

A Cloud of Witnesses: Week 3

Those who begat ... (and those who didn't): The 'story-less' people of the Hebrew Scriptures

In our reading of the Hebrew Scriptures we often focus on the stories of prominent people in the community. In contrast in our own lives we can feel insignificant when great events are happening.

What can we take from all those others who took part in the story of God's relationship with his people before Christ, but whose stories have not become famous?

How can they become real to us, so that we might distinguish them in the 'cloud of witnesses' that surround us? Can we see them, too, as part of God's story and therefore part of ours?

Here are three ways to start thinking about them. As you think yourself into their stories, ask yourself how they experience God's activity with Israel? Do they recognise that they are part of something that is greater than themselves?

1. Think of an Old Testament story, and picture it in your head. You might like to choose your favourite, or use one of the following:

- Jonah (either chapter 1 or chapter 3)
- Baruch reads Jeremiah's prophecies to King Jehoakim (Jeremiah 26: 11 – 26)
- Ruth gleaning in the fields (Ruth 2: 1 – 7)
- Joseph in the service of Pharaoh (Genesis 41: 46 – 49 and 52 - 57)

Who else plays a part in the story apart from the people who are named? Where do they come from and what is their day-to-day life? What are they doing in the story? What do they witness?

2. Read to yourself one of the lists of names in Numbers or Chronicles (eg a paragraph of Numbers 26, or 1 Chronicles 4, which includes more women). Don't worry if you can't pronounce them all – no-one is listening. Pick one of the names and imagine meeting this person. What would they look like? What would you ask them? How do they feel about their name being included in this book? Who else is in their family, their household, whose name isn't written here? Who are the people they depend on in their life, and who depends on them?

3. Think about one of the following two pictures:



This is a 5/6th century BC Persian carving of a man leading a camel (sadly only the camel's nose remains on the fragment). It was carved when Darius or Xerxes (also called Ahasuerus) was king – so about the time of Queen Esther, or when the Jews were returning to Jerusalem after the exile and beginning to rebuild the Temple. It can be found in the British Museum.

Who was this man? Why not give him a name? (and maybe one for the camel, too) What did he know about the Jews and their God? What about the sculptor? Did he know any of the exiled Israelites? Might any of them have seen it when it was newly made?



Poussin's picture of 'The Israelites collecting Manna in the Wilderness' (painted 1637 – 39) owes much to the imagination of the artist and the painting fashions of the day, but it reminds us of the many individuals who all gathered the Manna. Choose one of the figures and give them a name. Imagine how they might tell the story, and what they might want you to know about the rest of their life. If you would like to discover the picture further, there is a short film at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6llhxxOdGI> which, especially in the first half, explores how and why the different people are portrayed.

The hidden and forgotten in our own setting

If the Hebrew Scriptures are full of people whose names we do not know or whose lives we know nothing about, the same is true of our present. **Consider** the people who live in your neighbourhood, or the bystanders you see in the background of news reports. How often do we refer to groups of people without individualising them – ‘witnesses’ of an accident, ‘residents’ of a tower block or estate, ‘migrants’ in an overcrowded boat? We do not know their names – but God does, and he formed them in the womb even before they had names (Ps 139:13).

As you go through the week, **pay attention** to the people you see in your daily life whose names and stories you don’t know. But also **look out for** the names of people who are unfamiliar to you – names on a war memorial or gravestone, names mentioned in a newspaper, strangers on social media. Can you acknowledge them as individuals created and known by God, part of his story just as you are?

If you have access to a list of people who have asked for prayer (or see requests on social media), **choose** one or two of the names you don’t recognise and **pray for** them. **How does it feel** to pray for a stranger?

What of your own family, and your own story? The history of the world might be ‘the biography of great men’ [and women], but God is concerned with the personal, as much as, if not more than, the universal. Ultimately, of course, God became a person with a name and a story of his own and he continues to work through and for individuals; those whose names we know and form part of our story, and those who inhabit other stories in different times and places.

Some bible readings for reflection:

Psalm 139, or choose one of the following verses: Genesis 1:27; Isaiah 43:1; Jeremiah 1:5; Isaiah 44:2; Job 31:15

- What does it mean to you to be an individual in God’s sight?
- Can you hear him speak your name?
- What is your story with him?

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https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1894-0331-19 (accessed 23 April 2021)



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