

THE  
DISCIPLESHIP  
PLACE

Telling the Old Testament  
Story of God



**SESSION 3**

Introduction to the Pentateuch

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# Introduction to the Pentateuch

## SESSION OVERVIEW

**Major Divisions of the Pentateuch**

**Outlining the Contents of the Pentateuch**

**Major Themes of the Pentateuch**

**Application**

**Exam**

**Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant**

## LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should:

- discuss the similarities and differences between the primeval history in the Pentateuch and similar texts from the ancient Near East.
- recognize the connection between the biblical narrative in the Pentateuch and the history of the Ancient Near East.
- outline the major contents of the Pentateuch.
- list four major themes that run through the Pentateuch.

## INTRODUCTION

This session focuses on the first major unit of the Old Testament. We will look at the divisions, content, and major themes of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament).

## MAJOR DIVISIONS OF THE PENTATEUCH



### NOTES

The term Pentateuch refers to the first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). The Pentateuch can be organized historically according to the following outline:

#### **PRIMEVAL HISTORY: GENESIS 1-11**

The term primeval means belonging to the first or earliest age, or original. Other ancient Near Eastern communities had myths similar to Israel's primeval history. One definition of a myth is a story which seeks to present a truth that relates to everyone for all time. It is the attempt of a people to understand and explain their existence, customs, and traditions. The myth of the tortoise and the hare, for example, reminds us that faster isn't always better, that it's OK to take our time.

Often myths are simply attempts to understand the how and why of things. Scholars call these why issues etiological concerns. Some have pointed to evidence of these why, or etiological, concerns in the primeval history of Genesis 1-11. For example: Why do snakes crawl on the ground? How did people come to wear clothing? Why do people die? Why are some people so big and tall (as if giants compared to others)? Why are there different languages in the world? How did sin enter the world? How did the earth come into existence? Other ancient Near Eastern communities had stories, in some ways similar to Israel's primeval history, which sought to explain their own questions of existence. For example: the Sumerian creation story called Enuma Elish, and the Babylonian flood story in the Gilgamesh Epic.

The similarities between these stories and Israel's primeval history point to an important part of God's divine revelation in Scripture. God often communicates in ways that are familiar to His people. Ancient Israel was exposed to and understood the significance of how myths were used by its pagan neighbors. Rather than inventing a new format of communication that might be unknown to Israel, God used a familiar format to communicate God's truths.

Israel's primeval history (Genesis 1-11) communicates truth from God about the relationships between humans and each other and between humans and God. Though this divine revelation from God is similar in format to surrounding myths, it actually denies many concepts of the religions around Israel in favor of the truth from God.

 **NOTES****PATRIARCHAL AND MATRIARCHAL HISTORY: GENESIS 12-50**

For the skeptic who may think the stories of the Bible are completely fiction and unrealistic, sources outside the Bible verify the realistic environment of the Scriptures, beginning with the patriarchs and matriarchs, the fathers and mothers of the faith (stories of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel/Leah, and Joseph).

Names and places, customs, and traditions described in Genesis 12-50 can be found in documents from surrounding communities in the Ancient Near East. Two examples are the archives of Mari and Nuzi. (See the list of terms in Session 2 for these and other examples.)

**THE EXODUS AND WILDERNESS PERIOD: EXODUS, LEVITICUS, NUMBERS, DEUTERONOMY**

It is often argued that the history of Israel as a nation begins with the Exodus account. The earliest formation of what eventually becomes the nation of Israel comes from the families, or tribes, brought out from slavery in Egypt. At this point the Hebrews begin to become traceable historically (at least through vague references), not only in the Bible, but also in the documents of surrounding nations (consider the Amarna Letters and the Merneptah Stele). (See the list of terms in Session 2 for further explanation.)

## OUTLINING THE CONTENTS OF THE PENTATEUCH

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### NOTES

#### Primeval Accounts: Genesis 1-11

- Creation Accounts
- Flood Story
- Tower of Babel

#### Patriarchal and Matriarchal Stories: Genesis 12-50

- Abraham/Sarah
- Isaac/Rebekah
- Jacob/Leah/Rachel
- Joseph cycle

#### The Exodus: Exodus 1-14

- Moses and the Plagues
- Parting of the Red Sea

#### The Sojourn in the Wilderness: Exodus 15-Numbers 36

- From the Red Sea to Mount Sinai
- Covenant at Sinai (Ten Commandments)
- From Mount Sinai to Plains of Moab

#### Preparation for Entering the Promised Land: Deuteronomy

- Sermon on the Plains of Moab
- Death of Moses

#### Legal Material at Sinai: Exodus 19-Numbers 10

- Instructions for building the Tabernacle
- Laws regarding sacrifice, festivals, and social relations


**NOTES**

Transitional/Framing material (scattered throughout)

- Genealogies
- Wilderness stations
- Other transitions

## HISTORICAL AND LITERARY APPROACHES TO THE PENTATEUCH

### *Diachronic Analysis of the Pentateuch and Source Theory*

The historical approach has led to the investigation of possible historical sources that may have been used to form the writing of the Pentateuch. Keep in mind these approaches are not a threat to the divine inspiration of the Scriptures. God could have used any author or number of authors to produce the inspired work of the Bible through His Holy Spirit. It does not destroy our belief in God's inspiration of the Bible to believe that He inspired more than one person to author a given book.

One of the major products of a historical approach to the Pentateuch comes through source criticism (the investigation of possible sources used to produce the Pentateuch). This major product is known as source theory, or specifically in the case of the Pentateuch, the documentary hypothesis. The documentary hypothesis, or four-source theory, claims the Pentateuch was produced from four original sources, which can be described as follows:

- The Yahwist source (known as J). This source consistently refers to God as Yahweh.
- The Elohist source (known as E). This source consistently refers to God as Elohim.
- The Priestly source (known as P). This source reflects a concern for law, ritual, and statistics such as genealogical information.
- The Deuteronomistic source (known as D). Characterized by an emphasis on the centralization of worship in the one place where God chooses (understood to be the Jerusalem Temple). The source is mainly found in Deuteronomy.

Following is an outline of biblical data which scholars see as evidence of multiple sources (in this case, four sources) in the Pentateuch:


**NOTES**

- Different language, terminology
  - Two different names for God (Yahweh, Elohim)
  - Two different names for the covenant mountain (Sinai, Horeb)
  - Two different names for the native inhabitants of Palestine (Canaanites, Amorites)
- Duplications, repetitions
  - Two creation accounts (Gen 1, 2).
  - Three stories of a patriarch who deceives others by claiming his wife is his sister (Gen. 12, 20, 26)
  - Two accounts of Abraham sending out Hagar and Ishmael (Gen. 16, 21)
  - Two calls of Moses to lead out people (Exod. 3, 6)
- Stories which appear to blend two accounts
  - Flood story (Gen. 6-9; 7 pair of clean animals vs. just 1 pair of every animal).
  - Joseph being sold to Egypt (Gen. 37; Reuben pleads for Joseph and he is sold to Midianites vs. Judah pleads for Joseph and he is sold to Ishmaelites).

### *Literary Analysis of the Pentateuch*

A literary approach is not concerned with the history of the transmission of a text, but rather focuses on the text as a whole literary unit. Some recent studies on the Pentateuch have begun to deny the validity of the documentary hypothesis (described above) and focus on the unity of the Pentateuch. Such studies emphasize significant ties within the Pentateuch that cross source boundaries and bind the Pentateuch together as a whole.

Such studies recognize patterns and links throughout the text. These patterns and links demonstrate the unity of the material. A simple example of this kind of analysis can be seen in the envelope-type pattern of promise, wilderness, law, wilderness, promise evident within the Pentateuch, from the patriarchs to Deuteronomy. Here's an example of the envelope-type pattern:

- A) Genesis 12-50. Contains God's giving of the promise of land, descendants, and blessing to the patriarchs and matriarchs.




**NOTES**

- B) Exodus 1-18. Contains the Exodus and wilderness wanderings from Egypt to Mount Sinai. God leading the people toward fulfillment of the promise.
- C) Exodus 19-Numbers 10. Contains the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. This law defines the relationship between God and His people.
- B1) Numbers 11-36. Contains further wilderness wanderings from Mount Sinai to Plains of Moab. Still on the way to fulfillment of the promise.
- A1) Deuteronomy. Contains sermons on the plains of Moab, in preparation to receive the promise.

Notice how the pattern above unites the material under the theme of promise. The sections labeled A and A1 correspond, as one refers to the giving of the promise, and the other refers to preparation for receiving the promise. Sections B and B1 correspond in the fact that both sections reflect wilderness wandering on the way to the fulfillment of the promise.

Enveloped in the center of the pattern is section C. Section C is highlighted and emphasized by standing alone in the heart of this pattern. It emphasizes the central message that the fulfillment of the promise depends on faithful obedience to the law and covenant with God.

The central message is confirmed at the end, in Deuteronomy, which is a sermon filled with warnings about keeping the law of God or else the nation will lose the land of promise. This kind of analysis of the Pentateuch suggests the biblical material often appears to contain patterns and related structures that demonstrate the Pentateuch is one united document (rather than the product of multiple sources).

## MAJOR THEMES OF THE PENTATEUCH



### NOTES

#### COVENANTS

There are three important covenants in the Pentateuch:

- *Covenant with Noah*: promise never to destroy the earth by flood again. The sign is the rainbow. This covenant is found in Gen. 8:20-22.
- *Covenant with Abraham*: promise of land and descendants. God's sign of this covenant is circumcision. (See Gen. 12)
- *Covenant with Moses or the Sinai Covenant*: God promises to be God to the people and the people agree to obey His statutes. The sign of the covenant is obedience (some say Sabbath). (See Exod. 20)

#### PROMISE OF LAND

As illustrated in the literary analysis of the Pentateuch, the theme of the promise of land runs throughout the Pentateuch.

#### THEME OF ABUNDANCE AND FRUITFULNESS

Related to the theme of the promise of land is the theme of abundance, fruitfulness, and multiplication. God tells the first couple in the garden to be fruitful and multiply. God also promises Abraham his descendants will be as abundant as the stars in the sky, or the sand on the shore. The Hebrews become so abundant in Egypt that they become a threat to Pharaoh's power and control. These examples illustrate the significance of this theme in the Pentateuch.

#### LAW AND THE SACRIFICIAL SYSTEM

The giving of the Law at Sinai is the main concern of Exod. 19-Num. 10. All of Leviticus is concerned with legal stipulations and instructions for the sacrificial system. Deuteronomy is cast as a speech from Moses serving as a review of the Law.

## APPLICATION



### NOTES

1. Look at the learner objectives for this session.
  - Do you see the similarities and differences between the primeval history in the Pentateuch and similar texts from the Ancient Near East?
  - Do you recognize the connection between the Pentateuch and the history of the Ancient Near East?
  - Can you outline the major contents of the Pentateuch?
  - What are the four major themes that run through the Pentateuch?
2. Read the following texts describing three important covenants in the Pentateuch: Gen. 9:8-17, 12:1-3, 17:1-21; Exod. 19:1-8. For each covenant, list the following:
  - Who is the covenant made with?
  - How long is the covenant intended to last?
  - What are the promises of the covenant?
  - Does the covenant benefit anyone beyond those immediately involved in the making of the covenant? (i.e. does the benefit of this covenant carry on through history?)
3. Journal your reflections and insights from this session and from your readings. Write a sample covenant of your own between you and God, and include all the parts of a covenant. Have you experienced covenant services like the installation of a new pastor? How meaningful are these covenant services in today's culture? In God's covenant with Israel, expressed in the Ten Commandments, what does it mean when God says, "Your sacred place is My sacred place?"

## EXAM



### NOTES

1. The flood story of Gen. 6-9 is an example of an account which appears to blend two stories.
  - A. True
  - B. False
2. The term Pentateuch refers to \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. The last six books of the Bible
  - B. The last five books of the Old Testament
  - C. The first five books of the Bible
  - D. The Hebrew word for prophecy
3. The historical approach has led to the investigation of possible historical sources that may have been used to form the writing of the Pentateuch.
  - A. True
  - B. False
4. The term primeval means \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. The sin of Adam and Eve
  - B. The love of money
  - C. The period in which Abraham and Isaac are said to have lived
  - D. Belonging to the first or earliest age, original
5. Often myths are simply attempts to understand how and why things are the way they are.
  - A. True
  - B. False
6. The primeval history of Gen. 1-11 is a blanket acceptance of the myths of the religions surrounding Israel in the Ancient Near East.
  - A. True
  - B. False
7. The Documentary Hypothesis is an example of \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. Literary criticism
  - B. Source criticism
  - C. Narrative criticism
  - D. None of the above

 **NOTES**

8. Source theory and literary analysis should be viewed as a threat to God's divine inspiration of the Old Testament.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
9. The Documentary Hypothesis is also called a \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. One-source theory
  - B. Two-source theory
  - C. Three-source theory
  - D. Four-source theory
  
10. A literary approach is not concerned with the history of the transmission of a text, but rather focuses on the text as a whole literary unit.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
11. Which of the following is NOT a major theme in the Old Testament?
  - A. Covenant
  - B. Promise of land
  - C. Women's suffrage
  - D. Abundance and fruitfulness
  
12. A covenant between God and Noah is included in the Old Testament.
  - A. True
  - B. False

## DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT

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NOTES

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. How does the similarity of the Enuma Elish and the Epic of Gilgamesh to parts of Gen. 1-11 affect your view of the way in which God inspired the authors of the Bible, if at all?
2. Does it help you to see the outline of the Pentateuch's contents? Do you see an historical timeline here?
3. What are the four major themes in the Pentateuch? How do they carry over into the New Testament, if at all?
4. Do you most resonate with the Documentary Hypothesis or with literary criticism of the Pentateuch? Why?