

Handbook  
on the  
Pentateuch

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# 1 | *Introduction to the Pentateuch*

The Pentateuch consists of the Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Revered by the Jews as the Torah, the Pentateuch also has a celebrated place in the hearts of many Christians. The creation story in Genesis appeals to the believer as proof of God's control over the universe and history. Christians identify with the journeys of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their pursuit of the home God promised them. The miraculous exodus from Egypt has not only touched the hearts of those who have faced the bondage of sin, but also those whose heritage records the Lord gloriously breaking the chains of slavery and emancipating their ancestors.

While Christians revere Moses' parting of the waters through divine intervention, many wish to stay on the banks of the Red Sea rejoicing with Moses and Miriam rather than making the trek to Sinai. God gave the Law to Moses at Mount Sinai, but many Christians dismiss this grand revelation as unimportant in the larger scheme of God's design for humanity. Although respectful of the Ten Commandments, some have a negative view of the Law as a whole, deeming it a set of rules for a long gone era. Others see the Law as

the necessary precursor to Christ, serving as a placeholder until Jesus came to abolish it. Still, others reject it altogether, claiming that the harsh and judgmental God of the Old Testament cannot be the same loving Lord who manifest Himself in flesh and came to earth to save humanity.

All of these interpretations reveal a serious lack of appreciation and understanding of the Pentateuch. Although many people criticize the actions of God in the Old Testament, the narrative the Lord was weaving shows He clearly had a plan for His people, and the laws He gave challenged them to go beyond simply following a list of dos and don'ts. In fact, these laws had ethical implications. God wanted His people to love other Israelites as well as strangers, widows, and orphans. God wanted to create equality by eliminating corrupt systems that allowed elites to escape judgment for their crimes.

Israel means “one who wrestles with God,” and the Lord wanted His people to wrestle with ethical issues such as human sacrifice and loving others who were not a part of the family of Israel. God constantly called His people to something greater. The narratives, laws, and ethical sayings of Scripture compelled the Israelites to surpass the barbarism of the nations that surrounded them. While the family of Israel failed in many instances, the divine impetus to rise above their humanity and commune with God never disappeared. The Lord consistently worked to keep covenant with His people even as they turned to worshiping other gods while Moses received the Law on Sinai. Moses broke the tablets of the Law in frustration, but God never broke the covenant with His people. Therefore Christians can glean valuable lessons from the Pentateuch.

This book dares readers to avoid dismissing the Five Books of Moses as unimportant or obsolete, and engage in careful exploration of the history, narratives, legal codes, and

ethical systems found in the Pentateuch. The historical periods consist of the following:

Primordial Age (Pre-History)

The Time of the Patriarchs

The Exodus

The Wilderness Wanderings

Key narratives frame the early history of the Bible, with stories that reveal Israel's shaky place in the world as the fledgling family struggled to survive external threats and internal strife. The giving of the Law attempted to bring some order to the motley group of slaves that left Egypt. God founded the Law on a powerful narrative and a very real call. The call to "Remember" the time of slavery in Egypt formed the basis of Israel's laws and revealed ethical factors that went far beyond following a set of rules. Today God calls on believers not to cast the Pentateuch aside, but to wrestle with the Law just as Jacob wrestled with Him. Those who embark on this quest will have the opportunity to be true members of the house of Israel.

## **TANAK**

Most Jews focus on the Torah in their study of Scripture. The Jewish Bible is known as TaNaK (Tanakh) and consists of the Torah, the Nevi'im (the Prophets), and the Ketuvim (the Writings). The Nevi'im<sup>1</sup> features the Former Prophets, the Latter Prophets, and the Book of the Twelve. Christians place the Former Prophets (Joshua–Judges and I Samuel–II Kings) among the Historical Books. The moniker "Prophets," however, is not without merit since Joshua, Deborah, Samuel, Nathan, and other prophets both named and unnamed appear in these texts. The following chart compares the nomenclature and organization of these books in Judaism and Christianity:

Figure 1. The Prophets and the Writings

<b>Judaism</b>	<b>Christianity</b>
Former Prophets (Joshua–Judges; I Samuel–II Kings)	Historical Books (Add Ruth and I Chronicles–Esther)
Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel)	Major Prophets (Add Lamentations and Daniel)
Book of the Twelve	Minor Prophets

Some of the texts designated as Historical Books in Christianity are part of the Writings in Judaism. The Writings include poetic books and narratives such as Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, and I and II Chronicles. In contrast to the Christian ordering of the books, Judaism places Ruth, Lamentations, and Daniel among the Writings.

The Torah holds the preeminent place in Judaism. Throughout the ages and even in modern times, rabbis derive many interpretations and write commentaries based on its pages. Many rabbis discourage potential converts from joining the Jewish faith because of the necessity of keeping the 613 laws found in the Torah. The three main branches of Judaism—Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform—respond differently to the Torah. The Orthodox take a literal approach in obeying the Law of Moses. Conservative Jews attempt to balance the keeping of the Torah with modern living. Many Reform Jews have abandoned some of the laws, such as keeping kosher, in order to focus on the ethical aspects of the Torah.

The Torah is the heart of Judaism. Many other books in Tanakh gain greater significance because of their connection to the Pentateuch. In particular, three books in the Writings, the third section of Tanakh, have grown in importance because of their links to Jewish holidays. Song of Solomon is associated with Passover, Ruth with Pentecost and the giving of the Law, and Ecclesiastes with Sukkot (Booths/Tabernacles).

**KOSHER COCA-COLA**

*For a product to be deemed kosher and fit for consumption by Jews who observe dietary laws, a rabbinical organization must examine the food and approve it. Rabbi Tuvia Geffen wanted Coca-Cola to be kosher for Passover because many Jews did not wish to give up drinking it for the holiday. Coca-Cola agreed not to use corn syrup since the presence of the grain would make it unsuitable for Passover. The company used cane sugar and removed a minor ingredient so that the rabbi could certify the soft drink to be kosher. Rabbi Geffen was one of the few people to learn the secret formula for one of the world's most popular drinks.<sup>2</sup>*

In addition to these holidays, the historical periods of the Torah have shaped Judaism. The divine ordering of creation in the face of chaos reflects the Jewish desire for order even in the midst of turbulent times. Such order can be found in the yearly reading of the Torah and other Jewish rituals. The Time of the Patriarchs highlights the many difficulties that Jews have encountered in negotiating boundaries and other interactions with Gentiles. Each new generation of Jewish children remembers the Exodus at Passover, eating bitter herbs and tasting the tears of their ancestors even while they learn of the miracle at the Red Sea.

The Wilderness Wanderings often describe the “kvetching” of the Jews as they complain incessantly. Kvetch is a Yiddish word for this endless complaint. On the positive side, kvetching can turn into a form of lament where the people pour out their complaint to the Lord. On the negative side, Israel’s tendency to kvetch led God to prohibit an entire group of Jews from entering the Promised Land. The Torah ends with a new generation of Jews poised to claim the blessings that their parents could not.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, human frailty and failure in the midst of God’s faithfulness serves as one of the primary themes of the Torah. Throughout the five books, God thwarts humanity’s lofty goals because of sin and

pride while the family of Israel consistently misses moments to achieve greatness because of faithlessness and disobedience.

## **THE PRIMORDIAL AGE**

This disobedience takes center stage in the Primordial Age that covers Genesis 1–11. The Primordial Age contains the highs and lows of humanity, from the time in the Garden of Eden to the casting out of paradise; from the command to be fruitful and multiply to the near total extinction of all life in the Flood; from the baseness of humankind in the first murder to the lofty goal of the species to reach the heavens by building the Tower of Babel.

Throughout the Primordial Age, symbols of God’s love abound even in the midst of judgment. The Lord sacrificed animals to clothe the wayward Adam and Eve. The murderous Cain received a mark that ensured his survival. A merciful God set His rainbow in the sky as an emblem of peace. The chaos and confusion of languages experienced by the ambitious builders of the Tower of Babel foreshadows speaking in tongues and the peace and clarity that only the Holy Spirit can give.

## **THE AGE OF THE PATRIARCHS**

### ***ABRAHAM AND SARAH***

Hints of the promise of the Holy Spirit appear in God’s commands and pledges to Abram<sup>4</sup> in Genesis 12:1–3:

Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.