

THE PENTATEUCH

INTRODUCTION

The first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), commonly called “the law” or “the Pentateuch” (Greek *pentateuchos*, “five volume [book]”), are the first and most important section of the Old Testament in both Jewish and Christian Bibles. The threefold division of the Hebrew Bible into Law, Prophets, and Writings can be traced as far back as the New Testament (Luke 24:44). The arrangement of the Old Testament in Christian Bibles, based on the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint; c. 150 B.C.), also gives the Pentateuch such primacy.

AUTHORSHIP

Though widely challenged by critical scholars beginning in the 17th century, Jewish and Christian tradition point to Moses as the author of the Pentateuch. Support for Mosaic authorship is clear from Scripture. References to the Pentateuch by such terms as “the Book of Moses” (Neh 13:1; II Chr 25:4), and “the Book of the Law of Moses” (Neh 8:1) reflect Old Testament attestation of Mosaic authorship. The New Testament also refers to the Pentateuch as “the Law of Moses” (John 7:23), and uses similar designations as those found in the Old Testament (Matt 12:5; Mark 12:26; Luke 16:16; 24:27 John 7:19; Gal 3:10). These various headings underscore Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and its binding authority. Further evidence includes specific references to Moses’ writing activity (Ex 17:4; 24:4; 34:27; Nu 33:2; Deut 31:22, 24-26), and the “eyewitness” perspective found in the book of Exodus.

Even with such strong support, Mosaic authorship is not without problems. The difficulties center on texts that would be either awkward or even impossible for Moses to write. Numbers 12:3 is an example of an “a-Mosaica” text: *Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth.* It seems unlikely that the most humble man on the earth would write something like this concerning himself! The other difficulty involves “post-Mosaica” texts such as Deuteronomy 34:5: *So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD.* How could Moses have written the account of his own death?

The solution to these difficulties becomes clearer when one understands what is meant by the “essential authorship” of Moses. When scholars refer to Moses as the author of the Pentateuch they do not mean that he wrote *every* word, but that he was the fundamental or essential author. The expression “essential authorship” vigorously affirms Moses as the author of the Pentateuch, while acknowledging later canonical additions.

There is sufficient evidence to indicate editorial activity in the Pentateuch designed to clarify Scripture for later generations. Geographic locations may have been updated to assist later readers in identifying them (Gen 14:14). The language itself may also have been updated (Gen 11:31; 36:31-43). With this understanding, it is not difficult to assume that passages like Numbers 12:3 and Deuteronomy 34:5 were written and added later. It is possible that the death of Moses was provided by Joshua (Josh 24:26).

DATE

If one assumes Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, it is reasonable to conclude that the overwhelming majority of the material dates from the fifteenth century, between Moses' birth (c. 1526 B.C.) and his death (c. 1406 B.C.).

GENRE

The Pentateuch is primarily a combination of narrative history and law. These primary genres are not unrelated: the narrative history *explains* the laws, or put another way, the Pentateuch is a story with a teaching function (The Hebrew word "Torah" is derived from the verb meaning, "to teach."). For example, the law about circumcision is given and explained by the narrative about God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah (Gen 17:9-14). Any attempt to understand the law apart from its historical and narrative context would be futile and dangerous.

LITERARY UNITY

The Pentateuch is both a composite document of individual books and also a seamless narrative of a complete story from creation to the death of Moses. Each of the five books holds its own interest and unity. At the same time, the five books of the Pentateuch are linked together as a continuous narrative. Exodus continues the story begun in Genesis of the Israelites who had gone to Egypt (Gen 46:26, 27; Ex 1:1). Moses fulfills Joseph's deathbed oath to carry up his bones out of Egypt (Gen 50:25; Ex 13:19). Leviticus 1-9 explains the rituals of the tabernacle, as a kind of supplement to the instructions for building it found in Ex 25-40. Leviticus also shows how the service for ordaining priests, outlined in Exodus 29, was carried out. Numbers shares many connections with Exodus and Leviticus; large portions of all three books take place in the wilderness of Sinai and share similar ceremonial regulations and concerns. In his first address in Deuteronomy, Moses summarizes Israel's history from Sinai to Moab as recorded in Numbers. In his second address he makes frequent allusions to Exodus, repeating with slight modification the Ten Commandments and Israel's response to them (Ex 20 and Deut 5).

PURPOSE

The purpose of the Pentateuch is to teach the people that Israel's God, who is both Creator and Redeemer, will fulfill His promises to His people by establishing His rule (kingdom) through the covenant in the land He has promised them.

THEMES

Primary themes in the Pentateuch include God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, His deliverance of their descendants from Egypt, and their obligation to keep the laws of God given to them in the Sinai wilderness.

(Portions of this information were drawn directly from the "Introduction to the Pentateuch" found in *The Reformation Study Bible*.)