

Torah & Covenant

Traditions that weave Israel's foundations

DISCOVERING PENTATEUCH

Foundations and joy

'I find delight in your commandments,
because I love them.
I revere your commandments,
which I love,
I will meditate on your statutes.'
(Ps 119:47-48)

It comes as something of a shock to discover that the longest Psalm in the Psalter, 119, is made up of 176 verses full of enthusiastic and joyful praise for God's Law. It is startling to see Hasidic Jews holding scrolls of the Torah aloft as they dance around the synagogue with Pentecostal fervour. For the contemporary Christian the very idea of the law and the commandments seems to run counter to the theme of 'grace' which is surely central to the gospel and the new covenant. Added to which when they turn to the text of the Pentateuch they are confronted with a strange literature of stories and instructions from millennia and worlds gone by which appear to have little or no bearing on the life of modern times. Is it little wonder that these documents are virtually a closed book to most Christians today. In what sense can these writings and instructions be God's word to Christians today? How can one explain the euphoria expressed by Jews, both ancient and modern, towards these documents?

The title 'Pentateuch' literally means the 'five books'. It refers specifically to the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures; Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The first and foundational section of the Hebrew canon. They are also referred to as the 'Torah' [divine instruction] or as 'the books of Moses' or simply 'Moses' [the central figure and traditional author of the writings].

From earliest times the traditions that have been woven to form these documents have been seen as the foundation of God's revelation of himself to his people and humanity. It is these documents that give Israel her understanding, and the origin of every aspect of her life is found there. Through the unfolding story and the specific commands, through the poetry and the prophecy, God's character, will and purposes are revealed. Here is the source of life! Is it any wonder it has provoked a dance of joy throughout the Jewish centuries.



Christians and commandments

Christians appear to face a paradox with the commandments of the Pentateuch. The sacrificial demands, the dietary laws, the purity requirements etc all reflect a cultural and spiritual environment quite different from that of the church and the new covenant. In Jesus the temple and sacrifices are obsolete (cf John 2:19), all foods are clean (cf Mark 7:19) and we are cleansed in a way that the hygiene requirements knew nothing of (cf John 15:3). Nevertheless, the Pentateuch is part of the whole body of God's revelation and recorded scripture, and Jesus himself said, 'I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished' (Matt 5:18).

The extent to which the law still applies has always been a point of tension between Christians, but the following observations and principles appear to be important in our reading and application of its truth:

- The law was the basis of the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel; it was the most wonderful gift to Israel which brought great blessing when it was obeyed;
- The Hebrew covenant is not the new covenant so its instructions are not automatically binding upon us; both require loyalty but the means of showing it have largely changed;
- Many of the stipulations of the Hebrew covenant have not been renewed in the new covenant, often there are similar themes but usually different expression;
- In Jesus there is a new law, it does not abolish the old law but rather fulfils it (cf Luke 16:16-17);
- The spirit and the heart of the Hebrew law continues in renewed form in the new covenant; 'Love God with all your heart soul and mind' (Deut 6:5), 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (Lev 19:18);
- The teaching of Jesus points us to the spirit behind the commandments; e.g. not murder but anger, not adultery but lust - this is the real challenge;
- The Pentateuch is still God's word to us even though it is no longer God's command to us; it is part of the story of God's self revelation, it points us towards his character which is now fully revealed in Jesus.

DIVERSITY AND INTEGRITY

The Book of the Law

As it stands in the scriptures today the 'Pentateuch' is a single integrated work in five volumes, it is not a collection of five different books. The division of the 'Torah' into five parts most likely came about by a combination of:

- The nature of the subject matter;
- The physical limits of the scrolls.



So we have five documents that form a unity, but we also recognise that each of the five units, as historically preserved, have also developed their own particular character. While continually remembering that each is part of the whole, we also note their distinctives and are equally aware of the strands that run through and beyond every part.

There is also a sense in which the 'Torah' is more than simply a five document unity, but in fact part of a nine volume work which runs from Genesis to Kings; from 'Creation' to the 'Fall of Jerusalem' in 587 BCE.

The unity and integrity of the present form of the Pentateuch is also emphasised in Hebrew the titles of each of the five books. These are not distinct labels added to each book, but rather they are formed from the opening word or phrase with which each book begins. This emphasises the unbroken flow from one document to the other:

- Genesis: 'In the beginning'
- Exodus: 'Names'
- Leviticus: 'And he called'
- Numbers: 'In the wilderness'
- Deuteronomy: 'Words'

The titles used in our English editions of the Bible are derived from the titles used in the Greek translations that attempted to describe the main subject in each document. However, in doing so it destroyed the sense of integrity that the Hebrew approach provides.

Origins and questions

Traditionally the Pentateuch was spoken of as 'the books of Moses', or simply as 'Moses', who was also seen as the author of the whole. A close examination of the text suggests that this is not only impossible, but that all the evidence suggests the literary collection grew, developed and was edited into its present form over a long period of time. There are many and differing reasons for this:

- The person of Moses is only ever spoken about in the third person, as one observed rather than the observer and he would not have written about his death (Deuteronomy 34).
- In Gen 36:31-39 there is a reference to the kings of Edom who ruled, 'before there were any kings in Israel'; only an author from the time of the monarchy or later could have written this.
- In Gen 12:6; 13:7 the author of Abraham's story speaks of 'the Canaanites *still* living in the land', and in Gen 21:34 and Exod 13:17 Canaan is called 'Philistia'; again such references demand a date much later than Moses.
- There are duplicate stories which suggest quite different traditions; the naming of Beersheba (cf Gen 21:31 with 26:33) and Bethel (cf Gen 28:19 with 35:15).
- There are inconsistencies; creation of animals before people (Gen 1:26-31) and people before animals (Gen 2:7-20), single pairs or seven pairs of species into the Ark (Gen 6:19-20 or 7:2), Joseph is taken to Egypt by



Ishmaelites (Gen 37:25) or Midianites (Gen 37:28) and either Ruben (Gen 37:22) or Judah (Gen 37:27) tried to rescue him. Here are clearly quite different traditions.

- In Exod 20:24 the sacrifices can be offered in 'every place', while in Deut 12:14 'only in the one place'; in Exod 28:1 only Aaron's family may offer sacrifices while Deut 18:6-7 allows any Levite to do so; the Passover lamb is to be roasted (Exod 12:8-9), but it is to be boiled (Deut 16:7). Again quite different traditions.
- We are told Moses is the first to know God's name as Yahweh (Exod 6:2-3), but it is used from the earliest times (Gen 4:26); the names Yahweh and Elohim are used in different ways by the writer(s).

These observations in no way damage the integrity of the message of the writings as a whole, but they show that the Pentateuch could not have been the work of one author or of one historical period. Close reading of the text, identifying seams in the narrative (some of which have been mentioned above) has led scholars to identify four major sources:

- J (Yahwistic source) - usually dated to the 10th or 9th century BCE;
- E (Elohistic source) - usually dated to the 9th or 8th century BCE, although a substantial minority of scholars remain sceptical of E;
- D (Deuteronomistic source) - 7th century BCE;
- P (Priestly source) - 6th to 5th century BCE.

There is widespread agreement that the Pentateuch in its final canonical form should be dated to the 5th century BCE.

Currently there is a movement away from detailed source-critical considerations and much more attention is given to the narrative shape of the whole. Within this development particular attention is given to the redactional (editorial) activities of the Deuteronomic and Priestly traditions:

- Torah as covenantal obedience (Deuteronomist)
- Torah as cultic activity (Priestly)

There is also more attention to the theological dimensions of the text recognising that '[t]orah ... is not simply a set of commands ... it is also *a rich, dense field of imagination in which Israel is free to receive its life, playfully, as the people of God*'.¹

In summary:

- The Pentateuch would have been made up of oral and written traditions from various sources.

¹ Brueggemann, *Theology*, 590, his emphasis.



- Moses was clearly linked with the writing of some of the tradition (cf Exod 24:4-8; Num 33:2; Deut 31:19-29).
- Excavations at Ugarit show that religious technical terms used in the Torah were also quite common in Canaan long before the Israelite conquest.
- Joshua speaks about 'the book of the Law' (1:8; 8:31).
- Samuel wrote down the 'rights and duties of kingship' which must have been part of the process; his link with the sanctuaries must have put him in touch with most of the traditions (1 Sam 7:16; 10:25).
- It was required reading for the rulers and the nation (Deut 31:11).
- It was appealed to by the prophets as the basis of covenant life.
- It received pledged obedience during Josiah's reign (2 Kgs 23:2ff).
- The nation committed itself to 'obey the Law of the Lord' during the time of Nehemiah/Ezra (Ezra 7:6).

Structure and dynamic

Whatever their development the five books of the Pentateuch now form an organic unity; this is reflected in their rabbinic title the 'five fifths of the Law'. However, with the exception of Genesis and Deuteronomy, which are special in both their material and in their position at the beginning and end of the Torah, the present divisions between the books do not illustrate the natural flow of the material. An overall structure of the Pentateuch would be best seen as follows to draw out points of transition:

BEGINNINGS Primeval history Patriarchal history	Prologue 1-11 12-50	Genesis 1-50
EXODUS Preparations The 'Way Out' 10-19	Towards Sinai 1-9	Exodus 1-19
COVENANT Decalogue and Covenant Tabernacle and Priesthood Idolatry Tabernacle regulations Sacrifice Consecration of Priest Cleanliness Day of Atonement Morality and Cleanliness Vows and Tithes Numberings and Laws	Revelation at Sinai Exodus 20-24 25-31 32-34 35-40 Leviticus 1-7 8-10 11-15 16 17-26 27 Numbers 1-9	Exodus 20 - Numbers 9
WANDERINGS Sinai to Kadesh Kadesh to Moab	Towards Moab 10-20 21-36	Numbers 10-36



RETROSPECT	Epilogue	Deuteronomy 1-34
The Acts of God	1- 4:43	
The Law of God	4:44-26	
Covenant with God	27-30	
Joshua and the Death of Moses	31-34	

This 'bird's eye view' of the Pentateuch, shows where the stress and emphasis lies, and reveals the beautiful symmetry to the overall structure of the writings, which becomes an important vehicle for their message:

The central all cohesive event around which the whole of the Pentateuch fits together is the covenant revelation of Yahweh at Sinai and all the instructions and directions that flow from this epoch making divine act (Exodus 20 – Numbers 9).

Either side of the Exodus event is the dynamic movement:

- Towards Sinai (Exodus 1-19) in which Yahweh displays his saving power upon Israel and shows his judgment upon the Egyptians.
- Away from Sinai (Numbers 10-36) in which Yahweh declares his covenant love in every emergency and shows his judgment against apostasy.

Either end of the Pentateuch as a whole there are the two monumental documents which serve as a prologue and an epilogue, preface and conclusion to the entire literature:

- Genesis reveals the backdrop to the events of the Exodus.
- Deuteronomy reflects upon the impact of the events of the Exodus.

Within this broad and carefully integrated framework the divergent traditions and intricate detail of the text work themselves out. Each of the five scrolls fits into this broad framework, yet each also has its own distinctive character and within each document there are further strands of different traditions from which the whole has been woven. All this should be a reminder that the study and interpretation of the Torah demands sensitivity and constant awareness.

LAW AND GRACE

Law is grace

For so many Christians the Pentateuch is perceived to be a book of 'laws'; therefore a cold legalistic set of documents standing in contrast to the extravagant 'grace' of the new covenant. But such an attitude fails to really understand the true nature of 'torah' and the fact that all the events and instructions of the Pentateuch are a constant demonstration of God's grace. The simple fact is that until we understand the astonishing nature of grace in the Hebrew covenant we are unlikely to fully appreciate the extraordinary



nature of grace of the new covenant.

As we have seen so clearly, the centrepiece of the Pentateuch is Yahweh's demonstration of power and love in the events of the Exodus. He shows that he is the sovereign Lord of history and nature in his saving act of freeing his people from Egypt, and he shows his grace and mercy in its consummation in the covenant making at Mount Sinai. The total event is alive with grace.

The instructions God gives are not steps towards legalism. The word 'torah' comes from the root 'to teach'; it is a family word, the loving direction and guidance given by a parent to their child. Once again it is alive with grace and explains something of the joy the Hebrew community feel about the words.

So the Pentateuch throbs with God's grace. He calls Israel into being as a nation, he acts constantly on their behalf, repeats his promises, seals his relationship by Covenant, and gives direction by clear instructions. The powerful demonstrations of the Exodus brought Israel to the realisation that Yahweh was 'Redeemer', which in turn led them to understand Yahweh as both 'Creator' and 'Sustainer' of the universe as well. Their understanding of Yahweh as the God of 'grace' deepened their understanding that he was also the God of 'nature'. His demand to keep his instructions is itself 'grace', for he desires only what is good for Israel and wills her obedience will enable her to reach her potential in God.

Grace at the heart of Torah

Exod 19:4-6 is a key passage, just prior to the giving of the Decalogue, which is taken up in the NT in 1 Pet 2:9. In this text:

- God takes the initiative in an act of grace (v. 4);
- Covenantal obedience is the appropriate response to God's initiative (v. 5a);
- Relationship with God is central (vv. 5b-6):
 - treasured possession;
 - priestly kingdom;
 - holy nation.

Torah as a way of life

Deut 13:5c speaks of 'the way in which Yahweh your God commanded you to walk'. Covenantal life before God thus involved:

- A walk (*hālak*) - this speaks of a journey of discovery, not a static, prescriptive, blind obedience;
- in the way (*derek*) - cf Acts 9:2 'any who belonged to the Way';
- following Yahweh's direction (*torah*)

Torah strategy

God calls a people (Exod 19:4-6) and gives them detailed instructions on how to live covering their moral, civil and cultic life (*torah*) in order that they should



be a model to the nations. Whenever the covenant is broken God sends prophets to call the people back to covenantal obedience.

Torah's subversive character

As **God's** instruction torah is fundamentally subversive of the worlds structures:

- 'No other gods' (Mammon, Mars, Venus, Gaia, Dionysus, etc.).
- The gods of this world are fundamentally unjust (Psalm 82).
- By way of contrast, torah fundamentally concerns justice, mercy and faith (Matt 23:23).
- Jesus' attitude is summed up in Matt 22:37-40 (quoting Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18).

Law and codes

The covenant at Sinai, fruit of the Exodus, became the foundation stone of Israel's life; it give them their moral base, spiritual force and missionary destiny. They are the only ancient nation to centre their whole national existence upon a covenant relationship with a single deity.

The Torah as we have it now is an anthology of laws relating to different times and situations within the whole spectrum of Hebrew history. Scholars have identified within the books of the law four, five or more different collections of laws that have now been woven into the totality of the Pentateuch. How these law codes originally related to each other is uncertain and our view on this will depend upon how we believe the literature as a whole reached its final form.

Decalogue (Exod 20:1-17)

These ten two-word phrases, which have subsequently been somewhat expanded, form the centrepiece of the covenant demands. They are not laws in the typical sense for they have no penalties attached to them; they are a bill of rights, a charter of fundamental human rights, a policy statement of behaviour in the light of relationship with God.

Book of the Covenant (Exod 20:22-23:33)

The heart of covenant is enshrined in the 'book of the Covenant' (cf Exod 24:7). This has the 'Ten Words' as its focus and base and has grown around this living centre. This is the oldest Hebrew law code. The material appears to follow that of the 'Decalogue', and it has been suggested that it should be seen as providing a 'running Midrash' (commentary) on it. It is a mixture of civil and criminal law, ritual rules and humanitarian demands.

Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-26)

This is about ritual purity and moral worth. It calls people to holiness with the words, 'You shall be holy, for I Yahweh your God am holy' (19:2). It often strengthens the force of its instructions with a reminder, 'I am Yahweh'. Its spirit and themes may have been a strong influence upon Ezekiel.



Priestly laws (Exodus 25-30; 35-40; Leviticus 1-16; Numbers 1-9)

Found throughout the remainder of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. There are instructions about the tent of worship, its contents and the priests. There are regulations about worship, food, domestic and personal hygiene.

Deuteronomy

As we shall see below here we find the themes of earlier law codes amplified and applied to meet changing circumstances in Israel's life. Some scholars believe it formed a liturgy for covenant renewal when the nation committed themselves afresh to God. The 'sermon' style portrays its popular style and sets the scene for presenting the Torah.

Law is life

Hebrew law was seen as the standing stones and stepping-stones of life. It is here we see what the people believed about God and what he required of them. That is why the Pentateuch interweaves narrative with instruction. Torah breaks into life and is born out of life; the stories create the background and environment for the direction and teaching and show the positive results of obedience and the effects of rebellion. Knowing God can never be the blind obedience to rules, it is experiencing God in the personal and social dimensions of life.

Laws were born out of Israel's close relationship with God and they broadly took two forms:

Casuistic laws

These were 'precedents'; case laws expressed in conditional terms, they were concerned with the everyday situations that occurred in rural life, they gave guidance as to how particular disputes and difficulties should be resolved:

'When fire breaks out and catches in thorns so that the stacked grain or the standing corn or the field is consumed, the one who started the fire shall make full restitution'.
(Exod 22:6)

Apodictic laws

These are 'statutes'; prohibitions expressed in absolute terms, they were based upon a simple statement of God's nature as he had revealed himself and had been experienced within their history. These laws formed the heart of the covenant demands and were not open for negotiation, they were to be obeyed:

'You shall not murder.
You shall not commit adultery.



You shall not steal'.
(Exod 20:13-15)

For all the 613 commandments that the Rabbis have identified in the Pentateuch the Hebrew scriptures does not contain comprehensive legislation to meet every possible situation. These laws give the essential principles and examples of how justice should be administered. It is up to the community to live justly in the spirit of what has been clearly stated.

FOCUS 1: LEVITICUS

Framework

To the modern mind the book of Leviticus is one of the strangest and most difficult of the biblical books. Its highly detailed instructions about sacrifice and behaviour written in what can only be described as 'technical spiritual language' is so foreign to us, different again from the colour and emotion of either the stories or the prophetic oracles. It therefore comes, as something of a surprise to learn that traditionally Leviticus was the first of the biblical books taught to Jewish children.

However, it should not be a surprise that Leviticus was a child's primary biblical text, for understanding this book is fundamental to any understanding of God's revelation to humanity. Its laws are related to the worship in the tabernacle, and later the temple, its instructions are a natural continuation to the events at Sinai as they are a witness to the power of God in human concerns, giving direction to spiritual life. The reason why its contents appear so 'technical' is because they were the special responsibility of the Levitical priesthood.

Central to both the instructions and the literary structure of Leviticus is the awesome and central event of the 'Day of Atonement' - '*Yom Kippur*' (Ch 16). It is 'Atonement' that draws together all the meaning of the other rituals taught in the document. The book itself falls into two clear halves, with this crucial act of 'Atonement' at its centre. Each half of the book emphasises a major theme that finds its focal point in '*Yom Kippur*'; there is clear symmetry between the two halves:

- Ch 1-15: removal of the defilement that separates people from God;
- Ch 17-27: means by which disrupted fellowship with God can be restored.

The contents of Leviticus are essential to the whole fabric of Hebrew social, moral and religious life. To the Christian it provides the necessary background for a theological understanding of the ministry of Jesus, and in fact the New Testament letter to the Hebrews is in many ways a new covenant commentary on the book of Leviticus. Jews prize Leviticus because it contains binding regulations about sin, atonement, sanctification and physical health. Christians have accepted its instructions on marriage relations.



Sacrifice and cleanliness

Holiness is the essence of the covenant. It showed that the people belonged to Yahweh and declared the demand that his character was to be demonstrated in their lives. However, whenever the covenant was broken the relationship could be restored by sacrifice (see especially ch 1-7). Hebrew sacrifice shared a similar expression as pagan sacrifice with a desire for fellowship with God, atonement for defilement and the assurance of God's blessing. However, the Hebrews were the only people who had sacrifices as a result of their covenant relationship with God; no other nation had anything like it. All other peoples offered sacrifices in an attempt to appease their gods, the Hebrews were given sacrifice as both a gift and a means by which to put relationships between themselves and God right. All sacrifices were to make 'atonement' (cover) for the person making the sacrifice. The animal victim was a substitute for the human sinner, its life effecting vicarious atonement (Lev 17:11). Behind every sacrifice must be seen the strong embrace of 'covenant grace'.

The offerings involved in sacrifice were required to meet particular standards of cleanliness; they were restricted to particular species of birds and animals. The underlying principle was that of 'property' (cf 2 Sam 24:24). Only domesticated animals could be used, because wild ones already belong to God (Ps 50:10). Sacrifice involves the cost of giving something precious. Vegetables are the fruit of human sweat and so were acceptable, however, property wrongly acquired is unacceptable. Only the best is acceptable: male (usually), physically perfect (breeding stock) and mature. However, the economic situation of the worshipper was taken into account. Remember, Hebrew sacrifice did not remove all forms of sin; obduracy, idolatry and apostasy placed a person outside covenant mercy for which there was no sacrifice.

It could be said that 'cleanliness was next to godliness' in Hebrew society; 'cleanliness' was certainly a central part of Jewish life (cf Lev 11:1-47). It must be clear, however, that the distinction between 'clean' and 'unclean' had nothing whatever to do with the 'magical' practices of primitive peoples, it was rather a positive statement of dietary principles, hygiene and good preventative medicine to ensure the well being of the covenant people. 'Cleanliness' must not be made equivalent to 'holiness'; cleanliness is a negative statement that implies that the positive state of holiness is attainable. The link between faith and health in the Torah emphasised the wholeness of Yahweh's gift of covenant life; 'I will put none of these diseases upon you' (Exod 15:26). God's grace included freeing them from much of the disease afflicting their pagan neighbours. If Israel lived out covenant life to the full they would have immunity from disease that the magic of paganism could never provide. The Torah has seven principles for hygienic living:

- Sabbath for individuals (Lev 23:3) and land (Lev 25:5);
- Diet (Lev 11:1-47);
- Circumcision (Gen 17:11);
- Sexual relationships (Lev 18:6);
- Sexual hygiene (Lev 15:2);
- Purification rituals (Lev 1:9 etc);
- Sanitation (Deut 23:12-14).



Diet regulations simply indicate food that is beneficial (and that is not). All clean animals are exclusively vegetarian (less likely to transmit infection). Pollution of foodstuff and water are also to be avoided. Preventative diet and hygiene is the only satisfactory approach.

FOCUS 2: DEUTERONOMY

Framework

Israel is poised on the threshold of the Promised Land, her wanderings at an end. The days of their great leader Moses are also drawing to a close. The book of Deuteronomy is written as a collection of the final addresses given by Moses to Israel on the plains of Moab. However, material from earlier periods is probably also included. In Deuteronomy the essentials of Leviticus (which was written for the Priesthood) are rewritten in a way to make it much easier for the ordinary person to understand; it has been described as a 'people's Torah'. In every sense it reveals the very heart of covenant life, while its language is simple its concepts are profound. In so many ways Deuteronomy is the 'John's gospel' of the Hebrew scriptures. When Jesus silences the tempter he uses passages from Deuteronomy on every occasion (8:3; 6:16; 6:13), showing he loved the book and knew much if not all of it by heart. Deuteronomy is one of the most frequently quoted books in the New Testament (along with Genesis, Isaiah and Psalms), in fact only six books fail to allude to it directly (John, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Timothy, 1 & 2 Peter). There is also a close link between Deuteronomy and the 'Book of the Covenant'.

In unsophisticated terms Deuteronomy gives clear exposition of Israel's faith; it is the only book in the Hebrew Scriptures that attempts to do this. All the basic questions are faced:

- What is the meaning of God's great saving acts in preserving his chosen people?
- What is the meaning of the Covenant and the revelations of God's will within it?
- What particular temptations will be faced in the promised land to which they are going?

To capture the spirit of the book reflectively read Deut 10:12-22; it has been said that if these words do not move you then few words in scripture will!

Themes and Theology

The major characteristics of the theology of Deuteronomy are:

Monotheism

There is a pure monotheism, 'Yahweh alone is God' (4:35). Israel is to be



totally devoted to him, having nothing to do with her pagan environment. No other God has done for a people what Yahweh has done (4:32-34). No other nation is as close to their God or has the righteous Torah (4:6-8).

Power

Yahweh's power is seen in both his grace and his jealousy. This power should draw forth when his people contemplate what he has done; he is experienced in their inner spirit as they respond to him in obedience. All Yahweh has done is the product of his grace, which has strength and sternness, he cannot be presumed upon or trifled with. God is righteous, jealous, a consuming fire to those at enmity with him (4:15-24).

Election

Israel is an elect nation, specially chosen, there is clear purpose behind God's choosing of them. They have no grounds for feeling self-righteous; they were chosen when they were few and weak (7:7). They have no inherent righteousness, they have been rebellious since the first day (9:24). God's choice is mysterious, based on God's love and promises to their fathers (7:8; 9:5). Election is not for privilege (though this may happen), but for participation in the covenant, to be unique among the nations.

Divine destiny

God is directing Israel's destiny. Her suffering in the wilderness was the discipline of a father to a child. They had to learn that everything comes from dependence on God. The gift of a land is the sign that God controls history. Conquest is due to his power. They have no natural right to the land.

Agents of judgment

The wars of conquest were a demonstration of God's power. Israel was being an agent of God's judgment on the Canaanites as well as inheriting the promises.

Two ways

The principle of the covenant is unconditional obedience. Deuteronomy has the closest pull between 'obedience' and 'security'. It presents the two ways: 'the way of life' and the 'way of death'; the choice is Israel's. There is 'promise' and 'judgment'; 'love' and 'jealousy'; 'peace' and 'the sword'.

Spirit

Much of Deuteronomy is made up of laws, all anchored in the 'Decalogue' in chapter 5. But the book continually pushes past the letter of the Law to its spirit. Torah is that which should exist between devoted friends. The 'Shema' (6:4-5) is the heart of the law. The true motivation behind all the law is relationship with God, humanity, community, brotherhood and neighbourliness. The true spirit upon which the Torah rests and which it reflects is true worship,



complete love, reverence and loyalty to God, which creates a 'pliable heart' instead of a hard heart and a stiff neck.

Prophetic and eschatological

The essentials of Deuteronomy are prophetic and eschatological; the details cannot be transported into the new covenant, but the spirit is already there. Futuristic phrases like 'go in and possess' (35 times) and 'the land which the Lord your God has given you' (34 times) are frequent. Optimism, faith and divine power are the hallmarks of its prophetic message.

PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION

Jesus and Torah

In Matt 5:17-48 Jesus clearly states that he has not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it. Nevertheless, he continually states: 'Torah said ... but I say ...' Does Jesus fulfil or abolish the law, therefore?

Specificity of commands in the Law

The very specific nature of many of the commands make it difficult to know how to apply them today.

Diversity of standards

Whilst we may commend the concern for the poor, under-privileged and immigrants contained in the law (e.g. Exod 22:21; 23:6-9; Deut 24:10-15), it is not as easy to condone its attitude to disability, illegitimacy and foreigners, for example (Deut 23:1-2, 20).

Leviticus and the cultic commands

Despite the theological reworking of Leviticus in Hebrews it is often difficult to see how to appropriate the book today.

Contemporary sensibilities

It is difficult to reconcile the perspective of torah with a number of contemporary issues. For example:

- Capital punishment
- Holy war
- The patriarchal framework
- Sexual ethics, especially homosexuality
 - Treatment of animals, especially the emphasis on animal sacrifice to
 - appease/please God



ATTEMPTS AT RESOLUTION

Reconstructionism

This position has gained popularity in some conservative circles in the United States. Reconstructionists solve the problem by insisting that society should be reconstructed according to OT law.

The law, as given through Moses, established the laws of godly society, of true development for man under God ... civil law cannot be separated from Biblical law, for the Biblical doctrine of law includes all law, civil, ecclesiastical, societal, familial, and all other forms of law. The social order which despises God's law places itself on death row: it is marked for judgment.²

This movement purports to be biblical but we have to ask to what extent this is really a Christian position in the light of Jesus.

Traditional division of the law

It has been traditional to divide the law into:

- moral law - which is still binding;
- civil law - which may or may not be binding, depending on the specific law;
- ceremonial law - which is no longer binding.

The problem with this position is twofold:

- There is a wider variety of law than the above division indicates;
- Moral, civil and ceremonial laws cannot be so sharply distinguished; many ceremonial and civil laws embody moral principles.

PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION

Christocentrism

The law must be read in the light of Jesus who affirms, fulfils, yet qualifies the law (Matt 5:17-48). Jesus himself summarises the law in terms of loving God and neighbour (Matt 22:34-40) and states that the law concerns justice, mercy and faith (Matt 23:23).

The Principle of Condescension

This views the law as an accommodation of God's ideal standards to the realities of human life. For example, the slavery laws work to make slavery work with as little injustice as possible. However, Jesus calls us back to the ideal (e.g. Mark 10:1-12 and the antitheses of Matt 5:21-48).

² R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Philipsburg: The Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company, 1973) 3–4.



The Centrality of the Decalogue

This views the ten commandments as central with all other commands flowing from them. The ten commandments can be appropriated in their entirety today.

Specificity

Specific commands, by their very specificity, provide 'models of God's purposes at work in particular ... situations which can help us to discover and to implement his purposes in other situations. Such models, *because* they are highly specific, can often stimulate our thinking and imagination more effectively than very general principles can'.³ For example, the law of gleaning in Lev 19:9-10 was an appropriate means of providing for the poor in an agrarian society. This should stimulate us to think about appropriate ways of providing for the poor and marginalised in our society.

Theological Interpretation

This takes the example of Hebrews as a theological commentary on Leviticus as paradigmatic:

- Jesus as high priest
- Sacrifice to end sacrifice
- Sabbath rest
- Jesus entering the inner sanctuary behind the curtain
- Change in priesthood (from Levitical) implies change in law
- Tent of meeting as type of heavenly sanctuary
- Jesus' death as means whereby we can enter inner sanctuary
- 'Not Sinai but Mount Zion'

Sociology and Anthropology

This uses insights from the social sciences as an interpretive grid. For example:

- Ancient Israel as a covenanted, intentional community represented a radical break with oppressive power structures of both the Egyptian empire and Canaanite city-states.⁴
- Levites as a 'revolutionary cadre' who convinced the coalition of tribes that Yahweh, who had defeated Egypt on its home ground, could defend an enlarged anti-imperial & anti-feudal order in Canaan.⁵
- Purity systems as a reflection of the cohesiveness of the social order:⁶
 - purity involves system, order & classification
 - purity of social body requires purity of physical body

³ R. Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics: How to Read the Bible Politically* (London: SPCK, 1989) 12.

⁴ N. K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979).

⁵ Gottwald, *Tribes*.

⁶ M. T. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).



Models

John Goldingay usefully suggests three models for appropriating Torah:

- Ideal and condescension (as above);
- Foundation and superstructure - the law forms a foundation for the more demanding requirements of the NT;
- Boundaries and what fills them:
 - The laws in the Hebrew Scriptures form boundary markers marking limits of acceptable behaviour: 'beyond these, one operates in unequivocally foreign territory';
 - The NT fills in 'the positive content of behavioural style and attitude that are appropriate to this country'.⁷

QUESTIONS

1. How would you explain how the 'five books' of the Torah hold together as a whole?
2. What are the fundamental revelations God gives about himself in the Pentateuch?
3. The first five books of the Hebrew scriptures (the Torah) are the foundation documents of the whole Bible. They contain stories and instruction. What do you find attractive about these writings and what do you find unattractive? Give your reasons. Why do you think these first five books are so important in Jewish and Christian thinking? What practical things do you think we could do to get people excited about reading and studying the Torah?

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