

The Nature of the Pentateuch

What Is the Pentateuch?

Beginnings are important. If we want to know what kind of a book we are reading, we skim over the first few pages to see how it starts and what point of view the author adopts. For this reason it is vital to recognize the special character of the first five books of the Old Testament. They stand apart as an introduction to the rest of the Bible and, more importantly, both the Jewish and the Christian faiths recognize them as the foundation on which the rest of the Scriptures are built. They might be called a blueprint or a constitution that becomes the standard by which all other revelation is interpreted. The name Pentateuch comes from the title given in the earliest Greek translation that dates to the second century BC and means a “five-part” writing. This confirms that even from biblical times the Pentateuch has always been understood as a single work. Jewish tradition calls it Torah, which does not so much mean “law” as “teaching.” This five-book Torah contains the basic teaching of the Jewish faith.

The Pentateuch as a Part of the Canon of Scripture

A “canon” means a rule of arrangement. Biblical books are in a certain order. We do not always know clearly just when or why the Bible was ordered in exactly its present lineup, but we can be sure of one thing—it was never accidental. The order of some books changed over the centuries, but gradually each book was positioned intentionally to be read in its present order; and how we interpret the message of a book is determined at least in part by where it stands in relation to other books. So, when we begin to study the Old Testament, we must look for the clues that tell us why Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are divided into five books and are lined up as they are. This must be done on two levels: (1) the religious and theological meaning of the books for our Jewish and Christian faiths today; and (2) the background of what the text and words meant to those who wrote it and put it together. This latter task also involves several other aspects: (1) the historical development of how the books came together and what pieces were added to them as they grew to their final size; (2) the literary shape or form of the books alone and together that give them such qualities as a plot, dramatic power, connected narrative story, and the like; and (3) whatever knowledge of Israel's actual history that we can discover. Thus, in all, when we set out to study the Pentateuch, we ask four questions: (1) What kind of literature is it? (2) What is it saying to us? (3) What really happened to Israel behind this account? and (4) How did this literature reach this form? It is far easier to answer the first two questions about the literary qualities and the message of the text than to rediscover after more than two thousand years how accurately all the stories from Israel's history were transmitted, or the actual way the text itself was put together by generations of biblical editors.

Reading through the Pentateuch in the *New American Bible*

The text of the NAB already provides us with several helpful tools with which we can deepen our understanding of the text of the first five books of the Old Testament. There is a brief introduction to the Pentateuch itself at the beginning, as well as specific introductions placed before the opening chapter of each individual book. These introductions sketch for the reader some of the key structures in the outline of a book and some of the major religious themes that play a crucial role in the text's message for us.

They also raise a few of the major concerns of biblical scholarship for the reader to consider. In addition, there are the valuable notes at the bottom of each page of text that give us historical and scholarly information about difficult or confusing words in the text, or about the customs of ancient peoples, or about the meanings of obscure references. They sometimes also explain doctrinal beliefs of our faith that are rooted in particular biblical verses, or refer us to similar passages in other books of the Bible that throw further light on the subject under discussion.

As important as all these helps are, they are very brief. It is the purpose of this study guide to do several things to supplement them so that a serious reading of the Pentateuch will be possible without getting lost in the forest because we cannot see past all the trees. First of all, these study aids will expand the points mentioned in the introductions and notes of the NAB about the scholarly interpretation of the text's background and development so that they can be understood as part of the larger picture that the Pentateuch paints. And second, they will explore the literary unity and artistic shaping so that the harmony of its inspired message will stand out more clearly to the modern reader. We will hopefully better appreciate how the five books all relate to one another both historically and literarily to form the foundational source of biblical faith.

The contents pages of the NAB (see p. [86](#)) include eight books in all under the title “Pentateuch.” This is an unusual division, and it may be more helpful for us to look at the biblical arrangement in the threefold way that the Jewish Bible does rather than in the fourfold groupings that the NAB and other modern Christian Bibles follow. Thus, for the Jewish tradition there is the Torah (or “Law”), the Prophets, and the Writings. See [diagram below](#) .

The Catholic Bible also includes seven other books under the Writings, which are lacking in Jewish and Protestant Bibles, and are often called deuterocanonical because they were written in Greek and not Hebrew: Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach/Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, and 1 and 2 Maccabees.

When ordered in columns like this, it becomes evident that prophecy includes both historical books and prophetic speakers. That is, both types are considered to call people back prophetically to the message in the Pentateuch and to show how that message was lived out or not lived out in history. The Writings, in turn, are a further

The Law (Torah)	The Prophets	The Writings
Genesis	FORMER PROPHETS	Psalms
Exodus	Joshua	Job
Leviticus	Judges	Proverbs
Numbers	1 Samuel	Ruth
Deuteronomy	2 Samuel	Song of Songs

	1 Kings	Ecclesiastes
	2 Kings	Lamentations
		Esther
	LATTER PROPHETS	Daniel
	Isaiah	Ezra-Nehemiah
	Jeremiah	1 Chronicles
	Ezekiel	2 Chronicles
	The Book of the Twelve	

grouping that should be understood primarily as books of reflection, piety, or additional explanation to help us live the message of Torah day by day. In short, all the other books of the Old Testament flow from reflection on the Torah five.

What Kind of Literature Is It?

Story and Law

Before we begin to read the text closely, several preliminary issues must be discussed more deeply in order to answer our four questions. The first is: What kind of literature is it? At first glance, the NAB reveals that it is prose rather than poetry, except in a few places (for example, Ex [15](#); Dt [32](#)). But what kind of prose? A quick survey of all five books reveals a mixture of two types: laws and narratives. Generally, they are separated into large sections of each, carefully alternated, but not completely. Every narrative part contains scattered commands and laws, and every collection of laws has a healthy episode or two of story. The books break down as follows (in rough divisions):

- **Genesis** All Narrative (Genesis [1-50](#));
- **Exodus** Part Narrative (Exodus [1-19](#); [24](#); [32-34](#)); Part Law ([20-31](#); [35-40](#));
- **Leviticus** All Law (Leviticus [1-27](#));
- **Numbers** Part Narrative (Numbers [11-17](#); [20-26](#); [31-33](#)); Part Law (Numbers [1-10](#); [18-19](#); [27-30](#); [34-36](#));
- **Deuteronomy** Part Narrative (Deuteronomy [1-4](#); [31-34](#)); Part Law (Deuteronomy [5-30](#)).

One could illustrate this dramatically by the diagram above.

Jewish religious tradition generally identifies 613 divine commandments within the Pentateuch. The rabbis and sages have divided the breakdown of these laws as follows:

- Genesis 3 laws
- Exodus 111 laws
- Leviticus 247 laws
- Numbers 52 laws
- Deuteronomy 200 laws

As shown above, the laws are contained inside a story framework that traces the “history” events from the moment of creation in Genesis [1](#) down to the moment when Israel stands at the edge of the Promised Land, but before it has been entered in Deuteronomy [34](#) . But this story is really part of a much larger historical narrative that combines the Pentateuch with the so-called Deuteronomistic History (the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings) and goes from Creation to the fall of Judah, the last independent part of Israel as a nation, before the Babylonians in the sixth century BC.

What the Pentateuch proposes as a way of life through Law and Story is then narrated and judged as lived or rejected in the history of the national life on the land. 2 Kings [25](#) ends with a vague openness to a possible new start after the people have been defeated and exiled for their failure to obey the Word of God that was given in the Pentateuch and then proclaimed by God's prophets (see 2 Kgs [17](#)). Because of this greater scope, we can be sure that the authors of the Pentateuch intended readers to see the giving of many laws as intrinsically important to their existence as a people—not just as a lesson in the past but as a continuous claim on every new generation of Israel (see [diagram above](#)).

The mixture of law and story narrative may seem boring to modern ears since we are not used to hearing long lists of regulations recited inside a good story. But to the ancient believer, knowing and accepting such laws expressed a continuity with the stories of how God dealt with their ancestors. They might say, “Our ancestors did those things, and we obey these laws, and as a result we are one and the same people of God!”

The Overall Structure

The present structure of the Pentateuch has a distinct shape to it. Not only is it story and law, it is also drama. Each book has its own subject matter that can be studied by itself, but only if the reader does not forget the larger movement of all five books. One way to look at this interlocking action among the books is to see three distinct stages:

1. The preparation period (Genesis)
2. The time of Moses in Egypt and Sinai (Exodus to Numbers)
3. The new preparation for life in the land (Deuteronomy)

This can be diagrammed as a forward movement, as shown below.

The “Plot”

This is the simplest diagram. But even more action appears when we trace the focus of God's “plan” through the developing plot. God creates the world for all peoples to praise the divine goodness, but humanity fails the divine hopes (Gn [1–11](#)); so God chooses a single family or people that will prove faithful and teach all other nations (Gn [12–50](#)). These in turn must learn the lesson of God's goodness through hardship and then deliverance (Ex) and become obedient and formed as truly God's holy people (Lv and Nm [1–10](#)). Then God will lead them to a Promised Land (Nm [10–36](#)), which they will keep only if obedient and loyal (Dt). This new articulation can be diagrammed also. See [diagram](#) at top of next page.

The Symmetrical and Artistic Unity

The Pentateuch has been divided into five books by ancient editors who found that they had so much material they needed five separate scrolls to copy it all down. They made the divisions as naturally as possible, choosing about the same lengths for each scroll and breaking between obvious changes in place or topic. But the five divisions also reveal a very carefully balanced symmetry in which the ends and middles balance one another in a chiastic (or ladderlike) construction that can be called an ABCBA pattern. (See [diagram below](#).)

Many themes of call and response, promise and rescue are echoed between Genesis and Deuteronomy and between Es and Numbers, and key themes of obedience and faith resound in all five books.

Key Theological Themes

Certain key themes flow through the five books, sometimes limited to only one book, sometimes found in several books. The most important are:

- 1. The primeval history of the world before Israel's own remembered history began (Gn [1–11](#)).
- 2. The promises and blessings to the great tribal ancestors, the patriarchs and matriarchs (Gn [12–50](#)).
- 3. The rescue and exodus out of Egypt (Ex [1–18](#)).
- 4. The giving of a covenant and laws (Ex [19, 1–Nm 10, 10](#)).
- 5. Guidance in the wilderness (Ex [13–18](#); Nm [10, 11–36, 13](#)).
- 6. The conditional warnings to guide Israel through its “salvation history” in the land (Dt).
- 7. The conquest of the land (Gn passim; Nm and Dt).

These all interact. Note, for example, that the promise of land is announced as God's plan of action in Exodus [3, 7–10](#); but it has been foreshadowed to Abraham in Genesis [12, 1–3](#) and then noted as fulfilled in Deuteronomy [34, 1–3](#), just as the conquest is to begin.

Reading the Pentateuch without Being a Fundamentalist

Each book of the Pentateuch has its own unique flavor, and each deals with a different part of the

A. Genesis	(the preface in which God calls and forms the ancestors)
B. Exodus	(the wilderness journey to the mountain of Sinai to meet God)
C. Leviticus	(the center at the top of Sinai where God gives Covenant and Law)
B. Numbers	(the wilderness journey from Sinai to the Promised Land)
A. Deuteronomy	(the epilogue in which God calls and forms Israel for the land)

story and the laws by which Israel was to live. But even if we can read each one separately, it is even more important to read them together as a single story. We have already noted how these five books tell the history (in its ancient sense) of the world and of Israel in particular from the beginnings of creation down to the hopeful moment when Israel stands on the edge of a new land and a new home in Palestine. Two things can be noted about that history mixed with laws and lessons: the first is that it is to serve as a handbook or a rule book for how Israel is to live in the land it is about to possess (see Dt [4,1](#)), and the second is that it certainly does not make a complete history, although it is a complete story. It picks and chooses only certain events and certain themes to treat, and these all have very significant religious lessons to teach. That is, it is a theology book as much or more than it is a real history of the people.

It is hard for us to escape a desire to see a strict modern scientific history in the stories of the Pentateuch, but let's look at one illustration to help us. In Genesis [4](#), Cain kills Abel when they are the only two living children of Adam and Eve according to the story. Cain is punished by God and sent far to the East. Then the text says that "Cain had relations with his wife" in Genesis [4,17](#). But what wife was possible in a real history? Up to this point, the story has moved from the world's first killing to a new theme—how the world was populated—and it doesn't seem to bother the author that the second cannot fit this history just related. The only concern for the writer is to make a series of religious lessons that we can all learn from.

But the Pentateuch is not an idle story, either. It is very carefully crafted and put together to tell of the crucial things that happened in the past that we need to know in order to discover God. It tells of human weaknesses and urgings toward sin, about the failure of most of the world to know God, and the divine choice of Israel to witness the loving concern of God to others, and how God was revealed in a number of central events: (1) the choice of the patriarchs, (2) the giving of a covenant, (3) the law to be obeyed, and (4) the guidance through the wilderness to a promised land.

The Pentateuch is a great work of art. It tells a vital story of God's relationship to the world with power and beauty. It proposes history but does not allow us to question it too closely about exact descriptions. It proposes religious and theological lessons but warns us not to treat it like a textbook full of lists of truths. It proposes a story that will teach us by sharing its experience with our experience. We must read it for enjoyment and for skillful storytelling. Once we have understood the whole as literature, we can ask, "How does this literary style give us history?" and "How does it present its message?" For an

overview of the history of how the Christian tradition has interpreted the Pentateuch as part of the whole Old Testament, see the article by Kevin Madigan, “Catholic Interpretation of the Bible” (RG [54–67](#)).

Critical Interpretation of the Pentateuch

Interpretation of the Bible changed radically in the growth of modern thought after the Reformation and with the Age of Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Much of the early efforts at a critical and historical interpretation of the Scriptures began with work on the Pentateuch. Before we look at how those scholars tried to recover the actual historical development of the Pentateuchal texts and what methods they proposed for understanding its meaning, we need to note briefly how the New Testament itself makes use of texts from the Pentateuch in order to have a point of comparison.

The New Testament

Jesus himself and the various authors of New Testament writings often cite texts from the Bible, which of course was simply the Old Testament in their day. Almost always, they cite passages from the narratives and rarely refer to the legal materials in Leviticus and Numbers, although the laws first given on Mount Sinai in Exodus [20–23](#) and then the speech of Moses on the law in Deuteronomy were known to them. Often the stories are cited as proofs for something that Jesus taught or that the apostles were preaching. An example is found in Jesus' teaching on divorce that is found in Matthew [19, 5](#) (and Mark [10, 7f](#)). Jesus refers to Genesis [2, 24](#) when he says “a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”

A few stories from the Pentateuch are treated as a type case. Paul in Romans [4, 9–22](#) cites the story of Abraham recorded in Genesis [15, 1–6](#) and [17, 1–5](#) as a forerunner of a chosen people having faith without having the law of Moses to live by. Abraham is viewed as a forerunner of the Christian believer; but in a general sense this usage may be seen as a type of prophecy—the Old Testament person foreshadows God's revelation to the Gentiles; like Abraham, they are called without living under the Law. Elsewhere, the authors of the Gospels and Acts quote Old Testament passages from the prophets and psalms as predictions of Jesus as Messiah and to help explain his death and resurrection. But occasionally, Paul uses an almost allegorical method of interpreting biblical texts. In Galatians [4, 21–31](#) , he treats the children of Hagar and Sarah, that is, Ishmael and Isaac from Genesis [16–21](#) , as prototypes of Jews and Christians. Hebrews [7, 1–10](#) does the same with the story of Melchizedek and Abraham from Genesis [14, 18–20](#) . The author wants to show that Melchizedek represents a fore-type of Christ, who is the new and eternal high priest. To do this, however, he plays on the etymology of the name Melchizedek as “king of righteousness” and Melchizedek's position as king of Salem (“king of peace”) and fancifully builds up a case that since no mention is made in the text of the king's parents, his birth, or his death after the event, he prefigures the eternal character of Jesus as divine high priest.

Overall, however, New Testament use of the Bible is nearly always focused on showing the deep connection between the meaning of earlier revelation and the person and role of Jesus. A good source for all the quotations of the Old Testament in the New is R. Bratcher, *Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament* (United Bible Societies, 1987).

The Post-Reformation Interest in Sources

The Protestant Reformation stressed the return to the study of the original texts of the Old Testament in Hebrew and other languages. This soon led to the keen observation that the vocabulary and style of passages were not consistent within the Pentateuch itself and perhaps showed signs of combining different (and older) traditions together.

The first (1678) truly modern Pentateuchal scholar was a French priest, Richard Simon. Simon noted after careful analysis that Genesis [1](#) and [2](#) seemed to differ in style, and that this was found elsewhere in Genesis and probably showed that Moses used several different sources in writing the five books of the Pentateuch. For such a modest insight, his work was condemned by church authorities and put on the index. But it opened the door. He was followed in the next century by many others who gradually explored the differences between passages that constantly called God by the proper name Yahweh, and those that called God by the more general term Elohim. The NAB always renders Yahweh by the English word "Lord," and Elohim by "God."

These could be traced as two complete parallel stories interwoven throughout the Pentateuch up to the book of Numbers. Arguments developed over whether these had been originally two separate written works that told the same history of Israel, or whether there was one original version that was supplemented or added to over many centuries to make two variants with time. In the early nineteenth century, scholars began to note that the so-called Elohist passages really represented two separate accounts themselves, one more narrative and interested in the great interventions of God, the other more concerned with priestly and ritual actions. These were named in turn the Elohist and the Priestly strands.

By the mid-nineteenth century it was commonly agreed that there had indeed been three independent versions of the Pentateuch's basic story, which could be titled by the initials J (for German Jahwist), E (for Elohist), and P (for Priestly). At the same time, the book of Deuteronomy was acknowledged to be a fourth and totally separate source of its own that could be labeled D naturally enough. In 1878 Julius Wellhausen published his *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, in which he laid out the arguments for the postexilic composition of the P source. In the process he not only analyzed the arguments for the "four-source theory," as it was now called, but he supported the basic sequence of JE as monarchic, followed by D in the early exilic period, and then by P in the postexilic period, and he identified the four historical situations that led to each different telling of the history.

The Development of Form Criticism

Shortly after Wellhausen's great summary of the theory of four separate documents was published, attention turned to getting behind the four sources to the original units that comprised them. Where did all the individual incidents and poems and stories and laws come from? Thus, at the beginning of the twentieth century was born form criticism, the search for the earliest and the smallest units of the tradition. The founder of this method was Hermann Gunkel, who wrote extensively on the form-critical analysis of Genesis and the Psalms. These scholars were interested in the literary genres that made up the four sources. If scholars could identify the special form of a poem or a hymn or a law or a narrative,

they could probably identify the situation out of which it came. Thus the victory hymn of Israel over the Egyptians in Exodus [15](#) can be further specified as praise of God as a divine warrior who battles alongside Israel's troops and guarantees the defeat of the enemy. This helps us realize it originates in a tribal setting before the people were settled in a kingdom, and perhaps was sung at an annual festival of God's victory.

Form criticism can even help distinguish different types of law. The Ten Commandments in Exodus [20, 1-17](#) are simple and direct commands to do or not to do something. They differ completely from most of the laws in the Pentateuch that specify "if you do such and such, then the penalty will be the following." Because the laws had these two differing styles, scholars assume that the first kind was more like a catechetical instruction for children to help them memorize and summarize the law; while the second type came from actual court cases in which a decision had to be made.

It can honestly be said that the work of form-critical study of the Pentateuch was the dominant task of scholarly study of the Bible in the first half of the twentieth century. As scholarship has developed in the last forty years, both source and form criticism have given way before new concerns and the new methods needed to deal with them. Before noting such shifts, what can be said of the accomplishment of these older methods?

The Fruits of Source Criticism

When scholarly criticism was born in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it first noted the difficulties in the text, which suggested more than one style or author. Examples included the different names for God in the two creation stories of Genesis [1, 1-2,4a](#); and [2, 4b-3,24](#). The first always calls the divine name "God," the second always uses the title "Lord God." The first is extremely formal and shows great reverence for God's transcendence, while the second makes God almost like a human being, working in clay to build a body and conferring in person with his creature. Many other places in the text show the same clear differences. Also, they noted many examples of double accounts which, except for some small differences, looked like exactly the same story being told twice. Compare Genesis [12](#) and [20](#) on Abraham passing his wife Sarah off as his sister; or the two accounts on how Hagar had to flee to the wilderness with Ishmael in Genesis [16](#) and [21](#).

After three centuries of study, scholars reached a general consensus in the late nineteenth century that there were indeed the four sources described in the section above. They can be briefly described in the following manner to reveal their individual characters and the probable date and historical situation from which they came:

The Yahwist (J)

This is the earliest and most comprehensive source of the whole story. It was written in Judah, probably Jerusalem. It was long believed to have been written under King Solomon or one of his successors in the late tenth century or early ninth century BC, but now many scholars are convinced that it was done much later in the monarchy or even in the Exile, while others believe that at least many additions can be found in the present J text that were added much later to an early version. The authors wished to show that

the promises to Abraham were fulfilled in the empire founded by David. It uses the name Yahweh for God and has a frank and earthy language about God's closeness to those he chooses. It naturally favors strong leaders of the type of David.

The Elohist (E)

When Solomon's kingdom fell apart and the north went its own way, it needed an official account of the tradition that reflected its anti-Jerusalem view. Early source critics believed it was written shortly after the founding of the Northern Kingdom just after 900 BC, but many scholars today wonder if there ever was such an independent document; the majority perhaps believe the unique E elements are simply revisions or additions to the basic J text over the centuries. However, many of its characteristics are strong in certain sections of the Pentateuch, such as the Jacob stories or the Exodus narrative. These passages prefer the name Elohim for God and strongly emphasize Jacob and northern places such as Bethel, Shechem, and the like.

The Deuteronomist (D)

Deuteronomy and those books influenced by it, the so-called Deuteronomistic History (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings), are generally understood today to reflect the Exile in their final form. Many scholars trace their origins to the eighth and seventh centuries BC as a reassessment of the J and E traditions in light of pagan inroads and unfaithful kings. It has affinities to the Elohist in its stress that the covenant with Moses is more important than kingship, and on the need for total loyalty to Yahweh; and it has affinities to J with its emphasis on Jerusalem. Unlike J, the D source restricts worship of Yahweh to Jerusalem as the only legitimate center for north and south alike.

The Priestly Source (P)

Much of the P material on cult and law probably dates to the same time as Deuteronomy, but its ordering and some new materials are clearly reflective of the needs of the exilic community in the sixth century BC. It stresses obedience to the law and the permanence of God's blessing no matter how desperate the situation, and it demands personal commitment to God. Most probably the P editors arranged all four of the sources into our present Pentateuch around 500 BC. Some commentaries date it to as much as a century later. Both P and the Pentateuch as a whole reflect a definite Judean point of view in their final shapes.

J and E went along side by side as long as the two kingdoms lasted from 930 to 722 BC. When the northern kingdom fell, its E story was carried down to Judah by refugees and there combined at some point around 700 BC with J into a single account. Still later, in the time of the fall of Judah itself in 587 BC and during its exile, D and P were also combined with JE to make our final JEDP. Editors and teachers from the Priestly circles put it into final shape, and possibly it was this work that Ezra the Scribe made all the people accept as the Book of the Law of God about 458 BC (see Neh [8-9](#)).

Form Criticism and the Process of Tradition

Although the results of source criticism have largely stood the test of time, the interest in going back behind these written sources led to the dominant role of form criticism in this century. The heart of the form-critical method is recognition of the various literary genres and types used in biblical books. Each genre has a certain style and way of being expressed that corresponds to its purpose or function. So a letter always has a heading and salutation because a person who receives it will feel this personal touch and more likely pay attention to its message than if one just writes someone a list of facts on a page. In the opposite fashion, a telephone book always uses columns, alphabetic order, and a listlike format because a continuous letterlike paragraph would make it impossible to locate a name, which after all is the sole purpose of the directory.

Form criticism assumes that communication is socially determined by rules that reveal what kind of thing someone is trying to say. Scholars recognized that, in ancient society especially, most people depended on oral recitation and memory aids because knowledge of writing was reserved to a few, and writing materials were scarce. Thus ancient ways of speaking were stereotyped—that is, they stuck to certain well-known patterns of saying things that were used according to their intended purpose—and these genres lasted over many centuries with little variation in form. Actually, each time something was said or passed on, speakers gave it a slightly different emphasis or touch. Only when it was written down and became fixed did it stop changing altogether, yet the basic form remained constant.

To understand Pentateuch texts from a form-critical viewpoint, first see if you can find the beginning and end of a single section (what are the limits of a unit?). Then attempt to name the genre or form (is it a hymn? law? temple lament? historical narrative? fable? myth?). Next, guess at what might have been its original purpose or setting in the ancient life situation (is it part of a long epic of great heroic ancestors? Is it from the temple liturgy? Is it part of a catechism for children? Is it propaganda?). Finally, ask what purpose it plays in this narrative or section (Does it add a new episode to the plot? Does it support a line of argument? Does it explain the character of the hero?).

Our interest in the original form of a unit of biblical literature, and our investigation of where it came from in the life of ancient Israel, should draw our attention to a final critical consideration: to question the entire process of how traditions get passed on and grow or change. Both form and source criticism fall under a more general interest in the transmission history of the text (often called its tradition history or redaction criticism). Each original statement or story or law goes through a process of being combined with other units and then combined again in still larger works. Thus collections grow and stories are put in a new order or used in a different way for a new purpose. At the same time, each age looks at the old stories and laws and often rewrites or changes them to fit modern times.

The redaction critic tries to trace this history of transmission, editing, and adapting from the earliest stages right up to the final form as we have it in the Pentateuch today. It is a complex and difficult process that can only be done by those who know Hebrew as well as the history and literary works of the Near East. But even the new reader can get some flavor of it by carefully looking at a text, noting its structures and development, enjoying it as literature, and using the commentaries and other available tools.

Current Trends in Critical Study

Both source and form criticism work directly from what we can know of the text by comparing it with other literary styles and literary works. Much of the inspiration for form criticism, for example, came from the great work on the origins and development of fairy tales and folk stories by the brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Anderson in the early nineteenth century. But these methods have been mostly analytical; that is, they break down the narratives and laws into smaller and smaller units, and assign dates and origins to each piece. This makes it harder to read the biblical books as single works. There has been a definite movement to counterbalance this with rediscovery of methods that can be used to read the Pentateuch more fully as a whole story or literary work.

Some of these are rhetorical criticism, which tries to show the literary artistry in the combination of pieces into a whole and how the whole story is structured for effect; structural analysis, which searches for the language patterns and levels of meaning that control both the plot and the underlying message by word clues; reader-response criticism, which studies a text by paying attention to what the audience would hear and expect and how an author tries to reach that audience—this requires imagining ourselves in the world of the text. All of these are under the broad category of modern literary theory, and they have become very important new directions for biblical study, especially of the early books. Closely connected to these is canonical criticism, which tries to understand how a book like Genesis or Exodus is read as part of the larger collection of sacred books. Is there importance in Genesis being first? What happens when we read the wisdom books before the prophets in the order of our present canon?

Still another major area of new study focuses on the contributions of the social sciences. Sociology gives us models for how various types of social groupings interact together that might throw light on how ancient tribal or town or small-kingdom forms of life were lived in biblical times. Anthropology and ethnology let us study people who are still living more like the ancients did than like the way we live. Archaeology as well discovers and re-creates life as it was from stones and human remains.

Truly, Bible study today employs all the tools made available by cooperative sharing of scholarly knowledge among different sciences. At the same time, none of the gains of one movement, such as those of the early source critics, are ever thrown away as useless, but they need to be supplemented and refined by later research. And whenever one branch of study concentrates too much on just a part of the picture, we can be sure that other scholars will arise to call us back to what we have neglected.

The Historical Background of the Pentateuch

A Wide Diversity of Materials

The Pentateuch as a historical narrative begins with the creation of the earth and follows human history up to the time the Israelites enter the land of Canaan. In fact, however, few passages in the five books really reflect historical records of the past. First of all, many sections are made up of laws that have been included from collections dating to different periods in Israel's history. In a very loose way we could say they all belong under the name of Moses, the first lawgiver, because he founded the way of defining the covenant by means of religious laws.

Second, some stories are clearly not about ordinary time in history at all. All of Genesis [1–11](#) treats the creation of the world and the first events of human existence without any historical concreteness. As a literary genre, they do not fit the category of history telling. Instead, they are about why things are the way they are—why God made humans this way, why we sin, why we die, why it is hard to obey God, why men and women are different, why the earth is plagued with floods, how God deals with evil. Such stories about the divine purposes at the beginning of creation, and about the nature of human life as we experience it, are usually called myths if they are told in story form. Genesis [1–11](#) is almost entirely based on the myth genre. And even the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs in Genesis [12–50](#) are not a modern type of recalling history but largely model hero stories built around folktale types of storytelling. Even though they are based on real history, it is often hard to pin them down to exact locations and events.

The View of the Ancient Historian

This special character of the Pentateuch as both law and story alerts us to a fundamental problem that plagues most modern believers who read the Bible. Contemporary understanding of history differs greatly from that of the ancient world. Modern people expect proof through documents, witnesses, electronic records such as audio tapes or video recordings, and careful digging to find out just what happened, without all the propaganda and personal bias of a particular interest group. This is a difficult order to fill in any case, since all of us, even trained historians, have special points of view that color what we find. It is, however, an impossible order to demand of the ancient historian. They never thought this way, and as a result did not record the events of their time with such neutral objectivity, nor did they ever believe in telling the past as a simple and objective search for exactly what happened.

First, of course, they had no ways of getting much of the historical record. There were fewer written accounts and documents, there were no electronic or permanent ways of storing information in large and easy-to-produce books like we have, and there were no schools of science that valued exact observation as a primary end. Thus little or nothing was preserved for its own sake. Second, everything that went on told us about something important for our lives. This meant that most history was seen as a lesson for humans to learn by. History was written largely to persuade people of a certain type of behavior or a certain outlook on the world. It was viewed much as we would understand propaganda for a good cause, perhaps like newspaper editorials that take sides to explain major events or argue for their favorite causes.

The bottom line, therefore, is that ancient history was more interested in explaining why something happened than what precisely took place, and it was more interested in the message it communicated for the audience than in a record of accurate details for future study.

This insight will help us understand why the ancient historians felt no awkwardness in adding long lists of laws to a good story. The laws were vital parts of the “message” that the story was supposed to tell.

Moses as the Author of the Pentateuch

Traditionally, Moses has been considered the author of the Pentateuch. Orthodox Jews and Conservative Christians still hold this position strongly, but historical scholarship does not. Nowhere do these books actually mention an author, but frequently they state that Moses taught the people their contents, especially the laws (see Lv [23, 1–25](#)). If Moses is the actual author, then all the laws at least would have their origin in a direct revelation from God on Mount Sinai. The book of Nehemiah relates how Ezra brought forth “the book of the law of Moses which the Lord prescribed for Israel” (Neh [8, 1](#)), and insisted on a total commitment to its words. This passage has generally been understood to mark the beginning of a concept of canon, that is, that the book of the law of Moses was sacred and not to be revised or added to in the future. Ezra made his proclamation sometime after 458 BC, far removed from the days of Moses in the late second millennium BC. Moreover, the response of the people, and Ezra's efforts to explain it to them, suggest that they certainly did not already know this book as it was read out loud. Although they all recognized the teaching, they did not seem to be aware of this particular collection as a single work (read Neh [8–10](#)).

For this reason, and for many others, including the fact that many of the laws belong to situations much later than the time of Moses and the people in the desert (see, for example, the laws on worshipping at the one sanctuary in Jerusalem in Deuteronomy [12](#)), modern scholars do not try to prove that Moses was the author of the written books of the Pentateuch. Rather, Moses was the founder of Israelite faith as we find it in the Bible. The Pentateuch, however, contains many, many traditions, laws, stories, hymns, and reflections added by later generations from earliest times right down to the time when it was completed and Ezra declared it sacred so that further additions were no longer permitted.

Historical Dating of the Pentateuchal Traditions

Despite the difficulties in locating the exact historical events and pinning the materials to firm dates, the discoveries of other ancient tablets and chronicles, and the findings of archaeologists digging in ancient sites have given us some idea of what each different period in the second millennium BC was like. Scholars who hold a more conservative view generally situate the patriarchal narratives somewhere between 2000 and 1500 BC, the Exodus event between 1450 and 1250 BC, and the invasion of the land of Palestine around 1250 to 1200 BC. As doubts have arisen about the accuracy of the portrayal of the invasion of Canaan as recounted in the accounts of Exodus and Numbers, many scholars are expressing caution about whether the descriptions accurately reflect genuine memories of such early periods, or are rather the creations of later writers, who used some earlier materials and memories but more likely reflected the life of their own times. Many anachronisms occur in the patriarchal narratives for example, such as use of the domesticated camel, or the presence of the Philistines, neither of which were known in the first half of the second millennium.

Arguments for some early dates are more likely than others. Thus, because Egypt had foreign rulers between 1750 BC and 1550 BC, scholars have argued that the Joseph story fits best into this time frame; because Exodus [1, 11](#) says the enslaved Israelites built the cities Pithom and Raamses, they would date the Exodus to the reign of Ramesses II (about 1295 to 1235 BC). On the other hand, lack of evidence for the violent destruction of Canaanite cities in the twelfth century BC can be used to argue for later

tradition idealizing the past. For further discussion of dates and times, consult an introduction to the Old Testament or a short history of Israel listed in the bibliography.

A brief chart of comparative events may also be helpful (see RG [97](#)).

Reflecting on the Message of the Pentateuch

The Theological Themes that Unite the Pentateuchal Books

In reading the Pentateuch with its vast array of materials that reflect a world of thought so different from our own, we need some guideposts. We can generally find them in those themes and topics to which the books return over and over again. The demand for obedience to the divine will would be one such example. From Adam and Eve and their failure to obey, down to Moses' own failure when striking the rock for water in Numbers [20](#), great stress is laid on obedience. Another way of identifying central topics is to follow the dramatic action that focuses on a certain moment or specific action. The conferring of a covenant in Exodus [19–24](#) is an example of this type of guidepost. The biblical tradition is so rich that there may be trouble trying to limit such important topics to ten or twenty or even thirty. Nor would it be wise to do so, since every time we read we will discover new aspects of revelation that speak to us today.

Before listing any of the major theological themes of the Pentateuch, it will help us to understand them all if we remember that the Bible is not only a book of God but about God. The central thread that weaves together all the other strands in these books tells of that God who acts in human history. More particularly, the Bible almost never worries about the general need for a divine principle in the world, or about the gods of other peoples, but only about this God who has been revealed as the one God and who chooses to be known to Israel in a special way. In short, the following themes all flow from the Lord's conversation with the people—and their responses!

Ten Central Themes

Creation Establishes a Good World

When Genesis [1](#) affirms that God created all things by speaking a word, it really means that all is ordered by the divine plan and works together in harmony. After creation was completed, God looked and “found it very good” (Gn [1, 31](#)). Thus, no matter what evil and failure will follow in world history, we are to recall that goodness will prevail.

God Has Blessed Human Life

An important corollary of a good world is divine blessing upon it. Twice Genesis tells us that God blessed the human race (Gn [1, 28](#); [9, 1](#)). Later, much is made of the blessing of Abraham (Gn [12, 2](#)), of Sarah and Isaac (Gn [17, 16](#)), of Jacob (Gn [27, 27–29](#)), of the whole people by Aaron (Nm [6, 24–26](#)), of the nation by Balaam (Nm [23, 20](#)), and, as the finale of the Pentateuch, of each tribe by Moses (Dt [33, 1–29](#)).

Humanity Has a Tendency To Sin

Much of the biblical story centers on the disobedience and sinfulness of God's creatures who refuse to heed or obey the divine will. In turn, many of the laws center on atonement (in Leviticus particularly), and on the need for repentance and turning back to God (in Deuteronomy particularly).

God Delivers from All Evil

If humanity tends toward rebellion, God tends toward forgiveness and mercy. God spares Adam and Eve, Cain and Noah, and others in order to give the human race a new start each time after it sins. God is revealed above all else as a liberating God in the Exodus event. This becomes the heart of Israel's praise for God in the Passover celebration.

God Fulfills the Promises

The Pentateuch stressed again and again the fulfillment of the promise made to Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses that God will make them into a great people. The Lord was never a god patterned on the recurring cycles of nature, but always a God of the future who calls forth in Israel a trusting hope that must expect new and greater divine acts still to come.

The Covenant Binds God to Israel

Naturally all people believe their god relates to the world somehow, but only in Israel do we find a union based on love and loyalty pledged to each other in a permanent union that actually respects the role of the human partner. The covenant is the heart of biblical faith because it expresses a unique bond between God and people, built on past deeds but committed to future collaboration.

The Law Expresses Israel's Bond to God

The covenant establishes a relationship, but the laws of the Pentateuch show how that relationship can be lived out by the people—they are not restrictive rules but a dynamic way of life that expresses faithfulness to God in actions as well as words, always with a touch of joy for flavoring.

Worship Is Praise Is Thank You

This may sound like a strange heading, but the point needs emphasis: to pray is to praise, and to praise is to thank God. The Pentateuch constantly points to what God has done for Israel, and the laws point to a spirit of rejoicing and thanksgiving on Israel's part in giving back to God a part of the gift to them: namely, praising the divine goodness in everything.

Religious Life Is Life in Community

Israel is a people, not a number of all-star individuals. Discovery of the divine will and proper praise can only be given by human voices joined together. God's many faces can be seen only when memories are shared and mutual goodness is shown in action to one another.

God Directs All of History

The natural conclusion to be drawn from the preceding attributes of God is that everything falls under divine providence. The central conviction of Israel that there is one, and only one, God leads to recognition of the divine lordship over all peoples and all events. God both blesses and punishes, sets obstacles as well as shows the way to pass through them. All things are in the hands of God, and so no course of action is thinkable except to walk in the ways of the Lord.

Further Reading

General Introductions

Blenkinsopp, Joseph. *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible*. Anchor Bible Reference Library. New York: Doubleday, 1992. An excellent scholarly analysis of modern criticism and

its difficulties and achievements

Boadt, Lawrence, C.S.P. *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985. A

readable overview of all the critical and theological issues of Old Testament study

Campbell, Anthony, and Mark O'Brien. *Sources of the Pentateuch*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993. The authors provide texts and notes on the various documents that supposedly stand behind the Pentateuch

and its growth.

Childs, Brevard. *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1979. A very technical but excellent introduction to each book of the Bible as it developed through the process of

transmission and redaction.

General Commentaries

Barton, John, and John Muddiman. *The Oxford Bible Commentary*. Oxford and New York: Oxford

University Press, 2001.

The Collegeville Old Testament Commentary. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1985, 1987. Short, handy

series written for Catholics.

The International Bible Commentary. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998. Scholars from every continent contribute to this work that emphasizes a literary approach to interpretation of each book, combining literary theory, historical criticism, and the history of how the book was used and interpreted

throughout the centuries.

The Message of the Old Testament. Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1980, 1984. Readable middle-level

commentaries on the theology of each book of the Bible.

The New Interpreter's Bible. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994. The combination of modern scholarship and theological reflection in a very readable format make this an excellent resource for parish libraries.

The New Jerome Biblical Commentary. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990. A superb one-volume commentary on all of Scripture with fine background articles for study of the Pentateuch.

Biblical Criticism

Brueggemann, Walter, and Hans Walter Wolff. *The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions*. 2nd ed. Atlanta: John Knox, 1982. Readable essays on each of the four sources.

Friedman, Richard Elliott. *Who Wrote the Bible?* New York: Summit Books, 1987. Most readable account ever of the excitement of discovering the four sources in the Pentateuch.

Ralph, Margaret Nutting. *"And God Said What?"* Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986. A very understandable introduction to literary forms in the Bible.

Bible Dictionaries

Achtemeier, Paul, ed. *Harper's Bible Dictionary*. New York: Harper & Row, 1985. Another excellent, up-to-date resource book.

Freedman, David Noel, ed. *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday, 1991. Comes in six large volumes and is the most complete resource tool available.

McKenzie, John L. *Dictionary of the Bible*. Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1965. A superb work on almost every facet of Bible study but somewhat dated in its information on the latest trends in criticism. Its strength lies in McKenzie's incisive insights into the Catholic biblical tradition.

Metzger, Bruce M., and Michael D. Coogan. *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

The Individual Books of the Pentateuch

Bailey, Lloyd. *Leviticus*. Atlanta: John Knox, 1987. Simple but useful handbook to the various laws in Leviticus.

Boadt, Lawrence. *Genesis*. The International Bible Commentary. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998.

Childs, Brevard. *The Book of Exodus*. Old Testament Library. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974. A very detailed treatment of Exodus and the origins of its traditions and its history of use in the Church.

Craighie, Peter. *The Book of Deuteronomy*. New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976. A readable and thorough explanation of the theology of Deuteronomy.

Levine, Baruch. *Numbers 1–20*. Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 1993.

Milgrom, Jacob. *Leviticus 1–16*. Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 1994.

———. *Leviticus 17–22*. Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 2000.

———. *Leviticus 23–27*. Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 2002.

Sarna, Nahum. *Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel*. New York: Schocken Books, 1966.

Very fine explanation of the message and background of Genesis from a Jewish viewpoint.

———. *Exploring Exodus*. New York: Schocken Books, 1986. The follow-up to *Understanding Genesis* and just as readable, just as informative.

Weinfeld, Moshe. *Deuteronomy 1–11*. Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 1991.

Westermann, Claus. *Genesis 1–11; Genesis 12–36; Genesis 37–50*. 3 vols. Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1984, 1987.

Other Literatures of Biblical Times

Matthews, Victor, and Don Benjamin. *Old Testament Parallels*. Rev. ed. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1998.

Pritchard, James. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969. An excellent anthology. Referred to as ANET.

