

## Overview of the Old Testament

### Contents of the Old Testament

This Old Testament is primarily the literary history of the nation of Israel from its founding around 2000 BC to its return from Babylonian exile in 500 BC. The Old Testament consists of 39 books written by at least 29 different authors over the course of 1,000 years and includes several different literary genres, including historical narratives, poetry, prophecy, and law.

The books themselves cluster around four specific points in Israel's history. These four clusters are covered in great detail, with the history narratives focusing on a few years, supplemented by the poetry, music, and legal aspects of Israelite culture for these time frames. Between these four clusters, the narrative covers vast periods of history in broad strokes primarily so as to connect these clusters.

### The Exodus

Around 1500 BC the people of Israel were a slave nation, held under the control of the Egyptian Pharaoh. The first historical cluster found in the Old Testament tells of the events surrounding the miraculous liberation of the Israelites slaves by God through the man Moses. This is known as the Exodus.

It is during the Exodus that the first 5 books of the bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Number and Deuteronomy) are written. These books tell the history of this Israelite people beginning with God calling their ancestor Abraham out from among the nations to become the father of a new nation. It speaks of their ancestor Jacob (a.k.a. Israel) and his 12 sons, and how those 12 sons became the 12 tribes of Israel, and how that family ended up in Egypt. These books describe the miraculous redemption of the Nation from Egypt, and their subsequent wanderings in the desert for 40 years. Mostly, these 5 books outline the civil, criminal and religious law for a new nation. In all, these 5 books were written over period of about 40 years.

These five books were written by Moses during their desert wanderings, and were probably compiled by Joshua as the nation was conquering Palestine ("the Promised Land").

### The Davidic Kingdom

After Israel conquered Palestine, there is a dark period of 400 years where Israel neglects God. These four centuries are covered in one book: Judges. At the end of the period of Judges, the second historical cluster tells of the rise of the Davidic Kingdom. The book of Samuel and Ruth tells of the transition from the time of Judges to the time of Kings, and explains how David, a humble shepherd, became the great warrior king of Israel. The book of I Kings continues the story as it tells of the actions of David's son, Solomon. In all this period covers about 120 years.

Also during this time, the great poetic books were mostly written. David wrote most of the book of Psalms, which is a collection of songs used in the Israel's worship. Solomon wrote Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon.

## The Divided Kingdom and Exile

Following Solomon, Israel experienced a civil war, where the north broke off from David's royal line. The northern kingdom continued to be called Israel (or sometimes Ephraim), while the southern kingdom came to be called Judah. Over the course of 400 years, both kingdoms found themselves in spiritual decline, until God allowed both kingdoms to be taken into captivity. Assyria captured Israel in 722 BC and Babylon captured Judah in 586 BC.

The third cluster of books covers the spiritual decline of Israel and Judah, both in the historical book of Kings, and in the prophetic books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea through Zephaniah. The prophetic books warn of the coming captivity if the nation does not turn back to God. Most of the prophetic books are clustered around the last 150 years of this time.

The Babylonian exile lasted for 70 years. During this time, the prophetic books of Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah were written.

## Post Exile

After the exile, the Jews were allowed to return to their homeland (although only a small number actually returned). This post-exilic period represents the fourth historical cluster. The historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah cover this period, along with the prophetic books of Haggai and Malachi. Finally, Esther relates a story of Jews who did not return to their land following the exile.

## Purpose & Theme of the Old Testament

Why would God use the historical literature of one nation as His revealed Word for the entire world? What makes Israel's history so special and distinct from the history and literature of other nations?

The history and literature of Israel is special because Israel is God's "chosen people." This is the nation through which God would reveal himself to the nations (Isaiah 42:6) and through which God would reveal His Chosen One (Isaiah 49:6, Galatians 3:8). To be the chosen people is to be the family or nation through which the Messiah would descend. Therefore God specially worked in this nation in order to prepare all things at just the right time to reveal His Messiah (Galatians 4:4).

Israel was not chosen because it was especially righteous or had any special qualities. Indeed, Israel repeatedly failed to live up to the standard that God had for them. Instead, the history of Israel is a testimony not to the greatness of the nation, but to the sovereignty, faithfulness and the grace of God.

It is not that God didn't work in and among other nations. In fact several times the Old Testament refers to priests and prophets of His who are at work in other nations (Genesis 14:18, Exodus 18:1ff, Numbers 22). However, Israel is unique because the salvation of all humanity would come through this race.

Therefore, the Old Testament is not just a history of Israel, but it is the revelation of God's plan of salvation for all of humanity, culminating in the coming of the Messiah. The Old Testament is not a record of all God's interaction with humanity during this time, nor is it even an exhaustive record of all that happened in Israel. Instead the Old Testament is a deliberate collection of books which are carefully written and compiled to reveal how God founded, developed, nurtured, disciplined and raised a nation through which He would reveal His Messiah in order to bring salvation to the entire world.

## Arrangement of the Old Testament

The ancient Hebrew bible arranges the Old Testament around 24 books grouped into three sections: the Torah (law), the Nevi'im (prophets) and the Ketuvim (writings). These sections correlate to the timing of the books compilation and addition to the canon:

- The Torah was most likely compiled by Joshua shortly after the death of Moses (~1500 BC).
- The Nevi'im was mostly written primarily around the time of the exile as an explanation as to why Israel had been taken into captivity (~600 BC).
- The Ketuvim was compiled by Ezra after the exile as part of his efforts to re-institute temple worship (~450 BC).

Because this arrangement is based upon periods of history, studying the Old Testament according to this arrangement helps a student to more easily understand the historical and spiritual background into which these books were written. The overriding purpose of the books become more apparent, and provides the context for the message.

Hebrew Arrangement		Greek/English Arrangement	
The Torah (Law)	"In the beginning" (Genesis) "These are the names" (Exodus) "And He called" (Leviticus) "In the wilderness" (Numbers) "These are the words" (Deuteronomy)	Law	Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy
The Nevi'im (Prophets)	<u>Former Prophets:</u> Joshua Judges Samuel Kings  <u>Latter Prophets:</u> Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekiel  <u>The Twelve:</u> Hosea                      Nahum Joel                          Habakkuk Amos                        Zephaniah Obadiah                    Haggai Jonah                        Zechariah Micah                        Malachi	History	Joshua Judges Ruth I Samuel II Samuel I Kings II Kings I Chronicles II Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah Esther
		Poetry	Job Psalms Proverbs Ecclesiastes Song of Solomon
The Ketuvim (Writings)	<u>Sifrei Emet (The 3 Poetic Books):</u> Praises Proverbs Job  <u>Hamesh Megillot (The Five Scrolls):</u> Ruth Song of Solomon The Preacher (Ecclesiastes) How! (Lamentations) Esther  <u>Other Historical Books</u> Daniel Ezra-Nehemiah The Words of the days (Chronicles)	Major Prophets	Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations Ezekiel Daniel
		Minor Prophets	Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi

By contrast, our modern English arrangement consists of 39 books arranged into five sections. This arrangement, along with the names for the books, came out a translation of the Old Testament into Greek called the Septuagint (2<sup>nd</sup> century BC). In this translation, some books were split (Samuel, Kings, Ezra-Nehemiah), and they were rearranged more according to literary genre than historical

context. It is also through this Greek translation that we get our modern English titles to the books (e.g. Genesis is Greek for “origins”).

Because this arrangement is based on literary genre, studying the Old Testament using the Greek/English arrangement helps the student to use consistent hermeneutical techniques for each genre.

## What Bible Did Jesus Use?

In Matthew 23:35 Jesus condemns the Jews for killing prophets “from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah.” Abel was the first martyr, whose murder was in the book of Genesis (Genesis 4:1-16). Zechariah was martyred in 2 Chronicles 24:20-21. Jesus point is that prophets had been martyred from the beginning to the end of the Old Testament. This point is only clear if Jesus used the Hebrew bible, which concludes with Chronicles.

Jesus alludes to the three part division of the Old Testament from the Hebrew arrangement in Luke 24:44-47.

*Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. (Luke 24:44-47)*

In other places, Jesus uses a two fold division: Law and Prophets (Matthew 5:17-18; 11:13; 22:40; Luke 16:16-17). Jesus is most likely grouping the writings with the prophets and is certainly not discounting the importance of the Writings.

Having determined that Jesus used a Hebrew bible, it is clear that many of the apostles used the Septuagint. Throughout the New Testament epistles, the apostles quote the Old Testament, and most of the time they are quoting the Greek translation. This is due to the fact that most of the original readers of the epistles could not read Hebrew. Nonetheless, this affirms to us that it is acceptable to study the Old Testament in its English/Greek arrangement, as well as affirming to us that it is legitimate to use translations (albeit with caution) in our reading of scripture.

While knowing which bible Jesus used is certainly a fascinating issue, we should not lose sight that in each of these references, Jesus is affirming that all the Old Testament, Law, Prophets, and Writings, teach that the Messiah would come, suffer and die, and then be raised from the dead so that we could be forgiven of our sins. The gospel, which we so often consider a New Testament doctrine, according to Jesus, is contained in every part of the Old Testament.

Indeed, Jesus is the purpose and focus of the Old Testament, and Jesus is the focus of our study of the Torah this fall.

## Overview of the Torah

### Structure

The Torah or the “book of Moses” is divided into five sections or books. The Hebrew names for these books are taken from the first phrase in book, while the Greek and English names are taken from the theme of each book. These five books are also known as the “Pentateuch,” which is the Greek name meaning “five cases,” referring to the five containers in which the scrolls would have been kept.

The books are chronological, with the events recorded and most likely written one after the other. However, the books are also highly unified, having been written by one author and carrying one single theme throughout.

Greek Name	Hebrew Name	Events/Themes	When written
Genesis	“In the beginning”	Creation of the world Calling of Abraham	Probably After giving of the law at Mt. Sinai.
Exodus	“These are the names”	Redemption from slavery The civil & criminal law Building the tabernacle	After giving of the law at Mt. Sinai
Leviticus	“And He called”	The ceremonial law	Probably after the establishment of the tabernacle
Numbers	“In the wilderness”	The census Wilderness wanderings	Sometime prior to Deuteronomy
Deuteronomy	“These are the words”	Second giving of the law	Prior to entry into the promised land

### Author

By tradition, the Torah was written by Moses. It was not until the 17<sup>th</sup> century that any serious challenge to this tradition was raised. In 1753, Jean Astruc proposed a theory that the Torah was a compilation of material from several different sources. This was hotly debated until 1877 when Julius Wellhausen codified the multiple source theory.

Wellhausen stated that there were four distinct original sources which were later compiled into what we know as the Torah today. He named these four sources J, E, D and P. “J” was named for “Jehovah” and represented a source written in the southern kingdom of Judah about 850BC, showing a personal and anthropomorphic God. “E” was named for “Elohim” and represented a source written in the northern kingdom of Israel about 750BC, and showed a more objective view of God. According to Wellhausen, these two sources were combined to form JE around 650 BC.

“D” (which stands for “Deuteronomy”) was written by the priest Hilkiah around 621BC during the reforms of King Josiah, while “P” was written by Ezra around 500BC and included the genealogies, rituals, and the sacrificial passages of the Torah<sup>1</sup>.

Wellhausen’s theory was thoroughly developed and widely accepted by biblical scholars<sup>2</sup>. The only problem with his theory is that it contradicts scripture, and more importantly contradicts Christ.

First, the Torah itself seems to indicate that Moses wrote down at least a significant portion of these books (Exodus 24:4, 34:28, Numbers 33:2, Deuteronomy 31:9). In the New Testament, John

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed explanation of Wellhausen’s theory, see Allen P. Ross, “Genesis,” from *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*. John F. Walvoord & Roy B. Zuck, ed., Victor Books, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that even most liberal scholars, while still denying the Mosaic authorship, they no longer hold to the JEDP theory.

tells us that the “law was given through Moses” (John 1:17). Paul also affirms Moses authorship (Romans 10:5, 1 Corinthians 9:9), as does the writer of Hebrews (Hebrews 9:19).

Finally, Jesus himself attests to Moses authorship. In Mark 12:26 Jesus states:

*And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong." (Mark 12:26-27. ESV)*

This is not an isolated account, as Jesus frequently refers to the Law of Moses, or states “Moses says” when quoting from the Torah. To doubt the Mosaic authorship of the Torah, then, is to doubt the words of Christ.

## Date & Audience

For nearly 400 years, Israel had been enslaved in Egypt by Pharaoh. Then God miraculously reveals himself and his power over Egypt through 10 terrible plagues. This culminated in the 10<sup>th</sup> plague, Passover, where God illustrated his redemption of the nation from the angel of death through the slaughter of a lamb. Through the course of these events, God forced Pharaoh to let His people go. But not without a final show down at the crossing of the Red Sea.

Israel then camped at the base of Mt. Sinai, where God himself descended onto the mountain the form of a storm cloud. From there, God gave to Moses the Law, carved into stone by the hand of God himself.

However, when the Torah was being written, these incredible events had taken place a generation before. Nearly all of those who were first hand witnesses to these events had passed away. Because of the sin of their parents, all this generation knew was 40 years of nomadic desert wandering. They hadn't experienced the hardship of slavery. They hadn't seen the miracles. They hadn't experienced the presence of God on Mt. Sinai.

Moses did not want this generation to forget the amazing things which God had done for them. He didn't want them to forget their roots. He didn't want them to forget their God, who not only created the world, but called them out as a nation through their ancestor Abraham, and then redeemed them from slavery.

So after meeting with God on Mt. Sinai, Moses undertook the project of creating a written record of all that had transpired. He wrote the “prequel” to these events in the book of Genesis. He wrote down the events of the Exodus from Egypt and their desert wanderings. He wrote down all the Laws which God had given. And finally He wrote down his final address to the nation before he died, and included in it a song so they could easily remember his words. Today Moses words to that generation are available for us in the Torah.

## Literary Structure

The Torah is a unique blend of historical narrative and law. While this may seem an odd mixture of literary genre, in the ancient world this was a distinct genre known as a suzerain-vassal treaty. This treaty between a powerful king and his vassal had a structure where the king recounted the shared history before outlining the legal requirements of the treaty. While certain parts of the Torah (Exodus 20-24, Deuteronomy 1-31, Joshua 24) follow the strict suzerain-vassal structure<sup>3</sup>, the entire Torah's mix of history and law would have been to its original readers.

In addition to this historical-law genre, at key points in the Torah, the author interjects a poem or song followed by a brief epilogue. This poem-epilogue serves to tie the historical narrative to the

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<sup>3</sup> The suzerain-vassal treaty structure will be looked at in more detail when we study the second half of Exodus.

either readers current situation or some yet future event. Because of this the placement and message in this poetry is important to see the key purpose of the Torah<sup>4</sup>.

Preceding Narrative	Song	Epilogue	Future Connection
Creation of Humanity	Gen. 2:23	Gen. 2:24-25	Marriage principles are founded in the creation of man and woman.
The Fall	Gen. 3:14-19	Gen. 3:20-24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Current hardship is a result of the fall.</li> <li>• Hope will come from the woman's offspring.</li> </ul>
Joseph's Narrative	Gen. 48:15-20	Gen. 48:21-22	Promise that God will take you back to the land of their fathers
Jacob's Narrative	Gen 49:1-27	Gen 49:28-50:26	Jacob's burial in Canaan & Joseph's request for burial demonstrates the promise of a return to the land.
Crossing the Red Sea	Ex 15:1-18	Ex 15:19-20	People forget God's power and begin to grumble.
Balaam	Num 23-4		
Deuteronomy	Duet 32-33	Duet 34	Death of Moses while looking into the promised land.

The poetry would have been written to allow the listener to more easily remember the point of the passage. Each poem and the accompanying epilogue have a way of connecting these past events with a current or soon future circumstance.

## Purpose

Deuteronomy 31-34 is the grand climax of the Torah, ending with Moses final exhortation, the two chapter long "Song of Moses," and an epilogue regarding the death of Moses. This final poetic interjection summarizes all the narrative of the Torah, reminding them of all the great things God had done for their nation. It is accompanied by the admonishment to obey this God who has done such wonderful things for them.

These chapters summarize then Moses purpose for writing the Torah:

- Moses wanted to Israelites to obey the laws of the Torah so that they might live well in the land they were about to enter (Deut 30:16-20).
- Moses wanted to encourage the Israelites to be strong and courage as they entered the promised land by reminding them of how God had delivered them in the past (Deut 31:1-8)
- Moses wanted the Torah to be read regularly and formally every 7-years at the Feast of Booths (Deut 31:9-13)
- Moses wanted the Torah to be a testimony to the stubborn rebelliousness of the people of Israel (Deut 31:24-29)

<sup>4</sup> John H. Sailhamer. "Genesis." *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), electronic edition STEP file.

- Moses wanted the Torah to be passed down from generation to generation so that they might prosper in the Promised Land (Deut 32:45-47).

## Purpose for Today

The Torah was the rule of law for Israel in the Promised Land. It included civil, criminal and ceremonial legal requirements. Obedience to the law would result in prosperity and peace in their society. Disobedience would result in chaos and anarchy.

Obedience to the Torah, however, does not result in salvation. The Torah was never intended as a means of salvation (Galatians 3:21, Romans 3:28). Salvation for the Jews of this time came through faith in God alone (Romans 4:1-10)<sup>5</sup>.

Furthermore, the stipulations found in the law are very specific to Israel, and are not necessarily transcendent laws for our society today. They are the covenant guidelines between God and Israel which formed the constitution and legal structure for Israelite society.

How then do laws established to govern a society 3,500 years old have any relevance today? If the Law is not transcendent, either on a spiritual level (for it was never designed for our salvation) nor a civil level (for laws applying to a culture 3,500 years ago has little relevance), why should we read and study the Torah today? The following are some reasons:

- The Torah reminds us that we are part of a larger story of God's interaction and relationship with humanity.
- The Torah reveals the holiness of God.
- The Torah reveals the mercy of God.
- The Torah serves as a tutor and a guide to righteous living.
- The Torah serves to show us our own sinfulness so that we might recognize our need for God's mercy (Romans 7:7, Deut 31:24-29).
- An understanding of the Torah is critical for understanding most of the Pauline epistles in the New Testament.
- The Torah points to redemption in Christ.

## Theme

God's redemption of and covenant with his chosen nation, Israel.

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<sup>5</sup> The role of the Law and salvation will be discussed in more detail during our study of Leviticus.

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