

10 Things You Should Know about the Pentateuch

1. The Pentateuch is the first act in the Bible's grand story.

Just like missing the first fifteen minutes of a movie will spoil our ability to fully enjoy its plot line, a lack of familiarity with the Pentateuch will compromise our ability to fully appreciate the Bible's overarching story. This also means that as we go deeper in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, a black-and-white grasp of the Bible's message will increasingly give way to a vision of the gospel in resplendent color. These foundational books are the entry point into the biblical story that continues through the Old and New Testaments and gloriously concludes in the book of Revelation.

2. The Pentateuch is "The Book of Moses."

In Mark 14:26, Jesus referred to the Pentateuch as "the book of Moses," and various Old Testament passages do the same—see Ezra 6:18; Nehemiah 13:1; 2 Chronicles 25:4; 2 Chronicles 35:12 (see also the title "Moses" for these books in Luke 16:31 and 24:27). On the one hand, this title indicates that Moses was the author of these books. As the greatest Old Testament prophet (see Deut. 34:10–12), Moses provided firm authority for the Pentateuch. Also notice that the word "book" in these passages is singular. While the Pentateuch contains five books, and while each of them have their own individual integrity, they are also each a part of the larger "book of Moses." This means that they are meant to be read together, as a "book."

3. The Pentateuch is "The Book of Redemption."

The Bible—from Genesis to Revelation—tells the story of a God who created the world with humanity as its crowning climax, of a people who chose to rebel against their Creator, and of a God who responded with a promise to rescue his creation. Since the stories of creation and the fall into sin are told in the first three chapters of Genesis, we can say that the rest of the Bible—from Genesis 3:15 to the end of Revelation—tells the story of God's rescue of rebels. The technical term for this rescue is *redemption*. If the everyday meaning of redemption in the ancient world involved the rescue of a person out of a situation over which they were powerless, it is fitting that the biblical authors also used this word to describe the way God works for his people. And the Pentateuch is the first act in the Bible's drama of redemption.

4. The Pentateuch portrays creation as the theater of redemption.

Why does a well-structured Pentateuch begin with the creation account? In the Pentateuch we encounter a God who called a people to himself, who made promises, and who sealed those promises with covenants. As its first readers encountered the beginning of Genesis, they would have been blown away: *their God*—the God of the great and mighty covenant promises—was also the God of *creation*. This meant that nothing in the cosmos could stop him from being faithful to his promises, because nothing in the cosmos was outside of his control. Since the God of the covenants is also the God of creation, all of creation is the theater of redemption, and thus, God's promise is sure.

5. The Pentateuch outlines the first covenants that YHWH made with his people.

While the larger story of the Bible is indeed a story of God's redemption, the six covenants between YHWH and his people are high points in the larger story. (Note: "YHWH" is the name of God in the Old Testament. It is pronounced "Yahweh" and often written as "YHWH".) These covenants drive the story of redemption forward because they formalize YHWH's commitment, detail his terms, and guarantee a glorious outcome. And the Pentateuch records four of these: the creation covenant (Gen. 1:26–30; 2:15–25), YHWH's covenant with Noah (Gen. 6:9–9:17), YHWH's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:1–21), and YHWH's covenant with Moses/Israel (Ex. 19–24)—the others include YHWH's covenant with David (2 Sam. 7:4–17), and the new covenant (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:26–28). Without the Pentateuch, we would not grasp two thirds of the covenants that YHWH has made with his people.

6. The Pentateuch records the greatest act of redemption in the Old Testament.

When YHWH ushered Israel out of Egypt—an event referred to as "the exodus" throughout the Bible—he accomplished the greatest act of redemption in the entire Old Testament. It makes sense, then, that centuries later, when God's people were in desperate circumstances once again, the prophets envisioned their coming deliverance as a *second exodus*. Later still, the New Testament authors and Jesus himself cast his work of redemption as the

ultimate fulfillment of the second exodus the prophets had promised. In light of these things, we can conclude that *in order to understand the Bible's message, we need to understand Israel's exodus from Egyptian slavery.*

7. The Pentateuch taught Israel how to live as the redeemed people of YHWH.

When Christians think about the laws (or instructions) of the Pentateuch (e.g. Ex. 20), what often comes to mind is a legalistic code that stands in contrast to the grace offered to new covenant believers in Jesus. However, as we look at these laws in context, we discover that this is not the case. For those who lived in Old Testament times, the demands of the law arrived in a context of *grace*. Notice the way, for example, the Ten Commandments began: “And God spoke all these words, saying, ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery’” (Ex. 20:1–2). The pattern is clear: the words of instruction that followed were not about how to win YHWH’s favor; they were given to the people YHWH had just redeemed from slavery in Egypt, and they taught YHWH’s redeemed how to live as his people. Their message can be summarized this way: “now that you are YHWH’s redeemed people, this is how you must live.”

8. The Pentateuch details many gracious provisions for the redeemed.

The stories of the construction of the tabernacle and the instructions about the priesthood in the latter half of Exodus, along with the beginning of the functioning priesthood and the sacrificial system in the book of Leviticus, were all given as precious provisions for those YHWH had redeemed from slavery in Egypt. Although these symbols are not in use today—because Jesus has fulfilled them—we are better equipped to understand the person and work of Jesus as we first understand the Pentateuch’s teaching about them.

9. The Pentateuch is the key lens through which we understand the rest of the Old Testament.

Just as those of us who wear corrective lenses see the world more clearly when those lenses are in front of our eyes, so readers of the Old Testament need to read through the lenses of Deuteronomy 28 and 30:1–10. As we look ahead in the word of God, the blessings for covenant keeping in Deuteronomy 28:1–14 explain the coming possession of the promised land with the temple as the central place of worship for God’s people. The curses for covenant breaking in Deuteronomy 28:15–68 explain the subsequent division of God’s people into Judah and Israel, the wars they would face, and the defeat and expulsion from the promised land that each of these two nations would suffer. Finally, the teaching on restoration for covenant repentance in Deuteronomy 30:1–10 explains why the people of Israel could, while under the curse of YHWH in exile, still approach YHWH to ask for deliverance; this also explains the later return to the promised land and the second temple.

10. The Pentateuch points us to Christ and the gospel.

Since the Pentateuch records the first act in the Bible’s grand story, it is incomplete on its own. The Pentateuch records themes that find their ultimate fulfillment in Christ: Jesus is the prophet greater than Moses, he is the Word through whom the world was created, he is the seed of the woman who crushed the serpent’s head (cf. Gen. 3:15), and his death and resurrection accomplished the ultimate exodus (cf. Luke 9:30). Jesus is also the fulfillment of the tabernacle, he is the great high priest, and on the cross he offered the ultimate sacrifice that purchased salvation for all who would believe—from Old Testament times, New Testament times, and today. The Pentateuch is the first act of the greatest story ever told, but it is incomplete to read the Pentateuch without being pointed to the rest of the glorious story, especially its climax in the Lord Jesus.