

A Human Sign-Child and the **Divine Dragon- Slayer**

*The Importance of Historical and
Cultural Background to
Study of the Old Testament*

By Douglas R. Clark

The Old Testament is filled with historic and cultural facts, features, and background details. Sensitivity to these concerns is critical to interpreting biblical material. In fact, when I read a biblical text I first seek to understand how contemporary listeners must have understood the words we now read in the passage.

For example, how did Isaiah's audience understand his prediction of the birth of a sign-child (Immanuel) who, before coming of age, would signal the demise of two surrounding oppressive nations (chapter 7)?

What facts about the ancient world would help us deal with the vicious retaliation of the law requiring an eye for an eye? How did the Israelites grapple with moral issues like patriarchal polygamy?

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What do some of the biblical writers wish to convey about God when they describe Him as a mighty dragon-slayer?

Being aware of the world of the first hearers will go a long way toward helping us achieve a responsible reading of Old Testament texts. It will also open to us the redemptive richness that this too-often neglected portion of the Bible has to offer.

Seeking for Context

A single term is fundamental to

this quest—*context*. Appreciating and understanding the setting or backdrop is essential to biblical studies. Indeed, "to understand a writer one must enter into his world of thought and imagination, to sit where he sat, and, indeed, to think his thoughts after him."¹

Ellen White reflects the same sentiment:

Let us in imagination go back to that scene, and, as we sit with the disciples on the mountainside, enter into the thoughts and feelings that filled their hearts. Understanding what the words of Jesus meant to those who heard them, we may discern in them a new vividness and beauty, and may also gather for ourselves their deeper lessons.²

Our treatment of the Old Testament is too frequently only surface-level and overly selective. One way to ensure that we enter the feelings of the earliest audiences and think their thoughts is to be willing to slip out of our shoes into their sandals, to exchange our suits for their robes.

In short, we must spend some

time becoming acquainted with the historical and cultural background of the writings. Having discovered the principle or lesson imbedded in the passage, we are then in a position to responsibly translate that lesson into our 20th-century setting and apply it to our own lives. Otherwise, we run the risk of reading into the text what we hope it says or feel it ought to say when it may have a quite different meaning.

Applying TLC

In other words, a productive approach in studying the Old Testament is to apply TLC to the process. In this instance, the acronym stands for an awareness of biblical *time, language, and culture*.

We are a long time and two tough languages removed from the Old Testament originals (ask any theology student!). We are also a cultural universe apart from Oriental ways of thinking. By being sensitive to the distance between us and the biblical world, we have begun to recognize the nature of the task of biblical studies.

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However, we needn't be intimidated by what may appear a herculean task. Rather, with the use of many helpful resources (Old Testament introductions, histories, and archaeological commentaries), significant aspects of the Old Testament world will open before our eyes, giving us access to these ancient believers and their world.

To illustrate how an awareness of historical and cultural background might aid the process of reading and interpreting the Old Testament, I will discuss briefly each of the questions raised at the beginning of this article.

The Sign-Child

Isaiah 7 is a textbook case. Its pressing invitation to Ahaz to put

his trust in Israel's saving God usually goes unnoticed because Christians seldom reflect upon the context and setting of this powerful chapter.

The year is 734 B.C. Syria and Israel to the north have rebelled against the ruling power, Assyria. They need more help, other nations to join in their revolt.

In Judah, King Ahaz must decide how to relate to Syria and Israel's conspiracy. His options: (1) give in to Israel and Syria and join the coalition, risking Assyria's wrath; (2) sit out the siege by the two-vassal kingdom and hope to buy time, even outlast them; (3) strike out against them, intending to dissuade them; or (4) fire off an SOS to Assyria for military assistance,

thereby making himself further indebted to its support and control.

Enter Isaiah with his young son. The prophet offers Ahaz another alternative. Recommending that the monarch cease trembling in fear, he conveys the Lord's invitation to put his full confidence in Yahweh for deliverance.

Even in the face of Ahaz's refusal to request a sign that God would rid him of these two "smoldering stumps," Isaiah gives a sign nonetheless.

Behold, the young woman is pregnant and will bear a son and will call his name Immanuel. . . . Before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.³

Within two years (in 732 B.C.) Assyria had destroyed Syria and 10 years later the nation razed Israel. The states that had threatened the existence of Judah were removed as Isaiah had said. The token of trust was the birth of a son who would not reach accountability before the events predicted would transpire.

Unfortunately, Ahaz chose alternative No. 4 above, and his son suffered a dreadful Assyrian assault on Jerusalem in 701 B.C. This does not change the force of the chapter, however, which is rich in theological reflection about God's willingness and ability to rescue and save, even in the face of the king's reticence.

This message is accessible to us only if we are aware of the political situation at the time. Isaiah 7 can offer help as we make difficult choices such as the ones faced by Ahaz.

Christians have been accustomed to seeing Isaiah 7:14 as a prophetic reference to Christ, since it is echoed in the New Testament. However, we need to be careful not to ignore the original intent of the words, whatever their later, and, for Christians, more complete application might suggest.

An Eye for an Eye

We turn now to another biblical passage—the law of retribution. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" would, in the words of one celebrated Jew, leave the whole

world blind and toothless! And of course Jesus Himself replaced the dictum with one much better suited to peaceful relationships: turn the other cheek. But what did the famous "lex talionis" mean to the people who first heard it? Why did God repeat this law several times in the books of Moses? What redemptive value could it possibly have had?

In the early period of the Old Testament, society was organized by tribal units, clans, and families. These groups were held together by a sense of family solidarity, a holistic commitment to the welfare and survival of the familial unit. Whatever hurt one member of the

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group injured the whole. Responsibility was communal. Guilt for sin affected the entire clan (witness the Achan affair in the book of Joshua).

One of the functions of the kinsman redeemer (as in the story of Ruth and Boaz) was to stand up for an oppressed family member even if it meant avenging an injury or death. This aligned with the ancient Israelite world view that the universe was governed by a God of ultimate justice. He would see that wrongs were righted.

In this cultural context the survival of the tribes and clans of Israel depended upon strict adherence to the eye-for-an-eye legislation. However, retaliation was not to be undisciplined or open-ended—*only* an eye for an eye, nothing more. With such a law in place, Israelites would think twice about committing a violent crime, their sense of order and justice would find expression, and each tribe could survive in a time when life was cheap.

By the time of Jesus society was

no longer tribal in nature, but urban and more complex. The law no longer helped maintain order or ensure life. The God who issued it to meet His people's needs in their earlier setting now changed the law to better suit a changed society. His goal of orderly, peaceful cooperation remained the same; He simply had to apply it differently.

Patriarchal Lineage

It is just as important to keep background concerns in mind when we approach patriarchal customs surrounding marriage, adoption, and inheritance. It was quite acceptable during early periods of Old Testament history to take on a slave wife in order to ensure the survival of a withering and fragile family tree. Ownership, a sense of belonging, and even attending worship services depended upon a correct and verifiable lineage. Although polygamous relationships strike at the root of our moral sensitivities, the ancient world permitted them for reasons of survival and the economic security that a large number of working sons and daughters would imply.

Both then and now God speaks to human needs. He speaks not in a vacuum but in a world characterized by less than ideal situations. He wanted the Israelites and He wants us today to live a full and happy life in a difficult and sometimes confusing world.

Let's not be too eager, then, to cast aspersions upon our ancestors. Let's take the time to understand their setting, the customs practiced at the time, and the creative ways, under God, that they went about living, surviving, and sharing something good about God's love and character. It is so easy to criticize others' foibles. However, we might see more of the faith that animated their relationships with God and their contemporaries if we knew more about the context within which they lived.

Crushing the Dragon

We turn now to a final example of biblical material that archaeology and history have brilliantly illumined.

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nated. Though a bit unusual, it demonstrates beautifully how the Israelites adapted a concept quite familiar to their contemporaries to say something about redemption and the God of Israel.

Numerous passages in the Old Testament describe God as the mighty warrior who, in antiquity, "pierced the dragon," or the "fleeing serpent," who "crushed Rahab like a carcass," and "broke the heads of the dragon on the waters."⁴

As one reads these startling biblical passages, he or she will recognize in the surrounding verses the theme of Creation. Do we have here an innovative way of alluding to the Creator? How are we to relate to such unusual imagery? The story behind all this is rather bizarre, but needs to be told, since most Christians will seldom gain an understanding of these texts through the Sabbath sermon.

The Babylonian creation account, entitled ENUMA ELISH, was widely known in the ancient

world. Briefly, it unfolds as follows: A battle scene is set between Tiamat, the monster goddess of the sea, who created chaos and disaster; and Marduk, a giant warrior whose position among the gods depended upon his military prowess. To conquer the monster, Marduk enlisted the help of winds and weapons. As they began their struggle, the wind blasted into the open, fiery mouth of the dragon, bloating and disarming her.

In a flash, Marduk pierced her heart with a well-placed arrow, completing his conquest with mace blows to Tiamat's head. He then separated her body into two halves. Of the upper one he constructed a dome he called the sky. The lower portion became the earth. Lastly, Marduk formed humankind from the blood and remaining viscera.

Although rather grisly, this story spread widely and was popular among peoples in the ancient Near East. More importantly, it became, in the hands of inspired, creative Israelites, a means of turning attention to the true God who was the genuine Creator.

When many Israelites (especially those in Babylonian captivity) were tempted to trust in idols during

times of trial, biblical writers adapted an ancient, popular myth to make a statement about the God of Israel. "You thought it was Marduk who pierced the dragon and created the world? Let me tell you about the true Creator! He crushed the serpent (overcame chaos and disaster) and created the universe. And now He is able to fight any dragon afflicting you, to help in every situation."

These writers thus used rhetorical devices to draw Israel's attention, by means of creative readaptation, to the only source of life and help in times of distress—the only true God.

A Worthwhile Endeavor

Reading the biblical text through the spectacles of ancient history and culture may not be easy, but it is worth investing the time and energy. In this way, the Bible comes alive. It becomes dynamic and vibrant. Events and characters jump off neatly printed pages into the churning stream of life, and we experience God's activity anew. Such study helps us better understand human and divine behavior, and appreciate God's saving action.

As teachers, the challenge confronting us is at least twofold. We must discover this richness for the sake of our own Bible study. But we must also foster interest among our students and create an atmosphere in which they can understand, appreciate, and utilize the principles of interpretation as they read Scripture.

Suggested Resources

The following recommendations may open some doors for professional growth and development in this area and provide a springboard for classroom application.

Three types of material are important: Old Testament introductions, histories, and reports of archaeological discoveries relating to Old Testament times. Introductions typically deal with background issues and provide information about each biblical book. The one I use for my college classes is *Old Testament Survey*.⁵ Although a bit technical, it is a balanced, mid-

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the system as a whole, and less variety within particular institutions? Should we develop different kinds of postsecondary schools to provide different kinds of education? Should some academies and colleges have higher academic expectations than others? Should more time, effort, and money be invested in recruiting students at all levels? Should teachers be better paid?

If one of our temptations is to try to do too much, another is to be impatient with the process of getting good information. Whenever there is an evident problem, we are in danger of being seduced by a bright idea. But creativity and discussion are not adequate substitutes for gathering data and analyzing the facts.

Let us with Paul pray for wisdom and spiritual understanding so that Adventist education "may bear fruit in active goodness of every kind, and grow in the knowledge of God." We may be sure that He will strengthen us in His glorious might with "ample power to meet whatever comes with fortitude, patience, and joy."^{*}—Fritz Guy. □

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dle-of-the-theological-road compilation of helpful information.

Archaeological background is available in many sources. Two I have found especially helpful are these: *The Bible and Archaeology*⁶ and *Archaeology of the Bible Book by Book*.⁷ Students especially can benefit from the Reader's Digest volume, *Great People of the Bible and How They Lived*.

Understanding and appreciation of Isaiah's sign-child, the law of retribution, patriarchal propriety, and God's battle with the sea monster can be enhanced by examining ancient historical and cultural background. The task is not easy, but the rewards are beyond calculation. Scripture will come alive. We will be better equipped to apply (and to educate our students to apply) what the biblical authors intended. We will also have our faith strengthened as we see how God responds redemptively to our needs today as in times of old. □

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ James Muilenburg, "Ezekiel," *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, M. Black, T. Nelson (Nashville, 1962, 1985) (London: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1962), p. 568.

² Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing* (Mountain View, Calif: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1956), p. 1.

³ Isaiah 7:14-16. The translation reflects very closely the Hebrew grammar and vocabulary.

⁴ Major references include Job 26:12-14; Ps. 74:12-17; 89:9-13; Isa. 51:9, 10.

⁵ By William Sanford LaSor, et al., published by Ferdmans.

⁶ By J. A. Thompson (Published by Ferdmans, 1959, 1962, 1972).

⁷ By Gaalyah Cornfeld (Published by Harper and Row, 1976, 1982).

esting background material relating to the four Gospels see Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*.¹² Perhaps the easiest survey to read (illustrated with excellent pictures) is *Harper's World of the New Testament* by Edwin Yamauchi.¹³ Both elementary and secondary teachers would find many ways to make the New Testament more interesting and understandable in reading this volume. Finally, C. K. Barrett, *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents*¹⁴ offers a collection of original sources that illustrate the cultural and historical background of the New Testament. Some of this material is fairly technical, but it offers interesting insights into first-century culture. □

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ The term *Hellenism* refers to the prevailing culture of the Mediterranean world at the time of the New Testament writers. The conquests of Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C. had brought Greek art, thought, customs, and language throughout the region and helped create a common culture.

² From *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Copyright © 1978 by the New York International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

³ Plutarch, *Moralia*, Trans. Frank Cole Babbitt, et al. Loeb Classical Library (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1927), vol. 12, p. 555.

⁴ For an example see the apocryphal book II Esdras 12:32. Chapters 3-14 of this work are the first-century Jewish apocalyptic work known as IV Ezra.

⁵ *Ecclesiasticus or The Wisdom of Ben Sirach* 7:26-28, *The New English Bible With Apocrypha*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 25:24-26.

⁷ *Moralia*, vol. 2, pp. 299-343.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 305, 307, 313, 311, and 309.

⁹ G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Penguin Books, 1962), costs only \$6.95.

¹⁰ (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

¹¹ (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976).

¹² (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969).

¹³ (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981).

¹⁴ (New York: Harper and Row, 1961).

Coming down the coast of Palestine, Sennacherib next encountered the city of Ekron in Philistia where a rebellious element had deposed a king "loyal in his solemn oath which he had sworn by the god Ashur." While the king had pledged allegiance to the king of Assyria, his oath had been sworn in the name of the god of Assyria. With Sennacherib on the way, the Ekronites were now in trouble, so they called for help. In response, the Egyptian army came out to meet the Assyrians on the coastal plain of Palestine.

Sennacherib Hears From His Prophets

As he prepared to go into battle, Sennacherib was encouraged by, as he tells it, "a trust-inspiring oracle given by Ashur, my lord." Sennacherib does not tell us just how he received this message, but it may have come through a prophet in his camp.

In biblical times not only the Israelites, but also the Assyrians and Babylonians had prophets. Though we would classify prophets of Ashur as false prophets, in this instance their prediction worked out, for the Assyrians won the battle. (It probably did not require much insight to predict that the superior forces of the Assyrian army would vanquish the forces of Egypt!)

Sennacherib did not specifically mention his god in the account of his army's activities in Judah. However, what he had already said about the intervention of Ashur can be applied in principle there, too. Sennacherib believed that Ashur had given the Israelite cities into his power and defeated the troops of Judah. Ashur had put Jerusalem under siege and persuaded Hezekiah to pay tribute to Sennacherib.

The similarity between the two accounts is more striking than one might suppose. The Assyrian king claims a great victory over the cities and towns of Judah. The biblical account admits that he did indeed gain such a victory. This contrasts with the way historians of the ancient world usually operated. If this battle had taken place between the

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teacher gain a knowledge of the New Testament world. For a technical and thorough treatment see the first volume of Helmut Koester's *Introduction to the New Testament* entitled *History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age*.¹⁰ A briefer, more accessible survey is found in Eduard Lohse's *The New Testament Environment*.¹¹ For a wealth of inter-

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world were traded around by the different peoples, no other nation ever adopted Ashur into its pantheon.

Sennacherib's campaign began at Sidon on the coast of Phoenicia. Here Sennacherib says that "The awe-inspiring splendor of the 'Weapon' of Ashur, my lord, overwhelmed" the king of Sidon and his cities.