

LECTURE 1
PENTATEUCH OVERVIEW
COVENANT PEOPLE

INTRODUCTION

The Septuagint called the first five books of the Bible “The Pentateuch.” This was derived from Πεντετεύχος the Greek word meaning “five scrolls.”

The Jewish name for these books is the Hebrew word תּוֹרָה (*Torah*). This noun is derived from a root יָרָה meaning “to throw” or “to shoot” and means “direction, law, or instruction.”

I. AUTHOR

A. LIBERAL ARGUMENT

In *The Composition of the Hexateuch* (including Joshua), the liberal scholar Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918) wrote to identify what he saw were the four authors or sources of these books. In addition to some basic Mosaic material he argued that there were four redactors/editors who in later years contributed their own material for their own ends. This is generally known as the “Documentary Hypothesis” and the case for it is set out below.

1. Four redactors (editors)

(J) Yahwist: the J document was written by a pro-Davidic monarchy scribe in Judah around 850 BC and used the divine name “Yahweh.” In J, God is presented in a simple narrative style with human-like qualities.

(E) Elohist: This document was written by a pro-Northern Israel author about 750 BC to correct the J document. It uses the less intimate word “Elohim” for God, and does not use anthropomorphic language.

(D) Deuteronomists: The J and E documents were combined to reflect the theological convictions resulting from the 722 BC Assyrian victory over Israel. In 650 BC the D document was written to reinforce the cultic purity of Judah’s worship and so reinforce Josiah’s reforms. This new source stressed the importance of worshipping the LORD God (combining Yahweh and Elohim) at a central shrine, Jerusalem. Most of the material is restricted to Deuteronomy.

(P) Priestly writers: The JE and D documents were then fused into the JED source after 587 BC. At some point during the middle of the fifth century BC, the P document was written to address the priestly concerns of the postexilic community. Wellhausen believed that P contained the majority of the Levitical material.

Around 400 BC these two final documents (JED and P) were combined into a JEDP complex of materials that comprise the Pentateuch as we know it today.

2. Evidence

a. Doublets:

b. Divine names:

c. Theological themes:

Different theologies. For instance, J is commonly characterized as portraying God anthropomorphically; D presents a form of retribution theology; P is replete with priestly concerns and tends to emphasize the transcendence of God. The differing viewpoints in the putative documents are often alleged to show progression in Israel's theology from animism, to henotheism, and finally to monotheism. Furthermore, traditional critical scholars see a chronological progression among the sources in terms of form of worship, e.g., the issue of centralization of worship. According to traditional criticism, J is unaware of centralization (Ex. 20:24-26); D calls for it (Deut. 12:1-26), and P assumes it (Ex. 25-40, Numbers, and Lev. 1-9).¹

d. Stylistic differences:

3. Criticisms

¹ R Dillard & T Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 41.

B. EVANGELICAL ARGUMENT FOR MOSAIC AUTHORSHIP

1. Allowances

a. Moses may have used oral or written sources.

This may answer the question as to how Moses could reliably write about events which occurred up to 2,500 years before his birth. However, God may have revealed the contents of Genesis to him directly (Num.12:6-8).

While materials which the author used for the composition of this book no doubt came to him from five to six centuries before his time, prior to Jacob's migration into Egypt, nevertheless Moses seems to have served as a Spirit-guided compiler and interpreter of the pre-existent material which had come to him from his forebears in oral and written form.²

Trained in the "wisdom of the Egyptians" (Acts 7:22), Moses had been providentially prepared to understand and integrate, under the inspiration of God, all the available records, manuscripts, and oral narratives.³

In the final analysis, it is possible to affirm the substantial Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch in line with the occasional internal evidence and the strong external testimony, while allowing for earlier sources as well as later glosses and elaboration. It is in keeping with the evidence to remain open and non-dogmatic concerning the particulars of the composition (for instance, what is pre-Moses, Moses, post-Moses). In any case, our concern is the final form of the text, since that is what God has given the church as canon for its edification.⁴

b. While retaining overall control Moses may have used others to write the documents.

c. There may also have been minor inspired additions/revisions after the time of Moses.

Under divine inspiration there may have been later minor additions and even revisions. Substantially and essentially, however, it is the product of Moses.⁵

This is all consistent with the idea of authorship and literary practices in the ancient Near East.

2. Evidence for Mosaic Authorship

a. Old Testament

There are numerous references to Moses' writing activity in the Pentateuch (Ex.24:4,7; Ex.34:27; Num.33:2; Deut.31:9, 19, 22, 24).

In addition to these references to Moses' writing, there is the centrality of Moses' life and ministry in the Exodus to Deuteronomy narratives. God's speeches are often introduced by phrases such as "The Lord spoke to Moses, saying..." (Lev.4:1).

The Law is connected with Moses dozens of times in the Old Testament. Three examples of this are 1 Kings 2:3, 2 Kings 14:6 and Ezra 3:2 .

b. Jewish Tradition

The Talmud refers to the first five books of the Bible as "the Books of Moses." The Mishnah and the Jewish historian Josephus both accepted Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch.

c. New Testament

² G L Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Moody Press: Chicago, 1998), Electronic Edition.

³ *Nelson's complete book of Bible maps and charts* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), Electronic Edition.

⁴ R Dillard & T Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 47.

⁵ E J Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1953), 51.

Jesus also connected Moses' name with the Law. He told the cleansed leper to offer the gift which Moses commanded (Matt 8:4). He associated the name of Moses with the divorce law (Matt 19:7–8). He quoted two specific laws regarding respect for parents and attributed them to Moses (Mark 7:10). He directed the Sadducees to consult the "book of Moses" (Mark 12:26). After his resurrection he explained how all the Scriptures "beginning with Moses" pointed to him (Luke 24:24, 27). He rebuked the unbelief of his listeners by claiming "Moses wrote about me" (John 5:46).

It is not surprising that the founder of Israel's theocracy provided this masterful literary composition. Moses' superb training in the courts of Egypt, his exceptional spiritual gifts and his divine call uniquely qualified him to compose the essential content and shape of the Pentateuch. The founder of Israel's theocracy of necessity would have given Israel its prior history, meaning and destiny, as well as its laws. Nearly every significant political and/or religious community in the ancient world retained accounts of its defining origins. In much the same way, Genesis furnished the theological and ethical underpinnings of the Torah: Israel's unique covenantal relationship with God.⁶

Despite the most confident denials of a rationalistically controlled literary and historical criticism, the majority of Christians throughout the world continue and will continue to believe and maintain that the Pentateuch is not a late, anonymous, untrustworthy composite, but is correctly described as "The Five Books of Moses, the man of God."⁷

The genuineness and unbroken continuity of its history, the consistency of its plan, the sublimity of its purpose, the universality of its appeal, the omni-temporality of its message, the coherence of its subject matter, the naturalness and beauty of its literary quality and the spirituality of its meaning bind it together and demonstrate it to be the work of one great mind in vital contact with God.⁸

II. DATE

Earliest date:

Latest date:

III. HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

1. Chronology

4000 BC	Primeval Age: Creation, Fall, Flood, Babel
2000 BC	Patriarchal Age: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph
1500 BC	Mosaic Age: Moses, Joshua
1000 BC	Davidic Age; David, Solomon
500 BC	Restoration: Ezra, Nehemiah

2. Theological History

The Pentateuch is not simply a "history" of Israel. It contains much that we would not expect in a national history, and omits certain details that might ordinarily be considered historically pertinent. The Pentateuch is not just a document to provide us with important and true information, but also to strengthen our faith. It was originally meant to encourage ancient Israelites to believe and trust

⁶ *Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 3.

⁷ O T Allis, *The Five Books of Moses* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1949).

⁸ M F Unger, quoted in *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1998), Electronic Edition.

in God because of his faithful relationship with their ancestors. So without presenting a complete “history of Israel,” it traces the actions of God and Israel *in history*. For over two millennia, believers have found important historical, religious and theological truths in these books.⁹

3. Archeology

As mentioned above, twentieth century archeology has served to confirm the history of the Bible and the early authorship of the biblical documents.

In 1941 the most eminent archeologist of his time, W E Albright said:

Archaeological and inscriptional data have established the historicity of innumerable passages and statements of the Old Testament; the number of such cases is many times greater than those where the reverse has been proved or has been made probable.¹⁰

20 years later John Elder and J A Thompson commented along similar lines.

It is not too much to say that it was the rise of the science of archaeology that broke the deadlock between historians and the orthodox Christian. Little by little, one city after another, one civilization after another, one culture after another, whose memories were enshrined only in the Bible, were restored to their proper places in ancient history by the studies of archaeologists.... Contemporary records of Biblical events have been unearthed and the uniqueness of Biblical revelation has been emphasized by contrast and comparison to newly discovered religions of ancient peoples. Nowhere has archaeological discovery refuted the Bible as history.¹¹

Finally, it is perfectly true to say that biblical archaeology has done a great deal to correct the impression that was abroad at the close of the last century and in the early part of this century, that Biblical history was of doubtful trustworthiness in many places. If one impression stands out more clearly than another today, it is that on all hands the over-all historicity of the Old Testament tradition is admitted.¹²

4. Moses

Moses dominates the canvas of the Pentateuch. His life was marked by unique revelations from God (Ex.33:11; Num.12:6-8), special miraculous signs and wonders (Deut.34:10-11), special intimacy with God in prayer (Ex.32:11-14), and a special covenantal role (Ex.20:18-19).

From a Jewish perspective, the dominant figure in the Pentateuch and the entire Old Testament is Moses. Abraham plays a key role in Genesis, but his stature and accomplishments do not match those of Moses. Although Abraham was the founding father of Israel, Moses was the one who organized the nation, promulgated their laws, and, under God, led them for forty years through the wilderness. He was a prophet, a priest, and almost a king as he directed every facet of national life. The New Testament highly praises both Abraham and Moses, but it was Moses who appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration, along with Elijah, to talk with Jesus (Matt. 17:3–8).¹³

IV. LITERARY ANALYSIS

1. The Unity of the Pentateuch

⁹ B Arnold and B Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 64

¹⁰ W Albright, “Japheth in the Tents of Shem,” in *The American Scholar*, 42:692–94 (1941), 181.

¹¹ Elder, *Prophets, Idols and Diggers* (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1960), 16.

¹² J A Thompson, *Archaeology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 13.

¹³ H Wolf, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Pentateuch* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), Electronic Edition.

The Pentateuch is both a composite of individual books and a seamless narrative that renders a complete story from creation to the death of Moses. To read it as merely one or the other would distort its text.¹⁴

2. Literary Genre

Although it is true that the most common designation for the Pentateuch is “law” (Hebrew, “*torah*”), the overall composition of these five books is much more complex. The Pentateuch also contains historical narratives, laws, hymns, personal archives, epics, treaties, genealogical records, poems, proverbs and credos.

3. Original Meaning

It is true that Moses and many of his forebears had learned of the purposes of God either by direct revelation or by oral tradition and that they had communicated these divine intentions to their contemporaries in a variety of ways. Nevertheless, up till now there had been no systematic elaboration of the historical and theological building blocks that had resulted in the structure of a people united in covenant with God and charged with the awesome privilege and responsibility of functioning as his people in line with his redemptive design. Who indeed were these people? What was the meaning of Israel? How had Israel come to be? What, specifically, was she to achieve as one member among the family of peoples and nations? Beyond all that what was the meaning of creation? Of the heavens and earth? Of humankind? What object did the Creator have in view for his creation and if Israel was a sovereignly elected servant people, how was that servanthood to be employed in implementing the great saving purposes of God? Universal Jewish and Christian tradition clearly and unequivocally teaches that Moses, the covenant mediator and spokesman for Yahweh to his people, set out to answer these very questions as the last great ministry of his long and productive life. The form which these answers took is what is known to Judaism as the Torah and to Christians as the Pentateuch, the five books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.¹⁵

V. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

1. Individual Book Themes

J E Smith outlines the themes of the different books as follows:

BOOK	THEME	LESSON
GENESIS	THE ELECTION OF ISREAL	SALVATION ESSENTIAL
EXODUS	THE REDEMPTION OF ISREAL	DELIVERANCE ESSENTIAL

¹⁴ *Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 1.

¹⁵ E H Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books House, 1992), 22.

LEVITICUS	THE SANCTIFICATION OF ISRAEL	HOLINESS ESSENTIAL
NUMBERS	THE DISCIPLINE OF ISRAEL	PERSEVERANCE ESSENTIAL
DEUTERONOMY	THE INSTRUCTION OF ISRAEL	OBEDIENCE ESSENTIAL

¹⁶

The Nelson's Book of Maps and Charts sets out the contents of the Pentateuch below:

Book	Key Idea	The Nation	The People	God's Character	God's Role	God's Command
Genesis	Beginnings	Chosen	Prepared	Powerful Sovereign	Creator	"Let there be!"
Exodus	Redemption	Delivered	Redeemed	Merciful	Deliverer	"Let my people go!"
Leviticus	Worship	Set Apart	Taught	Holy	Sanctifier	"Be holy!"
Numbers	Wandering	Directed	Tested	Just	Sustainer	"Go in!"
Deuteronomy	Renewed Covenant	Made Ready	Retaught	Loving Lord	Rewarder	"Obey!"

¹⁷

2. God the Creator

3. God the Redeemer

4. God's Attributes

All of God's attributes are displayed in the Pentateuch. For example:

¹⁶ J E Smith, *The Pentateuch* (2nd ed.). (Joplin, Mo: College Press Pub. Co, 1993) Electronic Edition.

¹⁷ *Nelson's complete book of Bible maps and charts* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), Electronic Edition.

5. God's Names

God reveals Himself to the patriarchs and to Moses through His actions and also through His names, which in the Old Testament express the nature and essence of a person.

a. Elohim (God)

"Elohim" is the word used throughout Genesis 1, where it stresses God's work as Creator. The Hebrew form is a plural, but it is usually used with a singular verb. Some scholars have explained this as a plural of majesty or of respect. Others have said that while it does not prove the doctrine of the Trinity, it does allow for its later development.

b. Yahweh (LORD)

The personal name for God was "Yahweh," better known as "Jehovah."

c. Adonai (Lord)

d. El Elyon (God Most High).

e. Shaddai (God Almighty)

f. El Olam (Eternal God)

6. Salvation

7. The Covenants

We shall notice how God deals with man by covenant. From the covenant of works with Adam in Genesis 1 through the gradual unfolding covenant of grace in its various administrations – Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses – through to the covenant renewal of Deuteronomy we see the centrality of this concept.

Through the study of the Pentateuch we can learn who God is and what He requires of mankind. God is concerned about the whole world, though He chooses to work mainly through Israel and enters a covenant relationship with her. Sadly, Israel and the nations often choose to rebel against God, but Yahweh will not abandon His covenant promise and seeks to restore and redeem mankind. God is patient and merciful, but He is also holy and righteous, and those who disobey Him are eventually judged. But the Pentateuch also looks forward to the Lamb of God who will pay the ultimate price for sin.¹⁸

8. The Promise

Related to the idea of covenant is the theme of promise. The Pentateuch narrates the movement of God's people chronologically, geographically and spiritually toward the fulfillment of the Patriarchal promise of progeny, position, and possession. The individual books of the Pentateuch are seen by Clines to focus particularly on one of these three ingredients of that promise. Each book concludes with a thematic pointer indicating that faith in the Promise, though tested by circumstances, was still alive. Genesis focuses on the *progeny*. Exodus and Leviticus focus on the *position* of Israel in covenant with God and obliged to God. In Numbers and Deuteronomy the focus is on *possession* of the land

Deuteronomy is virtually a handbook of do's and don'ts to be observed once the entrance into Canaan has been effected. As Deuteronomy closes, the Promise still has not been realized. With the death of the great lawgiver one could even say that the Promise was in jeopardy. Thus the Pentateuch is a masterpiece of literature, carefully crafted by its author to underscore how faith in God's original Promise survived every challenge. Though full of accounts of false starts, failures, and reverses of every sort, the Pentateuch is basically optimistic. However slow and painful, progress toward the realization of God's Promise was ongoing.¹⁹

VI. NEW TESTAMENT ANALYSIS

1. God's People

As is true of all Scripture, God intends that this story – a story of his saving grace poured out freely on needy humans – should become our story as well. For indeed, this is the story of all who follow Christ. For Christians, personal salvation is very similar to the story of the Pentateuch. God, the Sovereign of the universe, breaks into our personal history and provides a solution for our brokenness. Because of his love and grace, he provides salvation by his own revelation in history (incarnation). God gives us prophets and teachers to interpret his historical acts and help us maintain our relationship with him. The rest of the story is one of growth in grace, or the imitation of our Savior. So the gospel of Jesus Christ was also the gospel of the Israelites.²⁰

2. Jesus Christ

Christ ... is the end of the *history* as well as of the *law* of the Old Testament (emphasis added).²¹

¹⁸ H Wolf, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Pentateuch* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), Electronic Edition.

¹⁹ J E Smith, *The Pentateuch* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press Pub. Co., 1993), Electronic Edition.

²⁰ B Arnold and B Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 68.

²¹ P Fairbarin, *The Typology of Scripture*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1989), 72.

Everything found in the Old Testament has relevance at some point to the incarnation, humiliation, death, resurrection, ascension, glorification, triumphant return or future kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God (cf. Luke 24:27). Without undermining the literal and historical sense of Old Testament Scripture, this principle will be applied throughout this entire book...Our principle is, that having once found the literal sense, the exact meaning of the terms, and the primary application...we are then to ask what the Holy Spirit intended to teach in all ages by this formula...This principle of looking for Christ will be basic to this overview of the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament.²²

In asking the question, 'Where does the story of Jesus Christ begin?' we must travel back with Matthew to Abraham (Matt.1:1-16), further back still with Luke to Adam (Luke 3:23-38) and with John to the eternity before time and creation (John 1:1-3). The Old Testament is then seen as the unfolding of a carefully prepared plan for the coming of his Son into the world which the Master Architect slowly and painstakingly reveals.²³

As William Hendriksen asserts, no Old Testament book is "interpreted fully until it is viewed in the light of New Testament revelation."²⁴

Genesis focuses on God's covenants with its fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, which promise that God will make of their family a great nation. The narrative in Exodus through Deuteronomy deals with the nation's founder, Moses, and God's covenant mediated through him to make Israel a holy nation. That story and these covenants find their fulfillment in Christ and the new Israel as the sovereign God directs history toward its ultimate destiny.²⁵

VII. THE MESSAGE OF THE PENTATEUCH

Original Message:

Present Message:

²² Gareth Crossley, *The Old Testament Explained and Applied* (England: Evangelical Press, 2002), 38.

²³ *Ibid*, 35.

²⁴ W Hendriksen, *Survey of the Bible* (Evangelical Press, 1976), 298.

²⁵ *Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 2.