



The Pentateuch

INTRODUCTION

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THE FIRST FIVE BOOKS of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament (Genesis–Deuteronomy) are generally called the Pentateuch among Christians and some biblical scholars. In Jewish tradition the Five Books of Moses are known as the Torah. The Hebrew word *torah* literally means “teaching” or “instruction” and refers to what is the heart of the Hebrew Scriptures in both content and importance. The story lines within this collection stretch from the creation of the world and humanity to Moses’s last speech on the plains of Moab as the Israelites prepare to enter into the land of promise. The Pentateuch, however, contains various forms of literature from many time periods. These five books have played a formative role in the religious beliefs and imagination of many Christian, Jewish, and Muslim traditions. The Pentateuch has also been one of the primary points of emphasis in modern biblical scholarship. In fact, one can trace the developments in the scholarly study of the Bible by surveying the history of Pentateuchal research. With such well-known stories as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Noah and the flood, the *Akedah* (or “Binding” of Isaac), the exodus, the Ten Commandments, and God’s provision of manna in the wilderness, it is no wonder that these texts have inspired generations of people for millennia.

One must distinguish between the narrative arc found within the Pentateuch, beginning with creation and ending on the plains of Moab, and the historical contexts out of which the traditions in these books emerge. Historically, scholars agree that the Pentateuch is a compilation of sources, traditions, folktales, and legal material from different historical



periods. Four primary sources have been identified within Genesis–Deuteronomy. The J and E sources, Yahwist and Elohist respectively, also known as the Epic Tradition, make up the main story line of the Pentateuch narrative. Both sources were written during the Israelite monarchy. Whereas the Yahwist source contains the perspective of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, the Elohist reflects ideas and themes associated with Israel, the Northern Kingdom. The J story line begins in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:4b) and extends into Israel’s journey through the Sinai wilderness. The D, for Deuteronomistic, source is comprised of significant portions of the book of Deuteronomy and was written largely during the time of Josiah’s reign (late-seventh century BCE). Finally, the P, for Priestly, document contains mostly cultic, genealogical, and narrative material written by a priestly school or group after the Babylonian exile (587 BCE). Genesis begins with the Priestly account of creation and its well-known phrase, “In the beginning . . .” (Gen 1:1). Hebrew scholars differ on exactly how that phrase should be translated.

Because of this complex textual process, the resulting five books are a richly diverse collection that includes many different and even conflicting perspectives contained within it. For example, the Priestly account of creation depicts a well-ordered creation, with a sovereign God (*Elohim* in Hebrew) who structures the natural order through divine command. In this first creation story, plants and animals are created before humans, with humans made last as the climax of God’s work. Immediately following the P version, the Yahwist’s account of creation begins (Gen 2:4b) in a garden. The deity, represented by the divine name (“LORD” in most translations), forms humanity out of the ground. Animals are created *after* the human in response to Adam’s need for companionship (Gen 2:18). Both accounts are self-contained creation stories. They provide different points of emphasis and depart from each other in significant ways—different names and images of the deity, different order of creation, and so on. Both accounts, however, are included in the biblical witness without significant editing to blur the variations. Thus the diverse and complex nature of the Pentateuch suggests that the final form of this collection was intended to reflect and keep in tension the various traditions that made up Israel’s historical self-understanding. It is important to note, however, that textual versions such as the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Septuagint (a Greek translation), and fragments from the Dead Sea Scrolls represent different lines of tradition and thus point to other communities with textual traditions of their own.

The basic structure of the Pentateuch follows a narrative progression from creation to the journey of a particular ancestral family that becomes a nation. Here is an outline:

Genesis: Creation to the ancestors

 Genesis 1–11: Stories about creation and early humanity

 Genesis 12–50: Stories about the ancestors



Exodus: Liberation from Egypt to revelation at Sinai

Exodus 1:1—15:21: Exodus from Egypt

Exodus 15:22—40:38: Journeys in the wilderness and revelation at Sinai

Leviticus: Revelation at Sinai continued

Leviticus 1:1—27:34: Laws concerning worship and holiness

Numbers: Wanderings in the wilderness

Numbers 1:1—25:18: The first generation in the wilderness

Numbers 26:1—36:13: The second generation in the wilderness

Deuteronomy: Re-proclamation of the covenant

Deuteronomy 1:1—30:20: Moses re-proclaims the covenant

Deuteronomy 31:1—34:12: Moses's farewell and death

The plot line of the Pentateuch starts universally, beginning with the creation of the world and humanity. Genesis 1–11 contains universal stories about the beginning of human civilization and addresses common themes such as mortality and death (Gen 3, Garden of Eden), violence between human beings (Gen 4, Cain and Abel), God's comprehensive judgment through flood (6–9), and the creation of different languages and cultures (Gen 11, Tower of Babel). In 12–50, the narrative focuses on the particular family line of Abraham and Sarah, from whom God promises to make a great nation (Gen 12:2). This couple's progeny eventually become the tribes of Israel. A persistent theme throughout the ancestral stories is how the divine promise reaches fulfillment in spite of the circumstances and human decisions that threaten it. The theme of barrenness is frequent and appears in the stories of Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel. In each case, God eventually opens the woman's womb. The most significant story that involves an endangerment of the promise is in Genesis 22, where God tests Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, as a burnt offering.

At the end of Genesis, Jacob and his family migrate south to Egypt, where Joseph had found favor in the household of Pharaoh. The book of Exodus begins with how the Israelites fell out of favor with a later pharaoh and were subjugated to slavery. Exodus 1–15 describes how the LORD delivers Israel from their bondage in Egypt. After a series of plagues, the Israelites are released. The climax of Israel's liberation occurs with the event at the sea, where the LORD delivers them miraculously. In the wilderness of Sinai, Moses receives the revelation of God, which will become the basis of Israelite community (Exod 19:1—34:35). The book of Leviticus, an extensive collection of laws with a primary focus on worship, is placed in the middle of the Torah and is set in the context of God's revelation at Sinai. The largest section