

Real Places, Real Time

Putting Historical Events in the Correct Place and Time

by Ronald G. Davis

Studying history demands both a geographical and a chronological context. Such elements are part of what distinguishes truth from fantasy. Real events happen at real places. Real people experience real events. And real events always happen in relationship to other real events. There is no “Once upon a time,” no “East of the sun and west of the moon,” and no “In a far, far kingdom where it was always summer.”

The Bible records real history. Real people. Real events. Real places. Real time. Its history is orderly and progressive. People are born, live, and die. Generation follows generation. A study in the book of Genesis offers an excellent opportunity to focus on the real history nature of the Bible. It traces the course of human history from two in a garden to a nation in Egypt. Generations and centuries pass, yet God is as present with Joseph at the end of Genesis as he is with Adam at the beginning. His expectations for the gardener are the same as they are for the governor. And both Adam and Joseph are free to make their own history—for good or for evil.

Wise teachers of history insist that their students know both the chronology and the geography of the material at hand. Such information is essential, for the temporal and spatial elements confirm the reality of significant people and the events of which they are a part.

A study of the life of Abraham—the man with whom God established his covenant and through whom he intended to bless “all peoples on earth” (Genesis 12:3)—should be a frequent experience. Abraham is such an important character that Paul and James, as well as the writer of Hebrews, base powerful arguments on his experiences. Thus the study of his life should be common, but it should never be ordinary.

Teaching Places

The geography of Abraham’s life is the geography of the Old Testament. The territory that includes Ur to Egypt, that stretches from the area of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers to the land of the Nile River, became “center

stage” for the unfolding of God’s redemptive plan, culminating in the birth of his Son in an obscure but real Judean town. Familiarity with this geographical framework is critical to a thorough understanding of God’s revelation and activity.

A map of Abraham’s world on display throughout your study of Abraham’s life will be an important part of your teaching strategy. And with maps, the general instructional principle is “the bigger, the better.” Even though the use of commercial maps can be beneficial, involving class members in the preparation and use of maps can be even more profitable. Look at the large open spaces available in your classroom: walls, tabletops, the floor, a bulletin board. Consider transferring a small outline of the land and water sites mentioned above to one or more of these spaces. If your congregation has an overhead projector, you can use an outline you have traced onto plastic to project a larger outline on the wall or on a large bulletin board. Masking tape (colored, if available) can be twisted to follow basic land lines. Or, for a bulletin board, yarn can be stapled into land shapes.

The traditional grid method of transferring an image can be used on any available surface. The original small map is ruled into squares (one-inch squares should work). Then the large surface is also lined into much larger squares in some fashion. Walls can be ruled with narrow masking tape; tabletops can be ruled with washable markers (or erasable pencil lines); in some cases, floors have the natural grid of square floor tiles. Make the squares on the larger surface proportionately larger and then put in the lines designating the land areas square by square. Most maps highlighting Abraham’s geography that are found in the back of a Bible will be about 4" by 8" for the area covered. Thus, if your wall has a 4' by 8' area, the squares can be one-foot squares, and the resulting map will be 144 times the size of the original!

However you decide to do this project, recruit two or three class members to help you with the work. Recruit one or two others to letter appropriately sized place-name cards. During the class session in which a specific place is introduced, have someone stick the proper name on the map. Whatever map(s) you prepare, be certain to give the students a scale of miles: “one inch equals ____ miles.” This will give students an appreciation of the rigors of Abraham’s travels.

Cartographic precision is not your goal in this project, so don’t be too concerned with details. General knowledge of bodies of water, cities, and the relationships of different areas to one another is what matters most. Abraham lived and moved in real places; your students need the ever-present reminder of what and where those real places were and are.

Teaching Time

Young children have often been taught the “big hand, little hand” method of telling time. (Today’s students are probably more familiar with digital timepieces.) Genesis is a history of real people and real events. Those who study it need to be able to “tell time”—to know beginnings from middles and middles from ends. Chronology gives evidence of validity and believability. At every point during a study from Genesis you, as a teacher, will want to emphasize the sequence of people and events. Once a student of the Bible learns to “tell time,” he or she is much closer to grasping the sequence of events within God’s master plan.

Early in the study you may find it helpful to give your students a list of the primary people of Genesis arranged in alphabetical order and ask them to put the names in chronological order. (You might use Abraham, Adam, Enoch, Eve, Hagar, Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob, Joseph, Lot, Methuselah, Noah, Rebekah, Sarah, and Terah.) One way of doing this would be to give each student a letter-sized sheet of paper divided into 15 boxes, with one name in each box. Ask your class to tear the names apart and stack them up from earliest to latest. When you announce the correct order, each person can check his or her work.

With some lessons, you may choose to condense the main story to six to ten key events written as sentences on strips of paper. Ask your class to place these in the correct sequence. For example, a lesson that surveys the four chapters given to Noah and the flood (Genesis 6–9) includes several details. Consider presenting the following ten sentences randomly to your class and asking the students to put them in correct order: (1) God tells Noah to build an ark. (2) Representative animals are gathered. (3) Rain falls for forty days and nights. (4) The flood covers the earth for one hundred fifty days. (5) The ark comes to rest on Ararat. (6) A raven is sent from the ark. (7) A dove is sent out twice. (8) Noah’s family comes out of the ark. (9) Noah sacrifices to the Lord. (10) God provides the rainbow as a sign.

Joseph’s Time

When you launch a study of the life of Joseph (Genesis 37–50), use the following collection of objects to help give an overview of his life: a piece of bright plaid cloth, twenty pieces of silver (dimes), a torn robe or shirt, two sets of seven calendars, handcuffs or chains, a sack of flour, a silver cup, and a small doll wrapped in gauze (like a mummy). Display the objects randomly to your class, and ask them to decide in what order to put the items to represent Joseph’s life.

Here are the answers: *cloth*=Joseph’s coat of many colors; *twenty dimes*=the

price of Joseph's slavery; *robe*=Potiphar's wife's act of lust; *chains*=imprisonment; *sets of calendars*=sets of seven years in Pharaoh's dream; *flour*=the plenty in Egypt; *cup*=Benjamin's sack of grain and silver; *doll*=embalmed Joseph.

Choose more or other objects if you think they will be more effective in telling the story.

Most students learn specific events best when they have an historic framework or overview. Most students learn history better when they can picture the geography of the area where the history takes place. Do all you can during your study of real history to aid your students in their understanding of the significant events and places of Genesis.