

# The Pentateuch



## Introduction

What does the word “pentateuch” mean?

When were these five books written?

What is the story that the Pentateuch tells?

## Mythology

Why do skeptics claim that the Pentateuch is just like any other ancient mythology?

What is Continuity?

Things that look the same or sound the same are the same. So, since the idol is like Baal, it is Baal. What is done to the idol is done to Baal. But Baal is also like the storm: he is potent; he is life-giving; he is impetuous; he is destructive. Therefore, he is the storm. Thus, what is done to Baal is done to the storm, and what is done to the storm is done to Baal. In this way, assuming that no barriers have been erected between the realms by destructive forces, it is possible to exert a measure of control over the divine and nature. But perhaps equally important, this understanding also means that humans can participate in nature and in the divine.

--John Oswalt

What are the implications of Continuity?

What is the worldview presented by the Pentateuch?

What are the implications of Transcendence?

All of the Bible's understandings stem from one ruling principle: it is the principle of transcendence. For the Bible, God is not the cosmos, and the cosmos is not God. God is radically other than his creation. This thought undergirds everything the Bible says about reality. From start to finish, the Bible adamantly resists the principle of continuity. God and the divine realm are not in any way a part of this world. He is everywhere present in the world, but He is not the world and the world is not Him. He is other than the world; He is separate from it; it does not proceed from him as a somewhat blurred reflection; it is a creation that, by his permission, has a distinct existence from his own. This is the law of transcendence, and it means that God is wholly other than the cosmos.

--John Oswalt

## Genesis

What happened before Abraham appeared on the scene?

What does God promise to Abraham?

How was Jacob's name changed to Israel?

How did the nation of Israel wind up in Egypt?

## **Exodus**

What came out of Moses' encounter with God?

What was the point of the ten plagues?

What happened on Mount Sinai?

What did Moses find when he came down from Sinai?

## **Leviticus**

What purpose did sacrifices serve?

What was Aaron's inheritance?

## **Numbers**

What were the four rebellions of Israel?

Who was Balaam and what was he hired to do?

## **Deuteronomy**

What is the format of Deuteronomy?

How did Moses die?

## Closer Look: Genesis 15

How do we discover the meaning of this chapter?

What is the purpose of the animals, and why were they cut?

What are the smoking firepot and the blazing torch?

What happens at a covenant treaty ceremony?

What is so different about this particular covenant ceremony?

What is the cosmic significance of this event?

## YHWH's Covenant with Abram | Genesis 15

1 After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision:

“Do not be afraid, Abram.

I am your shield,

your very great reward.”

2 But Abram said, “O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” 3 And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”

4 Then the word of the LORD came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir.” 5 He took him outside and said, “Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”

6 Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

7 He also said to him, “I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.”

8 But Abram said, “O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?”

9 So the LORD said to him, “Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.”

10 Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. 11 Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.

12 As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. 13

Then the LORD said to him, “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. 14 But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. 15 You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. 16 In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”

17 When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. 18 On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates- 19 the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, 20 Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, 21 Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.”

## Discussion Questions

Read Genesis 25:19-34 and 27:1-40. What are your impressions of Jacob and Esau? With which character do you sympathize? Jacob stole Esau's birthright and blessing through manipulation and deception. Why would God choose him to be the father of the twelve tribes of Israel? God even says through the prophet Malachi, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated." (1:2-3) Why would God say that? Why would God favor a man who got what he had through such malicious deception? Moreover, why would the author of Genesis make Jacob, one of the three patriarchs of Israel, appear to be such an unsavory character? How would Jacob's deception influence Israel's view of themselves as a nation? And, most importantly, what does all of this say about God?

The ten plagues in Egypt (chapters 7-11) seem to be perpetuated because Pharaoh's heart is hard toward YHWH and the Hebrews. It seems to be the case that, if only he had not hardened his heart, the subsequent plagues could have been averted. After the plague of hail, the author records this statement: "When Pharaoh saw that the rain and hail and thunder had stopped, he sinned again: He and his officials hardened their hearts." (9:34) However, at the beginning of the account of the very next plague (locusts), YHWH says this to Moses: "Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his officials." (10:1b) How do you explain this apparent contradiction? Why would God harden Pharaoh's heart? Why not rather just be mercifully done with the plagues, the last of which was the killing of all the firstborn sons of Egypt?

Secularists have often said of the Levitical laws that they are archaic and of no relevance to modern culture. After all, how many of us follow this command: "Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material?" (19:19d) If this is the case, then we need not concern ourselves with commands like, "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable," (18:22) or, "Do not have sexual relations with an animal and defile yourself with it." (18:23) What is the Christian response to this line of reasoning? Which, if any, of these Levitical laws are applicable today? How, and to whom, are they to be applied, if at all?

The test for an unfaithful wife is laid out in 5:11-31. What is the purpose of such a relatively large portion of the book being reserved for potentially adulterous women? What was the aim of such a test? Why is there no similar test for a husband who is suspected of being unfaithful? One of the chief criticisms of the Pentateuch is its patriarchal and misogynistic nature. How does the test for an unfaithful wife relate to this criticism? Does it confirm it? Is this another example of a misogynist bent in the Bible? Could it be otherwise? If so, how?

Read the account of Moses and the water from the rock in Numbers 20:1-13. Now turn to the account of Moses' death in Deuteronomy 34. Why wouldn't God let Moses enter the promised land? What exactly did Moses do that was so wrong? Moses had faithfully led Israel for 40 years in the desert. He had put up with a lot of complaining from the people and a lot of mystery from God. Why, then, would God not let him enter the promised land? Does this seem fair to you? Do you think Moses should have been allowed to enter the promised land? Why did he have to die on the border of the land that he had so hoped to bring his people to for over 40 years?

## Genesis | Outline

### 1-11 | prehistory | In the beginning, God... (1:1)

The Pentateuch opens with the account of Israel's God and the creation of the universe. The climax of creation is mankind, who are made in God's image. Everything that God created was good. It wasn't long, though, before things got bad. The man and woman that God created rebelled, and, as a result of their rebellion, they lost their place in Eden, the paradise that God had made specifically for them. The bad news is compounded when their first son killed their second son; and things eventually got so bad that God decided to destroy the whole earth with a flood, in which only one family (Noah's) was saved.

### 12-26 | abraham | I will make you into a great nation...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. (12:2a, 3b)

God called Abram and his wife Sarai to leave their homeland and travel to Canaan, a land that God promised to give to Abram's offspring. However, Abram was 75 and had no children. But God made a covenant with Abram, promising that his offspring will be as numerous as the stars. Later, Sarai, desperate for a son, gave Abram her maidservant Hagar, with whom he conceived Ishmael. But Ishmael was not the son of God's covenant with Abram.

Several years after Ishmael's birth, God appeared to Abram and changed his name to Abraham. He promised that in less than a year Sarai (now Sarah) would give birth to a son, Isaac. When Isaac was a child, God tested Abraham by commanding him to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham complied, but was stopped at the last minute by the angel of the Lord, and was given a ram to sacrifice instead. Abraham died at the age of 175 and was buried with his wife Sarah.

### 27-36 | jacob | Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God...and have overcome. (32:28)

Abraham's son, Isaac, had twin boys, Jacob and Esau. Jacob, the younger, stole the birthright and the blessing of his older brother. Afraid for his life, Jacob fled to Haran, the land from which God had called his grandfather, Abraham. While there, Jacob fell in love with Rachel but was tricked into marrying her older sister, Leah. Through a series of deceptive moves, Jacob married Rachel, stole his father-in-law's best animals, and fled back toward Canaan. While alone in the wilderness, Jacob wrestled with God through the night, after which his name was changed to Israel, which means "he struggles with God." Jacob eventually had twelve sons, who became the twelve tribes of Israel: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, Benjamin, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher.

### 37-50 | joseph | You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good. (50:20)

Joseph was Jacob's favorite son, and the Lord gave him dreams in which all of his brothers, and even his parents, were bowing down to him and paying him honor. This aggravated his brothers so much that they sold him to slave-traders who shipped him to Egypt, and then his brothers told Jacob that he had died.

Through a series of strange events, Joseph found himself standing before Pharaoh, interpreting his two dreams of seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine. Joseph made such an impression on Pharaoh that he was elevated to the position of second-in-command of the whole nation.

When the famine struck, Joseph's brothers came down to Egypt to buy food. In one of the most dramatic episodes in the Bible, Joseph and his brothers are reconciled. Jacob and his whole family move to Egypt, to the land of Goshen, and are honored among all the people of the nation because of Joseph. This is how the nation of Israel wound up in Egypt rather than Canaan.

## Exodus | Outline

**1-6 | moses** | I am who I am. (3:14a)

The story picks up nearly 400 years after the death of Jacob, and the Israelites have gone from a band of favored immigrants to a vast nation of slaves. Rescued from death as an infant, Moses grew up in Pharaoh's household, but had to flee the country after killing an Egyptian who was abusing a Hebrew. He found his way to Midian, where he married the daughter of a priest and had two sons.

Some years later, while tending his father-in-law's flocks, Moses encountered God in the Burning Bush. Here he learned God's name (YHWH) and God's mission for freeing the Hebrew people. God sent Moses back to Egypt with a message for Pharaoh: "Let my people go."

**7-18 | exodus** | At the end of the 430 years, to the very day, all the Lord's divisions left Egypt. (12:41)

Of course it couldn't be easy. It took ten plagues (blood, frogs, gnats, flies, livestock, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, firstborn) before Pharaoh finally let the Israelites leave during the night which is now commemorated by Passover. Regretting his decision, Pharaoh and his army pursued Moses to the Red Sea, where God caused a great wind to separate the sea for the Israelites to pass through safely. When the Egyptians tried to pass through, however, the wind stopped blowing and the waters came down on them, drowning the entire army.

Not long after this the people began to grumble against Moses because of their hard life in the desert. They grumbled against him because of lack of water, then lack of food, and then lack of water again. Each time God miraculously provided for the needs of his newly-freed people.

**19-24 | sinai** | Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (19:5b-6a)

Three months after leaving Egypt, the Israelites came to Mount Sinai, where Moses met with God. It was here that God consecrated the people of Israel to be his people, and where he gave them the Ten Commandments:

1. You shall have no other gods.
2. You shall not make for yourself an idol.
3. You shall not misuse the name of YHWH.
4. Remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy.
5. Honor your father and mother.
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not give false testimony.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's house.

Many other laws and customs were decreed to Moses on Sinai. God also confirmed his covenant with Moses and the people of Israel, appearing to them in a cloud of glory that had the appearance of a "consuming fire."

**25-40 | tabernacle** | Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. (40:34)

God went to great lengths to dictate the blueprints for his tabernacle, which was his portable temple—that is, where and how he will dwell with his people as they travel from Egypt to Canaan. The exact layout of the tabernacle, all the items in it, and all the other priestly rituals and clothing are described in striking detail.

After receiving all the laws and instructions, Moses came down from Sinai to find that the Israelites had abandoned YHWH and were now worshipping a golden calf in debauched revelry under the auspices of Aaron. In his rage, Moses called the Levites to his side, and they killed three thousand of their own countrymen that day. He also destroyed the golden calf by grinding it to a fine powder, scattered it over the water, and made the Israelites drink it.

The book concludes with the construction of the tabernacle, and the glory of YHWH coming down and filling it. From here on, when the cloud lifted, the people moved, and where it stopped, they camped.

## Leviticus | Outline

**1-7 | offerings** | It is a burnt offering...made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the Lord. (1:9b)

God dictated the various offerings and sacrifices that are acceptable to him. The several types of offerings are: burnt, grain, fellowship, sin, and guilt. The purpose of the offerings (especially the sin and guilt offerings) was to make atonement for the person who had done wrong. God forgave the sins of the people through their offerings and sacrifices.

There were strict regulations about what could be offered as a sacrifice. Any animal had to be without defect, and any sort of grain or bread had to be offered without yeast. God demanded pure sacrifices—the best of what the people had.

**8-10 | aaron** | Come to the altar and sacrifice your sin offering and your burnt offering and make atonement for yourself and the people. (9:7a)

Aaron and his four sons, Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar, were ordained as priests of YHWH on behalf of Israel. An elaborate ceremony was performed by Moses to consecrate Aaron and his sons, as well as the tabernacle and the elements within it. When they presented their first offering on the altar, fire came out from the cloud of the glory of the Lord and consumed the burnt offering. The people shouted for joy and fell facedown in worship.

Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, corrupted their priestly duties by offering "unauthorized fire." The same fire that had come out from the glory of the Lord and consumed the burnt offering exploded over them, killing them instantly. Aaron and his sons were not permitted to grieve, but were given further instructions on their duties and lifestyle.

**11-16 | purity** | The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place. (16:22a)

God made ritual cleanness a vital element of the Hebrew lifestyle by dictating several types of purity laws. The first group of laws had to do with clean and unclean foods. The second set of purification laws was for women who have given birth. The third set was for infectious skin diseases and mildew. The fourth set was for bodily discharges that made people unclean.

The regulations for the Day of Atonement follow the ritual purity laws. God commanded that atonement be made for the sins of the people once a year. There were to be two goats used in the atonement ceremony: one as a sacrifice, the other as a scapegoat. Aaron confessed all the sins and wickedness of Israel while his hands were on the scapegoat. The scapegoat was then released into the desert, with all the sins of Israel upon it.

**17-27 | laws** | If you follow my decrees...I will look on you with favor...and I will keep my covenant with you. (26:3a, 9a,c)

The rest of the book flows like this: laws, punishments, priestly rules, festivals and feasts, rewards for obedience, and punishment for disobedience. This section of the book operates within the Ancient Near Eastern custom of covenant-making, with all the various laws and decrees of the ruling king (YHWH, in this case), and the promises of blessing for obedience and curse for disobedience. This is a typical custom among Ancient Near Eastern cultures, and we should not be surprised to find the biblical literature conform to these cultural standards.

## Numbers | Outline

**1-10 | census** | The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace. (6:24-26)

The census was issued in order to count the men of fighting age from each of the twelve tribes. The Levites were not counted among the fighting men because they had been set apart for priestly duties. The total number of fighting men in Israel was 603,550.

A small set of laws forms an interlude between the census and the material related to the tabernacle. The tabernacle and the census are related because the tabernacle was the center of the camp, with the twelve tribes arranged on its four sides, with three tribes on each side. This was how the nation of Israel proceeded through the desert for as long as they journeyed.

**11-21 | rebellion** | I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them! (11:29b)

The people grumbled against Moses and YHWH, which set off a tragic series of events, culminating in the forty years of wandering. Prominent among the grumblers were Miriam and Aaron, Moses' siblings. Because of their sin, Miriam was afflicted with leprosy and was only healed through the prayer of intercession by Moses, her brother.

The most famous account of Israel's rebellion against YHWH is the report given by the spies sent into Canaan. Only two of the spies, Caleb and Joshua, had enough faith in God to say that they could, indeed, conquer the land. The other ten spies did not think it could be done because the inhabitants of the land were large and many.

Korah and 250 of his fellow Levites instigated a third rebellion. They accused Moses of setting himself above the people of God, for they claimed that the whole community was holy, not just Moses and Aaron. Their rebellion ended badly for them—they were swallowed up by the earth.

The fourth rebellion is the saddest of all because it is the rebellion of Moses. Although it is unclear what exactly Moses did that was wrong, God's charge against Moses was that he did not trust God enough to honor him as holy. As a result, Moses was barred from entering the promised land.

**22-25 | balaam** | But can I say just anything? I must speak only what God puts in my mouth. (22:38b,c)

Balaam was an enigmatic prophetic figure who lived in Canaan when Israel was preparing to conquer it. He was not one of the Israelites, but it seems that he knew who YHWH was. Balak, the king of the Moabites, hired him to curse the Israelites. Balak's hope was that if the Israelites were under Balaam's curse, then Moab would be able to destroy them. Balaam, however, claims over and over that he can only speak what God tells him to say. He promises neither a blessing nor a curse. In fact, although he was hired to curse Israel, he can only bless them.

**26-36 | summary** | So the Lord said to Moses, "Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay your hand on him." (27:18)

The final eleven chapters of the book include many of the elements that are common to the rest of the Pentateuch: a census; instructions about offerings, feasts, and the Day of Atonement; and other instructions on inheritance and vows. Two things of note in this section are the outline of Israel's sojourn in the desert (ch. 33), and the boundaries of the land that Israel was to conquer (ch. 34).

Another important element in this section is the beginning of the transfer of leadership from Moses to Joshua. Because of his sin, Moses was not permitted to enter the promised land. Joshua, his aide, was appointed as Moses' successor to lead the people in their conquest.

## Deuteronomy | Outline

**1-11 | remember** | Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. (6:4)

Deuteronomy is essentially a covenant document between YHWH and Israel. At the beginning of every covenant document is an historical record, and that is exactly what constitutes the majority of the first eleven chapters. Moses recounted all the major events, good and bad, of Israel's sojourn from Egypt, including the reconstitution of the Ten Commandments.

The most important Hebrew prayer, the Shema, is also found in this section (6:4-5). This is what Jesus cited when asked to identify the greatest commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."

**12-26 | stipulations** | These are the decrees and laws you must be careful to follow in the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess—as long as you live in the land. (12:1)

The largest section of the book deals with the requirements and stipulations of the covenant—the commands of YHWH that Israel was to obey. The first series of stipulations set out the boundaries of Israel's worship—where it will take place (yet to be determined) and YHWH's unique and jealous claim to their worship.

Much of the rest of the material is familiar, already covered in either Leviticus or Numbers. There are some new concepts introduced, however, such as the governmental regulations for judges, kings, courts of law, and warfare.

**27-30 | confirmation** | See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. (30:15)

After the history and stipulations come the blessings and curses in the confirmation of the covenant. YHWH outlined the various blessings that he will bestow upon Israel if they obey the commands he has given them and keep this covenant. On the flip side, he also warned them of the curses that he will bring on them should they disobey. The section on curses is significantly longer than the list of blessings, and it goes into horrible detail about the tragedy that will befall them if they abandon YHWH. There is, however, always a chance for them to return to the Lord after they have disobeyed because God has made provision for the renewal of the covenant.

**31-34 | moses** | Then Moses climbed Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah...and Moses the servant of the Lord died there in Moab. (34:1a, 5a)

The final four chapters cover the end of the life of Moses. When he had gathered the Israelites together to speak to them one last time, he appointed Joshua as his successor. He then read the law to the people and recited the words of the song in chapter 32. After this he blessed each of the tribes of Israel, much like Jacob had blessed his sons before he died. Then Moses climbed to the top of Mount Nebo and God showed him the length and breadth of the promised land—the land that he was not permitted to enter. After seeing the promised land, Moses died.

