

Introduction to the Pentateuch

The Old Testament begins with the *Torah* or *Pentateuch*, which has five books:

- The *Book of Genesis* purports to cover all human history from creation to the death of Joseph (the one with the dreamcoat) in Egypt. It then turns its attention to the story of Abraham and the other Patriarchs, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph.
- The name *Exodus* comes from the Greek language and means a going out, a marching out or a solemn procession. All three meanings can be discerned in the rescue by God of some Hebrew slaves from Egypt.
- *Leviticus* is a Latin word, which comes from the name of one of the sons of Jacob, Levi. He was the ancestor of all priests and their attendants (Levites) who served leading roles in the people's worship of God. It is a law book, bringing together laws governing sacrifices of all kinds.
- *Numbers* adds more laws and continues the story of what is happening in the desert. Twice in this book, a census or numbering of the people is taken. Hence the name.
- In *Deuteronomy*, there are three great sermons of Moses encouraging the people to remain faithful to their God and to the way of life to which they have been called. There are further lists of laws, concerning justice, the care of the poor and strangers. There are laws concerning proper sexual relations and divorce. Joshua is commissioned to lead the people into the Promised Land.

Genesis

The Old Testament begins with this book of beginnings with stories about creation and early relationships between God and his people.

A favourite quote

The book of Genesis narrates to us how God created the world and humanity. And when he had finished, “God saw all he had made, and indeed it was very good” (Gen 1:1-2:3).

The book of Genesis

Genesis is the first book of the Bible; it begins at the beginning of time. The first 11 chapters tell the stories of the origins of the world. From chapter 12 onwards, most scholars would put the timing of the book some time around 1800 BCE (during the Middle Bronze Age). It tells stories about *beginnings*: the beginning of the world, stories about how things developed.

Most important, the book of Genesis is a story about the relationship between God and humanity. This is conveyed through stories; for example, we hear about how God created Adam and Eve and how things went wrong due to their disobedience (Genesis 3:1-13). We hear the familiar story of Flood and how Noah and his three sons were saved and how God made a covenant with Noah (Genesis 9:12ff). The Flood is not simply a story of destruction and judgment. It describes the friendship of a loving God who makes a covenant with Noah never again to destroy the earth with water (Genesis 9:8-11) and he gives the rainbow as its sign of that covenant. He narrates how the world came to be populated by giving a long list of the descendants of Noah. However, sin remained a stark reality and led the humans to another sin of arrogance: trying to reach God by building the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-11:32). God’s punitive action explains the multitude of languages there are now on the face of the earth.

The book continues with the story of God’s relationship with Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. In this story, God tells Abraham, who was a nomad and had no land of his own, to set out for a land that he will show him – the land we call the Promised Land (Genesis 12:1-6). God makes a promise to this man who is childless and old that he will have children and grandchildren as numerous as the stars in the sky or the grains of sand on the seashore (Genesis 13:15-17). Abraham himself through faith was made a partaker of this promise, the name of God became known and a believing people came into being – and, since then, he has been known as “the father of all believers” (Romans 4:1, 13).

Who wrote this book?

For a few thousand years, *Moses* was indisputably considered the one and only author of the whole Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible, from Genesis – Deuteronomy). Slowly, however, over a period of time, discrepancies within the Pentateuch were pointed out, making it increasingly difficult to continue supporting

Mosaic authorship and considering the Pentateuch as one book written by one and the same author.

Questions arising

Genesis throws up a number of complex questions about what history is and what kinds of texts we think Genesis contains. For example, there is the question of the historicity of the creation and flood accounts and whether the serpent really spoke. And, then, there is the account of God creating everything in six days and we might well ask how long each day was – what is a day for God?

Some will argue Genesis is a scientific account; others that – parts of it at least – are poetic, imaginative reflections; others still that it is an etiology (i.e., a story to explain the origins of things). If you are finding it difficult as to whether Genesis is a scientific account or a story to explain the origin of things, you might think about the fact that it is more important *that* it happened than *how* it happened – or, indeed how *long* it took to happen.

During the Church year, we hear readings from Genesis

At the highlight of the liturgical year, the Easter Vigil, we begin with two readings from Genesis, the first on the creation and the second on the beginning of Israel's sacrificial worship in Genesis 22. The first 11 chapters of Genesis, the pre-history, are read in the Lectionary for Mass on weekdays between Christmas and Lent.

How is it structured?

1-11	the Creation of the world and of the human race
1:1-6:4	the Creation and the Fall
6:5-9:17	the story of Noah and the flood
9:18-11:32	from the Flood to Abraham
12:1-25:18	the Story of Abraham and Sarah
25:19-37:1	the story of Isaac and Jacob
37:2-50:26	the story of Jacob's son, Joseph

God speaks to us

God speaks to us through the stories in the book of Genesis about his desire to be in relationship with humanity.

Exodus

The Book of Exodus narrates how Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and how he led them in building the Tabernacle with God's instructions.

A quote from Exodus

God said, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:2-3).

The Book of Exodus

The events narrated in Exodus and the following books are of crucial importance for Israel's Faith Memory. Indeed, it is essential that we understand this point. Without the event of the Exodus (however it actually happened) there could never have been a people called Israel. Until this moment, we were told the story of Abraham and his family, but soon their descendants will be formed into one nation and one people. The liberation from slavery in Egypt and the giving of the Covenant at Mount Sinai made these people into a coherent nation united in faith around its God, Yahweh, who will repeat again and again "You are my people and I am your God" (Exodus 6:7).

Everything else in the Old Testament, events, Promised Land, institutions, rituals and sacrifice, priesthood and feasts, can only be properly understood against the background of the Exodus. Through it, Israel came to understand that its God was, unlike other gods, someone interested in their history. The *other gods* of the neighbouring peoples were only *gods of nature*, to be invoked to obtain a good harvest and to have good fertility; but Israel's God, Yahweh, was also and above all a God of History, directly leading his people and intervening on their behalf. He liberated them from slavery, led them to Sinai and concluded a Covenant with them (Exodus 19-24). Basically, this was a transition from servitude to service, from imposed slavery to freely chosen service. This important event is celebrated every year in the Passover, not only as a past event, but as an ever-again recurrent present event.

What was Moses saying in this book?

The story begins with Moses describing the hardships of the people in Egypt (Exodus 1) followed by the narrative of Moses and his miraculous escape from death and his early life (Exodus 2:1-10). Moses then tells the story of the Burning Bush, when he is called by God who reveals himself as Yahweh (Exodus 3:1-6). The Pharaoh does not want to "let the people go", but through Ten Plagues (Exodus 7:8-12:34), God forces him finally to agree.

The second part of the Book of Exodus tells the stories of the Journey through the Desert and the Covenant at Sinai (including the Decalogue and the Book of the Covenant). This covenant is solemnly ratified in Chapter 24, which is followed in Chapters 25-31 by a long list of instructions on the building of the sanctuary and on its ministers. Chapters 32-34 narrate the apostasy of Israel (the Golden Calf) and the renewal of the covenant.

A major theme

One of the major themes in this book is how God freed his people from slavery; but the Exodus is not just a past event. Even today, the Jewish people recall and make contemporary the Exodus as they celebrate the Passover. The Jewish Passover is an event which accompanies Israel throughout its existence. When people celebrate it in worship, they participate in the experience and enter into it with deep meaning. God frees them from anything that enslaves them – be it selfishness and self-interest, suspicions, distrust, offenses, and hardships. This allows them to understand that the whole of life is seen as an exodus, a journey towards the Kingdom of God and it makes it possible for them to have hope.

During the Church year, we hear readings from Exodus

During Lent, we hear how God spoke to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-8a) saying that he could see that his people were suffering and he wanted Moses to bring his people out of Egypt (Exodus 3:10). Then after Easter, we hear how, the people have turned away from God when they were in the wilderness. Moses pleads with God appealing to the love he had already shown in bringing the people out of Egypt. Moses reminds God that he made a covenant with Abraham that his people would be great and would live in the land he gave them. Moses acts as mediator between his people and God, begging God not to be angry with the people – and God decides not to punish them (Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14).

How is it structured?

- 1:1-15:21 the liberation of God's people in slavery in Egypt
- 15:22-18:27 the journey from the Red Sea to Mount Sinai
- 19:1-24:18 the Covenant on Sinai
- 25:1-31:18 instructions for the building of the Tabernacle
- 32:1-34:35 the Golden Calf and Renewal of the Covenant
- 35:1-40:38 the people built the Tabernacle as commanded by God

The message of Exodus

God wants to free us from whatever enslaves us into the ways of faith and service. Exodus is a useful book for catechumens in their journey towards the Sacraments of Initiation in the RCIA.

Leviticus

In Leviticus, God tells the Israelites and their priests how to make offerings in the Tabernacle and how to conduct themselves while camped around the holy tent sanctuary.

A favourite quote

God said, “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19:18).

The Book of Leviticus

In Leviticus, God speaks to Moses about laws, the laws that govern how the worship of God should take place. Chapters 17-26 form what is often called the Holiness Code, a particular collection of laws that give guidance on how to be holy. God tells the Israelites and their priests how to make offerings in the Tabernacle and how to conduct themselves when they are camped around the holy tent sanctuary. Even today, Leviticus is a major source of Jewish law and it is the book that teaches people about Judaism as a way of life.

There were five types of sacrifices: burnt offering, grain offering, peace offering, purification offering, and reparation offering. You might assume that the sacrifices were made to wipe out sin; but this is not the case. Nor were they supposed to be viewed as legalistic rites one must perform to earn God’s grace. They were outward expressions of a person’s or community’s inward desire to restore the broken relationships between humanity and God and humanity and the world.

Most of the material in Leviticus consists of rules on proper behaviour in acts of divine worship. Leviticus also includes very detailed lists of religious taboos in the area of food and disease – many of which are still practiced by the Jews today. Everything from sexual conduct to the handling of food, to instructions for worship and religious celebrations, is covered in detail in the book of Leviticus.

Who wrote this book?

Like all the books of the Torah, the book of Leviticus is credited to Moses, one of the great legislators of his people. Moses tells us about the long and detailed instructions the Lord gave to him about Israel’s religious practices and sacrifices. The instructions say what the sacrifice was for and how it was done. It is interesting to note that provision is made in these laws for poor people. If they could not afford to bring an animal to sacrifice, they could bring a measure of flour instead (5:7-13). This concern for the poor continues throughout the book of Leviticus (see 19:9-10 and chapter 25).

How was the book written?

Leviticus is composed of two basic genres: Narrative History and Law. It was written by Moses about 1445-1444 B.C in the context of the worship of God in the temple of

Israel – the laws are designed to help people know how to worship God, both in the temple and in their daily lives. A major theme is *purity* and *impurity*. The idea behind those terms is that God is holy and pure but human beings became unclean. The book explains what made people unclean and how they could become clean again so that they could worship the God of holiness, including the kind of punishment they should be given for wrongdoings.

The Mosaic Law stated: “eye for eye . . .”

In Leviticus, we hear that “anyone who injures their neighbour is to be injured in the same manner: fracture for fracture, eye for eye. . .” (Leviticus 24:19-21). The “eye for an eye” rule has often been misinterpreted; it did not authorise or sanction vigilante justice. Rather, it helped appointed judges to impose punishments that were appropriate, being neither too harsh nor too lenient. When properly applied, it meant that qualified judges imposed retribution for an offence only after first considering the circumstances involved and the extent to which the offence was deliberate (Exodus 21:28-30; Numbers 35:22-25). The “eye for an eye” rule thus acted as a restraint against extremes in punishment.

During the Church year, we hear readings from Leviticus

The Book of Leviticus was intended less for public reading than for private and group study. As a result, we only hear it once on Sunday in February when we hear Moses telling God told him to gather the whole community and tell them that they “must be holy” because he is their God and he is holy. God said, “You must love your neighbour as you love yourself” (Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18). In the weekday lectionary, one passage appears in July when we hear about the solemn festivals to which the children of Israel should be summoned (Leviticus 23:1, 4-11, 15-16, 27, 34-37).

How is it structured?

1:1-7	the Ritual of Sacrifice
8-10	the Investiture of Priests
11-16	laws and rituals about purity and impurity
17-26	the Holiness Code – guidelines for holy living
27	Appendix

In the Book of Leviticus, God is saying

that all aspects of our lives – moral, physical, and spiritual – are important to him.

Numbers

Twice in this book, a census or numbering of the people is taken – hence, its name.

A well-known blessing

“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace”
(Numbers 6:24-26)

The Book of Numbers

In the Book of Numbers, we hear the story of the time God’s people spent in the wilderness. Although the first and last chapters contain a census of the people, the rest of the book describes what happened to those who had left Egypt with Moses.

The people had been freed from slavery and oppression in Egypt; but they found themselves in an inhospitable wilderness and saved from starvation only by special divine intervention. The people complained to Moses, saying that they wished God had killed them in Egypt, where at least they had meat and other food to eat. God heard their complaints and told them that in the morning they would have their fill of bread so that they would know that he was the Lord their God. And, as promised, God provided quails and manna for them to eat in the desert (Exodus 16:11-16).

God also provided them with the Tabernacle to assure them of his presence. However, there followed a tale of consistent disobedience and rebellion against him and his servant Moses, and it culminated in Yahweh’s decision to exclude the exodus generation from taking possession of the promised land of Canaan (Numbers 14:19-23). The freedom that was given to them and the defeat of the Egyptian army at the sea had been misused.

Who wrote this book?

The book of Numbers in the Bible is the fourth book in the Old Testament. Again, allegedly, the author is Moses because it contains his story with the Israelites when they wandered throughout the wilderness before ending up at Israel (also known as Canaan or Palestine), where God promised they would settle. In truth, it was probably compiled much later.

How was the book written?

This book is a theological history – a history that is told with an eye to communicating what we believe about God. The key theme is the preparation of God’s people for living in the Promised Land – is the gradual fulfilment of the promises to Abraham that his descendants would be the people of God and would occupy the land of Canaan.

This book contains a mixture of legal material and historical narratives. The latter narrate the Sojourn through the Desert and the people’s preparation of entry into the Promised Land.

During the Church year, we hear readings from Numbers

The Book of Numbers is hardly used at all in the liturgy. It does make a fleeting appearance each year on January 1st, the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God (Years A, B and C), when we hear the well-known blessing of the Jewish people. The meaning of the blessing comes from the last line: “When they bless . . . *in my name*, I will bless them” (Numbers 6:22-27). In other words, when we bless in God’s name, it is actually God who is blessing. To say “in God’s name” is to say in or with all that God is and all that God does. To bless in his name is to make God totally present.

How is it structured?

- 1:1-10:10 the camp at Sinai, where a census is taken and the duties of the priests and Levites assigned
- 10:11-22:1 travelling to Moab during which people “murmured” against God and God decided that none of that generation would reach the Promised Land
- 22:2-36:13 the camp on the plains of Moab, where there is a new census because of the new generation of Israelites but new threats (like the Midianites) are recognised. This section ends with preparations for entering the Promised Land.

In this book,

And in the incidents concerning getting water from a rock, manna and quail, God is telling us that he always provides for us.

Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy, written as a speech of Moses, serves to deepen and sum up the meaning of the covenant for Israel later on in her history.

An important quote

“The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you. He will never leave you or forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged” (Deuteronomy 31:8).

The Book of Deuteronomy

The final book of the Pentateuch is Deuteronomy, which is written as the last speech and warning by Moses to the people on how to live in the Promised Land (which begins in the following book of Joshua). The book begins with Moses reminding the people how they had arrived near the river Jordan (i.e., a recap of the story so far) and then contains an explanation of God’s covenant with his people, including an explanation of the law, which contains a challenge to them to live up to the covenant and all it required of them. It ends with the death of Moses and a reassurance that God would keep his promises.

Who wrote this book?

Again, allegedly Moses wrote this book. It is certainly the continuation of Moses’ story; but it seems very likely that additions were made during the Exile. What is important to note is that this book was certainly written by priests and its content reflects matters of interest to priests. It is very possible that the people who put this book together were responsible for the final editing of all the five books which make up the Torah.

How was the book written?

It is presented as a series of speeches by Moses. Before he dies, he gives the people laws, and his last advice on the way in which they should live in the country that they are going to conquer. The book of Deuteronomy presents a complete contrast with the three previous books. The people of Israel are still waiting to enter the land of Canaan from which their elders have been excluded (Deuteronomy 1:35-40); but now, the focus is on the immediate future. This is a picture of how things will be when the people are settled in the land: a picture of a peaceful life for the obedient. In particular, all the blessings that Yahweh promised to confer on Israel are presented (Deuteronomy 28:1-14). But he then goes on to warn the people with an equally instructive list of the curses that would fall on the disobedient (Deuteronomy 28:15-68).

In Deuteronomy Moses looks to the future, forecasting the challenges that the coming generation of Israel will face, and applying God's covenant word to new situations. Reading Deuteronomy is like standing with Israel before Moses. He addresses us as a future generation of the covenant people of God, who have passed over Jordan into the good land - and yet still struggle with temptations and opposing forces. Theologian Raymond Brown tells us that the message of

Deuteronomy guides Christians to hear and appreciate the timeless relevance of this message: that God's Law comes alive again as a guide to good living, a call to wholehearted repentance, and a promise of healing restoration under God's merciful hand.

About religion

The Jewish people are reminded that religion is more oriented to holiness of time than holiness of place. Our homes are sanctified through a concrete ritual – for example, with the *mitzvah* of *mezuzah*, where a scroll is placed on the doorposts of their houses. Inside the scroll, on parchment paper, these words are written “you shall love your God, believe only in him, keep his commandments and pass all of this onto your children” (Deuteronomy 6:9, 11:20). The mezuzah serves two functions: every time you enter or leave, the mezuzah reminds you that you have a covenant with God; second, it serves as a symbol to everyone else that this particular dwelling is constituted as a Jewish household, operating by a special set of rules, rituals and beliefs.

During the Church year, we hear readings from Deuteronomy

The Book of Deuteronomy is used in the liturgy to teach and catechise on faithfulness to the covenant with God in Christ. Nothing must stand in the way of the disciple's pursuit of this goal. The need for this response is the reason why Deuteronomy is used for the Solemnities of Trinity, Corpus Christi and the Sacred Heart. In addition, during Year 1 of weekday Mass readings, Deuteronomy is allowed only two half-weeks in the summertime as part of the two-month exposition of the history of Israel from Abraham to David, covering the important preparation for the arrival in the Promised Land.

How is it structured?

- 1:1-4:43 Moses' first speech to God's people in which he reminded them how they got there
- 4:44-28:68 Moses' second speech reflecting on the covenant
- 29:1-30:20 Moses' third speech inviting God's people to choose life
- 31:1-34:12 a selection of passages including the appointment of Joshua and the death of Moses

Jesus sums up the law and the prophets

Jesus sums up the law and the prophets with a line from Deuteronomy: “love God, and love your neighbour as yourself” (Deuteronomy 6:5).