



Introduction to the Pentateuch

The Name of the Pentateuch

The Pentateuch, Greek 'five-volumed', consists of the first five books of the Bible, i.e. Genesis through Deuteronomy. The Hebrew term for it is *torah*, meaning 'law' or 'instruction', so this is how the NT refers to it, Greek *nomos*, i.e. law. In the Hebrew Bible, the law is the first of the three major sections, and sometimes *nomos* may refer to the whole OT, e.g. John 10:34. Although the Pentateuch contains many laws, it is essentially narrative with episodes of law-giving, but in the broader sense of *torah* all the Pentateuch can be seen as instruction, for it teaches as much through the history it records as by the law it gives. Another name for the Pentateuch found in some translations is 'the five books of Moses'. This is also an apt description in that the books of Exodus to Deuteronomy provide a biography of Moses, and traditionally he has been seen as their main author.

The Pentateuch as Foundational to the Whole Bible

The Pentateuch is not simply the beginning of the Bible; it is also the foundation of the Bible. It serves to orient the reader for reading the rest of the biblical story line. It introduces the key promises that show God's purposes in history and that lay the groundwork for the coming of Christ. Its theological ideas and ethical principles inform the rest of the Bible so that the subsequent books assume its authority and appeal to it as they evaluate people's deeds and character. These points are illustrated briefly here:

1. **Orientation**. The beginning of a book sets its tone and gives clues to the author's perspective. Genesis did this for the ancient world of polytheism by explaining that the world is created and controlled by only one God, not by a crowd of competing gods and goddesses. Similarly it speaks to today's readers, who often are essentially atheists, whether consciously or unconsciously: it shows them what it means to believe that behind all the phenomena of nature and the laws of science there is an all-powerful, loving God who controls all that happens.
2. **Divine purposes**. The Pentateuch shows God's intentions for his creation by describing what the world was like when he first created man and woman in the Garden of Eden. Their sin sets back the divine program but does not

defeat it, for God later calls Abraham and promises him descendants, land, and most important of all, blessing through his descendants to all the nations. These promises are more fully developed in the later books of the Pentateuch.

3. **Theology and ethics.** The Pentateuch gives insight into God's character and his ethical standards. It illustrates both his benevolence and his righteousness. He cares for mankind, creating man in his own image, providing him with food, and protecting human life from violent assault. Yet at the same time he demands moral behaviour, from keeping the Sabbath to refusing adultery or theft. Tales of punishment, from the flood (Genesis Chapters 6-9) to the golden calf (Exodus Chapter 32), demonstrate the danger of disregarding divine standards.

Content

A review of the contents of the Pentateuch shows that its centre of gravity is the law-giving at Sinai. All of Exodus Chapter 19 to Numbers Chapter 10 is devoted to the events that occurred in the vicinity of Sinai: the declaration of the Ten Commandments, the building of the tabernacle, the laws governing sacrifice, entry to the tabernacle, and the celebration of the festivals. Closer examination of this central section suggests that its climax is God's glory filling the newly built tabernacle (Exodus 40:34-38) as a visible demonstration of his choice of and intimacy with Israel—a restoration of the situation in the Garden of Eden, where God walked with Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:8).

But the outer frame of the books of Exodus to Deuteronomy is constituted by the life of Moses. Exodus 2 tells of his birth and providential upbringing in the Egyptian court, while Deuteronomy 34 describes his death. Exodus 3-15 describes his call to lead his people and the establishment of his authority over Pharaoh in the eyes of the Israelites (Exodus 14:31). Moses' approaching death colours all the final chapters of the Pentateuch. He is told to prepare for his death in Numbers Chapter 27, and the whole of Deuteronomy consists of his last appeals to the nation to serve the Lord faithfully. To this end he preaches three sermons and recites two poems (Deuteronomy Chapters 32 and 33) before he is granted a vision of the Promised Land and dies (Deuteronomy Chapter 34).

The Book of Genesis serves as an introduction to the rest of the Pentateuch. It explains the context for Moses' life and ministry. It gives the origin of the nation of Israel and its tribes, and explains how they came to be living in Egypt although their ancestors had been promised the land of Canaan. The people of Israel are to bring blessing to the nations, and the opening chapters of Genesis show the desperate need of the nations for blessing. The first avalanche of sin led to the universal judgment of the flood. The new start with Noah and his sons was again derailed, first by the sin of Ham (Genesis 9:20-29), and then by the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). In this general way Genesis explains the situation that Moses confronted, and various episodes in the lives of the patriarchs also show parallels to Moses' experience, e.g. Abraham's exodus from Egypt (Genesis 12:10-20).

Time Span

It is striking that the earliest events in the Bible are dated more precisely than the later ones. For example, the different stages of the flood are dated to the exact day of the year. The ages of the pre-flood heroes at the fathering of their firstborn and at their death are carefully noted in Genesis Chapter 5. Taking these figures at face value, Archbishop Usher (1581-1656) calculated that the creation of the world occurred in 4004BC. Using similar principles, Orthodox Jews hold that the year 2000 was the year 5760, i.e. 5,760 years since creation.

Such a venerable interpretative approach cannot be glibly dismissed, but most conservative interpreters today believe that it does not account well enough for the literary conventions of Moses' day. For example, the genealogies do not claim to include every generation, and may skip any number of them. With respect to the long lives of the antediluvians, those who lived before the flood, some scholars think these numbers should be understood as their actual ages in years, while others think their ages expressed in multiple centuries may have a symbolic significance, in line with the practices of other ancient peoples. It is best to admit one's ignorance here; yet at least it can be said that Moses used these numbers to make a point about the antiquity and reality of his audience's forbears.

However, the dating of the Israelite patriarchs by the internal numbering system of the OT is not so problematic. Conservative biblical scholars think it is likely that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob lived in the late 3rd and early 2nd Millennium BC, and that the Israelites entered Egypt either in the early 19th Century BC, consistent with an early date for the exodus, or else in the 17th or 16th Century BC, during the Egyptian second Intermediate Period (1640-1532BC). The Hyksos Dynasty that ruled during this time came from outside Egypt and therefore could have welcomed Hebrews like Joseph and his family to play a prominent part in Egyptian life.

The date of the exodus from Egypt is likewise controversial. Combining the biblical and extra-biblical evidence points to Solomon's temple being built in 967 or 966BC. According to 1 Kings 6:1, Solomon began to build the temple 480 years after the exodus. If the author intended 480 years as a literal designation, then working backward suggests the exodus would have been in 1447 or 1446BC, which is the date preferred by many conservative OT scholars today. However, on the basis of the description of the events surrounding the exodus, such as building the cities of Pithom and Raamses, most Egyptologists prefer a date in the 1200s, preferably after 1279BC but certainly before 1209BC, when an Egyptian monument mentions that Israel was established as a people in the land of Canaan. If there is symbolism in the designation '480 years', then it is possible that the exodus took place in the early 1200s BC rather than in the mid-1400s.

Composition

For more than 2,000 years, readers of the Pentateuch assumed that Moses was its author, as indicated by Jesus: <<***For Moses said, "Honour your father and your mother"; and, "Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die"***>> (Mark 7:10). This was a natural conclusion to draw from its contents, for most of the laws are said to have been given to Moses by God, e.g. Leviticus 1:1, and indeed some passages are explicitly said to have been written down by Moses, e.g.

Deuteronomy 31:9 and 31:24. The account of his death was most likely recorded by someone else, although some held it was a prophetic account by Moses himself (Deuteronomy Chapter 34).

However, in the late 18th Century, critical scholars began challenging the assumption of Mosaic authorship. They argued that several authors were responsible for writing the Pentateuch. These authors supposedly wrote many centuries after Moses, and were separated from each other in time and location. Complicated theories were developed to explain how the Pentateuch grew as different authors' accounts were spliced and adjusted by a series of editors. According to these critical scholars, it was likely that the Pentateuch reached its final form in the 5th Century BC, nearly a millennium after Moses.

In the late 20th Century this type of critical theory was strongly attacked, not just by conservative scholars but also by those brought up on such theories. They argue that the theories are too complicated, self-contradictory, and ultimately not provable. It is much more rewarding and less speculative to focus interpretative effort on the final form of the text. So there is a strong move to abandon the compositional theories of the 19th and early 20th Centuries for simpler hypotheses. Thus some critical scholars would see the Pentateuch being an essentially 5th Century BC creation. Others suggest earlier dates. But none of these suggestions can really be proven.

The Pentateuch does undoubtedly claim to be divine in origin, mediated through Moses. Thus Moses should be looked to as the original human author. Indeed, as stated above, the Pentateuch looks like a life of Moses, with an introduction. But this need not mean that he wrote every word of the present Pentateuch. It seems likely that the spelling and the grammar of the Pentateuch were revised to keep it intelligible for later readers. Also, a number of features in the text look like clarifications for a later age. However, this is quite different from supposing that the Pentateuch was essentially composed in a later age. Rather, it should be seen as originating in Moses' time but undergoing some slight revision in later eras so later readers could understand its message and apply it to their own situations.

Theme

The theme of the Pentateuch is announced in Genesis 12:1-3, the call of Abraham: **<<Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'>>**. Here God promises Abraham four things:

1. A land to live in.
2. Numerous descendants, i.e. 'a great nation'.
3. Blessing, divinely granted success for himself.
4. Blessing through him for all the nations of the world.

God's benefit for the nations is the climax or goal of the promises: the preceding promises of land, descendants, and personal blessing are steps on the way to the final goal of universal blessing.

Each time God appears to the patriarchs, the promises are elaborated and made more specific. For example, the promise of an unidentified 'land' in Genesis 12:1 becomes 'this land' in Genesis 12:7 and: <<***all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding***>> in Genesis 17:8.

The fulfilment of these promises to Abraham constitutes the story line of the Pentateuch. It is a story of gradual and often difficult fulfilment. The birth of children to produce a great nation is no easy matter: the patriarchs' wives – Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel – all have great trouble conceiving (Genesis 17:17, 25:21, and 30:1). But by the time they enter Egypt, Jacob's family numbers 70 (Genesis 46:27 and Exodus 1:5). After many years in Egypt they have become so numerous that the Egyptians perceive them as a threat (Exodus 1:7-10), and when the first census is taken, they total 603,550 fighting men (Numbers 1:46).

Similarly the promise of land is very slow in being fulfilled. Abraham acquires a well at Beersheba, and a burial plot for Sarah at Hebron (Genesis 21:30-31 and 23:1-20). Jacob bought some land near Shechem (Genesis 33:19), but then late in life he and the rest of the family emigrated to Egypt (Genesis Chapters 46-50). The Book of Exodus begins with the hope of a quick return to Canaan, but the stubbornness of Pharaoh delays Israel's departure. Their journey through the Sinai wilderness is eventful, and after about a year they reach Kadesh on the very borders of Canaan. There, scared by the report of some of the spies, the people rebel against Moses and the God-given promises, so they are condemned to wander in the wilderness for 40 years (Numbers Chapters 13-14). And of course the Pentateuch ends with Moses dying outside the Promised Land and the people hoping to enter it.

For these reasons the theme of the Pentateuch has been described as 'the partial fulfilment of the promises to the patriarchs'. Such a description certainly fits the climactic promise that through Abraham and his descendants all the families of the earth would be blessed. The closest fulfilment of this in the Pentateuch is Joseph saving Egypt and the surrounding lands from starvation in the seven-year famine. But later on, Israel is seen as a threat by other peoples in the region such as the Moabites, Midianites, and Amorites. It is not apparent how or when all the peoples of the world will be blessed. At the end of the Pentateuch that, like the promise of land, still awaits fulfilment.

However, the promise of blessing to the patriarchs and their descendants is abundantly fulfilled within the Pentateuch, despite their frequent lack of faith and their wilful rebellion. For example, after Abraham has lied about his wife and allowed her to be taken by a foreign king, the pair escape, greatly enriched (Genesis Chapters 12 and 20). Jacob, forced to flee from home after cheating his father, eventually returns with great flocks and herds to meet a forgiving brother (Genesis Chapters 27-33). The nation of Israel breaks the first two commandments by making the golden calf, yet enjoys the privilege of God dwelling among them in the tabernacle (Exodus Chapters 32-40). The Pentateuch is thus a story of divine mercy to a wayward people.

However, alongside this account of God's grace, must be set the importance of the law and right behaviour. The opening chapters of Genesis set out the pattern of life that everyone should follow: monogamy, Sabbath observance, rejection of personal vengeance and violence, principles that even foreigners living in ancient Israel were expected to observe. But Israel was chosen to mediate between God and the nations and to demonstrate in finer detail what God expected of human society, so that other peoples would exclaim, 'What great nation has a god so near to it? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law?' (Deuteronomy 4:7-8).

To encourage Israel's compliance with all the law revealed at Sinai, it was embedded in a covenant. This involved Israel giving its assent to the Ten Commandments and the other laws on worship, personal behaviour, crime, and so on. Obedience to these laws guaranteed Israel's future blessing and prosperity, whereas disobedience would be punished by crop failure, infertility, loss of God's presence, defeat by enemies, and eventually exile to a foreign land.

These covenantal principles, that God will bless Israel when she keeps the law and punish her when she does not—pervade the rest of the OT. The Book of Joshua demonstrates that fidelity to the law led to the successful conquest of the land, while the books of Judges and Kings show that Israel's apostasy to other gods led to defeat by her enemies. The argument of the prophets is essentially that Israel's failure to keep the law puts her at risk of experiencing the divine punishments set out in Leviticus Chapter 26 and Deuteronomy Chapter 28.

From NT times, Christians have seen the promises in the Pentateuch as finding their ultimate fulfilment in Christ. Jesus is the offspring of the woman who bruises the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15). He is the one through whom 'all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Genesis 12:3). He is the star and sceptre who shall rise out of Israel (Numbers 24:17). More than this, many heroes of the OT have been seen as types of Christ. Jesus is the second Adam. He is the true Israel (Jacob), whose life sums up the experience of the nation.

But pre-eminently Jesus is seen as the new and greater Moses. As Moses declared God's law for Israel, so Jesus declares and embodies God's word to the nations. As Moses suffered and died outside the land so that his people could enter it, so the Son of God died on earth so that his people might enter heaven. It was observed that the filling of the tabernacle with the glory of God was the climax of the Pentateuch (Exodus 40:34-38). So too: <<***And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory***>> (John 1:14a). The goal of the entire Bible is that humans everywhere should glorify the God whose glory has confronted them. Lost sight of in Eden, this goal reappears through Moses, on its way to final fulfilment through Christ.