

WEEK ONE

The Great Cultural Barrier

A Word from the Author

“The Bible is the saga of Yahweh and Adam, the prodigal son and his ever gracious heavenly father; humanity in their rebellion and God in his grace. The Narrative begins with Eden and does not conclude until the New Jerusalem is firmly in place. It is all one story. And if you are a believer, it is all your story. . . . If our goal is to know our own story, then we first have to come to understand the characters who populate the Old Testament: who they were, where they lived, what was important to them” (*Epic*, 15, 17).

Introduction

An eight-year-old girl in the suburbs listens to her grandmother’s tale of growing up on a small Midwestern farm; a ten-year-old boy listens while his grandfather tells of the time *his* father, a new immigrant, moved the family from an apartment in Brooklyn to a Craftsman Bungalow in San Francisco. In school, both of these children learn of the history of The United States—its founding, growth, and westward expansion; stories of war and peace, trial and triumph, of leaders great and small. Eventually these two become young adults, fall in love, and begin their own new family. And two separate stories become one, which will in turn be passed down to *their* children. All of these experiences and memories, individual and shared, become *their* story, shaping who they are and who or what they may one day become.

What is *your* story?

Most of us are like the two children mentioned above. Whether male or female, married or single, we’ve grown up with a common history, a common language, and a common literature. We share common truths and legends, values and dreams, and we

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pass them on to the next generation. In short, we share a common culture. Each of us adds our personal narrative, weaving our thread into the fabric of society and thereby helping to create the ever-expanding tapestry of culture. In doing so, the tapestry tells our collective story, one that we all know and share because our own hands had a part in creating it. Our thread gives shape and substance to the whole just as the whole gives shape and substance to us.

What is unique about the Christian community is that part of our story comes from a part of our “family” that we might not yet know: our forefathers in the faith—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This story is also part of the fabric of our lives, and gives shape to who we were, who we are, and who we will become.

Real Time and Space

This week, we begin to address the barrier of culture that stands between us and this other “family.” As we learn about the culture of this other family, we will traverse the land of the Bible from Mesopotamia to Canaan/Israel/Palestine to Egypt. We will travel in time from Abraham’s world somewhere around 2,000 B.C. to the Passion of Jesus in approximately A.D. 30.

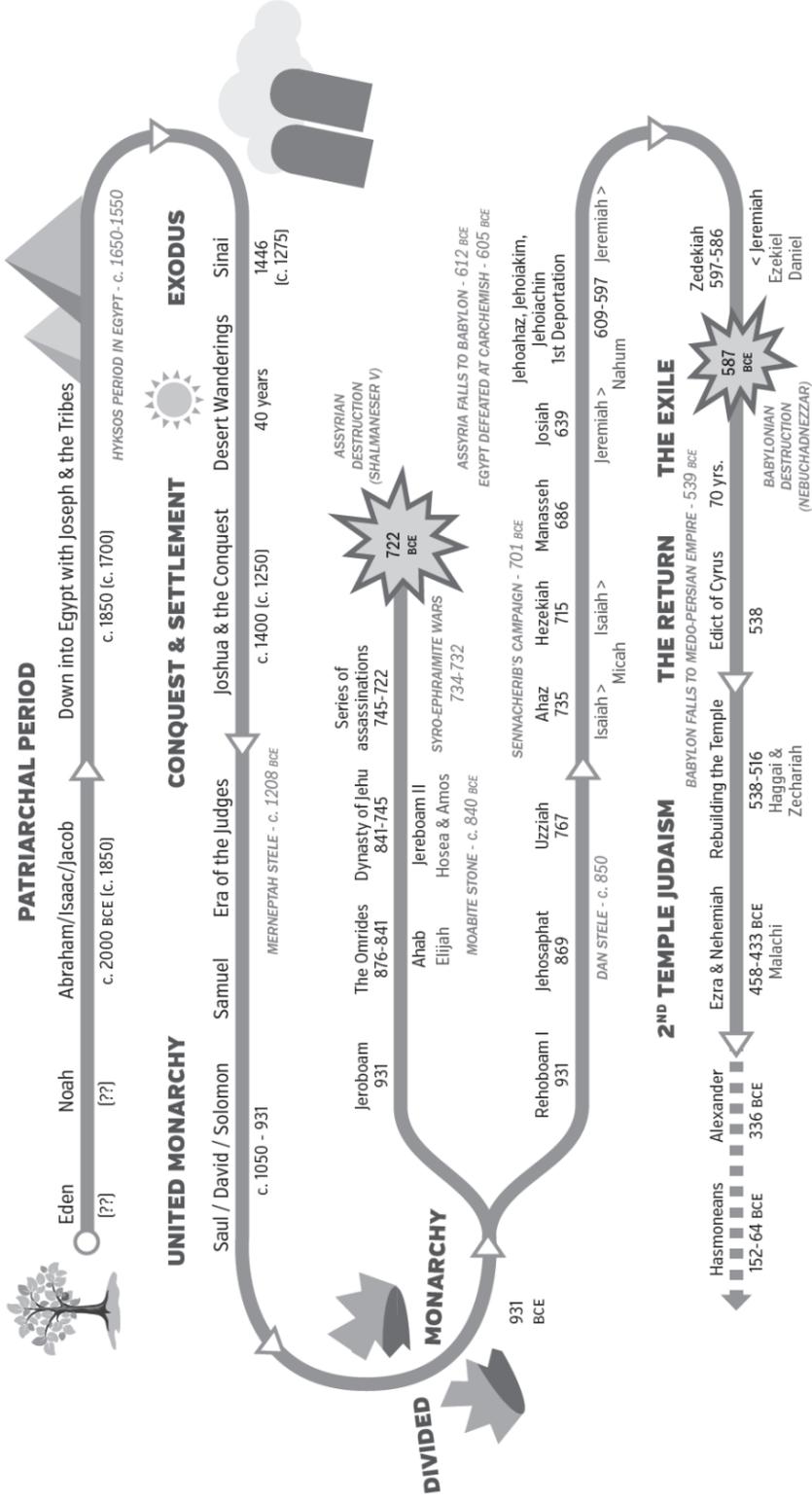
[Note: B.C. stands for the time period “before Christ” [or “before the Common Era”/B.C.E.] and A.D. stands for the Latin Anno Domini, meaning “The Year of Our Lord” [also sometimes referred to as the “Common Era”/C.E.].]

As you journey through these stories, think about what it would be like to live in a culture where the family was the basic unit and regulatory force of society. Think about what it would look like for God to connect with people living and breathing in this sort of tribal culture. With those thoughts in mind, let’s open our closet door and enter the Epic of Eden!

Humans, rather than recognizing the trappings of their own culture (and that their culture may in fact be very different from someone else’s), tend to assume that other societies are just like their own. This is known as *ethnocentrism* and is a human perspective that is as old as the hills. (*Epic*, 21)



The Fertile Crescent



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Getting Our Bearings

Before you open your Bible, jot down the names of seven characters from the Old Testament. If that took under a minute, go on to twelve, then twenty. With your Bible still closed, try to arrange these characters in chronological order. Next to each character list some detail you know about them: an aspect of their story, their hometown, their spouse. If someone asked you why this person's story was in the Bible, could you answer? What would you say?

Into the Story

Read Matthew 1.

- From the names in Jesus' genealogy, circle any of the names that are familiar to you.
- Place a checkmark next to the names of those whose stories you could explain to a friend or child.
- Draw a question mark next to any of the characters whose stories disturb or confuse you.
- Are there characters here whose significance to Jesus' genealogy that you recognize?
- Can you guess why the New Testament writers would launch the first book of the New Testament with a genealogy?

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Real People, Real Places, Real Faith

Out of the Old Testament characters on your list, identify one with whom you most connect. What parts of their story resonate with you? Now identify one character and/or story that you find really challenging to accept or to understand. List both characters here with your reasons. What do you want to know about these characters? What doors or barriers stand between you and a clear understanding of them?

Our People, Our Places, Our Faith

How would you respond if someone asked you today, "Why does the Old Testament (the back story of the New Testament) matter to your Christian faith?"

[[DAY TWO]]

Getting Our Bearings

Imagine that you needed a new job. What are the first steps you would take? Who would you ask for advice or direction? Where would you look and why? What are the five things that would be most important for you to emphasize to a potential employer on your resume?

Into the Story

Read Genesis 29:1–30.

- Find aspects of this story that are culturally different from yours. Underline or list them with their verse references.
- Are there differences here between their culture and yours that illicit a stronger reaction than others from you?

Israelite society was enormously different from contemporary life in the urban West. Whereas modern Western culture may be classified as urban and bureaucratic, Israel's society was traditional. More specifically, it was tribal. (*Epic*, 25)

Real People, Real Places, Real Faith

If you were Jacob, how would you react to Laban's deception? Put yourself in Rachel's sandals. How would you react to having the man promised to you given to someone else? Especially your older sister! Do you think Rachel was in love at this point? Consider Leah. How do you think she felt about being given in marriage to a man who wanted someone else? How in the world would these two women handle the wedding night? How in the world would they handle their future relationship? What is your opinion of Laban at this point?

Our People, Our Places, Our Faith

Compare the story of Jacob, Rachel, and Leah to your own story. Have you had any experiences similar to these characters? What significance do you see in the differences between your story and this one? Are there other stories in the Bible where your inner child screams

"That's not fair!"? Perhaps the warfare techniques of the conquest in the Book of Joshua or the social position of women in the Old Testament? How could understanding the biblical culture help you to better understand the Old Testament? Over the course of this study, your understanding of the time, space, and culture of the Old Testament story is going to grow tremendously. The goal? In helping you understand your Old Testament better, to help you understand your God and your other family better!

My goal as regards the great barrier is to bring the heroes of the Old Testament into focus, such that you can see them as real people who lived in real places and struggled with real faith, just as you do. We are "Abraham's offspring" (Gal. 3:29), and his story is our story. (*Epic*, 17)

DAY THREE

Getting Our Bearings

Think about who and what comprises your household. Who are the members? How many are there? What is the pecking order in your household? Who (if anyone) is in charge and of what? Who leads and how? How does your household structure compare to your parents', siblings', friends'?

Into the Story

Read Genesis 38.

- In Gen 38:6, Judah marries Tamar to his firstborn, Er. According to Israel's patrilocal culture, in whose household does Tamar reside?
- In Gen 38:11, Tamar now lives in her biological father's house. Why has she moved?
- Do you find anything in this passage indicating that this departure was not the cultural norm? If so, what?

As we open the Bible, however, we find that the God of history has chosen to reveal himself through a specific human culture. To be more accurate, he chose to reveal himself in several incarnations of the same culture. (*Epic, 23*)

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- What does Tamar do when she finds out where her father-in-law is? What action does she take?
- What does Judah declare to be done when he learns that Tamar is pregnant?

Real People, Real Places, Real Faith

Do you find that you are able to separate yourself from your own cultural norms as you read through Tamar's story? Do you see Tamar as a real person in a real place in a real time? In your mind, which characters/actions are good and which are bad? Why? List each of the main characters here and offer one word to describe each of those main characters.

Our People, Our Places, Our Faith

Do you ever find yourself avoiding certain Bible stories because they make you uncomfortable? Disapproving of the things the characters are doing, or perhaps finding the scenarios are too violent? Have you ever noticed that a lot of children's Bibles avoid these stories as well? Throughout this study, we challenge you to stop dodging. Rather, thoughtfully consider the characters as real people who are quite human and fallen, in real places that are probably geographically and culturally very different from your own, struggling with real faith in real circumstances. The objective? To come out with a better understanding of the character of our God and a better understanding of his people past and present across the globe.

[[DAY FOUR]]

Getting Our Bearings

If you were to write your last will and testament tonight, for whom would you make provision in the document? Who would be responsible for the care of your dependents? Why would you make provisions for these persons and how would you go about choosing your guardians?

Into the Story

Read Deuteronomy 25:5–10 (known as the Levirate law).

- According to this Israelite law, “when brothers live together” (i.e. in extended families living under one roof), what responsibilities does a surviving brother have to his widowed sister-in-law? List each command.
- What do you think the intended outcome of this law might be?
- In the case of an injustice, what is the surviving wife instructed to do?
- What responsibilities belong to the community leaders?

The people of Israel considered it a serious offense for a man to fail to fulfill this responsibility to his dead brother. . . . Although this system seems very odd to most Westerners, it worked. The inheritance of the deceased brother was properly conferred upon his legal offspring, and the young widow was secured within the household. Thus her current need for food and shelter was met, and her future need for a child to care for her in her old age was addressed as well. (*Epic*, 31–32)

WEEK ONE

Real People, Real Places, Real Faith

In the setting of the shaming described in Deuteronomy 25, what were the consequences for the brother who refused his responsibilities? What were the consequences for the widow? How do you think these consequences affected the extended family?

Our People, Our Places, Our Faith

In today's world, would a widow in similar circumstances need help? Recast this woman into a modern-day equivalent. To whom would such a woman turn for help? Who, if anyone, would be responsible for helping her? What would the community's reaction be if she did not receive help? Would it be different if it were a widower instead of a widow? Why?

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Getting Our Bearings

Have you ever gone through the loss of a mentor or leader? Perhaps a boss who had made a big impact on your professional growth? Perhaps a pastor who felt called to another ministry? Perhaps the premature death of a parent? What fears came with that transition? What losses did you face? What words or actions did you find comforting?

Into the Story

Read John 13:31–14:24.

- What is the setting of the narrative?
- What happened just before Jesus' Passover meal with his disciples? What will happen immediately following (John 18:1–5)?
- Focusing in on 14:1–18, notice where familial or household language is used. Underline this language in your Bible.

. . . the scene is a private one—Jesus' closest friends have gathered for one last meal together. Just after the meal, Jesus begins telling his disciples about his impending departure and the troubles that will follow. Of course, the disciples are confused and upset. Peter asks the question on everyone's heart: "Where are You going? . . . and can we go with you?" (John 13:36–37, NASB) (*Epic*, 39)

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- Note verse 2 (NASB) in which Jesus says: “In My Father’s house are many dwelling places.” How does your Bible translate the phrase “dwelling places”? Check several translations.
- Why do you think that Jesus speaks of his father’s house here?

Real People, Real Places, Real Faith

Think about being one of the disciples at the Last Supper. Jesus is telling you he is leaving, right at what should be the apex of the story. If you were Peter or James or John or Thomas, what would you be feeling right now? What would *you* ask Jesus?

Our People, Our Places, Our Faith

If we want to know our God better, we’re going to need to understand his story better. Indeed if the Bible is going to become our story, we’re going to have to put ourselves back into the biblical characters’ time and space. As you close down your study guide for the week, ask yourself what steps you are willing to take over the course of this study to accomplish that goal.

WEEK TWO

Redemption

A Word from the Author

“Our objective as Christians is to understand the story of redemption, the Bible. More than anything else, we want to hear the words of the biblical writers as they were intended and to claim their epic saga as our own. To accomplish this, we need to get past the great barrier—that chasm of history, language, and culture that separates us from our heroes in the faith” (*Epic*, 21).

Real Time and Space

Last week, we began to examine our closets to inventory what we know about the characters and stories of the Old Testament—and more important, why it matters. We learned that the Old Testament is more than just “an unfortunate preface to the New Testament,” that it is an integral part of the Story, and that it is our story. We began to cross the great barrier by investigating Israel’s patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal culture.

This week, we will continue to cross the cultural barrier by understanding what redemption meant to the real people of the Old Testament. This week we’re going to be all over our map, beginning in Mesopotamia in the city of Ur, and traveling to the land of Canaan/Israel/Palestine with Abram and his

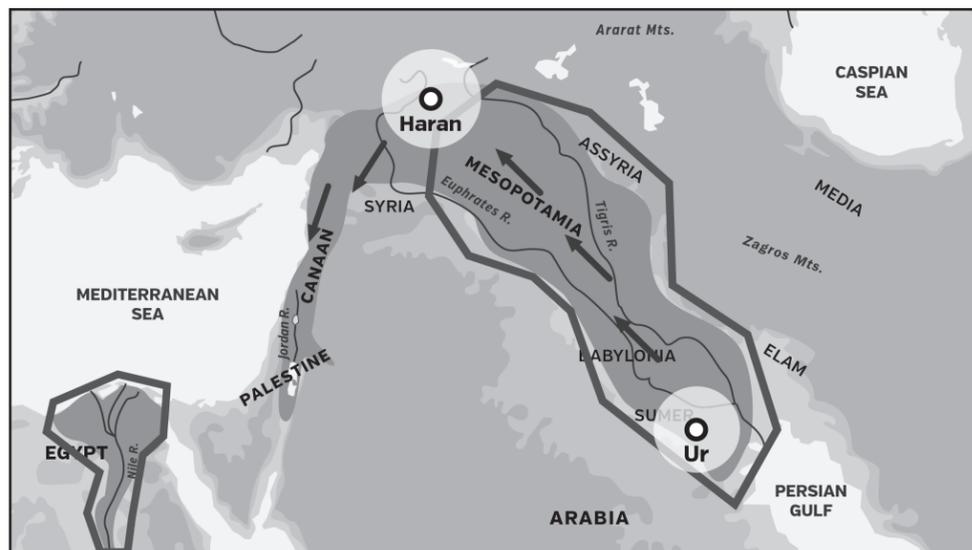
Patriarchal: *Having to do with the authority and centrality of the oldest living male member of a family in tribal society.*

Patrilineal: *Having to do with tracing ancestral descent through the male line in a tribal society.*

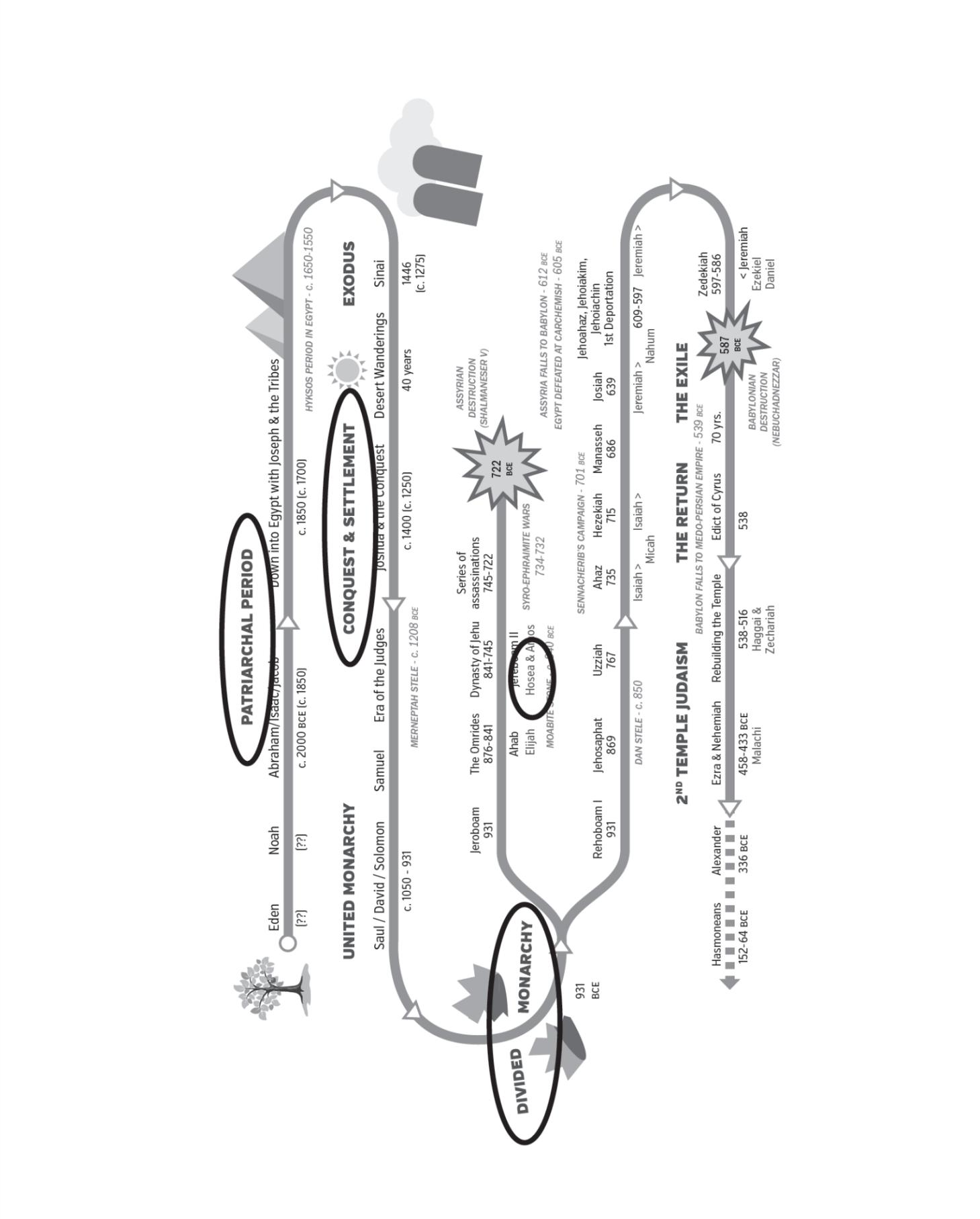
Patrilocal: *Having to do with the living space of the family unit being built around the oldest male in a tribal society.*

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descendants in the Patriarchal Period. We will continue on through the period of Ruth during the Settlement, to the time of Hosea during the Divided Kingdom, and finally to the New Testament with Jesus and his disciples in Jerusalem. Take a moment to locate the places on the map as well as the time periods on the timeline below.



Abraham's migration into Canaan



EPIC OF EDEN

Session Guide

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SESSION I

Introduction and the Great Cultural Barrier

Opening Prayer of Preparation

Debrief and Discover

- Make the statement “The Old Testament Is Your Story” and then invite participants to share whether or not they believe this statement is true or not, and why.
- Why do *you* think many Christians struggle with the study of the Old Testament?
- Open the floor for discussion regarding the prior week’s homework.
- Richter makes the point that not only is the Old Testament our story, but our story is a part of the Old Testament as well. Take a few minutes as either a group or as small groups to introduce yourselves to each other and tell each other how each member first claimed Christ as their own. (After introductions, the leader can emphasize the fact that this group is one small expression of the body of Christ, and their story will become part of the Great Story).

View Video

Dialogue and Digest

- Allow the opportunity for class members to respond to the video through open dialogue.
- How have you (or your church) framed Jesus in your image? What are some benefits to seeing him through your cultural lens? What are some risks?
- What parts of the Bible would you like to hear in surround sound? Are there areas where the message seems obscured by cultural interference?
- In *Epic of Eden*, Richter writes, “God did not canonize Israel’s culture . . . he simply used that culture as a vehicle through which to communicate the eternal truth of his character and his will for humanity” (*Epic*, 23). What are some ways that the church or some members of the body of Christ have canonized Israel’s culture in the past? What dangers can arise from this?
- How has ethnocentrism affected your understanding and interpretation of the Bible, especially the Old Testament?
- What are some misconceptions you have encountered about ancient Israelite society? Where did they come from? Why is it important to recognize these misconceptions? (You may want to consider Genesis 38 in this discussion).

Decide and Do

- Are you willing to make the commitment to spend the time and effort to develop a better understanding of the Old Testament?
- Are you open to examining and wrestling with those beliefs that may be ethnocentric or culturally canonized?
- What about the process do you expect will be difficult?
- What excites you about the process?

Closing Prayer and Challenge

SESSION 2

Redemption

Opening Prayer of Preparation

Debrief and Discover

- Open the floor for discussion regarding the prior week's homework and/or last week's discussion and video.
- What new insights have you gained into the stories of Ruth and Boaz, Lot and Abraham, or Gomer and Hosea upon studying this lesson?
- What insights into the heart and character of our God did you gain from these stories?

View Video

Dialogue and Digest

- Allow the opportunity for class members to respond to the video through open dialogue.
- Let's rehearse for each other some of the nuts and bolts of the concept of redemption. What aspects of this concept in Israel's world impacted you the most? Did anything surprise you? Offer some other words you would use to define redemption.

SESSION 2

- In the video, Richter states: “The metaphor of Scripture is the metaphor of the redemption of a lost family member by the patriarch of the clan, who sends his firstborn son, to not only *redeem* the lost family member, but to share his inheritance with them as well. His goal? To restore them to the *bêt ’āb* so that where he is, they may be also.” Discuss this statement.

If time remains, consider discussing:

- How do the stories of Lot, Ruth, and Gomer play into your understanding of the story of redemption as expressed in the Bible? Are these new insights for you?
- What new insights have you developed into the meaning of redemption and Christ’s sacrifice on the cross?
- How might your new understanding of redemption affect your prayer life or your worship life? How might it affect how you go about serving in the church or ministering to others?

Decide and Do

- The Old Testament had specific laws that defended the widow, orphan, and refugee. How can the church respond to people who are outside the economic and political safety nets of our society?
- How can we do better to meet the needs of the disenfranchised and bring the lost and the disconnected into the household of God?

Closing prayer and challenge