

Knowing God Through the Torah:

A survey of the Pentateuch

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Introduction

The Pentateuch, also known as the Torah, refers to the first five books of the Hebrew Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These texts hold immense significance not only in Judaism alone but also in Christianity. They are full of narratives about creation, the early history of humanity, the origin of the Israelite people, God's covenant with his people, religious laws and instructions, and the early days of the Israelites¹ as a nation.²

In order to understand its content, it is necessary that the reader be aware of the context upon which it was written³. In the words of John Walton, context is “A cultural broker [that] helps build bridges between people of different cultural backgrounds in order to facilitate communication”.⁴ Throughout the years scholars have attempted to comply with this principle, which in turn, has caused the Torah to undergo various methodologies of interpretation. A variety of these methods shall be discussed next.

¹ Held, Shai, *The Heart of Torah, Volume 1: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Genesis and Exodus, The Heart of Torah* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2017), xxii-xxiii.

² John Goldingay, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: Exploring Text, Approaches & Issues* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015), 50.

³ Klein, William. W., Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation: Revised and Expanded* (United States: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 42.

⁴ Walton, John H. and J. Harvey Walton, *The Lost World of the Torah: Law as Covenant and Wisdom in Ancient Context* (United States: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 13.

Interpretive Conventions

Knowing the Genre

From very early times, methods of interpretation had already been established to aid in the interpretation of the Torah. Any honest interpretation must begin with the acknowledgement of the Pentateuch as God's inspired, inerrant Word and the recognition of its role as a work of literature written through human beings. Before reading the Torah with the objective of interpretation one must read it by virtue of its canonical significance, the value of its literary genre, and its source of Spiritual truths. Stephen G. Dempster states that "We have been so eager to interpret the Bible that we have forgotten to read the Bible."⁵ Once familiarized with the literary genres of the text, the reader can begin making use of interpretative conventions pertaining to each genre and corpus. In the case of the Pentateuch, the genres to maintain in scope are the Law, Ritual, and Narrative genres.

Many might be surprised that the Law is considered a literary genre, but it is in the narratives of the Law that the Israelites found the way to obedience in order to enjoy God's blessings. In addition to this, the Law was responsible to set the people of Israel apart from other nations as holy people.⁶ A good principle to follow when attempting to identify the Law genre in the Pentateuch is to differentiate between the descriptive texts and prescriptive texts.⁷ Within the genre of the Law, we find two types of legal testament material: the Casuistic Law and the Unconditional Law. The Casuistic Law can be recognized by its "if..then" structure. It presents specific situations or cases and then provides a corresponding judgment or legal ruling for each

⁵ Dempster, Stephen G., *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (United Kingdom: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 24.

⁶ Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 438-439.

⁷ Walton and Walton, *The Lost World of the Torah: Law as Covenant and Wisdom in Ancient Context*, 18.

case. Casuistic laws deal with specific real-life situations rather than general principles. They permit a certain degree of flexibility and adaptation to different situations. They also offer a framework for applying principles of justice to a variety of specific cases. An example of this kind of Law can be found in Exodus 21:28-32.

The Unconditional Law, on the other hand, is a series of legal or ethical directives that are presented without specific conditions or stipulations attached to them. These laws are often seen as having a more absolute or universal character, meaning, they are not contingent upon certain circumstances or actions. An example of this kind of Law can be found in Exodus 21:12.⁸ When interpreting the Law, the reader must know that the text is best read as a body of guiding principles to live and execute justice,⁹ rather than as an explicit and exhaustive list of commands proposed to treat every possible scenario.¹⁰

When interpreting Narratives, however, the reader will find a broader spectrum of subgenres. Report Narratives are the simplest of the narrative types which is characterized by its third-person narration and typically focuses on a single event in the past. One example of this kind of narrative is the tribal settlements in Canaan (Judg. 1:16-17) or the narratives about construction in 1 Kings 7:2-8.¹¹ The reader must focus on the main subject and deduce their theological theme from the body that surrounds them since they do not offer much devotional content and they make their point indirectly. For example, in the passage of 1 Kings 22 Micah is portrayed as courageous and by implication condemns Israel's lukewarm faith. In such a case the

⁸ Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard Jr., 440.

⁹ Walton, and Walton, *The Lost World of the Torah: Law as Covenant and Wisdom in Ancient Context* 21-22.

¹⁰ Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard Jr., 453.

¹¹ Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard Jr., 424.

reader must enter the cultural context and ask how the social pressures of that time make the passage more vivid.¹² In a similar way, the Hero Narratives have in focus the heroic achievements of a specific character with the aim to exemplify a particular principle for the reader. When reading these kinds of narratives good questions to ask are, what kind of values is the main character inculcating? What can I learn from the manner in which they acted? After answering these questions the reader can ask how these values support or intensify the theme of the broader body surrounding it.¹³ For example, in the instance of Genesis chapters 15 and 21, the emphasis of this narrative is not on the infertility of the characters, Abraham and Sarah. The main point of the story is how God's power through Abraham's faith overcame all obstacles in order to fulfill His promise to him.

Context, Context, Context

Regardless of the genre, nonetheless, one thing that cannot escape a successful interpretation of the Torah, or any Biblical text for that matter, is context. The reader must be aware that when reading the Torah, he or she is attempting to close cultural, chronological, and linguistic gaps. The reader must also keep in mind the original audience and the motives of the author for addressing them. By asking questions such as: who was this originally addressed to? How did the cultural atmosphere influence the meaning of the text? When was this written? Is there any meaning loss in translation? Etc. The reader will be capacitated to better understand the contemporaneous theological application of the text. It is also important to know that every reader approaches the text with presuppositions or biases¹⁴ shaped by our culture, spiritual

¹² Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard Jr., 425.

¹³ Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard Jr., 429.

¹⁴ Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, 16.

education, and personal experiences, whether we are aware or not. The reader must identify these before approaching the text.

All these practices in themselves are not enough. The most crucial practice one can exercise before attempting any interpretive work of the Holy Scriptures is prayer and sensitivity to God's spirit. Prayer must be a present before, throughout, and after the interpretation process.¹⁵

Historical and Cultural Context

Understanding the historical and cultural context of the Pentateuch is essential for unpacking its depth and significance. The context provides a lens through which we can explore the religious beliefs, social dynamics, political circumstances, and literary conventions of the ancient Near Eastern. The world in which these Scriptural manuscripts were written. The endeavor of the reader of the Torah involves discerning the nuanced interplay between divine revelation and the human contexts that shaped the formation of the text. Understanding the time in which the text was written is also essential because it enables the reader to trace the historical development of foundational narratives and events, fostering a deeper comprehension of the theological themes. The Torah, as mentioned before, commences with the creation of the World located in the book of Genesis. In the same book is found the entrance of sin into the lives of the first humans, the flood of the earth as a consequence of that, and the confusion at Babel.

Although none of the books of the Torah explicitly denote their authorship, the author is generally agreed to be Moses,¹⁶ a view that does gain support from the Biblical text itself (Ex. 17:14; 24:4; Num.33:1-2; Deut. 31:9).

¹⁵ Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard Jr., 635.

¹⁶ Gleason L. Archer Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1968), 100.

Pentateuchal Chronology

Asserting an accurate period of time in which these events happened has resulted in a grueling task and in some cases impossible, as it is in the case of the creation of the world.¹⁷ Scholars have had difficulty finding an accurate time period for the first eleven chapters of the Torah. Some assign a lapse of 1600 years to the first 20 generations recorded.¹⁸ For the Pentateuch narrative from Genesis 12 to Deuteronomy 34, chronological estimates have been made. This period is often assigned the Middle Bronze and Late Bronze ages of Ancient Near Eastern history. Thus, implying that the period of the Patriarchs covered the lapse of time from 2000 to 1600 B.C. That, in consequence, puts the Exodus in a timeframe from 1500 to 1200.¹⁹ These estimates are not without problems, however. Scholars are divided over the dating of the Torah. Some of them who adopt a literal reading of the Torah typically side with earlier dates, while those interpreting it figuratively tend to opt for later ones.²⁰

Cultural Background

The Torah emerged in a complex and diverse context characterized by a mosaic of civilizations, languages, and religious practices. Ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Canaan, and other neighboring cultures cast their influence upon the authors of the Torah, shaping their perceptions, narratives, and even theological perspectives. The Torah reflects a world of agrarian societies, kin-based structures, and interactions with other nations. In such a world tribal identity,

¹⁷ Hill, Andrew E. and Walton, John H., *A Survey of the Old Testament* (United States: Zondervan, 2010), 64.

¹⁸ Schnittjer, Gary E., *The Torah Story: An Apprenticeship on the Pentateuch*, vol. Epub edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academic, 2010).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Hill and Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 67.

communal rituals, and land ownership were central. The codes of conduct, religious ceremonies, and historical recollections within the Torah are interwoven with the fabric of this society, providing insights into the challenges, aspirations, and values of the people of that era.

It was within this culture and geographical boundaries that the patriarchal families came into existence. Specifically from the land of Mesopotamia, as we are told that Abraham left the land of his fathers, Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen. 11:31). This region was formed of various nations which throughout history came into and fell out of power and dominance. The beginnings of this geographical area was primarily shaped by the Sumerian civilization in the South, the Subratian in the North West²¹, and the Akkadian in the Middle. They had the most influence under the Kingdom of Sargon and eventually lost control to Babylon in the lower half, subsequently dominated by Assyria in the North.²²

Mesopotamian and Egyptian cultures played a significant role in the shaping of the Israelite nation and influenced the worldview under which the Torah was written. Nonetheless, the idea that the Torah, specifically the Genesis narrative, was derived from Mesopotamian and Egyptian methodologies is irreconcilable when these sources are juxtaposed to the Genesis account. There is no doubt that similarities exist. For example there are similarities with the Mesopotamian flood and creation accounts but the Genesis account stands apart when considering the genealogical records and descriptions of the nature of the Biblical God in comparison to mythological gods.²³

²¹ Tenney, Merrill C., *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible, Volume 4: Revised Full-Color Edition*, The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Academic, 2010).

²² Ibid.

²³ Schnittjer, Gary E., *The Torah Story: An Apprenticeship on the Pentateuch*, vol. Epub edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academic, 2010); Walton, John H., Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 22.

However, the reader does need to keep in mind the Mesopotamian and Egyptian cultural influence when approaching the Torah. This is especially true when approaching its Law genre since Law, as it is known today, is not quite the same concept the Torah has in mind. Torah does contain legal implications, but it is better understood as “instruction” or “teaching.”²⁴ The idea that the Torah was not a law code of the land but a collection of instructions or teachings that aimed to establish a basis for moral and civil conduct instead was sprung by discoveries of various Ancient Near Eastern documents in which Scholars and Archaeologists commenced to see broad legislative gaps. That is, cases that were most probably common to occur within Ancient Near Eastern society were not covered under the stipulations of these documents.²⁵ Thus, it could be said that the Torah is an instruction book rather than a law book.²⁶

Archaeological Background: Genesis

In Genesis, society, politics, culture, and commerce is widely supported by the discovery of the Mari tablets. In the socio-political context, the Mari Tablets reveal details about the political organization, administration, and societal structures of the ancient Near East supporting the narrative of the patriarchs. In addition, the tablets contain a wealth of personal names, many of which are Semitic in origin which are in consistency with the names found in Genesis.²⁷ Other insights provided by the Mari tables are legal and economic matters of property ownership,

²⁴ Schnittjer, *The Torah Story: An Apprenticeship on the Pentateuch*.

²⁵ Walton and Walton, *The Lost World of the Torah: Law as Covenant and Wisdom in Ancient Context*, 28-29.

²⁶ Law as it is in its modern definition

²⁷ Andrew E. Steinmann and Tremper Longman III, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. [CA & US version], Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 159.

contracts, disputes, and transactions that parallel Abraham's purchase of the burial cave of Machpelah (Gen. 23:17-18).

Archaeological Background: Exodus

Among the archaeological evidence for Exodus are the presence of slave labor during the Late Bronze Age and the biblical account of the cities of Pithom and Raamses (Exo 1:11) which have been revealed in excavations at Tel el-Maskhuta and Qantir in Egypt.²⁸ In addition to this, the "Israel Stele," an ancient Egyptian inscription from the reign of Pharaoh Merneptah (around 1207 BCE) mentions "Israel" as a group of people in Canaan.

Archaeological Background: Leviticus

Perhaps one of the most significant pieces of archaeological evidence for the book of Leviticus are the religious Ancient Near Eastern documents found which include manuscripts that contain records shedding light on Jewish religious practices and interpretations during the Second Temple period. These records align with the time of Leviticus²⁹ and their religious rituals and practices have close similarities to those found in Leviticus also.³⁰

Archaeological Background: Numbers

While direct evidence of Israelite encampments in the desert is challenging to pinpoint, research into ancient trade routes, water sources, and settlement patterns provides context for the

²⁸ James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, USA, 1999), 119.

²⁹ Hill, et al., *A Survey of the Old Testament* (United States: Zondervan, 2010), 128-129.

³⁰ Walton, et al., *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* 120.

Israelites' journey described in Numbers. For example, exploration of the Sinai Peninsula offers insights into the landscapes and potential routes described in Numbers. Discoveries such as inscriptions, ancient mining sites, and rock art provide context for the regions traversed by the Israelites.³¹

Archaeological Background: Deuteronomy

The book of Deuteronomy reflects much of the Ancient Near Eastern treaties. The standard treaty was characterized by 6 different points: A preamble introducing the speaker, typically the Suzerain, then a historical prologue followed by stipulations for the vassal, a statement of the treaties terms, a list of witnesses, and finally curses and blessings according to each parties' participation in the stipulations.³² The study of these ancient Near Eastern treaties and covenant forms, support the authenticity of the book of Deuteronomy and illuminate the covenant language and structure used in it.

Theological Themes

Genesis

The Book of Genesis intricately weaves the tapestry of God's Covenant program, revealing His sovereign plan for humanity's redemption. At the heart of Genesis lies the Abrahamic covenant, a pivotal testament to God's enduring promise (Gen. 12:1-3). Yet, it is vital to recognize that the tapestry of covenants is richly woven throughout its pages. The Almighty

³¹ Baruch A. Levine, Numbers 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, The Anchor Bible: V. 4A (Yale University Press, 2008) 55-57,

³² Hill and Walton, 167.

enters covenantal relationships with figures such as Noah and his descendants. In this way, He illuminates His unwavering commitment to His creation (Gen. 9:8-17). The covenants serve as divine treaties, where God unveils His promises, prescribes sacred parameters, and outlines mutual obligations. In Genesis, the motif of covenant resounds with the symphony of God's faithfulness, His profound longing for intimate communion with humanity (Gen. 17:7), and the sacred reciprocity within the covenant community. Anchored in the genealogical chronicles, or Telodth, this theme pervades the narrative, manifesting itself in eleven instances. Five are elegantly woven through chapters 1-11, 11-25, and 25-50. Abraham's saga occupies the central space. In its entirety, Genesis unveils the steadfast fidelity of God, illuminating the resilience of the covenant, irrespective of the imperfections that mark Abraham's lineage (Gen. 11:11). Thus, serving as a testament to the enduring promises of our God.

Exodus

The Book of Exodus offers us profound insight into God's self-disclosure as an all-sufficient being in both character and nature (Exo. 3:14), who, nonetheless, desires a close relationship with His creation. This profound reality finds vivid expression in the theme of the Tabernacle. Through the Tabernacle, God conveys to His people His personal nature and His ardent desire to abide in their midst (Exo. 25:8), foreshadowing the profound truth that John would later convey in his writings (Jn. 1:14). Within the Exodus narrative, we are granted the dual gift of the divine commandments and the blueprint for the Tabernacle's construction. The book naturally unfolds into three distinct sections: Firstly, in chapters 1-18, it bears witness to God's triumphant deliverance. Then, chapters 19-24 vividly capture the establishment of God's covenant. Lastly, in chapters 25-40, the reader is immersed in the tangible manifestation of God's presence.

Leviticus

Leviticus revolves around the concept of holiness and the pathway for humanity to a holy God. This theme is deeply rooted, as evidenced by the repeated call for Israel to be holy because God is holy (Lev. 11:44-45). Leviticus functions as a divine guidebook, detailing the rituals and ethical behaviors necessary for a holy people to engage with their holy Creator. The theological essence of Leviticus underscores the profound tension between divine holiness and human sinfulness. This tension is encapsulated in the intricate system of sacrifices and offerings, which poignantly symbolize the intersection of God's justice and grace. The shedding of innocent blood within these rituals serves as a visual reminder of the cost of sin and the need for reconciliation (Lev. 17:11). In the midst of this tension, however, Leviticus presents the priests as a type of mediators in charge of bridging the gap between God and His people (Lev. 16:15-16). The shadow of a reality that the Lord Jesus Christ would fulfill in the New Testament years later.

Numbers

The Book of Numbers unfolds with the journey of the Israelites through the wilderness, revealing profound insights into God's guidance, provision, and His divine calling (Num. 9:15-23). This narrative is interwoven with the theme of God's sovereignty (Num. 14:21-23), as the Israelites' experiences exemplify the tension between obedience and disobedience in response to His guidance. The Book of Numbers marks a pivotal transition from the Exodus to the Promised Land (Num. 10:11-13), highlighting God's faithfulness (Num. 23:19) and the Israelites' wavering trust (Num. 14:11-12). Furthermore, the taking of the census reflects God's care for His people and His purpose for them (Num. 1:1-3), underscoring that God cares for each and every one of his people.

Yet, Numbers also portrays the challenges of human rebellion (Num. 11:1-3), and divine discipline (Num. 12:1-10). There are episodes of complaining (Num. 11:4-6) like the rebellion of Korah (Num. 16:1-35) and the lack of faith at Kadesh-Barnea (Num. 14:26-30). These underscore the rebellion of the human heart in the midst of divine providence.

Deuteronomy

The Book of Deuteronomy weaves a profound theological theme centered on covenant renewal, moral responsibility, and the call to wholehearted devotion to God. This farewell address of Moses to the Israelites before their entry into the Promised Land encapsulates key themes that resonate throughout Scripture. Central to this book is the reiteration and renewal of the covenant between God and Israel. This reaffirmation underscores the enduring commitment of God to His people and their reciprocal responsibility to uphold the covenant's terms (Deut. 7:9). The book emphasizes the importance of imparting God's teachings to successive generations (Deut. 6:4-9) with the intention to safeguard them from forgetting God's faithfulness and instructions. The theological core of Deuteronomy reveals God's desire for a thriving community defined by justice, compassion, and ethical integrity (Deut. 16:20). More importantly to Deuteronomy is its claim that anticipates the New Covenant and the coming Messiah. The promises of a Prophet similar to Moses (Deut. 18:15) and the call to love God wholeheartedly foreshadow Christ's fulfillment of these roles.

Application

Genesis

In a world full of uncertainty and rapid continuous decay on all fronts, Genesis encourages us as believers to hold fast to the promises of God because He is faithful (Heb. 10:23). In Genesis God displays His mighty arm by overcoming all odds that oppose the realization of His Word. As it was in the case of Abraham and Sarah, who were promised a descendance through a child whose possibility of being born required an exceptional miracle. Today, as followers of Christ we have been entrusted with many promises. He has promised us eternal life (1 Jn. 2:25), a firm place in Him (Rom. 8:38-39), and His soon return (Jn. 14:18). Thus, considering the Genesis narrative, we can be sure that He will keep His word in spite of the world's present agenda.

Exodus

In light of the book of Exodus we should be encouraged that we serve a perfect being who is all-powerful and self-sufficient, but yet, desires a close relationship with His creation. The book of Exodus gives us a perfect balance between the loving nature of God and His unwavering providence (Mat. 6:25). Nonetheless, it also displays the awful consequences for those who opt to be His enemies (Heb. 10:31). As believers, Exodus motivates us to stand in faith; God will not fail to provide our needs. At the same time, it impulses the believer to approach Him in humbleness and sacred reverence and to call others to enter into the same relationship with Him.

Leviticus

Leviticus is a call to all believers to be set apart and stand out from our present corrupted culture by being a holy people (Rom. 12:2; 1 Pet. 1:15-16; Eph. 1:4; Heb. 12:14). We must be distinguished from the world by our way of living not only for what we proclaim to be. We no longer depend on religious rituals, blood sacrifices, or adherence to the Law, since we now have an eternal High Priest (Heb 4:14-16) who has paid the debt of sin in full. It is His Spirit who enables us to live in a higher holy plane. In Leviticus, the emphasis on holiness is more vivid than ever.

Numbers

The book of Numbers is a reminder to those who love God that there is not a single person that goes unnoticed within His kingdom (Lk. 12:7; Mat. 10:29-31). Regardless of how minuscule our task or influence might seem in the church, God keeps a record of each one of us. The book of Numbers also emphasizes the tarnishing consequences of rebellion against leadership and the unhealthy desire to do more than that which we have been entrusted by God (Num. 16).

Deuteronomy

Salvation does not end with us. This is a good principle that we may draw from Deuteronomy. Its emphasis on sharing that which has been given to us with the upcoming generations (2 Tim. 2:2; 1 Cor. 2:13) elucidates this principle. It reminds us of the many benefits of being obedient to God's word and the catastrophic ramification of disobedience (Deut. 4:24). Deuteronomy invigorates us to be faithful in the vocation God has bestowed us. Specifically those who have been entrusted with a didactic or leadership role.

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