Chapter Three

The Torah

Introduction

The Torah, Hebrew for “instruction,” is also called “the Law,” the “Books of Moses,” and the “Pentateuch,” a Greek translation of the Hebrew phrase “five.” Though authorship of the Torah has, since the Greco-Roman period, been attributed to Moses, this attribution is relatively late, and most scholars believe the Torah was compiled using multiple sources well after Moses’ lifetime (see Appendix A). The Torah comprises the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

The Torah anchors the rest of the Bible by setting up its themes and preoccupations: the relationship between God and humanity, between God and his chosen people of Israel; God’s covenants and the consequences for not observing them; and the continuous cycle of falling away, punishment, and redemption that characterizes the relationship between Israel and God. Deuteronomy, the final book in the Torah and, based on internal evidence, the last to be compiled, already refers to the previous four books as “Torah,” a designation was expanded to include Deuteronomy itself (Alter x).

To describe human intervention in the composition of the Torah acknowledges the human role in selecting, editing, and compiling this text. It is not to reject the possibility of divine guidance and inspiration acknowledged by belief communities from Judaism through Christianity and Islam, but to recognize the text as a composite, a joint production that provides, in biblical scholar David M. Carr’s words, “a chorus of different voices, a distillate of ancient Israel’s experiences with God over the centuries, written in the form of continually adapted stories . . . “ (8). Storytelling is so central to the biblical tradition that some Hasidic scholars even proposed “that God made man so that he might tell stories, notably to God Himself” (Steiner 45). Further, the fact of the Torah’s accretive composition does not prevent us from understanding the text as a complete work composed with attention to meaningful structure in a literary sense; according to literary critic Robert Alter, the Torah has “powerful coherence as a literary work” (11).

The Torah originally existed as a set of scrolls rather than as a book with a cover and pages. There were no titles, subtitles, chapters, or verses—or even vowels between the consonants! Neither are there title pages, publication information, acknowledgements, or named authors or scribes. Therefore, the arrangement of the books, what to call them,
and how to mark the transition from one book or chapter to another, were all a matter of interpretation before a final arrangement could be determined.

Robert Alter comments that the Torah’s redactor(s) evidently incorporated multiple traditions of genealogies, etiological tales, ethnographic commentary, and mythological stories (11). These redactor(s) were highly qualified, respected experts in Jewish lore who shaped the final version of the text into its current form (12). The lengthy history of Rabbinic scholarship and commentary on not only the Torah but also the entire Hebrew Bible attests to the seriousness and reverence with which this process of study and canonization was invested.

**The Composition of the Torah**

Many factors have convinced most modern biblical scholars that the Torah’s material was compiled from many different documents at different periods, rather than being recorded at a single time or reflecting the perspective of a single author. These factors include:

- God’s names.
  - Yahweh, the personal name of Israel’s God, is part of a tradition called “Yahwist,” or “J” strand. “J” because the strand was first named by Germans, who employed “J” to transliterate the Hebrew letters YHWH as “Jahweh.” The Yahwistic strand is associated with the southern kingdom of Judea, and thought to date to the 10th century BCE, or the 900s.
  - Another dominant strand is the “E,” which refers to God as Elohim, recalling names of other regional gods, such as Canaan’s El. The Elohist strand is associated with the northern kingdom of Israel, and thought to date to the 10th century BCE, or the 900s.
  - Other names for God include El, Shaddai, and Adonai (which means “Lord”). God’s holiness was evoked by circumlocution—a substitution of “Lord” for the name in many places—and other admonitions to reverence.

- Different editorial preoccupations and the concerns of particular historical periods. The main two strands are the Priestly, “P,” and the Deuteronomistic, “D.”
The “P” strand emphasizes the role of the priesthood and temple cult. It has been connected with the reigns of Hezekiah (c. 727-ca 698 BCE) and Josiah (c. 639-609 BCE), who sought to reform Temple practices. This strand foregrounds God’s ordering out of chaos through his word (as in the first verses of the first creation account in Gen. 1) and through separation and purification. It also underscores the importance of the priestly family of Aaron, brother of Moses.

The “D” strand was probably compiled and edited after the destruction of the first Temple in Jerusalem in 587 BCE; it sought to make sense of that disaster by reframing earlier narratives into a broader pattern of history, and making Jewish faith and practice independent of the Temple (Römer 124).

- Syntax and diction. Widely differing forms of Hebrew indicate various degrees of antiquity. References to contemporary nations, towns, peoples, and naming practices may shift. Some words appear only once in one passage, leaving later writers to infer or guess what is meant. For an analog, consider what an English text might look like if made up of Anglo-Saxon, Chaucerian, Shakespearean, and modern sources, a comparable time frame to that of the Hebrew Bible.

- Repeated or contradictory accounts of the same event. Modern Bible scholars consider this as evidence of “seams” in which two or more traditions have been spliced together, leaving evidence of different accounts of the same incident. An example can be found in Genesis 37, when two versions of Joseph’s being sold into slavery are provided: in 37:27, Judah proposes selling him to the Ishmaelites approaching the camp, but then in 37:28, Joseph is drawn out of the pit by Midianite traders, who sell him to the Ishmaelites.

- In-text references cite scriptural and historical traditions not formally included in the final version of the Bible. For example, the poetic fragment of Numbers 21:14 is attributed to “the Book of the Wars of YHWH,” which has not survived.

- Evidence of the appropriation of characters, situations, and even lines of poetry from other ancient cultures. For example, the story of a great flood survived by single righteous man, together with his family and animals, by means of a boat, is found in several ancient scriptures, including the Sumerian epic Gilgamesh (ca. 1800 BCE).

Although the very earliest complete Hebrew Bibles date only from the 11th c. CE, scholars are able to infer stages of composition and redaction based on the existence of other
texts, such as translations, especially the Septuagint (a Greek translation made in the 3rd-2nd centuries BCE); independent transcriptions of the Hebrew Bible from Samaria and from Cairo; and other texts (see Römer). Comparison enables scholars to examine differences between passages that indicate different sources.

Still, we know from the canonical Masoretic text of the Torah—the text that was compiled, annotated, and canonized by Rabbis between CE 700-1000—that very great care was used to copy the Torah accurately. Since biblical Hebrew is written without consonants (also discussed on pp. 19-20), some guidance was helpful as priests and synagogue members read from the Torah as part of worship. Thus, a tradition began of producing two kinds of Torah: one for reading and study featuring the most accurate and precise reproduction of the text as it had been handed down; and one for reading aloud featuring inserts and commentary to aid in performing and interpreting the text. Once the scriptural canon of the Hebrew Bible was in place, very little change occurred, as has been ascertained by comparison between the oldest Masoretic texts and the Dead Sea scrolls (dated 2-1 centuries BCE), which were rediscovered in the 1940s (Khan 68; see also http://www.deadseascrolls.org.il/home).

Modern Bible scholars agree that the Hebrew Bible is a composite of oral traditions edited and supplemented with written sources from both the northern kingdom of Israel (c. 922 BCE to c. 721 BCE) and the southern kingdom of Judah (c. 922 BCE to 587 BCE), and it includes both pre- and post-exilic materials. An editor or series of editors, sometimes called “R” for “Redactor,” used many traditions, both oral and written, to produce the text we now have, probably during the time of the Babylonian exile (587-538 BCE) or early in the Persian period which followed (Brettler 6).

**Reading the Torah**

Contemporary readers may associate narrative with fiction, and laws, genealogies, and lists with less-interesting non-fiction. They may think that non-fiction aspires to fact, while fiction is untrue. These categories did not pertain in the ancient world. Historical fidelity was not a goal, though ancient interpreters, like readers of today, at times struggled to reconcile apparent contradictions. The Torah combines narrative with genealogies, poetry, and other markers to denote shifts in focus or to emphasize and recapitulate the main themes of the book and the narrative. Shifts from prose to poetry, from narrative to genealogy, and repetition of key summative points as conclusions or transitions are ways to help readers and listeners orient themselves in the text. What may feel repetitive at a single hasty reading actually helps reinforce the messages and extend
the themes. The Torah is composed to record a particular relationship and series of treaties, or covenants, between YHWH and his people.

**Genesis**

Jewish tradition calls this book *Bereshit* (Heb. “when first”; the convention is to call the book by its introductory words). Ancient translators of the Septuagint (3rd and 2nd centuries BCE) called it “Genesis,” which means “origin” or “birth” in Greek, and that name has persisted in English translations. As the name suggests, Genesis is a book about beginnings. Genesis may be roughly divided into two sections: the “primeval” section, which narrates the creation of the world through the account of Noah’s progeny (Gen. 1-11); and the “patriarchal” section, which recounts the foundation of the special relationship between God and Abraham and Abraham’s progeny, ending with the death of Joseph in Egypt (Gen. 12-50).

The primeval section is “mythic” in tone and style: the scale is monumental, characters are archetypal, and actions are consequential. Beginning with the creation of the world the narration narrows its focus from the beginning of all life, to the creation of humanity, of Adam and Eve; of their disobedience of the command not to eat from the tree of knowledge and their fulfillment of the command to “be fruitful and multiply.” Also included are etiological accounts of natural phenomena, of nations, cities, arts, and technologies (“etiological” stories explain the origin, creation, or name of something). A recurrent motif is the promise of fruitfulness, invoked even in the transition between the first and second creation accounts (Genesis 2:4), where the Hebrew word for “begetting” refers not only to human reproduction from Adam and Eve through Abraham and his descendants, but also to the “generation” of the heavens and earth themselves. (Alter 20n; Fokkelman 41).

Despite Genesis’ celebration of human creative and procreative abilities, it also underscores humanity’s failings. “Some critics have plausibly imagined this whole large process of biblical literature as a divine experiment with the quirky and unpredictable stuff of human freedom, an experiment plagued by repeated failure and dedicated to renewed attempts: first Adam and Eve, then the generation of Noah, then the builders of the Tower of Babel, and finally Abraham and his seed” (Alter 13).

Most modern Bible scholars believe that the initial creation account in Gen. 1-2:4 is “Priestly,” and distinct from the account that recounts the creation of Adam and Eve. It emphasizes God’s power to create order out of chaos in measured, poetic language that
shows how God set all life in motion. Humanity is created in God’s image, male and female with no implicit hierarchy of value (Gen 1:27); God’s only command to humanity is to “be fruitful and multiply . . . and have dominion . . . over every living thing” (Gen. 1:28). The God of this account is not the anthropomorphous deity typical of the ancient world, but an ineffably powerful being whose words function as actions. Gen. 2:5 and following, by contrast, depicts a more anthropomorphized deity, one who works with earth like a potter, who physically breathes life into Adam, and who walks and talks with his creation. The rest of the primeval account continues this picture of God as one who gets angry, who can be argued with, and who even changes his mind or regrets his actions. As the Torah continues, however, God becomes more like the character of Gen. 1:1-2:4, increasingly distant and distinct from humanity and even from his chosen people, as we’ll see in Exodus.

Over the years, Genesis has elicited a diverse range of interpretations of key episodes. Early midrashic and rabbinic interpretations emphasized God’s command to “be fruitful and multiply;” the fallen Eve is cursed with pain in childbirth, but bearing children is also a blessing yearned for by barren women. The many genealogies of Genesis recapitulate this theme by tracing multiple lineages from father through son. Procreation happens
sometimes miraculously, as with the long-barren nonagenarian Sarai, and sometimes discordantly, as when Lot’s daughters commit incest and Judah’s daughter-in-law Tamar pretends to be a prostitute in order to conceive. Tellingly, these latter women are implicitly rewarded for their transgressions by their progeny’s success: it is more important for women to have children than to be sexually continent.

The early Christians chose not to emphasize God’s command to be fruitful and instead focused on the message of radical likeness to God in Genesis 1:27; for these Christians, procreation was subordinated to virginity, and St. Paul saw in Adam and Eve’s story a fault that could not be rectified by merely human action. St. Augustine took this further by citing reason’s inability to control sexual arousal as evidence of original sin. For early Christians, then, Adam’s and Eve’s sin became sexual, and all sexuality was suspect; in contrast with Jewish tradition, God’s command to be fruitful and multiply was deemphasized (Pagels). Even the interpretation of what sin it was that condemned Sodom and Gomorrah in God’s eyes elicited different readings: although some rabbinic commentators thought it was homosexuality, others interpreted Sodom’s fault as inhospitality to strangers.

Much of the Hebrew word play of Genesis is, sadly, lost in translation. Without the convention of denoting proper nouns with capital letters, editors must determine whether a name is meant. For example, the word ‘adam is a gender-neutral term for human beings, used in Genesis 1:27, where “male and female” are specified as part of the category, giving rise to one midrashic tradition that Adam was originally a hermaphrodite (Alter 18 n. 26; Bialik 15). This passage has elicited much commentary on its implications for gender roles and its implicit challenge of womanly subordination, so clearly established by the story of Adam and his wife. In Hebrew, it is possible to read the story of Adam as the story of “the human,” but translators typically render ‘adam as “the man” in Genesis 2:7 and following. Starting with Genesis 2:20, however, translators such as the compilers of the King James Version, use "Adam" as a proper noun, a name. Readers of translations may lose the wordplay: in Hebrew, ‘adam is punned with adamah, arable land or ground, which emphasizes the materials God uses to make his man (Gen. 2:7). Eve is not given her name until after the Fall, and a literal translation of Adam, such as in the NRSV, continues to translate ‘adam as “the man” to the end of the tale. A continuing motif in Genesis is this tendency to give meaning-laden names through punning.

Genesis’ second part, sometimes called “ancestral” or “patriarchal,” recounts the story of the founding of the nation of Israel through God’s relationships with Abraham, his son
Isaac, and with Isaac’s son Jacob (Israel). This second section is structured with carefully parallel elements that establish the special relationship God has with the people of Israel.

As The New Oxford Annotated Bible notes, the story of Abraham sets up a pattern that is reflected and further refracted in the stories of his descendants. Abraham’s story is told as a “chiasmus,” or a structure in which the themes are first set up and then repeated in reverse order.

**Fig. 6. Chiasmus in the Story of Abraham.** *Adapted from The New Oxford Annotated Bible, p. 38.*

| A. Introduction via genealogy |
| B. God calls Abraham to leave family of origin |
| C. Wife-as-sister story |
| D. Separation from Lot |
| E. God promises Abraham his seed will possess Canaan |
| F. Human attempt to fulfill God’s promise (Hagar-Ishmael story) |
| E. God promises Abraham his seed will possess Canaan |
| D. Abraham is contrasted with Lot (hospitality/progeny) |
| C. Wife-as-sister story |
| B. God fulfills his promise to give Sarah a son, and Abraham’s family has a future |
| A. Conclusion via genealogy |

Chiasmus is one way the redactors of Genesis arranged the material; further study shows how each element repeats with variations the stories before it.

The story of Isaac recapitulates a wife’s barrenness despite God’s promise that his “seed” will multiply; Isaac claims out of fear, like his father did, that his wife is his sister. The story of their sons Esau and Jacob also recapitulates the drama of humanity’s first family in the account of two sons struggling for primacy and blessing, though less bloodily than Cain and Abel.

Jacob, whose story we then follow, is the surprising heir in a society arranged around primogeniture. Like his father Isaac, Jacob woos and gains his wife in a pastoral-nomadic context, with added complications. In his marriage with two sisters, the younger beloved and the elder merely accepted, Jacob recapitulates the sibling rivalry theme. Once again,
the beloved wife is barren in contrast with her less valued co-wife and concubines. As with Abraham, God establishes his relationship with Jacob in a series of dramatic covenants promising to bless him and his progeny.

In the final act of the patriarchal account, and echoing and reflecting the story of Cain and Abel, oldest sons do not fare well. Abraham’s Ishmael gives way to Isaac, Isaac’s Esau gives way to Jacob, and all ten of Jacob’s older sons eventually bow to their younger brother Joseph, providentially overcoming their fratricidal impulses. The conclusion of Genesis offers an image of fraternal order and harmony, establishing the order and identities of the Israelite peoples to come. These elements also foreshadow the dramas of exile and enslavement that will continue to define the children of Israel.

The patriarchal section of Genesis contrasts with the primeval section in its individualized characterization and idiosyncratic speech. Esau seems a rough and rather crude character when in Gen. 25:29 he demands Jacob give him the savory “red stuff” he’s cooked, referring to himself with a verb that describes, in all other cases, animals’ feeding (Alter 131 n. 30). Sarah’s ambivalent and tension-filled relationship with her slave-girl Hagar, and Hagar’s own desperate flight into the wilderness with her son Ishmael rather than continuing to endure her abusive situation, are told simply yet powerfully. The youthful Joseph’s naïve boasting to his brothers of his dream of power contrasts with his mature and politically savvy actions when those same brothers beg him for famine relief. And throughout the patriarchal account the setting of desert, grasslands, herds and tents evokes the nomadic origins of the people of Israel before they turned to town life with all its temptations.

Though Genesis is undoubtedly the product of a patriarchal society, women are important. Often, they work around obstacles set by God or by nature with ingenuity and craft: Eve decides to try the fruit when she learns of its marvelous gift of wisdom. Sarah decides that if Abraham is going to have a child, he’d better have it with a surrogate, adding another complicating factor in their lives together. Rebekah connives for her favorite son Jacob to receive his father’s blessing. Sisters and wives, Leah and Rachel compete for Jacob’s attention by trying to have the most sons, physical and surrogate; they also bargain with each other for conjugal rights. Women whose conjugal rights are withheld resort to desperate measures, as Tamar does in Genesis 38. In all these episodes, women’s concerns and priorities foreground their central role as matriarchs in a culture that values women primarily for their procreative ability. Often, their speech and action drives a crucial plot turn: their actions have consequences for history and Israel’s heritage. When Rebekah helps her younger son foil both his father and his brother into
giving him the rights and privileges of the eldest son, she determines the ancestral line of God’s chosen people. Still, there are also disturbing episodes reminding readers of women’s disposability, as when Lot offers his virgin daughters to be raped by a violent mob rather than relinquishing his esteemed guests.

Yet though many of the stories in the Torah are familiar, it is easy to overlook their strangeness. Why would God bless a sly operator like Jacob? Some commentators compare him to a folkloric trickster figure, one who transgresses social and other boundaries. His success emerges from his cleverness and persistence, and also from his ability to seize the advantage. Jacob’s wrestling with God after his dream of the ladder to heaven suggests an intimate, personal, physical relationship, more evenly matched than one might expect. More startling still is God’s demand that Abraham sacrifice Isaac. The story’s pacing—Abraham’s deliberate preparations, Isaac’s innocent questions, Abraham’s construction of the altar, his binding of his son, and the preparation of the knife—allow readers to experience the horror and incredulity Abraham must have felt at this incomprehensible demand from his God.

**Exodus**

Exodus’s narrative picks up where Genesis left off, with the children of Israel in Egypt. But times have changed, and from being privileged residents of Egypt, they are now slaves; their increasing numbers threaten the balance between ethnicities to the point that Pharaoh decrees that every Hebrew male child should be slain. From this situation of oppression and exile, God acts through one of the most dynamic and interesting characters in the Bible: Moses. The story of Exodus, and of the Torah, is the story of Moses. His life, his actions, his unique relationship with God, and his legislative legacy form the rest of the Torah, which ends with an account of his death before Israel finally enters the Promised Land of Canaan.

Moses’s wondrous story begins with his birth and rescue from death at the decree of Pharaoh. Moses’s floating nursery on the Nile, where he attracts the attention of an Egyptian princess, his adoption and upbringing in the Egyptian court, his increasing awareness of the Hebrews’ plight, and his call to act on their behalf follow a hero-tale pattern widely current in the ancient Near East (Raglan).

Multiple plot and diction elements in Exodus allude to the stories in Genesis. From being a single family, the children of Israel have become a nation—so prolific that they appear threatening to their host country. The infant Moses’s story echoes Noah’s as he is placed
in an “ark”; his survival furthers God’s promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to secure for them and their descendants a unique relationship to himself and a habitation. Central rituals of religious and national identity, such as the Passover, are put in a narrative and ritual context that affirms the mythic power of this story of deliverance. The institution of the Ten Commandments in Chapter 20, another defining moment, further codifies the unique relationship between YHWH and the people of Israel. It is universally acknowledged that there are ten laws or commandments, but curiously, the Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant traditions do not divide the commandments in exactly the same way, and some believe that the wordier commandments are probably explanations of what was originally a simpler imperative (see Alter 428). (As you read, try to decide for yourself what the division or numbering should be.)

As you read Exodus, attend to the contrasts in setting between Egypt, the wilderness, and the Promised Land. Robert Alter, among others, notes the significance of these settings for establishing the conflicts of each stage of Israel’s journey. Egypt is a place of fertility and plenty, but also of enslavement. Its dominant element is water, a fitting gesture to the centrality of the Nile in Egyptian life, and also a vulnerable point, as God works through Moses to compromise the water. The desert wilderness is a liminal place, where God manifests in a miraculously burning bush or a pillar of fire. But it is not a place to live: it is too inhospitable. In the wilderness, the people of Israel are tested, they fail, they are miraculously rescued, and then the cycle begins again. They long for the comforts of slavery, to feed their bodies at the expense of their autonomy. They forget the price of freedom and the cost of being chosen. The desert provides a vantage point uncluttered by distractions; as some nineteenth-century scholars put it, “the supposed clarity and purity of the desert in which there were no shades of grey, [is] where God’s moral being and ethical demands could be more readily apprehended than elsewhere” (Rogerson 4). Israel’s reward for this time of testing and trial is the Promised Land, flowing with milk and honey, but this land is inaccessible, deferred forty years (a formulaic and symbolic number) until the adult generation who left Egypt has passed and a new generation, defined by the desert, is allowed to proceed.

In Exodus, God’s relationship with his chosen people becomes more distant than in Genesis. Rather than meeting people face-to-face and taking on a human form, God manifests as fire. Like the bush that burns without being consumed, Moses is consumed by God’s spirit even as he struggles to convey that power to Pharaoh and even his fellow Hebrews. And when, in Exodus 33:18-23, Moses asks the power he has so long served for the favor of looking at his face, God refuses because it would kill him. No man, says God, can bear his full presence. As God appears to retreat from his creation, Exodus outlines
structures to focus and contain divine presence, as in the lovingly detailed account of the tabernacle’s structure, with its layers of boundaries defining holy spaces, and God’s commandments to Israel to separate itself from surrounding peoples and religions.

**Leviticus**

“You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean; and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the Lord has spoken to them through Moses” (Lev. 10:10-11).

Though it may be said to form the apex of the Torah as the central text of the five books, Leviticus is a challenging book to read, in part because it primarily recounts a system of law and cultural practice rather than telling a story. Since the 2nd century BCE, this book has attracted much exegetical attention as students of the Torah interpreted for new contexts the dictates addressed to people living under very different historical and cultural circumstances. Based on close textual analysis, scholars believe that Leviticus was compiled under the auspices of the Priestly redactors of the Torah following the fall of Judea in 586 BCE (Alter 540). Leviticus, as its name implies, is particularly interested in the role priests play in presiding over the cult, especially those associated with the priestly tribe of Levi and particularly Aaron, bother of Moses. In Jewish tradition, the book is called “The Priests’ Instruction” or, more commonly, wayyiqra (“and he [the Lord] summoned). The attention given to the cult, writes Alter, recalls and enshrines the Temple/Tabernacle as “a fact of the imagination and a blueprint for future restoration” (Alter 540).

How do we understand the many proscriptions of Leviticus? Some make sense, such as isolating those with contagious skin diseases such as leprosy. Others may seem less important, such as the prohibition against eating shellfish or weaving two kinds of thread together. Maimonides, the great medieval rabbinic scholar, was one of the first to posit that the reason for the famous dietary restriction against pork was hygienic, and many others have followed his lead, attempting to rationalize the practices encoded here as practical and as contributing to physical survival (Douglas ch. 3).

In her groundbreaking structural analysis of Leviticus, anthropologist Mary Douglas challenged this instrumentalist notion. Douglas showed that the Leviticus code’s careful distinctions between clean and unclean foods, clothing, bodies, and practices express a systematic world view. Biblical scholars such as Robert Alter and others agree with
Douglas that the regulations of Leviticus seek to establish order against chaos by segregating anything fluid, excremental, and liminal, much as God speaks the world into being in Genesis chapter one. Leviticus defines perfection as a physical whole, without blemish or defect. Leviticus defines perversion as mixing or confusion, anything that threatens normative order (Douglas 50-53). This taboo against confusing or mixing categories helps to account for Leviticus’ regulations concerning women and men with physical discharges or skin diseases (confusion of physical boundaries), prohibiting the combination of linen and wool threads (mixing separate categories) or men laying with men (confusion of categories). All these laws order and make harmonious the people of Israel as sacred (literally, set apart).

In addition to establishing a system for identifying and maintaining purity, Leviticus recapitulates the priestly elements of Genesis—creating order out of disorder, dividing what is valuable from what is chaotic and incoherent. Just as God created the world, the laws established by Leviticus create the conditions for practitioners to create an identity separate from their polytheistic context; rather than God participating in all of creation, these barriers “impl[y] an ontological division or chasm between the Creator and the created world” (Alter 542).

Leviticus articulates its ritual with four substances: fire, blood, oil, and water. These elements recur throughout the Bible, so it is worth thinking about their symbolic force. Fire, as we saw in Exodus, is associated with the deity and purification, with untouchable power. Because blood is the “very life” of an animal, it is particularly sacred and in ritual it is purgative. Oil, a man-made substance, is associated with daily life and has both social and political applications; thus, it is used for grooming and for assigning identity. Kings and priests are anointed with oil to denote their new status. Finally, water is, like fire and blood, a purifying agent. (Alter 544) These four substances form the basic materials of cultic practice for their potent symbolic significance, connecting the cult with the two orders of being (divine and creaturely) and two domains (agriculture and nature).

Though Mary Douglas’ work explained the underlying coherence of Leviticus’ codes, many students of the ancient Hebrew text see evidence of two traditions being spliced together: the Priestly tradition, which emphasizes the holiness of Israel’s hereditary priesthood; and the Holiness tradition, which extends the pursuit of holiness to the entire people of Israel. This latter aligns more closely with the preoccupations and priorities of Deuteronomy (Stackert 141).
**Numbers**

The book of Numbers takes its name from the Census with which the book begins; in Jewish traditions, it is called “the Fifth of the Census,” or “Bemidbar,” “in the wilderness,” the word with which the book begins. It is a “wilderness” book, with further accounts of the long journey from Egypt to Palestine, and of the deeds and misdeeds of the people. Numbers incorporates many diverse genres: lists, precepts, blessings, histories, poetry, folktales, geography, and itineraries. Thus, many find it the most miscellaneous book of the Torah. Modern Bible scholars believe that Numbers incorporates some of the most ancient elements of scriptural traditions, such as the story of Balaam and many intriguing fragments of poetry. The fact that statutes are articulated in response to particular situations suggests that the law evolves according to the demands of life (Fretheim 185).

Chapters 1-10 may be read as a continuation of Leviticus, with a similarly Priestly orientation; chapters 11-36 return us to narrative as we focus on the Israelites’ often-frustrated journey toward the Promised Land. Within the narrative portion, themes introduced in Exodus are extended: God’s promises to Israel that it has an important historical destiny; that this destiny will be fulfilled through their many numbers and their martial prowess; and that this call demands scrupulous adherence to the Law with severe consequences for transgressing it.

The story of Balaam and his ass is one of the most memorable in Numbers, and is thought to be significantly older than surrounding text. Outside of the serpent in the Garden of Eden, this is the only talking animal story in the Bible, and the satiric point that the renowned diviner is not as perceptive as his ass is as humorous today as it was when the story was first told. Robert Alter suggests that this episode and the mysterious and difficult poetic fragments found in chapters 21, 23, and 24 may have been used to provide an “antiquity effect” to the text.

**Deuteronomy**

Deuteronomy is Greek for “second law”; in Hebrew, the book is called Debarim, “words.” Deuteronomy restates the legal and cultural codes of Israel found in Exodus and Leviticus, such as the Decalogue, Passover practices, and many other important principles of Israel’s set-apartness as a people. As the conclusion of the Torah, Deuteronomy summarizes the story of the people of Israel and gestures to the future. Most students of Deuteronomy recognize the book’s rhetorical weight and complexity. According to biblical scholar Bernard Levinson, Deuteronomy addresses the “problem of the historical
distance between past and present, between tradition and the needs of the contemporary generation, between revelation and interpretation” (247). In this sense Deuteronomy is remarkably “modern” to Levinson.

In the voice of Moses, Deuteronomy recounts the wilderness years, foreshadows the conquest of Canaan, and offers dire warnings about the consequences should Israel become unfaithful to its God. Even though textual evidence supports the consensus opinion that Deuteronomy is more closely related to the subsequent books (Joshua, Judges, Kings) than it is to the other four books of the Pentateuch, the third century BCE compilers decided to use it as the final word of the central teachings (Torah) of the central text of Judaism. The Torah could have ended triumphantly, with the conquest of the Promised Land, but instead it describes the death of Moses and his final words to the people. From the vantage point of history, the Deuteronomist redactors concluded that the most important theological messages were the call to fear the Lord’s wrath (Deut. 32) and to trust the Lord’s blessing through the words of his prophet, Moses (Deut. 33).

Scholars date the writing of Deuteronomy to the seventh century BCE, relating it to the religious and legal reforms of King Josiah of Judah (2 Kings 22-23); there are strong parallels between Deuteronomy’s orientation and Josiah’s record. Josiah restricted sacrificial worship to Jerusalem and scoured foreign elements from worship, insisting that Passover be celebrated at Jerusalem rather than regionally and domestically, as it had been earlier (2 Kings 22:8). These revisions of the law align with Josiah’s goal to purify religious practice, to atone for the nation’s “falling away” from YHWH, and to forestall future divine chastisement. Students of the ancient Near East have noticed that aspects of Deuteronomy’s content and style are remarkably similar to Assyrian treaties with vassal states (Assyria was the dominant empire during the reign of Josiah). Deuteronomy challenges readers to attend to interpretative problems: it offers reinterpretations of earlier narratives, and it includes competing positions on important religious matters, such as whether the Decalogue (Ten Commandments) was given directly to the people or indirectly through Moses (Deut. 5:4-5) or whether God is the head of a pantheon or is the only God (Deut. 4:7-8 and Dt. 4:34-35, 39). As James Kugel notes, early rabbinic scholars were sensitive to inconsistencies: “why should the laws that God gives to two different prophets contradict each other, saying to one that the Passover sacrifice must be a sheep or a goat (Exod. 12:5) and that it cannot be boiled (Exod. 12:8), while saying to another that the Passover sacrifice can also be a cow or a steer (Deut. 16:2) and is indeed to be boiled (Deut. 16.7)?” (Kugel 299). By including these incompatible positions without further comment, Deuteronomy requires readers to become interpreters themselves (Levinson 249).
Questions for Further Exploration and Discussion

1. As you read, compare and contrast the stories of brothers in conflict: Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. What are the most important similarities that you see across these stories? What are the key differences?

2. Select a pair of parallel stories in Genesis. For example, the stories of creation in Genesis 1 and 2, the stories about Hagar (chs. 16 and 21), the covenant with Abraham (chs. 15 and 17), or Abraham and Sarah (12:10-20 and 20:1-18), and so on. Compare and contrast the two parallel stories and note the distinct perspectives and emphases of each. What are the most important similarities that you see across these two stories? What are the key differences?

3. How would you describe the role of women in these first five books of the Bible? What is the significance of the shift from humans as “male and female” created at the same time to Adam and Eve, created for Adam?

4. Examine the theme of “generations” and the command to be fruitful and multiply. What are the rights and responsibilities associated with sexuality? In a context where procreation is all-important, what is the role of barrenness or the role of fertility work-arounds? Compare the actions of Lot’s daughters, Tamar, Sarai, Rachel, and/or Rebecca.

5. What kinds of power do women in Genesis use or deploy? What kinds of power do they not have? Society and power in the ancient Near East were organized in terms of patriarchal tribal structure based on primogeniture. Where in Genesis do you see those structures of power disrupted or altered? Where are they reinforced?

6. Describe Joseph as a character. What seems distinctive and interesting about him? What do you make of the fact that he weeps several times? What is the significance of the tunic (or coat or robe) that he wears in chapter 37?

7. What themes, or story patterns, or ideas connect Joseph to early sections of Genesis? What new themes or ideas or plot elements are introduced?

8. Is Moses a “hero”? Compare him to Aristotle’s definition of a tragic hero or to Lord Raglan’s 22-point pattern of the hero archetype or to your own experience of
“superheroes” in comic books or movies. According to these conceptions of a hero, would he be considered a “hero”? Why or why not?

9. What might it mean to start the story of Exodus in Egypt? Why is the story of oppression in Egypt important to a book devoted to law? What connections does this story make between oppression and the law?

10. The Book of Leviticus lays down some legal tenets about separateness and some others about the duties of hospitality and charity? Compare these two kinds of laws. How are they different? Do they ever contradict one another? In what ways do they overlap or harmonize? Which kind of law seems to take priority?

11. In the Book of Leviticus, what is clean and what is unclean? Why does it matter?

12. Reread Numbers 22. What is the narrative or thematic function of the story about Balaam and his donkey? It seems to interrupt – in a really interesting way – the main story about the Israelites’ journey to the promised land. So, then, why is it here? What is it about?

13. Numbers has two primary themes: the census and the wilderness. Do you see any connection here between these two themes? If so, what might it be?

14. How does Moses compare and contrast the past and the present in his opening speech in the Book of Deuteronomy? What is different, and what is to be the same? How do the past and the present situations provide guidance and expectations for the future?

15. How does Deuteronomy seem different from the other books of the Torah? In what ways is it simply a repetition or a revision of previous material in the Torah?

16. The Torah seems to portray both a highly personified, immanent God as well as a distinctly impersonal, transcendent God. Describe God and his seemingly changing characterization in the Torah? From a literary perspective, how would you describe God as a character or as the protagonist of Genesis? What passages in the Torah denote various or differing understandings of God and humans’ relationship to God?

Works Cited and Further Reading


