

**This material forms both the ‘Thought for the week’ and the basic material for the Study Group on Wednesday. It might be easier to print it or have it available on a separate device if you intend to join the group via Zoom.**

Background. A very brief introduction to the Pentateuch

## INTRODUCTION TO THE PENTATEUCH

The first five books of the bible together constitute a unit in themselves, and the group was known to the Jews as the torah, or the ‘Law’. The earliest reliable witness to this title is to be found in the preface to the Book of Ecclesiasticus, and when the Christian era opened the term was already in common use, as in the New Testament, Mt 5:17; Lk 10:26; see Lk 24:44.

The need to have manageable copies of this vast collection of material dictated the division of its text into five scrolls of approximately equal length. Hence the name given to it among speakers of Greek: pentateuchos (biblos understood), the Book in Five Volumes’, transcribed in Latin as Pentateuchus (sc. Liber), whence English Pentateuch. Hebrew-speaking Jews however, called it ‘The Five Fifths of the Law’.

That this division into five books dates back to pre-Christian times is attested by the Septuagint. This Greek version of the Hebrew Old Testament designated the books according to their content, and the Church adopted its terminology. Thus the book which opens with the story of the beginning of the world is called Genesis; the second, which starts with the departure of Israel from Egypt, is named Exodus; Leviticus contains the law of the priests of the tribe of Levi; the first four chapters of Numbers deal with the census; Deuteronomy is so styled from the Septuagint rendering of Dt 17:18: ‘the second law’. The Jews, however, used and still use the initial Hebrew word of each book – or its first important word – to indicate the whole.

Genesis falls into two unequal parts. Ch. 1-11 deal with primordial history; they introduce us to the story of salvation, the theme that runs through the whole Bible. They go back to the beginning of the world and survey the whole human race. They tell of the creation of the universe and humanity, of the Fall and its consequences, of the increasing human wickedness which earned the punishment of the Flood. The repopulation of the earth starts with Noah but our attention is directed ultimately to Abraham, father of the chosen people, by way of a series of narrowing genealogical tables. Ch. 12-50 deal with patriarchal history; they portray the great ancestors of Israel. Abraham is the man of faith; God rewards his obedience with a promise of posterity for himself and, for his descendants, possession of the Holy Land (12:1-15:18). Jacob is the man of guile who supplants his brother Esau, tricks his father, Isaac into giving him his blessing and outwits his uncle, the unscrupulous Laban. But all his cunning would have been useless if God had not preferred him to Esau before his birth or renewed the promise and covenant granted to Abraham (25:19 to ch.36). The career of Isaac, Abraham’s son and Jacob’s father, is described more in relation to these two than for its own sake; he is a relatively colourless figure. The twelve sons of Jacob represent the ancestors of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The concluding chapters of Genesis (37-50, except 38 and 49) are entirely devoted to one of them: Joseph, the man of wisdom. The Joseph-cycle, in contrast to the foregoing stories, unfolds without visible intervention on the part of God and without any new revelation; it nonetheless has a lesson to teach, that the virtue of the wise is rewarded and that Providence turns human faults to good advantage.

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Genesis is complete in itself, the history of the ancestors. The three books that follow have for their common framework the life of Moses. They recount the information of the chosen people and show how its social and religious law was constituted.

Exodus is concerned with two main themes: the deliverance from Egypt 1:1-15:21, and the Sinaitic covenant, 19:1-40:38. A secondary theme; the journey through the desert, connects the two, 15:22-18:27. Moses, having received the revelation of the name of Yahweh on the mountain of God, leads the liberated Israelites there. In a majestic theophany God concludes an alliance with the people and proclaims his laws. The covenant is broken almost as soon as made: the people adore the golden calf. But God forgives the sin and renews the covenant. There follows a list of ordinances controlling the practice of worship in desert conditions.

Leviticus, taken up almost entirely with legislation, breaks the thread of the narrative. Its contents are as follows: sacrificial ritual, ch. 1-7; ceremony of priestly investiture described in terms of the consecration of Aaron and his sons, ch. 8-10; ordinances relating to things clean and unclean, ch. 11-15, concluding with the ritual for the great Day of Expiation, ch. 16; the 'Holiness Code', ch. 17-26, a section which included a liturgical calendar, ch. 23, and which closes with blessings and curses, ch. 26. By way of appendix ch. 27 lays down the conditions for redeeming persons and animals and goods vowed to Yahweh.

Numbers resumes the account of the desert journey. A census of the people, ch 1-4 and the offering of gifts on the occasion of the dedication of the dwelling, ch.7, form a prelude to the departure from Sinai. The second Passover is celebrated and, leaving the holy mountain, ch. 9-10, the people reach Kadesh after various halts on the way. From here an unsuccessful attempt is made to infiltrate Canaan from the south, ch. 11-14. After a long stay at Kadesh, the people resume their journey, until they reach the Plains of Moab, opposite Jericho, ch. 20-25. The Midianites are defeated and the tribes of Gad and Reuben settle in Transjordan, ch.31-32. Ch. 33 lists the encampments on the way from Egypt to Moab. Interspersed between these narrative sections are groups of laws either supplementing the Sinaitic code or preparing for the colonisation of Canaan: ch. 5-6; 8-15-19; 26-30; 34-36.

Deuteronomy has a distinct structure of its own. It is a code of civil and religious laws, ch.12-26:15, framed within a long discourse of Moses, ch. 5-11 and 26:16-28. All this material is itself preceded by a first Mosaic discourse, ch.1-4, and followed by a third, ch. 29-30, followed in its turn by sections dealing with the last days of Moses: the commissioning of Joshua, the canticle and blessings of Moses, his death, ch. 31-34. The Deuteronomic code is a partial restatement of the laws promulgated in the desert. The discourses commemorate the great events of the Exodus, of Sinai, and of the beginnings of the conquest, explaining the religious significance of these, emphasising the importance of the Law and exhorting the chosen people to be faithful to Yahweh.

Relation of the narratives to history.

From such traditions it would be unreasonable to expect the minute precision of a modern historian: they are not lifeless manuscripts but the living heritage of a nation whose spirit of unity they nourish and whose faith they sustain. But it would be equally unreasonable to refuse them any credence on the grounds that this precision is lacking.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis must be considered separately. They give a description in popular style of the origin of the human race; in a simple, pictorial way suited to the

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mentality of unsophisticated people, they declare the fundamental truths on which the plan of salvation rests. These truths are: the creation by God at the beginning of time, God's special intervention in the making of man and woman, the unity of the human race, the sin of our first parents, the fall from divine favour and the penalties which their descendants would inherit in consequence of sin. All these are truths which have their bearing on theological doctrine and which are guaranteed by the authority of Scripture; but they are also facts, although we cannot know their nature, as they are presented to us in a mythological form consistent with the mentality of their time and place of origin.

The story of the patriarchs is primarily a family history: a collection of memories handed down about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. It is also a popular history: it lingers over personal anecdotes and piquant details, making no attempt to situate its narratives in a wider historical context. Stories now attached to one great ancestor may well originally have been told of another, and other historical outlines blurred in the course of oral transmission. And, lastly, it is history written from a religious standpoint: each turning-point of the story is signalised by a divine intervention, and the hand of Providence is seen in each event – a theological outlook which disregards the play of secondary causes.

(For an excellent introduction to the O.T. read Etienne Charpentier, How to read the Old Testament. SCM 1982. (Old now but still available, still very good value))

**The OT reading for 21<sup>st</sup> Feb. 2021. Genesis 9. 8-17**

*<sup>8</sup> Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, <sup>9</sup> “As for me, I am establishing my covenant\* with you and your descendants after you, <sup>10</sup> and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark.<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>11</sup> I establish my covenant\* with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” <sup>12</sup> God said, “This is the sign of the covenant\* that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: <sup>13</sup> I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant\* between me and the earth. <sup>14</sup> When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, <sup>15</sup> I will remember my covenant\* that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. <sup>16</sup> When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant\* between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” <sup>17</sup> God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant\* that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”*

Most Biblical scholars believe the Book of Genesis was the first book to be written down. This would have happened around **1450 BC to 1400 BC**. So perhaps about **3400** years or so ago.

The Genesis flood narrative is encompassed within chapters 6–9 in the Book of Genesis, in the Bible. The narrative, one of many flood myths found in human cultures, indicates that God intended to return the Earth to its pre-Creation state of watery chaos by flooding the Earth because of humanity's misdeeds and then remake it using the microcosm of Noah's ark. Thus, the flood was no ordinary overflow but a reversal of Creation. The narrative discusses the evil of mankind that moved God to destroy the world by the way of the flood, the preparation of the ark for certain animals, Noah, and his family, and God's guarantee (the Noahic Covenant) for the continued existence of life under the promise that he would never send another flood.

After the flood, Noah offered burnt offerings to God, who said: "I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart *is* evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done" (8:20–21).

For a fuller introduction to Genesis see:

[https://divinity.yale.edu/sites/default/files/session-1-genesis-introduction\\_0.pdf](https://divinity.yale.edu/sites/default/files/session-1-genesis-introduction_0.pdf)

Five questions for discussion.

1. How do we read the O.T? Is it literal truth?
2. How does that view affect how we use the Bible?
3. What does our passage say about God?
4. What does the theological word Covenant (\*7 occurrences) mean?
5. What does our passage say about prayer?