

STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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by Nathan R. Schneider, Th.M.

As both eyewitness and researcher, [Moses] had collected and organized raw materials documenting the past and thus had created a literary masterpiece now known as Torah. It is in every sense a history book; but more than this, it is a theological treatise whose purpose is to show that God the Creator, through an elect nation, Israel, will sovereignly achieve his creative and redemptive purposes for all humankind.

—Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*,
2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 41.

OLD TESTAMENT FLYOVER:

The Torah

The Designations for the Torah

Greek Title: Throughout church history, the first five books of the Old Testament (OT) have traditionally been designated as the *Pentateuch* (from *penta* [five] and *teuchos* [scrolls], meaning “the five scrolls”). As the Greek implies, the title *Pentateuch* was the name given to these books by the translators of the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the OT completed around 200 B.C.

Hebrew Title: The Hebrew designation for these five books, however, has always been simply *Torah*, a term with wider meaning than simply “law.” Yes, the term is used of laws, rules, and statutes. But the idea behind the Hebrew term *torah* is inherently broader. It means “instruction,” “guidance,” and “teaching.” In this sense, it refers to more than what we think of as “laws” (e.g., the Ten Commandments). It refers to *a writing which gives guidance and direction for living, and which teaches and instructs on history, God, and the divine plan*.

Biblical Titles: Of course, the Hebrew designation is itself a biblical title for these books (Josh 1:7; 8:34; Ezra 10:3; Matt 12:5; John 7:19). But the Bible also uses other designations:

- **The Book of the Law** (Josh 1:8; Neh 8:3; Gal 3:10): The term “book” literally refers to a written document, which is astounding considering the liberal argument that the Torah as we know it was not formed until 398 B.C. In fact, it would seem that, in the 75 days that elapsed between Deuteronomy 31:9 (“so Moses wrote this law . . .”) and Joshua 1:8 (“this book of the law shall not depart from your mouth”), there was already a written document of the law on which Joshua and the leaders of Israel were to meditate.

- **The Book of the Law of Moses** (Josh 8:31; 2 Kgs 14:6)
- **The Book of Moses** (Ezra 6:18; Mark 12:26): Literally, we could translate this as “the book *from* Moses.” We may infer from this that Ezra and his contemporaries believed that the book as a whole was authored by Moses.
- **The Law of Moses** (Dan 9:11; Mal 4:4; Luke 2:22; John 7:23): Once again, here the “law” does not simply refer to the rules and ordinances found in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, though these are found in the writings. Rather, it is the “instruction” or “teaching” of Moses and refers the whole Pentateuch.
- **The Law of Yahweh** (Ezra 7:10; Luke 2:23, 24): Even though Moses is the human author, there is always an understanding throughout the OT that the Torah ultimately came from God. It was His law and His book.
- **The Law of God** (Neh 10:28, 29)
- **The Book of the Law of God** (Josh 24:26; Neh 8:18)
- **The Book of the Law of Yahweh** (2 Chron 17:9; Neh 9:3)

The Unity of the Torah

The Western church has propagated the conception that the five books of the Torah are, in fact, five *books*—that is, five distinct but related literary units. They may be intricately related, with much continuity, but they are distinct. Of course, the reason for this conception naturally stems from the individual titles given to each “book” by the LXX translators.

But a thorough search throughout the Scriptures will demonstrate that neither the OT nor NT ever refers to the individual books. They may cite from one book or another, but it is always understood to be a citation from the law as a whole and never from Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, or Deuteronomy, as if these five books have individual existences apart from the Torah.

To be fair to the LXX translators, the title they gave the Torah does suggest that even *they* considered the Pentateuch to be one literary unit. The confusion arose from the titles given to the individual *volumes* of the Pentateuch. But when we consider the Hebrew names for these volumes, it becomes clearer:

Volume	LXX Title	Hebrew Title
1	Genesis	“In the beginning”
2	Exodus	“And these are the names”
3	Leviticus	“And He called”
4	Numbers	“In the wilderness”
5	Deuteronomy	“These are the words”

The individual Hebrew titles are simply derived from the opening phrase of that volume.¹ In addition, when we look at how each book transitions, it becomes obvious that these books were written to flow consecutively, picking right up where the previous book concluded:

Volume	Opens with . . .	Closes with . . .
Genesis	the creation of the cosmos	the death of Joseph in Egypt
Exodus	the beginning of Israel's oppression in Egypt	the glory of Yahweh entering the tabernacle
Leviticus	Yahweh speaks from the tabernacle	Yahweh finishing instructions to Moses
Numbers	Yahweh giving new instructions to Moses	Yahweh finishing instructions to Israel on the plains of Moab
Deuteronomy	Moses speaking to Israel on the plains of Moab	Moses dying

In this respect, the internal (biblical designations and data) and external (LXX designation) evidence overwhelmingly suggests that we should not view the Torah as a section comprised of five books. Instead, we should think of the Torah as *one* book in *five* volumes. But why was it broken up into volumes if it was intended as a single unit? One common explanation suggests that the length of these volumes precluded them to be written together on a single scroll.² Rather, they were divided up onto five scrolls, and the opening phrases of each scroll were used as headings. However, other scholars have noted that a 5-fold division is not the only conceivable arrangement of the work. Why not 4 scrolls, or even 6 scrolls? Blenkinsopp posits that the 5-part division creates a central book—Leviticus—that becomes the focal point of the entire work.³ Since the Torah was written to explain Israel's past and purpose, it is only fitting that the central thrust of the work focus on how the covenant nation is the conduct itself so that Yahweh can reside among them.

The Setting of the Torah

Even though the events portrayed throughout the Torah occurred throughout an incredible span of time, the Torah as a literary work finds its origins on the plains of Moab on the east side of the Jordan River. It was there that Israel had finally settled after their exodus from Egypt and 40-year trek through the wilderness. It was there where they were making final preparation for the conquest of Canaan. Whether or not Moses composed some or all of the Torah during this time is unclear, but the internal testimony of the text suggests that the Torah as a literary work had a definitive origin on the plains of Moab (Deut 1:1; Deut 4:44-49).

¹ Both Leviticus and Numbers open with the phrase, "Then Yahweh called/spoke to Moses". Therefore, Leviticus is designated simply as, "Then He spoke" while Numbers adopted the subsequent phrase, "In the Wilderness."

² Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament: A Christian Survey*, Encountering Biblical Studies (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 64.

³ Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, NAC (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 42-43.

The Occasion for the Torah

What necessitated the writing of this massive literary work? As Deuteronomy 31:1-2 indicates, Moses was well aware of his impending death. He was on that day 120 years old and knew his time had come to an end. He would not lead Israel in conquest nor accompany them across the Jordan. In light of their precarious past thus far, Israel had many questions that needed answer:

A host of perplexing questions demanded answers. . . . Up until now there had been no systematic presentation of the historical or theological building blocks resulting in the composition of a people united in covenant with God and charged with the awesome privilege and responsibility of functioning as his people in line with his redemptive design.⁴

Merrill goes on to identify several important questions looming in the minds of Israel on the eve of their grand conquest:

- Who, indeed, were these people?
- What was the meaning of Israel?
- How had Israel come to be?
- What, specifically, was it to achieve as one member among the family of peoples and nations?
- What was the meaning of creation? Of the heavens and earth? Of humankind?
- What object did the Creator have in view for his creation?
- If Israel was a sovereignly elected servant people, how was this servanthood to be employed in implementing the great saving purposes of God?⁵

Moses set out to answer these questions as he wrote what became the foundational and central work within the OT canon. But he did more than answer questions. He provided an entire worldview for Israel that they were sorely lacking. In addition to understanding their history and purpose, they also needed a distinctively God-centered and God-shaped worldview to reform their undoubtedly Egyptian-influenced worldview that they had gained through centuries of exposure to pagan life and religion.

The Importance of the Torah

As a sacred text, there is nothing more central in the OT than the Torah. It lays the foundation for everything that follows.⁶ As Merrill notes, “The rest of the canon consists of a

⁴ Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 38.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Eugene H. Merrill, “A Theology of the Pentateuch,” in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 7.

recital of Israel's post-Mosaic history (Joshua-2 Chronicles) and an assessment of this history, both in process (the Prophets) and in reflection (the Deuteronomistic History, Chronicles, and Ezra-Nehemiah)."⁷ That is to say, the remainder of the OT either serves to comment on Israel's obedience to the Torah, to reflect upon its principles, or to teach its precepts. In the end, the Prophets and the Writings all revolve around the Torah as the theological foundation and center of the OT canon. **Application:** *If you want to understand the OT, spend time in the Torah. If you do not spend time in the Torah, you will pay the price later.*

This is not simply an academic truth, but a spiritual reality. Deuteronomy 31:9-13 explains that after Moses wrote the Torah, he gave it to the priests and to the elders, commanding them to read it to the people every seven years when they gathered together for the Feast of Booths. The Torah was so important to Israel's life and practice that they needed to hear it read publically every seven years "so that they may **hear** and **learn** and **fear Yahweh your God**, and **carefully observe** all the words of this law" (Deut 31:12).

The law initiates each of the remaining sections of the OT. At the opening of the Prophets, Joshua was to charged to carefully observe and meditate on the law (Josh 1:7-8). And at the beginning of the Writings, the blessed man is the one who is captivated and continually meditates on the law (Ps 1:2).

The Themes of the Torah

The Torah is a complex, literary masterpiece, but it contains several central themes that unite it together.

- God (the powerful, faithful, sovereign creator)
- Covenant (secular and theocratic)
- Sin
- Election
- Exodus
- Law
- Tabernacle/Priesthood/Sacrifice
- The Land
- Adam, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses

The Center of the Torah

One large question still looms before us: what is the theological "center" of the Torah? In other words, what, theologically speaking, explains the *point* that the Torah is trying to communicate to Israel?

Exodus 19: If the Torah is about showing Israel who they are and what they are to do, then perhaps the Sinaitic Covenant provides the most plausible center. While the covenant itself is

⁷ Ibid., 36.

expounded in Exodus 20:1-23:33, the *purpose* of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel is revealed in Exodus 19:

4 “You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings, and brought you to Myself. **5** Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; **6** and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”
—Exodus 19:4-6

In this passage we see the function that Israel is to serve: they are to be (1) a unique nation belonging specially to Yahweh that (2) that serves as priests to the nations. Their role is to stand between a holy God and the nations and serve as a mediator and intercessor.

We can hardly assume, then, that Israel is the center of the biblical story, though they obviously play a central role in that story. Rather, it appears that Israel serves as the means to an even greater end. The end itself, according to this passage, is Yahweh’s relationship with all the nations, not just with Israel.⁸ The center of the Scriptures—and thus, the center of the Torah—must be found in God’s purpose for mankind and not simply for Israel.

Genesis 1:26-28: It would make sense, then, that God’s purpose for man would intersect with creation itself.⁹ So we have to go all the way back to Genesis 1 where we see man as the pinnacle of God’s creation. In Genesis 1:26-28, God creates man out of divine deliberation, outlining his *purpose* and his *function* within the rest of God’s creation:

26 Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” **27** God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. **28** God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”
—Genesis 1:26-28

Here we see the divine purpose for man on the earth: human beings were created to represent God on the earth. They are to “rule” and “subdue,” terms that are intricately connected with kingship. As Merrill puts it, “Man is created to reign in a manner that demonstrates his lordship, his dominion (by force if necessary) over all creation.”¹⁰ As the story of Genesis unfolds, however, man’s ability to live out his divinely-ordained function was seriously impaired by the entrance of sin into creation, and God seeks to restore mankind to his original function through the seed of Abraham.

⁸ Merrill, “A Theology of the Pentateuch,” 12.

⁹ Ibid., 13.

¹⁰ Ibid., 15.

Summary: The theological center of the Torah, then, is God’s creation mandate to humanity: rule and reign over the earth as God’s representatives. The purpose of the Torah is to explain to Israel their unique role as a priestly nation in *restoring mankind to its proper role as rulers for God over His created earth*.

The Structure of the Torah

There are a number of ways to understand the literary structure of the Torah—how Moses organized and narrated the story of the Torah to Israel. From a purely outline form, we can divide the Torah into three major sections:

1. The Primeval History (Gen 1-11)
2. The Patriarchal History (Gen 12-50)
3. The Beginning of the History of the Nation of Israel (Exod 1-Deut 34)

But there are a number of other important structural insights features God shed light on Moses’ literary shaping of the Torah. First, there appears to be an intentional movement throughout the Torah involving three key individuals: Jacob, Baalam, and Moses. Each of these men give a key address with near and far implications for Israel and its purpose. Their addresses are poetic and prophetic, and provide the culmination of a long section of narrative which then ends with an epilogue. As the table below shows, each poetic address is marked with several key features which point to the intentionality of the structure:

Central Narrative Figure	Jacob	Baalam	Moses
Calls an Audience Together (imperative)	Gen 49:1	Num 24:14	Deut 31:28
Proclaims	Gen 49:1	Num 24:14	Deut 31:28
What will happen	Gen 49:1	Num 24:14	Deut 31:29
In “the end of days”	Gen 49:1	Num 24:14	Deut 31:29

<i>Narrative</i>	<i>Poetry</i>	<i>Epilogue</i>
The Patriarchs (Gen 1:1-48:22)	Jacob’s Prophecy (Gen 49:1-27)	Death of Jacob & Joseph (Gen 49:28-50:26)
Israel’s 1 st Generation (Exod 1:1-Num 22:40)	Baalam’s Prophecy (Num 22:41-24:25)	Failure of 1 st Generation (Num 25:1-18)
Israel’s 2 nd Generation (Num 26:1-Deut 31:23)	Moses’ Song & Blessing (Deut 31:24-32:47)	Death of Moses (Deut 34:1-12)

A third structure is also helpful in demonstrating the covenant scheme that runs through the Torah narrative. Note especially the amount of narrative material dedicated to each major section and the covenants that are central to those sections:

The Fathers	Israel's 1 st Generation	Israel's 2 nd Generation
<i>Covenants:</i> Noahic (Gen 8:21-22; 9:8-17) Abrahamic (Gen 12:1-3; 15:7-21; 17:1-21; 18:17-19)	<i>Covenants:</i> Abrahamic (Exod 2:24; 6:4-8; Lev 26:40-45; Num 23:10) Mosaic (Exod 19:1-Num 10:36) Priestly (Num 25:10-13)	<i>Covenants:</i> Abrahamic (Deut 1:7-9; 4:31; 30:5) Mosaic (Deut 5:1-28:68; 31:14-22; 31:30-32:43) Another (Deut 29:1-30:20)
Genesis 1:1-Genesis 50:26	Exodus 1:1 – Numbers 25:18	Numbers 26:1 – Deut 34:12
25%	50%	25%