

Introduction to the Pentateuch

Background

The Hebrew Bible or Old Testament took shape over many centuries. Long before the final written form of the Scriptures came to be, bits and pieces of it were told orally, sometimes as stories, sometimes in worship rituals, sometimes as legal judgments about particular disputed claims. In time, these oral traditions, long passed down by word of mouth, were codified in written form as stories, liturgies, and legal texts. Finally, after many rewrites and much editing, the Old Testament emerged as the Sacred Scriptures divided into three sections. The first, and most authoritative section of the Bible for most Jews is called the Torah, a Hebrew word often translated as “law” or “the Law.” The second and third sections of the Hebrew Scriptures are called the Prophets, and the Writings, respectively. Hints of this three-part canon of the Scriptures are found in the foreword of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) around 180 BC and later in the New Testament (Matthew 5:17, Luke 14:44, John 1:45), but the roots of this division go back much earlier. As the canon of the Scriptures evolved over time, and with the inclusion of additional books, the Old Testament canon as we know it was divided differently.

Torah: The Heart of the Old Testament

The Torah is considered the heart of the Old Testament, as the Gospels are the heart of the New Testament. The term *Torah* can also be understood more broadly than simply “law” or even a set of laws. Its meaning includes general instructions or teaching, including the story or narrative into which these instructions or laws are sometimes placed. Law, instruction, teaching, and story are all found in the Torah of the Scriptures, that is, the first five books of the Bible known to non-Hebrew readers as the Books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. As the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek, the name for this first and most sacred part of the Scriptures became known by its Greek title, “The Pentateuch,” meaning, “the five books.”

The Torah or Pentateuch opens with the story of Creation and concludes with the death and mourning of one of its central characters, Moses. It opens with stories of the world’s formation and closes with the children and grandchildren of freed Hebrew slaves standing on the banks of the Jordan River waiting to enter the Promised Land. In between, stories are told of the faith and disobedience of the ancestors, the escape from Egyptian slavery, the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, forty years of wandering to and fro in the desert, and several significant law codes woven throughout.

If one reads the stories of the Torah or the Pentateuch according to the chronology laid out in the stories themselves, it becomes apparent that the storytellers wished to emphasize certain parts of the story over others. For example, the first fifty chapters of the Pentateuch, the Book of Genesis, purports to cover about 2,300 years according to the narrative’s own internal chronology. We now know, of course, that in actual historical time, such a time frame is much too short, giving us a clue to the writer’s ancient mythic worldview. The next part of the story, which tells of the Exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Law and other events at Sinai, takes eighty-one chapters (Exodus; Leviticus; and Numbers, chapters 1 through 14) to tell about events that cover just over one year! The last twenty-two chapters of Numbers cover the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Finally, the Book of Deuteronomy spends thirty-four chapters recounting the last day or two in Moses’ life as he interprets the Law for a new generation on the banks of the Jordan River in what appears to be his last will and testament. Given such a contrived chronological storytelling structure, clearly, for the storytellers of the Pentateuch, the Exodus experience and the giving of the Law at Sinai were critically important. These two experiences provide a lens through which all other experiences before and after were to be understood. In the central themes of salvation



and covenant, grace and obligation, gospel and law, freedom and commitment found throughout the Scriptures, one sees traces of the Exodus and Sinai traditions.

When Moses is called to lead the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, the Lord promises not only to “rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians” but also to “lead them out of that land into a good and spacious land” inhabited by other peoples (Exodus 3:8). Over one hundred and fifty times in the Pentateuch, the ancestors of Israel are not only promised many descendents, a relationship with God, and that they will be a blessing to the whole world, but they are also promised a new homeland. Genesis 12:1–3 provides the most succinct expression of these promises made by the Lord to Abram. As if to underscore these promises, the earliest oral confessions of faith recorded in the Scriptures (e.g., Deuteronomy 6:20–24, 26:5–9) also recount the fulfillment of these promises in one form or another, especially, the promise of a new homeland.

If good stories have good endings, then the Torah or Pentateuch seems to end all too abruptly. Given how many times a homeland was promised throughout the rest of the Pentateuch, one might have expected that a good storyteller would have ended the Torah story with the people having arrived in their new homeland. They certainly had available to them stories of glorious conquest and entrance into the land as told in the Book of Joshua. Indeed, one might have guessed that the Book of Joshua would have been the most natural conclusion to the story as it unfolds in the Pentateuch. Why not a hexateuch (six books), then, instead of a Pentateuch (five books)? Why does the story end as it does with Moses dead and the fate of the ancestors in limbo? Why does the Pentateuch, the heart of the Old Testament, end with a landless people standing on the banks of the Jordan River looking longingly across to the Promised Land? Why, then, does the Pentateuch seem to end so badly? It’s as if, in terms of the stories of Jesus in the New Testament, the Gospel writers would have told of Jesus’ birth, life, teachings, and Death, but left out the most important part—his Resurrection! The ending of the Pentateuch, then, comes as a near total surprise.

Something must have happened in the intervening years between the first telling of these old, old stories about the promises God made to the ancestors and the final version of their telling in the Pentateuch that deliberately leaves out the fulfillment of those promises, especially the promise of land, as told in the Book of Joshua. Indeed, something huge did happen many years later, which provides the best explanation for why the Pentateuch ends the way it does and suggests a relative time frame for dating when the Pentateuch was finally compiled.

The Exile Factor

We now know that the Hebrew Bible, after a long process of gathering and editing oral and written sources, began to emerge in its final form during and soon after the People of God once again found themselves as refugees in the Babylonian Exile (587–538 BC). Their great Temple, their land, their kingdom, indeed, everything that had given them a sense of identity and destiny for some six hundred years, was all gone. If you imagine these refugees standing now on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in Babylon (modern-day Iraq), looking longingly eastward toward their homeland back over the Jordan River, the Torah story ending where it ends must have sounded like good news, wonderful news, of the possibility of an imminent homecoming. The Jordan River could well have been the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers of Babylon. The hills of Moab overlooking the Promised Land, where Moses and the people spend their last days together as described at the end of the Pentateuch, could well have been the fertile crescent of Babylon where the people find themselves now hearing the Pentateuch story in its final form.

The emotions of those who heard the Pentateuch read aloud for the first time, either in the Babylonian captivity or soon thereafter, are captured in the story of Ezra, the great scribe. In the Book of



Nehemiah (8:1, 9–12), Ezra reads “the book of the law (or Torah) of Moses” to the returning refugees in the square of the Water Gate in Jerusalem. The people all stand up in reverence throughout the reading, which took all morning. When the people hear the words of the Law (Torah) read, they weep (8:9). Soon after the reading and with a little encouragement from Ezra, their weeping turns to great rejoicing. If only reading the Torah or Pentateuch still evoked such awe and depth of emotion.

All readers, in some sense, must enter the story of the Pentateuch, first and foremost, from the perspective of those first hearers and readers. All readers now read it, as it were, backward from Exile. Now, as it was heard by the refugees in Babylon, all the stories and characters of the Torah or Pentateuch become larger than life, bigger than history, archetypal in force. In the Pentateuch the characters and events are more than historical. They have become mythic in revelatory power.

Now, the fact that the Pentateuch opens in the Garden of Eden located in Babylon between the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers matters. The first humans in the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis are invited to make choices of life-altering consequence just as the people gathered around Moses at the end of the Book of Deuteronomy face choices for blessing or cursing, for life or death. Reading such stories from the perspective of the Babylonian Exile or any existential exile, for that matter, becomes a new invitation to appreciate how one’s destiny is shaped by one’s choices. Adam and Eve were exiled from Eden having made wrong choices.

Indeed, the stories in the second part of the Hebrew Bible, the Former Prophets (Joshua through 2 Kings) recount the choices of consequence that were made by all those who first entered the Promised Land from the banks of the Jordan River. Those choices eventually led them once again out of the Promised Land into Exile, first to Assyria, then to Babylon. Ironically, the Book of Joshua, which would seemingly have fit best as the climax of the Pentateuch, has now been placed, instead, as the introduction to a negative history of choices gone wrong that lead to Exile. The beginning and ending of the Pentateuch are bookends of choice and its consequence.

The primeval stories that tell of Adam, Eve, the serpent, the Great Flood, and the Tower of Babel in Genesis, chapters 1 through 11, are more than origin stories per se. When read together, as a whole, these stories might legitimately be called a theopolitical manifesto composed by a people living as subjects beneath the coercive power of Babylon. Each biblical story seems to have near parallels to Babylonian origin stories only now retold so as to be critical of the domination system of the Babylonian city-state. Later, in the Book of Exodus, the stories of the Lord defeating the empire of an unnamed pharaoh allows for mythic comparison to any empire that tries to subjugate God’s People. Clearly, from the perspective of the Pentateuch, bondage in Babylon need not be any more permanent than bondage in Egypt had been. The extended story of Joseph living in exile in Egypt, not only serves as a paradigm for how a person of minority status might manage to become a “light to the nations” but also how the people might benefit from a Nehemiah-like leader who later becomes influential in Persian empire politics. The Pentateuch, throughout, has a strong bias against empire politics, while at the same time offering pragmatic illustrative stories for how a minority people living under the control of empire might survive until their promised liberation. The Pentateuch, as such, might be considered subversive literature on par with the underground literature of dissident playwrights.

The stories of Adam and Eve suffering only exile from Eden and not immediate death, the story of Cain’s exile to the East of Eden being a sort of protective custody from his avengers, the story of God starting Creation all over again with Noah in spite of ongoing human sinfulness, are heard in fresh ways by people who are on the brink of starting over again in their own exile. Exile may not be an ending but a beginning. Indeed, Abraham and Sarah, whose story begins in Babylon, immediately following the Tower of Babel mess, offer renewed hope for all would be refugees. Abraham became the mythic father of faith for the world’s three dominant monotheistic religions, precisely because in his refugee status he had to learn to live by faith in a stateless, boundaryless, existence relying only on God for his identity and existence. He and Sarah were called to leave Babylon in order to live a life of exile, that of travelers



toward the Promised Land of Canaan. Even after they arrive there, they leave once again almost immediately into exile in Egypt because of famine. As life was for Abraham and Sarah, so is life for those living in seemingly permanent Exile in Babylon. Their confessions proclaimed: “My father was a wandering Aramean” (Deuteronomy 26:5). Perhaps, wandering like Abraham, even in the wilderness for forty years as they would later do, was survivable with God on their side. Perhaps, they could even begin to imagine that they, like Abraham and Sarah, were once again being called out of Babylon to go to the Land of Promise (Isaiah 51:2).

Abraham’s grandson Jacob, renamed Israel on his way into Exile to Haran (Babylon), receives his new name and renewed promises of destiny even as he flees for his life from his murderous brother Esau. Jacob, now Israel, eventually returns to the Promised Land in humility, bearing gifts and bowing down before his brother in reconciliation. Recounting such a tale would remind those returning, or about to return to Judah from Babylon, of the need to consider how delicate any rapprochement with those living back in the homeland might need to be.

Living in Exile: Maintaining Communities of Faith

The law codes and legal material found throughout the Pentateuch serve to remind people living in exile of the importance that worship and ethics play in the formation and maintenance of communities of faith and life. Indeed, people living in exile might easily be tempted to assimilate to the dominant culture, choose the gods of the empire, and too easily forget the Covenant relationship promised to them by God. All the various versions of the Law in the Pentateuch seem to function less as stories telling of Israel’s past, than as stories creating an imagined future around profound jurisprudence and constitutional formation. Ultimately, the variety of laws in the Pentateuch, and especially those that have been explicitly updated from earlier versions of the Law such as Moses models in the Book of Deuteronomy, suggest that even these sacred laws may be in need of periodic revision. The laws serve as a summons to the people to live lives of obedience and true worship, to make choices for blessing, now more than ever, as they stand on the banks of the Jordan or Tigris and Euphrates Rivers living in hope of yet fulfilled promises.

When Jesus is asked by some lawyerly peers who are trying to test his faith, “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?” (Matthew 22:34–40), he responds with two verses from the Pentateuch. First, he quotes Deuteronomy 6:5: “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (verse 37). Jesus adds that “this is the greatest and the first commandment” (verse 38). Second, he quotes Leviticus 19:18: “The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (verse 39). Jesus concludes by saying, “The whole law [meaning Torah or Pentateuch in this instance] and the prophets depend on these two commandments” (verse 40). In a sense, in reciting these two verses from the Pentateuch, Jesus responds to two questions asked by the Lord at the beginning of the Pentateuch. To Adam and Eve hiding in shame because of their disobedience, the Lord seeks them out and asks, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9). To Cain, after he kills his brother, the Lord asks, “Where is your brother?” (Genesis 4:9). The first question invites reflection on one’s relationship to God, the Creator. The second question invites reflection on one’s sister or brother or neighbor. In short, Jesus’ summary of the Law is a summary of the Pentateuch—love God and love others!

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