but if he chose not to exercise the privilege, Boaz would. The kinsman, however, was quick to want the purchase for his own family. Since Naomi was past the childbearing age, he supposed he wouldn't be obligated to father an heir in Elimelech's name. Then his own sons could inherit the land.

But Boaz continued, explaining that Naomi's sons had been heirs to the land but died without children, leaving Ruth, the Moabitess, a widow to raise up a son in the family name. Therefore, the kinsman must also take Ruth as a wife for that purpose.

At this bit of news, the kinsman

immediately changed his mind. Why should he pay for land that would revert back to the inheritance of another family, especially through a son that would be half his own blood and half Moabite? It simply didn't appeal to him. He had his reasons, of course, but they were primarily selfish ones.

Boaz then proclaimed before the witnesses that he would buy the land. As kinsman with the legal right, he would also take Ruth for a wife to raise up an heir for her dead husband. So the kinsman took off his shoe, a custom that acknowledged the agreement. The elders pronounced the matter finished and pronounced a blessing on Ruth, saying God should give her children who would be honorable to Boaz and all Bethlehem.

A son is born

Boaz was a happy man with a happy bride. And God blessed her with a firstborn son.

Naomi no longer felt the reproach of having no heir for her husband. She looked upon the child as her own, caring for him as a nurse.

The women of Bethlehem praised Naomi and her daughter-in-law and blessed the infant son, saying, "may his name become famous in Israel." They named him Obed, meaning *servant*.

And God did bless Obed. For he later had a son named Jesse, the father of King David. This was the line of Judah that formed the legal genealogy of Christ. It was preserved during this period of history by the marriage of Boaz to Ruth, a foreigner from Moab. Boaz himself was half Canaanite. His father was Salmon of Judah and his mother was Rahab, a woman of great faith who in her youth had been a harlot at Jericho (Joshua 6:25, Matthew 1:5).

Ruth, though a foreigner to Israel, was a beautiful example of virtue, humility and service to the true God. For these fine qualities, she has often been cited as a type of what God's Church ought to be like — willing to forsake idolatrous kindred and lands to embrace and serve the only true God. God, in turn, has repeatedly shown that His blessings for such faith and actions will surpass one's greatest expectations.

Old Testament Personalities

NOAH

About the time of Adam's death, the earth was experiencing a great population explosion. With life spans of eight hundred and nine hundred years, people could produce dozens of children during a normal lifetime of marriage.

The natural death rate was low as well. Adam's was the first recorded natural death, and that was 930 years after creation. Anyone who can do simple multiplication will conclude that there could easily have been more than a billion people inhabiting the earth within the first thousand years. There were probably more.

But now the sad part. Wickedness was multiplying just as fast as the population. Most everyone had rejected the commandments of the true God and disregarded any code of moral conduct.

An age of evil

By the end of another 1,300 years the population had mushroomed; and mankind had sunk to new lows of depravity and corruption.

Evil men wrought havoc with each other, being especially brutal to the posterity of Seth. Among his offspring were a line of righteous men

(about 250 years after creation) who dedicated themselves to serving God, even though surrounded on every side by wickedness (Gen. 4:26).

The most notable was Enoch (Gen. 5:24), whose righteous example infuriated the wicked. God may have rescued Enoch out of this turbulence to save him from a violent death at the hands of his enemies, for "God took him."

Genesis 6:2 tells us, however, that even this righteous line of Seth eventually gave in to the corruption around them. They began to marry women outside their faith and soon



The building of Noah's massive ark required large amounts of timber.



Noah suffered harassment and ridicule for making the great ship.



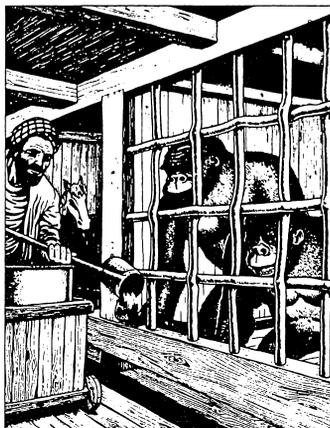
Hired craftsmen were unproductive, necessary for the boat's construction.



The work went on for decades — while the world refused to repent.



All earth's air-breathing life perished, except the ark's precious cargo.



Noah had to care for his ship's great menagerie.



The ark ran aground on Mt. Ararat after five months on the waters.



A dove Noah sent out returned with an olive branch.

Illustrations by Basil Wolverton

were absorbed into the perverse society, totally losing sight of God and His law of love.

It's important to note that this pre-flood society was not comprised of a ragtag generation of cave dwellers. It had, to the contrary, become somewhat sophisticated.

Music, literature, art and architecture were quite advanced. Various metal-working skills were also practiced (Gen. 4:22). The people knew a great deal about physical things, but had utterly rejected spiritual knowledge.

God, in reviewing the terrible state of affairs, was momentarily sorry He had ever created the human race (Gen. 6:6). He determined to give mankind 120 years to repent en masse or be destroyed (verse 3).

Then, seeing they refused to change, He decided to do just that — destroy the entire perverted society, both man and beast, in a flood.

Yet God did find one righteous man — Noah, the ninth descendant

from Adam through Seth. Noah walked with God, following in the footsteps of righteous Enoch, his great-grandfather. And God extended him mercy.

Noah found grace

Little is mentioned of Noah until he reached the age of 500 years. Then he had three sons — Shem, Ham and Japheth. There is no statement to identify any of these sons as Noah's firstborn, which leads to speculation that he may have had other children earlier — possibly sons who became wicked themselves or fell victim to violence. Josephus states that Noah at one point feared for his life and fled from his land with his wife and children. (*The Antiquities of the Jews*, Book I, Chapter III).

So it was this family — Noah, his wife and his sons and their wives, eight persons in all — that God decided to spare. And this, because of Noah's righteousness.

God spoke directly to Noah, telling him of His decision to destroy wickedness from the earth. He told him to build a great ship through which his family and all birds and mammals would be saved alive while God covered the earth with a flood.

God said that Noah wouldn't have to go looking for the animals, for they would come to him (Gen. 6:20), but he would have to provide quantities of food and grain.

Preparing the ark

Skeptics have claimed the ark couldn't possibly hold all those animals and provisions, but simple fact proves otherwise, for the average size of the animal kingdom is roughly that of a medium-sized dog. There was plenty of room for everything, including waste. The physical dimensions alone stagger the imagination: 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, 45 feet high. It had three decks totaling more than 2½ acres of surface, and its capacity in volume exceeded 1.5



The ark was designed to hold numerous provisions also



God caused the animals to come to Noah and board the ship.



People were terror-stricken when Noah's prediction came true.



God caused it to rain for 40 days and 40 nights.



A year and 10 days after the flood began, the earth was again dry



Noah's unusual passengers disembarked to repopulate the earth.



Noah offered sacrifices of thanksgiving to God.



The rainbow symbolized God's promise to never again destroy all living things.

million cubic feet. That's equivalent to 175 modest one-bedroom apartments!

Building the ark, then, was not a simple undertaking. Until the last hundred years, it was the largest oceangoing vessel ever constructed. Considering that all the work was done without the help of modern equipment, it must have taken Noah and his sons — undoubtedly with the aid of hired laborers and craftsmen — several decades to build and outfit it with supplies. Some suspect it may have taken the full 120 years that God had allotted mankind.

Certainly Noah suffered an immense amount of harassment and ridicule for building a great ship in the middle of a dry field. But when the crowds gathered to jeer, he probably took the opportunity to warn them of how God viewed their wicked society and remind them that their 120 years of grace was running out. For Noah was a preacher of righteousness (II Pet. 2:5).

He also must have possessed considerable resources and wealth, as enormous quantities of timber, building supplies and foodstuffs — plus labor — had to be purchased or obtained by barter. Yet, his wealth shouldn't surprise us. God demonstrates time and again throughout the Bible how He physically blessed those who humbly served Him.

The great flood

The preparation was finally finished, and God told Noah to take his family and enter the ark. Seven days later, in the 600th year of Noah's life, it began to rain (c. 2370 B.C.).

This may have been the first rain ever, as God had previously watered the earth with a mist (Gen. 2:5-6). He may have withheld rain as a part of the curse He placed on the land (Gen. 3:17) to inhibit easy growing of crops. For Lamech, the father of Noah, prophesied that Noah would "comfort us concerning our work and toil of our hands, because of the ground which the Lord hath cursed" (Gen. 5:29). The name *Noah* means *comfort*.

So God began to erase the curse on the land, but with a temporary action much more devastating. Lamech died before the rains came, but Noah's grandfather, ancient Methu-

selah, evidently died the same year as the flood at 969 years of age — the oldest age recorded in the Bible.

It rained for 40 days and nights, during which time water also burst forth from great crevasses in the earth — called "fountains of the great deep." The flooding continued until water covered the highest mountain to a depth of 22 feet (Gen. 7:19-20). All air-breathing life was destroyed except for the precious cargo on the ark.

After 150 days, the waters subsided sufficiently for the ark to run aground on Mt. Ararat in present-day Turkey. Noah and his family had been in the ark exactly five months.

About 2½ months later, other mountain tops began to appear. Noah waited another 40 days, then sent out a raven and a dove to see if they would find dry ground in the valleys below. But, finding no rest, they returned. Seven days later a dove was sent again, and this time returned with an olive branch.

Noah waited another seven days. Then, after sending out a dove that didn't come back, he removed a portion of the covering from the ark and looked out at the dry ground. It was now one full year and 10 days since the beginning of the flood. And God spoke from heaven, saying it was time to disembark.

Once off the ark, Noah immediately built an altar to God and offered sacrifices of every clean bird and animal (those fit for food). And God smelled the savor of the offering and appreciated Noah's attitude of thanksgiving and his acknowledgment of human frailty and sin.

Then God made a promise to Noah that He would never again curse the ground or destroy all living things (Gen. 8:21). He told them to be fruitful and repopulate the earth. He granted them rule over the animal kingdom (Gen. 9:2), and He also established the death penalty for the sin of murder (verse 6).

Then God set a rainbow in the sky as a sign of His agreement not to flood the earth again (verse 13). And so today, when we receive rain, we are also reminded of that assurance by the rainbow.

Noah and his sons found themselves in a fresh new world with plen-

ty of opportunity, along with plenty of work. They began to farm the land for food, using seeds and plant cuttings brought with them through the flood.

A curse on Canaan

As the years passed, Shem, Ham and Japheth each had several sons and daughters, and once again there was a working, thriving, small community of people on the earth. But this new society was no better than the first. God well knew "the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Gen. 8:21). And Noah, if he hadn't suspected how fast things could degenerate, was soon to find out — through Ham's youngest son, Canaan.

After the grape harvest and wine-making was over one fall, Noah was guilty of celebrating a bit too much. He became drunk from the wine and passed out in his tent, probably in the company of Canaan, his grandson. Later, Ham entered the tent and found Noah alone, but lying naked on the bed. He immediately told Shem and Japheth, who covered their father with a blanket (Gen. 9:23).

When Noah awoke out of his stupor, he realized what his grandson had done to him (some sort of sexual dishonor) and placed a curse on Canaan and his descendants. He gave Shem the birthright and declared that Canaan would be a servant to both Shem and Japheth. And true to his prophetic blessing — and curse — Shem's future descendants (Israel) conquered and enslaved the progeny of Canaan at the hand of Joshua.

Noah lived for 350 years after the flood, making him 950 years old at death. During this time he probably set the first nine chapters of the book of Genesis in order, having brought the creation record (compiled by Adam) and the family genealogical records through the flood, and personally wrote the chapters pertaining to the pre-flood and deluge periods.

Noah was greatly beloved of God — a rare man, who had walked with God in two different worlds (pre- and post-flood). He bridged those worlds in an ark of gopher wood and died a powerful example of faith and obedience to his Creator.