



Panorama of the Old Testament

Stephen J. Binz

with Little Rock Scripture Study staff



*A ministry of the Diocese of Little Rock
in partnership with Liturgical Press*

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DIOCESE OF LITTLE ROCK

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Dear Friends,

The Bible is a gift of God to the church, the people gathered around the world throughout the ages in the name of Christ. God uses this sacred writing to continue to speak to us in all times and places.

I encourage you to make it your own by dedicated prayer and study with others and on your own. Little Rock Scripture Study is a ministry of the Catholic Diocese of Little Rock. It provides the tools you need to faithfully understand what you are reading, to appreciate its meaning for you and for our world, and to guide you in a way that will deepen your own ability to respond to God's call.

It is my hope that the Word of God will empower you as Christians to live a life worthy of your call as a child of God.

Sincerely in Christ,

✠ Anthony B. Taylor
Bishop of Little Rock



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Welcome	7
What materials will you use?	7
How will you use these materials?	8
Lesson One (The Pentateuch)	11
Lesson Two (The Historical Books)	37
Lesson Three (The Writings)	59
Lesson Four (The Prophetic Books)	81
Praying with Your Group	102
Reflecting on Scripture	104

Wrap-up lectures are available for each lesson at no charge. The link to these free lectures is LittleRockScripture.org/Lectures/PanoramaOldTestament.

Welcome

The Bible is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. It is the Spirit-inspired word of God for us. It reveals to us the God who created, redeemed, and guides us still. It speaks to us personally and as a church. It forms the basis of our public liturgical life and our private prayer lives. It urges us to live worthily and justly, to love tenderly and wholeheartedly, and to be a part of building God's kingdom here on earth.

Though it was written a long time ago, in the context of a very different culture, the Bible is no relic of the past. Catholic biblical scholarship is among the best in the world, and in our time and place, we have unprecedented access to it. By making use of solid scholarship, we can discover much about the ancient culture and religious practices that shaped those who wrote the various books of the Bible. With these insights, and by praying with the words of Scripture, we allow the words and images to shape us as disciples. By sharing our journey of faithful listening to God's word with others, we have the opportunity to be stretched in our understanding and to form communities of love and learning. Ultimately, studying and praying with God's word deepens our relationship with Christ.


Panorama of the Old Testament

The resource you hold in your hands is divided into four lessons. Each lesson involves personal prayer and study using this book *and* the experience of group prayer, discussion, and wrap-up lecture.

If you are using this resource in the context of a small group, we suggest that you meet four times, discussing one lesson per meeting. Allow about 90 minutes for the small group gathering. Small groups function best with eight to twelve people to ensure good group dynamics and allow all to participate as they wish.

WHAT MATERIALS WILL YOU USE?

The materials in this book include:

- Commentary by Stephen J. Binz, which has also been published separately as *Panorama of the Bible: Old Testament* (Liturgical Press).
- Occasional inserts  highlighting elements of the Old Testament. Some of these appear also in the *Little Rock*

Catholic Study Bible while others are supplied by staff writers.

- Questions for study, reflection, and discussion at the end of each lesson.
- Opening and closing prayers for each lesson, as well as other prayer forms available in the closing pages of the book.

In addition, there are wrap-up lectures available for each lesson. Your group may choose to purchase a DVD containing these lectures or make use of the audio or video lectures online at no charge. The link to these free lectures is: LittleRockScripture.org/Lectures/PanoramaOldTestament. Of course, if your group has access to qualified speakers, you may choose to have live presentations.

Each person will need a current translation of the Bible. We recommend the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible*, which makes use of the New American Bible, Revised Edition. Other translations, such as the New Jerusalem Bible or the New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition, would also work well.

HOW WILL YOU USE THESE MATERIALS?

Prepare in advance

Using Lesson One as an example:

- Begin with a simple prayer like the one found on page 11.
- Read the assigned material in the printed book for Lesson One (pages 12–13) so that you are prepared for the weekly small group session. You may do this assignment by reading a portion over a period of several days (effective and manageable) or by preparing all at once (more challenging).
- Answer the questions, Exploring Lesson One, found at the end of the assigned reading, pages 32–34.
- Use the Closing Prayer on page 35 when you complete your study. This prayer may be used again when you meet with the group.

Meet with your small group

- After introductions and greetings, allow time for prayer (about 5 minutes) as you begin the group session. You may use the prayer found on page 11 (also used by

individuals in their preparation) or use a prayer of your choosing.

- Spend about 45–50 minutes discussing the responses to the questions that were prepared in advance. You may also develop your discussion further by responding to questions and interests that arise during the discussion and faith-sharing itself.
- Close the discussion and faith-sharing with prayer, about 5–10 minutes. You may use the Closing Prayer at the end of each lesson or one of your choosing at the end of the book. It is important to allow people to pray for personal and community needs and to give thanks for how God is moving in your lives.
- Listen to or view the wrap-up lecture associated with each lesson (15–20 minutes). You may watch the lecture online, use a DVD, or provide a live lecture by a qualified local speaker. This lecture provides a common focus for the group and reinforces insights from each lesson. You may view the lecture together at the end of the session or, if your group runs out of time, you may invite group members to watch the lecture on their own time after the discussion.

Above all, be aware that the Holy Spirit is moving within and among you.

Panorama of the Old Testament

LESSON ONE

The Pentateuch

Begin your personal study and group discussion with a simple and sincere prayer such as:

Prayer

Loving God, you liberated your people and led them to the Promised Land. Liberate our minds and hearts as we study your word, that we may live joyfully as your faithful people.

Read the Preface on pages 12–13, and pages 14–31, Lesson One.

Respond to the questions on pages 32–34, Exploring Lesson One.

The Closing Prayer on page 35 is for your personal use and may be used at the end of group discussion.

PREFACE

People in every culture seem to tell their story around the table. One of my fond memories of childhood is Sunday dinner at my grandparent's house. Our whole family— aunts, uncles, and cousins—would gather at the table for the meal, and my grandparents would tell stories of the past. Looking back on that experience helps me to realize that the narratives they told around the table are an important part of who I am. At the family dinner I realized how our family came to be, where I fit into the story, and I learned the family traditions that I would continue and reshape in my own life.

The family of God tells our story at the table, too. For ancient Israelites, the Passover meal was one way they passed on the narrative of salvation: how they were slaves and how God delivered them, led them through the trials of the wilderness, and brought them into a land where they could live as a free people. For disciples of Jesus, the Eucharist is that sacred meal where the past is narrated and where we join our lives to that story of salvation around the table.

Every time we pick up the Bible and read, we are either preparing ourselves for the family meal or savoring our memories of the table. The Bible is like our family album, like a chest containing old family treasures. It is the literature of the people of God, the book of the church. When we reflect on the words of Scripture, either with others or in quiet solitude, we learn who we are, where we come from, and where we are going. We discover the truths that keep our family of faith together, and we learn what it means to live as a member of that family.

We open the Bible to hear our story. The history of salvation includes what God has done in the past, as well as what God is doing for us now, and what God will do in the future. But sometimes we miss the big picture. We often know individual characters and events in the great narrative of God and humanity, but we fail to comprehend how the whole Bible fits together. Focusing exclusively on parts of

the story, we miss the overall plot and how the various narrative threads intertwine to tie together God's wondrous plan.

The Bible is a magnificent library of seventy-three books. But, more important, this wonderful variety of books forms one tradition and is one story of salvation. This one Bible, the essential library of the descendants of Abraham, is the book of the church. Although the Bible consists of many books and a variety of different types of literature, the whole Bible is the narrative of God's redemption of the world. Patriarchs and matriarchs, prophets, judges, kings, priests, apostles, and evangelists belong to this inspired book of life.

This biblical account of redemption encompasses the whole world and offers us God's intentions and desires, which give cohesion, meaning, and purpose to human life. It is the grand narrative that explains for us the way things are, how they came to be so, and what they will ultimately be. It begins with creation and ends with the renewal of all things in the new creation for which we are destined. And in between, it offers us an interpretation of the whole of human history. Learning to take a panoramic view of the Bible enables us to live in the narrative and discover the real story of which each of our lives is a part.

So this panorama of the Bible, presented in two volumes—one on the Old Testament and one on the New Testament—offers a bird's-eye view of the Bible. Like looking at a map before setting out on a journey, we will survey the Scriptures so that later in other studies we can explore the riches in each book of the Bible. There is not a book in the Bible that can be interpreted satisfactorily in isolation from the rest. The central themes that run throughout the whole of Scripture offer us the big picture through which we can appreciate the details more clearly.

These two volumes belong together. Together they express one unfolding drama. As St. Augustine wrote, "The New Testament lies hidden in the Old, and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New" (*On the Spirit and the Letter* 15.27). The Scriptures of Israel and the writ-

ings of the early church are both necessary for a full understanding of God's saving plan. They are both important for Christian readers because together they are the word of the Lord.

When we understand that the Bible is our literature, we can enter into the story personally and view our lives as participants in the grand narrative of salvation. So, as we review this panorama of the Bible, it will be the responsibility of each reader to continually ask

the personal questions: How do I fit into this great story of God and humanity? How do I enter this narrative of salvation today? How is my life being shaped by this inspired literature and molded into the person I was created to be? The more we can understand the whole drama as one grand narrative of salvation and then find ourselves within that story, the better we will embody Scripture and become participants in the mission of God.

ISRAEL'S BEGINNINGS

The Pentateuch is the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. "Pentateuch" comes from the Greek meaning "five scrolls." In Hebrew, these books are known as the Torah, best translated as "teaching" or "instruction." The Torah forms the founding charter of Israel as a nation and as a religion. It contains many different forms of writing: poetry, legend, genealogy, law, and the epic history of the nation.

These books are attributed to Moses, which means that he is the central figure and the authority behind these books. In fact he appears in almost every chapter of the last four books. But the first book, that of Genesis, doesn't mention him at all. Rather it forms a preparation and preview of the central events to follow.

The Bible begins by setting the story of Israel's past within the framework of the wider context of the whole world. The first eleven chapters of Genesis attempt to answer some of life's most basic questions about the origins of the world, the meaning of good and evil, and God's plan for humanity.

God's Desire for Creation

The whole sweep of the Bible—from its first book, Genesis, to its last book, Revelation—expresses God's desire to offer the fullness of life to the world. The opening two chapters narrate that God, "in the beginning," created "the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1–2). And the final two chapters relate that God is establishing "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev 21–22). These chapters frame the entire biblical narrative of the world's salvation. The process that God desired from the beginning is fulfilled as all creation is perfected and glorified according to God's plan.

The opening chapters of Genesis present us with God's intended design for the earth. In the initial creation account of Genesis 1, God is pictured as creating all that exists. The ac-



count is organized like a typical week for the Hebrews—six days of work followed by the Sabbath of rest. The world is shown to be the work of the great artisan, working with creative skill, then relaxing to enjoy the work.

The first three days are depicted as days of separation: the light from the darkness, the sky from the water, and the water from the land. The next three days are shown as days of population: the sun, moon, and stars, the birds of the sky and the fish of the sea, and the animals and people to populate the land. Compared to the creation of a temple, we can say that the divine builder spends three days constructing the holy place and then three days furnishing it. And on the seventh day, God rests and honors this "very good" creation, blessing the seventh day and making it holy.



Six Days of Creation

Day	Domain	Creatures	Day
1	Day & Night	Sun, Moon & Stars	4
2	Sky & Water	Birds & Fishes	5
3	Dry Land	Animals & Humans	6

All of the attention in this creation narrative is on God, the one uncreated reality. God alone is divine and eternal, so powerful that only the divine will causes creation to spring into being. God's word of command, the repeated "Let there be . . ." brings forth a world characterized by order and harmony. Only this God, the cause and source of all things, is worthy of worship.

The seven-day framework for God's creation, the formation of man and woman in the divine image, God's walking with them in the garden, and the forbidden tree of knowledge are all figurative expressions of what God most deeply desires for creation. God does not distance himself from creation, but rules over it in a deeply personal way. God makes the garden the place of divine dwelling with man and woman, and as they continue to multiply and fill the earth, God wishes the whole earth to be that divine dwelling place.

To read these stories as if they were simply historical information would diminish the richness of meaning and depth of truth contained within them. The writers are not writing as journalists, scientists, or historians would write. The stories presume the primitive worldview of the ancient Middle East. The earth they understood was a flat surface covered by a dome called the firmament, which let in the

rain and the snow. The earth was elevated above the sea and the waters beneath the earth.

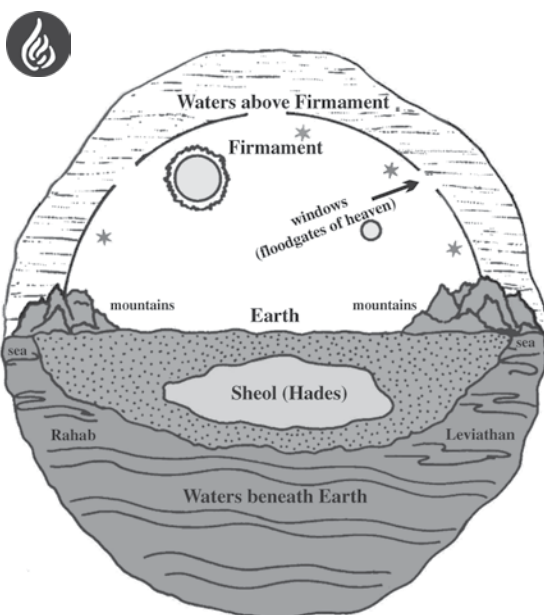
The Garden of Eden is described as a divine sanctuary where God is at home and lives in harmony with creation. Like ancient temples, it is entered through its east side where it is guarded by cherubim. God's command that the human being (Hebrew: *ʾadam*) "serve and care for" the garden are the same verbs used in later passages to describe the duties of Israel's priests in the tabernacle. So, human beings were designed by God to serve as priests in this garden-sanctuary with direct access to God.

Similarly, God's creation of man and woman in the "image of God" confers regal status upon them. In the ancient world of other cultures, the divine image was linked to kings. The royal ruler was believed to be the living image of the divine sovereign. In Israel, this regal status is confirmed as God gives the man and woman dominion over every living thing, appointing them to rule with divine care and justice over God's creation. As man and woman are fruitful and their descendants spread throughout the earth, they are to extend the reign of God throughout creation. So, God's original design for human beings is that they be royal rulers throughout the earth and a kingdom of priests.

Clearly, the creation accounts do not so much address the question of "how" the world came to be, as the more important question of "why" the world was created. They are a profound meditation on the meaning of creation. The ancient authors choose to pass on the truths that they have come to know in the form of stories, and these stories of creation are very successful attempts to express the essential truths about existence and life.

These stories have been honored for thousands of years because people have understood that they address some of the most profound and important questions of human life: What is our purpose? What is God like? What does God want us to be like?

Some of the essential truths taught by the creation account of Genesis 1 are these:



- There is one supreme God, unlike the multiple gods of other nations.
- God is the primary cause of all that exists.
- The sun and moon are not gods, as other religions believed, but part of God's creation.
- All creation is good, and people are the peak of that good creation.
- Men and women are equally made in the image of a loving God.
- Men and women are cocreators with God and stewards of the earth.

God's Design Disrupted by Human Sin

A second creation story, which includes the story of sin, follows the first creation account. The editor of Genesis decided to include both of these creation stories because both had long been treasured within the community as expressing the truth about God and humanity.

In this second account of Genesis 2, God forms *ʾadam* from the ground (*ʾadama*), and breathes the divine breath into his nostrils to make him live. God then plants the Garden of Eden and places the man there. When God forms birds and animals from the ground, God presents them to the man for naming. But when none of them prove to be a suitable companion for the man, God builds a woman from the side of the man. When she is brought to the man, he recognizes that she is not from the ground like the animals but from his very self: "bone of my bones / and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23). And like children, they feel no shame in their nakedness.

In both creation accounts, we see that human beings are made for God, for one another, and for the created world. As God's royal stewards and priests, we are responsible for developing the world in such a way that all creation gives God glory. But as the narrative continues, God's design is disrupted by the refusal of man and woman to

live according to God's desire for creation. The cunning serpent, one of God's creatures, deceptively distorts God's words and undermines God's plan, and man and woman choose to listen to the serpent's instructions rather than those of God.

By failing to exercise their dominion over the serpent, they destroy the trusting harmony God desires within the garden. By betraying God, man and woman are sent forth from the dwelling God prepared for them. Their God-given dominion over the creatures of the earth turns to domination. God's authority is overturned, and harmony begins to revert to the chaos that existed before God formed the world. As the stories of the early chapters of Genesis reveal, the hallmark of sinful humanity becomes violence toward other creatures, both human and animal, and toward God's good creation.

This account in Genesis 3 focuses on the human condition: our desire for happiness and the reality of pain, sin, and death. The storytellers of Israel's wisdom tradition saw how the world is deeply wounded and wondered how human suffering is compatible with belief in a powerful and loving God. With colorful language and the symbols of the garden, the author paints a picture of God's desire for our happiness, yet also of God's desire to create us free, capable of personally choosing God's will for our lives. The human will turned against God's plan, and the result is the suffering and death that comes from sin. The storyteller shows us how it has been *from the beginning* by painting a story of life *in the beginning*.

The symbolic tree, whose forbidden fruit the couple eats, represents the temptation to be autonomous and to live apart from God's reign. Human beings are alive and free to enjoy creation as long as they live out their freedom under God's rule and will for human life. The temptation they face through the serpent is to become a law unto themselves, to walk according to their own path rather than the way of their Creator.

The result of this human choice for autonomy apart from God's way is the destruction of the harmony that God placed within

creation. The human relationship with God is distorted. From walking comfortably with God in the garden, man and woman now hide from God's presence in fear and shame. The relationship of man and woman to each other is damaged. They become morbidly self-conscious, quickly covering their nakedness and blaming one another.

Yet, God's purposes are not defeated. Although an uncertain and perilous world faces the couple, God does not abandon them. They will still bear the divine image in the world. Although God punishes by cursing the serpent and putting enmity between the offspring of the serpent and that of the woman, God also offers hope by promising that the offspring of the woman will strike and crush the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15). That is, a descendant of Eve will destroy the powers of evil that the man and woman have unleashed through their disobedience.

Some of the essential truths taught by this account of Adam and Eve are these:

- Human beings are created by God with the ability to choose or reject God's will.
- The root cause of human suffering is sin, the human choice to disobey God.
- Sin disrupts human relationships and brings about shame and blame.
- Suffering is not a punishment inflicted by God, but a consequence of sin.
- Human beings suffer on account of our own sin and the sin of others.
- God doesn't abandon the human race but promises them a future in which to hope.

The Effect of Sin in the World

The stories of Genesis 3–11 show how the effects of sin multiply and destroy human relationships with God, with other people, and with the created world. After the sin, Adam hides from God; he blames Eve, and he is ex-

pelled from the harmony of the garden and made to work for food with hard labor. When Eve gives birth to Cain and Abel, rivalry grows between them. Out of jealousy, Cain murders his brother Abel and must wander alone upon the earth. The family that God desires to be a place of support and companionship becomes a breeding ground for envy, resentment, rage, and vengeance.

Accounts of family rivalry lead up to the story of Noah and the catastrophic flood. Sin has spread throughout the whole earth, and violence and corruption have so filled the world that God regrets making human beings on the earth. In God's desire to remake the world, he saves Noah and his family as well as a remnant of every species upon the earth. God manifests his commitment to creation despite the destructive effects of human beings in the world. Following the flood, God establishes a covenant with every living creature with the rainbow as its sign (Gen 9:8-17).

The final story of sin's expansion is the account of the tower of Babel. Even though the growth of cities and cultural progress can demonstrate human achievement, it is doomed to failure when it demonstrates human autonomy apart from God. The huge tower becomes the symbol of humans' arrogance because of their attempts to go it alone in defiance of the Creator (Gen 11:4). God condemns the human pride that has inspired it and judges the people by confusing their language and scattering them abroad.

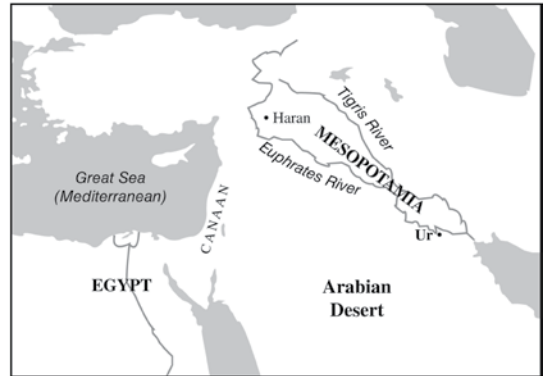
These stories describe tendencies that move deep within every person. Men and women are inclined to act in ways that lead to estrangement and blame each other for it. Siblings tend to fight with one another and grow apart. Human beings think they have the power and wisdom of God, and they suffer in their sinful choices. Men and women are good, yet flawed and fallen. Although God passionately wills life and blessing for his creatures, all of these blessings begin to be destroyed because of sin. The power of death gets increasingly stronger and the world begins to return to the chaos from which it came.

Against the background of these early chapters of Genesis, the rest of the Bible narrates the history of salvation. The remainder of Scripture demonstrates how God desires the world to become a dwelling shared by God, humanity, and the creatures of the earth. God’s people must be rescued from the control of sin and receive the royal and priestly dignity that God wishes to bestow upon them. The kingdom of God must be established throughout the earth so that God may dwell with his royal and priestly people.

God Initiates a Saving Plan

Although the stories of Genesis 1–11 show humanity moving away from God, Genesis 12 introduces a different kind of narrative. Against the darkness of human sinfulness, the light of God’s saving will begins to shine in the person of Abraham. Beginning with his call, we see Israel looking deep into its own ancient history to recover accounts of its ancestors. These accounts of the origins of Israel go back to the ancient traditions passed on through many generations. The type of writing we see in these narratives can be described as folk history, an ancient history that has been handed down through oral tradition. Though rooted in history, the accounts contain imaginative, symbolic, and legendary material. They have a timeless quality and they teach us powerful lessons about God and faith.

Out of all the scattered nations of the earth, God chooses one family. God called Abraham and Sarah to leave their homeland and go to a new, unknown land—to leave their former identity and find their identity in God. They migrate from Ur of the Chaldeans (in present-day Iraq), up the Euphrates river valley, to Haran in Mesopotamia (a city near the present border of Turkey and Syria). Then, they travel with their whole household to the land of Canaan, which would become the land of Israel many centuries later.



The opening verses of Abraham’s call (Gen 12:1-3) preview the covenant God will make with him in the form of three promises. First, God will give Abraham a new land, a land to which God is leading him. Second, God will give Abraham numerous descendants—too many to count—who will form a great nation. And third, God assures Abraham that through him “all the families of the earth will find blessing.”

In other words, God doesn’t call Abraham just for his own sake, or for his own family, or even for the future people of Israel. Rather, God calls Abraham and enters into covenant with him so that, ultimately, all the people of the world will be blessed. The stories of Abraham demonstrate how God begins to fulfill these promises; the remainder of the Torah shows their partial fulfillment; and the rest of the Bible shows how God fulfills those promises completely.

For all later generations, Abraham becomes the father of faith. Asked to leave his autonomy and security—family, tribe, home, country—he travels a long journey to an uncertain destination, following where God leads him. His faith is marked by his constant relationship with God—a faith that consists of belief in God, trust that God will fulfill the promises, and obedience to God’s will.

God is at work, through Abraham, to reverse the curses that sin has brought upon the world. God desires to restore his original bless-

ings and purpose to creation. By giving Abraham's descendants the land, by making them the great nation of Israel, and by ultimately restoring God's blessing to the people of all nations, God makes Abraham his first instrument in the divine plan to redeem the world.

God confirms the covenant with Abraham through sacrificial rituals and concrete signs. The sign of the covenant with Abraham is circumcision, a visible and permanent mark of God's relationship with this people who come from Abraham's loins. After many long years of trusting, God reaffirms the covenant, telling Abraham and Sarah that they will have a son whom they will name Isaac. Sarah's barren womb gives way to God's promise. Although both Abraham and Sarah laugh aloud at the suggestion that they will have a son in their elderly condition, God has the last laugh. God says to Abraham, "Is anything too marvelous for the LORD to do?" (Gen 18:14). When their son is born, they name him Isaac, which means "laughter."

Finally, Abraham's faith is most challenged when God tells him to take his son Isaac and offer him in sacrifice on Mount Moriah. In this unbearable test, Abraham reluctantly but trustingly journeys to put his only beloved son to death. While Isaac carries the wood of the sacrifice, he asks his father, "Where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" And Abraham answered, "God will provide the sheep for the burnt offering" (Gen 22:7-8). At the last moment, God stays his hand. Abraham has demonstrated his faith in the fullest way.

Following this scene, God reaffirms the promises of the covenant: "In your descendants all the nations of the earth will find blessing" (Gen 22:18). This final promise to Abraham frames the narrative of his obedient life, from its early beginning at Abraham's call to its final, climactic end. Later revelation states that Mount Moriah is the temple mount in Jerusalem. Here, in later history, the priests of the temple will make morning and evening sacrificial offerings, a divine sign that God will provide universal blessing for all people. Here, at the place God desires to establish as a house of

prayer for all the nations, God desires a final sacrifice, an offering for the sin of all humanity.

Patriarchs and Matriarchs of God's People

Many centuries after the life of Abraham and Sarah, God spoke through Isaiah the prophet and called God's people to trust in a troubled time: "Look to Abraham, your father, / and to Sarah, who gave you birth; / though he was but one when I called him, / I blessed him and made him many" (Isa 51:2). God calls future generations to imitate the example of Israel's first patriarch and matriarch because the promises God made to them are being fulfilled in every age.

The accounts of Genesis 25–35 narrate the stories of the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. We see that God's promises are reaffirmed to their son and grandson, so that God comes to be referred to as "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

But these stories are filled not only with promises confirmed, but also with bitter family relationships. The one who inherits the promises is not Abraham's first son, Ishmael, born of Sarah's slave girl Hagar, but Isaac, conceived in Sarah's old age by the saving will of God. When Isaac marries Rebekah, they have twin sons. Esau is the first born, then Jacob follows from the womb, gripping Esau's heel and prefiguring a life of conflict between the two sons.

As the boys mature, Jacob uses his cleverness to claim the inheritance that is due to Esau. With the help of his mother, he outwits his father Isaac and his brother Esau to obtain the birthright and become the heir of the covenant promises. Over and over Israel's stories demonstrate that God's promises cannot be merited or taken for granted. They do not belong by right to the natural or most obvious successor; rather, they are the free gift of God.

The feuding between Jacob and Esau plays itself out in a variety of ways as Jacob flees for his life because of Esau's desire to kill him. On his journey, God meets with Jacob through a dream at Bethel. While sleeping, Jacob dreams

of a stairway stretching between earth and heaven, with angels traveling up and down on it. God stands beside Jacob, identifies himself, and reaffirms to Jacob the promises made to the family of Abraham.

I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you are lying I will give to you and your descendants. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and through them you will spread to the west and the east, to the north and the south. In you and your descendants all the families of the earth will find blessing. I am with you and will protect you wherever you go, and bring you back to this land. I will never leave you until I have done what I promised you. (Gen 28:13-15)

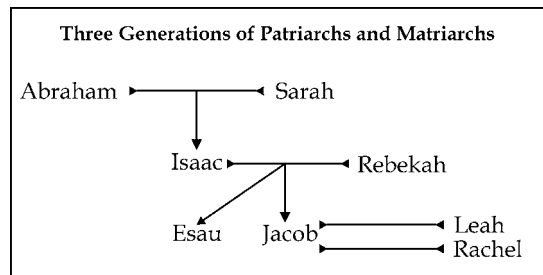
Polygamy was common among the people of the ancient Middle East and the people of Israel were no exception. When Jacob desires to take Rachel as his wife, her father offers to give his daughter in marriage after Jacob has worked for him seven years. Then on the night of the wedding, her father deceives Jacob and switches his older daughter, Leah, in the darkness of the marriage chamber. The next morning, when Jacob discovers that he has been deceived and has consummated the marriage with Leah rather than his beloved Rachel, the girls' father promises he will give Jacob his younger daughter after another seven years of Jacob's service to him. The one who used his clever cunning to obtain his own father's blessing now is deceived by the clever father of his wives.

While Leah gives birth to sons, Rachel bears none. Competing to see which side of the family will have the most children, both women offer their maidservants to their husband to bear more children. This rivalry between wives and sons will bring immeasurable jealous division within the family of Jacob.

When Jacob prepares to return to his own land with his two wives, two maidservants, and eleven children, he learns that his brother Esau is coming to meet him after many years of estrangement. Jacob fears that his brother will take revenge for his deception. But on the night before

their meeting, Jacob encounters a divine visitor who wrestles with him throughout the night. When Jacob asks the stranger for a blessing, God changes Jacob's name to Israel, which means "he who wrestles with God." So Jacob becomes the father of the nation that will be formed from the tribes of his sons, a nation what will certainly wrestle with God throughout its history.

At dawn Esau arrives and runs to his brother, weeping and embracing him. Jacob's happy surprise teaches him to trust in God's designs. He does not need to scheme and deceive to obtain God's blessings. Jacob experiences the divine presence in both the love of God and the love of his brother. Here there is hope that forgiveness and reconciliation can prevail over the homicidal jealousy exemplified in Cain and Abel.



The Twelve Sons of Jacob

The children of Rachel and Leah, together with their midwives, number twelve sons: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Joseph, and Benjamin. These twelve become the patriarchs from whom the twelve tribes of Israel take their descent.

The last section of Genesis, chapters 37–50, contains the stories of Joseph and his relationship to his brothers. Joseph, the first son of Rachel, is Jacob's spoiled and favorite son. His father loves him best and has made him a long ornamented tunic. Joseph's dreams and his ability to interpret them intensify his brothers' jealousy, so they plot to kill him.

Instead they sell him to a band of traders who bring him down to Egypt, but they deceive Jacob into thinking his son has been murdered. They dip Joseph's coat in the blood of a goat, and they tell their father that Joseph has been slain by a wild beast. Again, Jacob reaps what he has sown. Just as Jacob deceived his own father Isaac to obtain his blessing, so now Jacob experiences the betrayal of his own sons' deception.

In Egypt, Joseph becomes a servant to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh. Then his fortune changes when he successfully interprets the dreams of Pharaoh and thereby saves Egypt from famine. When Joseph is made a favorite minister of Pharaoh, famine in Canaan brings his brothers to seek help in Egypt. Joseph is now in a position to invite his father and brothers to come down to Egypt to live and escape the famine. Joseph's reunion with his brothers is an emotional event and their father Jacob dies a happy man because he is reunited with his son Joseph.

The account of Joseph reads like a novel that is hard to put down. It is a story of injury and forgiveness, of estrangement and reconciliation. We see the development of Joseph from a selfish and alienated youth to a mature and selfless leader fully reconciled with his family. Through his generosity and willingness to forgive, Joseph upholds the unity of Israel's family and prevents their extinction. Throughout these accounts, the providential hand of God guides the fate of the family of Jacob—Israel as God brings good out of evil and turns disaster into triumph over and over again.

Moses Called to Be God's Instrument of Liberation

The whole book of Genesis is a preview for the experiences told in the book of Exodus. Most nations can point to a decisive event that constitutes the beginning of their histories. For Israel that event is the exodus. This event gave birth to Israel as a people, as a nation, and as a religion.

The book can be described as epic history. It does not use detailed historical records, but it recounts the oral history remembered by the people of Israel through the ages. It exalts the power of God in the founding events of their life as a people. At its core it is historical, but its focus is on God—the One who cares for his chosen people and passionately desires their freedom.

As Exodus begins, we realize that the seventy members of Jacob's family who went to Egypt have increased abundantly over many generations.

Now Joseph and all his brothers and that whole generation died. But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific. They multiplied and became so very numerous that the land was filled with them.

Then a new king, who knew nothing of Joseph, rose to power in Egypt. (Exod 1:6-8)

The first chapters of Exodus are an account of misery and oppression. The new pharaoh fears the numbers of the Israelites, so he subjects them to brutal slave labor and initiates a cruel policy of killing all newborn male Israelites. After a wondrous infancy narrative, showing how the initiative and courage of women rescue Moses and lead him to be raised in the court of Pharaoh, the book recounts how Moses is called to rescue his people.

The call of Moses, like the call of Abraham, marks the beginning of a new stage of God's saving plan. While shepherding sheep in the wilderness, Moses comes to the mountain of God. There he has an astonishing encounter with God, who speaks to him from a burning bush. Telling Moses to take off his sandals because the place and the encounter is holy, God identifies himself to Moses as the God of his ancestors.

I am the God of your father, he continued, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

But the LORD said: I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard

their cry against their taskmasters, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and lead them up from that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Girgashites, the Hivites and the Jebusites. Now indeed the outcry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen how the Egyptians are oppressing them. Now, go! I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt. (Exod 3:6-10)

God initiates the events of the exodus as God sees the wretched state of the people and hears them as they cry out for help. God is determined to rescue them from their oppression. But the exodus event is not just liberation from slavery; it includes the gift of freedom to live in a land of blessings and abundance. The fertile and spacious land of God's promises is the ultimate goal of Israel's redemption. Now God is sending Moses to Pharaoh to be the instrument of Israel's deliverance.

The response of Moses expresses humility and reluctance. When he asks for the divine name so that he can identify God to his people, God responds with the distinctive name by which God will be known throughout the Scriptures. God says, "I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you" (Exod 3:14). The divine name, *YHWH*, is generally written in English versions of the Bible as "LORD." The root verb conveys the idea of dynamic presence. The name conveys this idea of God's active presence in the life of Israel. God will be known through what God does, through the effect God has in the life of the chosen people. The whole of salvation history is God's expression of the divine name.

Moses uses every excuse he can muster to escape his call, yet God reassures him: "I will be with you." Then the presence of God, bringing good from evil, bringing freedom from oppression, is demonstrated in two basic stories of deliverance: first, the plagues in Egypt and Passover (Exod 7–11), and second, the crossing of the sea (Exod 13–15).

God Frees the Israelites from Slavery

The obstacle to the Israelites' liberation is Pharaoh, who is regarded by the Egyptians as divine and holding absolute power. The exodus is described as a conflict between the LORD, the God of freedom and life, and Pharaoh, the god of oppression and death. Both assert a claim over the faithfulness and service of the Hebrews. The exodus events express the defeat of the powers of slavery that Pharaoh represents, and they express the liberation of God's people from all that prevents them from becoming the people they were chosen to be.

Through a series of ten plagues, Pharaoh is confronted with the fact that the LORD is God. The LORD's enslaved people are rescued from their oppression on the night of Passover. As the tenth and final plague comes upon the Egyptians, the families of the Israelites are instructed to sacrifice a lamb and to apply its blood to the lintel and the doorposts of their homes. This sacrificial blood prevents death from entering their houses and becomes the doorway through which the families of God will enter into their freedom.

Defeated and desperate, Pharaoh at last lets the Israelites go. But he makes one last attempt to restrain the Israelites and orders his armies to pursue them as they flee Egypt. The Israelites then arrive at the sea, with the Egyptians in hot pursuit. At God's command, Moses stretches out his hand over the sea and the waters are divided, allowing the Israelites to pass through the sea for their final escape to freedom. With the waters divided like a wall to their right and left, the Israelites pass through on dry land just before the break of dawn.

This passage of Israel through the sea is remembered as the primary event of salvation for Israel, expressing in a single event the whole narrative of transition from bondage to freedom. For the ancient Israelites, the sea represents the forces of destruction, chaos, and death. The passage through the waters, from the darkness into the dawn, is an image of birthing, the transition through the birth canal. Israel is God's firstborn, and the exodus is described by later writers as the moment of Israel's birth.

The song of Moses in Exodus 15 celebrates God's magnificent rescue at the sea and describes this liberation as the way God will be continually manifested. God is the one who is repeatedly conquering all those forces opposed to freedom and abundant life: crushing injustice, overcoming domination, and vanquishing oppression. The newborn Israelites praise their God of freedom and life and celebrate God's divine victory over all the forces of oppression and death. The song links Israel's "coming out" of bondage to the people's "coming into" the land.

One of the most important descriptions of God in the Old Testament is "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exod 20:2; Deut 5:6). The liberation of God's people from bondage and their establishment as a people was the decisive event of God's self-revelation to Israel. This passage from bondage and death to freedom and life became the paradigm for describing all of God's future actions of deliverance.

The people of Israel learned to reflect on all the events of their national history in light of the primary event of the exodus. The Israelites expressed their faith in God by reciting the saving deeds they experienced throughout their history, beginning with the exodus and narrating their history with ever-new hope. Because God had heard the people's cries in the past, they could be certain that God would continue to rescue and save them. In every age, Israel knew that its future would take shape according to the same patterns with which its past had been formed.

Over and over again throughout the story of Scripture, people find themselves imprisoned, locked in captivity. And God, with power and compassion, brings them to deliverance and abundant life. This bondage takes many forms and many names in Scripture: slavery, imprisonment, oppression, grief, doubt, sin, death, alienation, and despair. Likewise, the passage to freedom takes many forms and names: rescue, deliverance, ransom, release, passover, redemption, and salvation. This de-

liverance that God offers is both physical and spiritual, both temporal and eternal.

Now that the people of God have passed through the waters, the history of Israel as a nation has begun. Israel was born out of the waters, brought by God out of the waters and into life. Now that Israel is born, God leads her through a period of childhood and adolescence, before she reaches adulthood in the Promised Land. These are the topics we will explore as we complete our survey of the Pentateuch.

ISRAEL'S FOUNDATIONAL COVENANT

After Israel is given birth through the waters, the formative period of Israel's young life is spent in the wilderness. Here the Israelites learn how to relate to God, how to trust in God's presence, how to worship God, and how to live as a people specially chosen by God. In the wilderness the Israelites begin to leave behind the mentality of slavery and embrace the freedom of serving the LORD, the God who acts on their behalf.

The Torah is inspired through the leadership of Moses. Since it narrates his own death and includes material that was written long after the days of Moses, he is not the "author," in the modern sense of writing the whole work himself, but he is the *author-ity* behind the whole Pentateuch. His obedience to God, his mighty deeds, his mediation for Israel, gives the Pentateuch its lasting form and the core of its ongoing tradition.

The five books of the Pentateuch are focused on Mount Sinai, which is at the heart of the Torah. Genesis and the first eighteen chapters of Exodus lead up to the mountain. In Exodus 19–40, the whole book of Leviticus, and Numbers 1–10, Israel is at Mount Sinai. Then the remainder of Numbers and the book of Deuteronomy show Israel moving from Sinai toward the Promised Land.



The Pentateuch Focuses on Mount Sinai

Genesis 1-50 Exodus 1-18	Movement toward Mount Sinai
Exodus 19-40 Leviticus 1-27 Numbers 1-10	Israel is gathered at Mount Sinai
Numbers 11-36 Deuteronomy 1-34	Israel moves from Mount Sinai toward the Promised Land

Guided to the Mountain of God

After describing the captivity of the Israelites and their liberation through the sea in the first fifteen chapters of Exodus, the following chapters narrate their journey from the sea to the mountain. Along the way, they experience God’s saving power in numerous ways. God’s guiding, protective presence with the Israelites along the journey is seen in the column of cloud that leads them during the day and column of fire during the night. God’s provident, nurturing presence is demonstrated by God’s feeding the Israelites with manna and quail and giving them water to drink from the rock.

After three months of desert travel, the Israelites reach the mountain of God, the same area where Moses first encountered the LORD. But now God is not just calling one man for a specific mission; God is calling an entire people to be his own. God is revealed this time not in a burning bush but in an awesome display of thunder, lightning, fire, smoke, and clouds. Israel experiences God as powerful and near.

Through speaking with Moses on the mountain, God reminds the Israelites of what he has done for them. God says that he has brought them out of Egypt like an eagle carrying its tired young on its wings. The deeply relational nature of God’s saving activity is expressed in God’s words to Israel, “I . . . brought you to myself” (Exod 19:4). Israel is utterly dependent on God’s gracious acts for its survival, but God’s desire is to have a people with whom he shares a personal relationship.

God calls Israel for a special purpose. God says, “You will be my treasured possession among all peoples” (Exod 19:5). And further, “You will be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation” (Exod 19:6). God is seeking to restore the divine image that had been disfigured by human sin. God is beginning to raise up a people who will be royal rulers and priests, through whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed. As a royal priesthood among the nations, Israel is called to be a mediator between the LORD and the other nations and to be a model for other nations of what it means to be in covenant with God. So being chosen by God is not just a special privilege; it is a means of serving God, reflecting the divine image in the world and demonstrating for other nations what living under God’s reign looks like.

Forming the Covenant with God

At Mount Sinai God enters into covenant with Israel, a bond modeled on the relationship of family. The LORD will be the God of Israel and Israel will be the people of God. In covenant, they belong to God, and that family bond implies a relationship that expresses itself in changed behavior.

As an expression of this relationship, God speaks the Ten Commandments, literally “the ten words,” to Moses. These form the core of the covenant law. The first three commandments deal with Israel’s exclusive worship and relationship with God. The remaining commands deal with the obligations of the Israelites toward one another. These ten are the seed from which all of Israel’s legal tradition grows.

Israel’s understanding of these commandments is intimately related to their covenant with God. The law, those things that Israel must do as an expression of this bond with God, is a response to what God has already done for Israel. So, obeying the Torah is not another form of slavery. It is rather a loving response to the compassionate care that God has already demonstrated for Israel.

God commanded Pharaoh, “Let my people go to serve me” (Exod 9:1). Israel realized that slavery under Pharaoh led to bondage and death, but servitude under YHWH leads to freedom and life. Thus obedience to the law of God was Israel’s means of expressing their new family relationship with God and the freedom associated with being bonded to God.

The additional legislation found within the Sinai covenant expresses the fact that these texts are the work of many generations of living in the covenant. The Covenant Code—laws regarding slaves, personal injury, property damage, loans, care for the poor, pilgrimage, and the like—sets out in greater detail Israel’s obligations: first, to worship God rightly, and second, to deal justly with one another. All aspects of life as a nation come within the scope of God’s reign over Israel. How God’s people treat one another will forever be a manifestation of how genuinely they worship the LORD. A people who has been rescued from bondage and oppression must never become oppressors in their relationships to the neglected and the powerless in their midst.

Israel’s Torah expresses a level of social awareness unmatched in the ancient world. Reading the lists of laws and liturgical regulations throughout the Pentateuch reminds us of the commitment our ancestors made to right living and dedicated worship. Even though many of the social laws and rules of worship no longer apply literally today, they can inspire us to give our very best to God, both in worship and in relationship with God’s people. Like Israel, we must try to understand God’s commandments not as a constraint that makes life difficult, but as keys to living the fullness of life for which we were made.

Israel confirms their covenant with God at Mount Sinai and seals their bond in a sacrificial liturgy. A covenant requires two willing partners. In Exodus 24, we see that Moses recites all the words and ordinances of the LORD and writes them down. God does not coerce, but invites Israel into a covenant that will make them his people. God’s people voice the words of their acceptance, saying, “All that the LORD has said, we will hear and do” (v. 7).

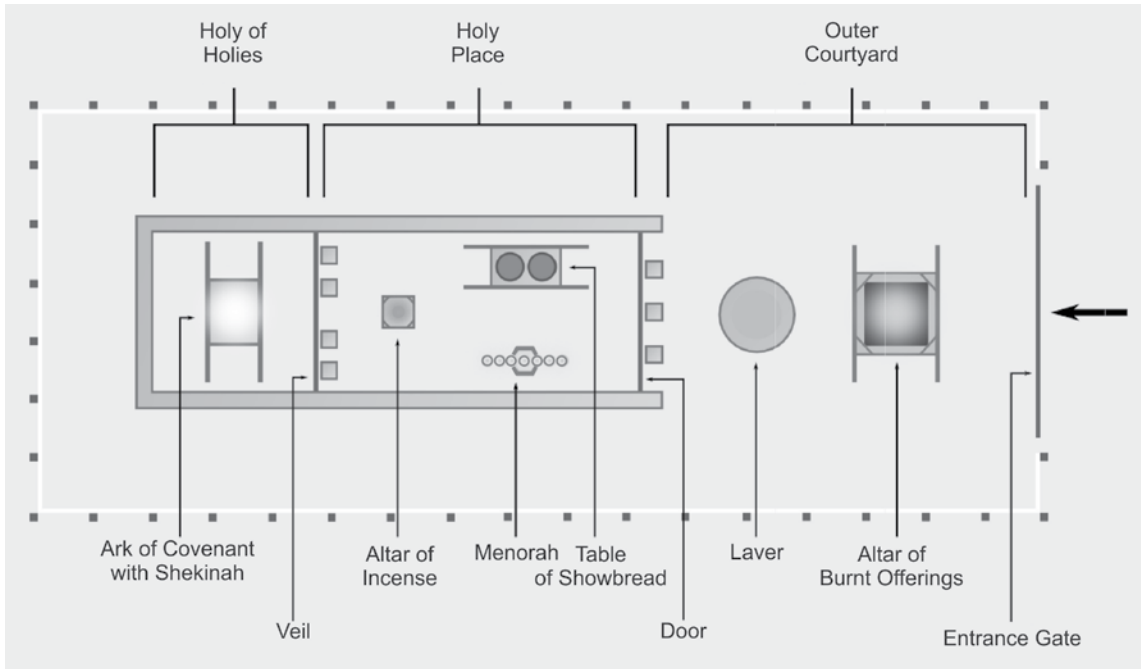
Next, Moses builds an altar and sets up twelve sacred stones, representing the fact that each of the twelve tribes (descendants of Jacob’s twelve sons) are entering into this covenant with God. The young men then offer burnt offerings and communion sacrifices in which blood is poured out. This “blood of the covenant” is splashed both on the altar, representing God, and on the people. To share the same blood is to share the same life, to be joined in a family bond.

After this sacrificial rite, Moses and the elders of the people go up the mountain and are given an extraordinary experience: “They saw God, and they ate and drank” (Exod 24:11). They eat and drink the communion sacrifice, an expression of a shared life and family bond with God. The LORD has promised to dwell with his people, and here we see that promise on its way to being fulfilled in an intimate way.

Following the covenant ceremony, the remainder of Israel’s history is basically a narration of how faithfully (or unfaithfully) Israel lives up to its call given at Mount Sinai. Israel will be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation to the degree that they adhere to their bond with God as stipulated in the covenant. If they choose to live in the presence of their God and live in obedience under God’s reign, then they will live a full and rich life in which the peoples of the world will want to share.

Building the Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle

Although the communion sacrifice experienced by Moses and the elders with God is a transitory event, God desires to dwell among his covenanted people in a permanent way. So the final chapters of Exodus describe God’s detailed instructions for building the tabernacle, a tent structure that would, two centuries later, develop into the design for the temple in Jerusalem. This tabernacle in the wilderness will be a portable sanctuary, God’s personal residence among the Israelites, as they continue their journey.



The focal point of God’s traveling presence amid the people is the ark of the covenant. This wooden chest, plated inside and outside with pure gold, is designed to contain the visible reminders of God’s covenant with Israel. The top of the ark is a cover made of pure gold with two golden cherubim at each end, their wings sheltering the cover. There, between the cherubim and above the cover, the invisible God promises to abide among the people.

The other structures for the tabernacle include a golden altar for incense offerings, a golden menorah (the seven-branched lampstand), and a display table with plates containing loaves of bread and pitchers and bowls for wine offerings. Each of these are designed for worship in the divine presence, and each is designed with two golden poles mounted on their sides to that they may be carried along the way.

God instructs that the ark be placed in the holy of holies and that it be separated from these other objects by a purple-scarlet veil. A similar curtain is to be hung at the entrance of the tab-

ernacle. In the courtyard outside the sanctuary, God describes the construction of a large bronze basin filled with water for the washing of the priests and a bronze altar on which burnt sacrifices are offered. Rites for the consecration of priests, the design of priestly vestments, and formulas for anointing oils and incense complete God’s instructions for worship at the tabernacle.

No longer are God’s people forced to build for the pharaoh; now they willingly donate their talent and treasure to build God’s dwelling in their midst. These last chapters of Exodus, detailing the nature and shape of God’s portable residence, emphasize that Israel’s journey moves from Egyptian slavery to divine service, the worship of the LORD.

But after Moses receives God’s instructions for the tabernacle and its construction, Exodus narrates a great rebellion by the people that threatens the covenant itself. While waiting for Moses to descend the mountain, the Israelites become impatient and make for themselves a golden calf. Comparable to the defiance of Adam and Eve in the garden-temple, the people try to

replace what God is already providing them. Rather than depend on their unseen and holy LORD, they quickly construct a visible object to replace the divine presence, violating the first of all the commandments. Only the appeal of Moses to God averts the disastrous consequences of a broken covenant. As Moses bows to the ground and begs God's pardon for the wickedness of the people, God passes before Moses on the mountaintop and proclaims:

"The LORD, the LORD, a God gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in love and fidelity, continuing his love for a thousand generations, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin; yet not declaring the guilty guiltless, but bringing punishment for their parents' wickedness on children and children's children to the third and fourth generation!" (Exod 34:6-7)

In the face of the people's shameful betrayal, Moses discovers the depth of God's merciful love. The Israelites receive God's forgiveness, yet they are also warned of the inevitable consequences of sin. These treasured words will give hope to rebellious Israelites throughout their history. It will help them understand the consequences of their infidelity, but will enable them to trust that God will always be their God. So, with this understanding of God, the people of Israel construct the tabernacle according to God's directions.

The tabernacle and its liturgy perpetuate God's saving presence in the midst of the people. The liturgical legislation received and enacted at Mount Sinai and the completion of the tabernacle and its liturgical furnishings serve as a kind of portable mountain of God. The once-and-for-all experience of forming the covenant on Sinai is made present again and again as the liturgies of the sanctuary are enacted by the people bound to God in covenant.

The book of Exodus ends as the glory of the LORD fills the tabernacle and God comes to dwell with his people. Freed from Egypt, they are now liberated to desire the LORD. Abounding in love and fidelity for the Israelites, God leads them along their journey.

The Quest for Holiness

Leviticus, the third book of the Pentateuch, is a collection of covenant legislation regarding worship and the priesthood. Because God has come to dwell with the Israelites, they must become and remain a holy people, a people set apart for God. They must live in a way that reflects the holiness and closeness of God among them. God says, "I, the LORD, am your God. You shall make and keep yourselves holy, because I am holy" (Lev 11:44). "Be holy, for I, the LORD, your God, am holy" (19:2).

Holiness has both a positive and a negative aspect. It is an attachment to God, a way of living that gives honor to God and that recognizes the sacredness of others. Holiness is also a separation from whatever is unholy, impure, unclean, or sinful. Everything dedicated to God—the place of worship, the priests, and the feasts—were set aside from ordinary life and consecrated.

The first part of the book, Leviticus 1–7, describes the rituals for different kinds of sacrifices and offerings. It includes directions for burnt offerings (holocausts), grain offerings, communion sacrifices, purification offerings, and reparation offerings. Israel's sacrifices express gratitude for God's gifts by offering a portion of them back to God. They also demonstrate a recognition of sinfulness and a desire to be restored to a right relationship with God.

The second section, Leviticus 8–10, describes the ordination ritual for Aaron, the brother of Moses, and the sons of Aaron. Since Aaron is from the tribe of Levi, he and his descendants are set apart to be the priests for Israel. Although all the people of God are called to holiness, the priests are further set apart to be the facilitators of the holiness of all. As such, they serve as mediators between God and God's people by leading worship and directing the Israelites in the rituals that structure their lives.

The third part, Leviticus 11–16, is the code of laws regarding legal purity. The foundation of many of these laws remains obscure, but so many of them are related to a deep respect for blood and sexuality. Israel knows that life is a holy mystery with its source in God and that

life is intimately connected with blood and sexuality. The loss of any bodily fluids represents in some way a loss of life and so renders one unclean. Often the state of being clean or unclean, pure or impure, is not related to moral choices, but is rather a ritual reality concerned with one's condition for coming into contact with God in worship.

The final section, Leviticus 17–26, is the collection of holiness laws. These regulations concern all aspects of Israel's existence as a holy people whose life is oriented toward the worship of God. In addition to moral laws, Israel has its calendar of feasts to help it recognize the holiness of time. Every week, the Sabbath must be observed. Every year, Israel celebrates the feasts of Passover (Pesach), Pentecost (Shavuot), New Year (Rosh Hashanah), Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), and Tabernacles (Succoth). Then every seventh year, the Sabbatical Year, provides for a time of rest even for the fields, and every seventh Sabbatical year (every fifty years) brings the Jubilee year, a time of reconciliation and renewal for all of Israel.

All of the legislation of Leviticus is intended to order Israel's life with God. It deals with the reality of an all-holy God living in the midst of a less-than-holy people. It teaches them that God is the source of all life and holiness. All that relates to sin and death is kept apart from the presence of God. God alone has the power to completely conquer sin and death, a promise that God will make throughout the history of his people in the land.

From the Mountain to the Promised Land

The book of Numbers takes its name from the census or numbering of the people that begins the book. This fourth book of the Torah tells the story of Israel's journey from Mount Sinai, through the wilderness, and finally to the plains of Moab, just outside the Promised Land.

The first ten chapters of Numbers takes place at Mount Sinai, where the people of Israel have been encamped since their encounter with God on the mountain. While Leviticus

details the organization of Israel's worship, these pages of Numbers itemize the organization of Israel's community. A census is taken of the men in each tribe who are able to serve in the army, as this group of former slaves becomes a well-ordered force ready for military conquest of the Promised Land.

The tribe of Levi, the priests, is exempted from military service, but their duties are described as central to the life of Israel. Their responsibilities are centered on the ark of the covenant and the tabernacle, the dwelling of God in the midst of the people of Israel. As the final preparations are made to continue the journey, God gives to Aaron and his sons the priestly blessing upon Israel, with its threefold invocation of God's holy name.

The LORD bless you and keep you!

The LORD let his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you!

The LORD look upon you kindly and give you peace! (Num 6:24-26)

As the Israelites set out from Mount Sinai, the narrative takes up again where Exodus left off. The LORD who bore his people on eagle's wings must now teach them how to fly. As they journey through the wilderness, they are led by the guiding presence of God manifested in a column of cloud by day and a column of fire by night. But despite having God in their midst, soon the Israelites begin to complain about the hardships of desert travel.

God's people continually face two temptations along the way. The first is the lure of stopping and settling in place. Although God gives them periodic places of rest along the journey, they are forbidden to settle down for too long. God continually called them from the securities of the present into the unknown risks of the future. The second enticement is turning back to Egypt. The past looks attractive because at least it was secure and predictable. The Israelites were challenged to remember the past, but only in order to live better in the future, not to avoid the future.

The lessons that Israel learns in its wilderness narrative are lasting and recurrent in every

age of their covenanted life with God. For later generations who hear these accounts, they serve as both warning and encouragement along the way. Getting Israel out of Egypt is much easier than getting Egypt out of the hearts of God's people. God tests and challenges them along the journey in order to extract their slave attitude and victim mentality, teaching them to trust and filling them with the divine spirit of liberty and the fullness of life.

The worst crisis on the journey comes after Moses has sent a team of scouts to spy out the land of Canaan to which the Israelites are traveling. The scouts report that the land is indeed fertile and fruitful. They carry back a cluster of grapes so large that it requires two men to carry it on a pole between them, and they declare that it is a land flowing with milk and honey. However, they also report that the people of the land are strong and their cities are fortified. The scouts state that they felt like mere grasshoppers in comparison to these people.

The report generates fear among the people, a dread that surmounts the people's trust in God. The Israelites begin to weep and despair of ever reaching their destination. They see only their temporal situation: they are just runaway slaves and cannot hope to accomplish what God is calling them to do. Complaining bitterly they question God's motives, and rebelling against God, they decide to choose a new leader to lead them back to Egypt. This plan marks a rejection of their covenant with God. Once again, only Moses's pleading with God prevents their destruction.

But God declares that none of this faithless generation will enter the land. As a result, the Israelites are made to wander in the wilderness for forty years. Throughout the Bible, the number forty, whether it be forty days or forty years, is a time of testing and preparation for what God is going to do next. The entire generation that was numbered in the census that began the book of Numbers will perish in the wilderness, while their children, the next generation, will one day enter the land God has promised them.

As the long journey continues, the murmurings and rebellion of the Israelites continually

threaten their covenant. They must learn to trust their future to God and to take on a whole new approach to life. The desert period is a time of probation, a time to adjust their attitude of slavery, overcome their fears, and take on a new set of values. God wants them to change their victim mentality and take on the values and lifestyle of a holy nation, God's special possession.



The Final Testament of Moses

The final book of the Pentateuch is Deuteronomy. Its setting is the Plains of Moab across the Jordan River, with the Israelites encamped and on the verge of entering the Promised Land. Moses will not enter the land with them, but will die here. Most of the book takes the form of several eloquent speeches given by Moses to the people on the eve of his death. The book is a restatement, explanation, and further development of much of the Pentateuch. By reminding the Israelites of their past and preparing them for the future, he urges them to be faithful to the covenant.

In his first speech (Deut 1–4), Moses reviews the events of the past forty years, from Mount Sinai to the present moment. He tells the new generation of the important lessons learned from the experiences of their parents'

generation. This interpersonal union that God has formed with them demands an exclusive worship of the LORD. Israel's constant temptation throughout history will be the worship of other gods and idols. The God who brought Israel out of slavery is the one God.

This is why you must now acknowledge and fix in your heart, that the LORD is God in the heavens above and on earth below, and that there is no other. And you must keep his statutes and commandments which I command you today, that you and your children after you may prosper, and that you may have long life on the land which the LORD, your God, is giving you forever. (Deut 4:39-40)

The future well-being of God's people in the land will depend on their loving and serving God from the heart.

The second address (Deut 5–28) is a restatement and expansion of God's commandments with applications for their future life in the land. Moses reminds the Israelites that the Ten Commandments and all the decrees are rooted in their relationship with God. Following in the way of the covenant is the way to love God with your whole being. The *Shema* forms their daily prayer.

Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone! Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your God, with your whole heart, and with all your whole being, and with your whole strength. Take to heart these words which I command you today. Keep repeating them to your children. Recite them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them on your arm as a sign and let them be as a pendant on your forehead. Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates. (Deut 6:4-9)

The purpose of this book and indeed the whole Torah of Israel is to make the Israelites know how much God loves them and how much God wants them to return that love. God's love for Israel is demonstrated by liberating them from slavery, guiding them through the wilderness, and bringing them into the Promised Land.

Israel's love for God is shown through an active obedience that involves their whole life and is motivated by wholehearted love.

Moses, who knows the challenges that God's people will face as they enter the land, is passionately urging them to remain faithful to the covenant, to the loving and exclusive relationship that God has established with them. Moses knows that if the people of Israel continually repeat these words and allow these words to form their lives, teaching their children to do the same, then they will remain faithfully committed to their God. The covenant should shape their thoughts and actions every day of their lives. If they see these words of instruction when they come and go from their homes, they will remember God's covenant and experience the blessings of a faithful life.

The detailed legislation recounted in Moses's address brings this vision of loving God with one's whole self down to the particular instances of daily life. Living under God's reign has implications for the whole life of the people in the land. Its obligations are both individual and communal—personal, social, spiritual, and political.

In addressing the new generation, Moses urges them to "remember." By remembering, God's people form identity. They become a part of all that God has done in the past. Every generation of Israel must pass on the tradition to their children. They must remember continually, visually, and tangibly, by binding the words of the Torah on their foreheads and on their arms, and upon the door and gates of their dwellings.

By remembering, the past becomes real in the present, and life can be lived more faithfully and genuinely. Each generation is able to share fully in the formative events of Israel. The moment that is most important for the book of Deuteronomy is not the past; it is "this day." The critical time for every person is "today."

The LORD, our God, made a covenant with us at Horeb; not with our ancestors did he make this covenant, but with us, all of us who are alive here this day. (Deut 5:2-3)

This day the LORD, your God, is commanding you to observe these statutes and ordinances. Be careful, then, to observe them with all your whole heart and with your whole being. Today you have accepted the LORD's agreement: he will be your God, and you will walk in his ways, observe his statutes, commandments, and ordinances, and obey his voice. And today the LORD has accepted your agreement: you will be a people specially his own, as he promised you, you will keep all his commandments, and he will set you high in praise and renown and glory above all nations he has made, and you will be a people holy to the LORD, your God, as he promised. (Deut 26:16-19)

The final address of Moses before his death (Deut 29–33) presents the Israelites with the choice that will determine their future. If they obey the Torah, loving God and walking in God's ways, they will have life and prosperity. If, however, they refuse to listen to God's word and turn to serve other gods, they will have death and doom.

I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the LORD, your God, obeying his voice, and holding fast to him. For that will mean life for you, a long life to live on the land which the LORD swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give to them. (Deut 30:19-20)

Lastly, after appointing Joshua as his successor, Moses goes up to Mount Nebo, across the Jordan River from the Promised Land. He looks at the land from afar, and he knows that the new generation will live in the land. Then Moses dies and is buried on the mountain. The book concludes, "Since then no prophet has arisen in Israel like Moses" (Deut 34:10). He

was the leader of the people, a mediator before God, a wonderworker, teacher, and Israel's greatest prophet. The Torah, given to Israel through Moses, would form the foundation of Israel's life through the centuries.

The final editors of the Pentateuch bring together many narratives and traditions from Israel's early history to give us an account of where the Israelites have come from, who they are, and to what they are destined. Genesis shows us Israel's origins; Exodus shows us Israel's birth as a people; Leviticus describes the holy nature of Israel; Numbers describes the organization of Israel; and Deuteronomy shows us the spirit of Israel. The dynamism of these biblical stories always points toward the future.

The promises made by God will be fulfilled only when the blessings of God are extended to the whole of humanity. The God of the Torah is the one who overcomes chaos, death, slavery, and injustice. The LORD is the one who offers freedom and life, who brings his chosen ones into an experience of intimacy with him so that through them all the nations of the earth may be blessed.

The Torah is both narrative and legislation, both story and ethics. The more God's people understand who God is, the more they will know who they are. By hearing and remembering the story, God's people will know how to live. Just as God creates life out of chaos, God's people are to be life-givers and care for life. Just as God frees from slavery and oppression, God's people are to seek justice and liberate others. Just as God is faithful to the covenant, God's people are to be faithful to that relationship of intimate love.

EXPLORING LESSON ONE

1. The stories found at the beginning of Scripture are stories of spiritual, religious truth rather than historic, scientific fact. After reading about the stories found in Genesis 1–11, what are some of the central truths about God and human beings that are taught here?

2. In the covenant with Abraham, God promises land, numerous descendants, and the assurance that through Abraham, “all the families of the earth will find blessing.” Many centuries later, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke trace Jesus’ genealogy back to Abraham (Matt 1:1-2 and Luke 3:34). What connection can you make here? How is Jesus the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham about “all the families of the earth”?

3. The story of Joseph and his jealous brothers (Gen 37) develops into an account of Joseph’s rise to favor in the house of Pharaoh and his reunion with his family in Egypt (Gen 42–47). When has God done something unexpected in your life, leading to an improvement or a reunion?

4. What name does God give when Moses asks God to identify his divine name (Exod 3:13-14), and what does this name convey? How is this name usually written in English versions of the Bible?

5. What is the primary event of salvation for the Israelites? What does this event tell them about their God?

6. Exodus 6:2-8 can be read as a kind of summary of much of the Pentateuch (also known as the Torah). Summarize the promises God makes to his people in these verses from Exodus.

7. a) Read Exodus 16, which tells the story of the LORD feeding his people with manna in the desert. How does this story illustrate God's relationship with his people?

b) How can we apply this story to our lives as Christians? How has God nourished the church? How has God nourished you?

8. How would you describe the covenant relationship between God and Israel? How did Israel experience and live the covenant? (In other words, was the covenant a burden for Israel? Were the laws considered restrictive?)

Lesson One

9. a) What is the biblical understanding of “holiness” (Lev 11:44; 19:2)? How did Israel live this holiness in concrete ways?

b) How are you being invited to live “holiness” in a biblical sense?

10. What were the two main temptations the Israelites faced as they travelled through the desert toward the Promised Land? Do you face either of these temptations in your life?

11. This lesson ends with the following insight: “The more God’s people understand who God is, the more they will know who they are.” What have the Israelites learned about God? What does this tell them (and us) about how they (and we) are to live?

CLOSING PRAYER

Prayer

The LORD bless you and keep you!

*The LORD let his face shine upon you, and be
gracious to you!*

*The LORD look upon you kindly and give
you peace! (Num 6:24-26)*

O God, we ask this priestly blessing of Israel upon all your people, and especially upon those who gather to share in the blessings of your word. May our faces shine with your light and graciousness, and may we bring your kindness and peace to those most in need in our world. Today we pray especially for . . .