

## *Chapter 3: Introduction to the Pentateuch*

### **Key Terms**

- Pentateuch: Greek expression meaning "five scrolls," consisting of the first five books of the OT: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy
- Torah: a Hebrew term meaning "instruction" in holiness, used by the Jewish community to refer to the first five books of the OT
- canon: as applied to the Bible, a collection of religious books measured against the standard of divine inspiration
- suzerain: a superior feudal ruler; an overlord
- vassal: a subordinate nation or people group (usually as a result of a treaty following conquest)
- date formulas: a stylized expression that records chronological information for the purpose of assigning a piece of literature to a specific historical period (often connected with the years of a king's reign)
- literary criticism: an interpretive method emphasizing the author's style, literary features, themes, and structure as keys to understanding a biblical text
- tradition history: an interpretive approach that focuses on the history of the transmission of the biblical traditions by studying the oral traditions during the period of their transmission, and by tracing the development of the written biblical documents, giving special attention to the theological emphases of the community editing and shaping those materials
- covenant theology: a theological system that understands God's relationship to humanity as a divinely established compact or covenant based on the analogy of the interrelationship of the three persons of the Trinity
- foreshadow(ing): the literary device of prefiguring or indicating a significant person or event beforehand
- messiah: (Heb. "anointed one"). Generally one set apart for a divinely appointed office such as a priest or king. Specifically, the title identifies a figure prominent in the OT prophetic writing who serves as Israel's deliverer-king (realized in Jesus of Nazareth according to the NT writers).

### **Key Ideas**

- The Pentateuch is unified by the theological theme of the Abrahamic covenant.
- The Pentateuch is composed of diverse literary types and distinctive literary features.
- Though there are undeniable distinctions between the Old and New Testaments, the theological principles that undergird OT law remain intact.

### **Chapter Summary**

The Torah was the first collection of writings acknowledged as Scripture by the Jewish community. The Torah divides into two sections: Genesis 1–11, and Genesis 12–Deuteronomy 34. The first section tells of the origins of creation and the introduction of sin, with the consequent judgment. The second records God's gracious extension of the covenant to Abraham's family, by which God reveals himself to humanity. God's promise to Abraham in Gen. 12:3 contains the major themes of the Pentateuch: nation, land, and blessing.

The Pentateuch contains four primary literary genres: prose narrative, poetry, prophecy, and law. The first category, prose narrative, comprises the majority of the Pentateuch. This genre combines historical reports and theological interpretation. Interspersed in narrative is Hebrew poetry, used for prayers, songs and hymns, blessings, prophetic utterances, and covenant promises. Prophecy can include both foretelling

(revelation) and exposition (interpretation). The genre of law was not unique to Israel; in fact, many features of Hebrew law reflect the conventions of the ANE. The purpose of the law in Israel was to produce holiness in the community and thus maintain the covenant relationship with Yahweh. The covenant between Yahweh and Israel contains many of the features of the suzerainty covenants of the Hittites. Old Testament law contains primarily declarative and prescriptive covenant stipulations, categorized as casuistic/case law, apodictic/direct affirmative law, prohibition/negative command, death law, and curse.

While there is no way to be sure of a beginning date for Genesis, we can be fairly certain that the historical narratives took place during the Middle to Late Bronze ages. It is difficult to assign exact dates to the events recorded in the OT because of the scant information provided by the text itself. The debate over chronological dates centers on the literal or figurative/symbolic interpretation of date formulas.

Scholars have also argued over the historicity of the patriarchal narratives, but their conclusions on this matter are determined more by presuppositions about the divine origin of the text than by the archeological and extrabiblical data.

The church has long struggled to understand the proper place for the OT for Christians today; some utterly reject the OT as irrelevant, while others embrace the OT as absolutely authoritative. The church has applied numerous interpretive methods to the OT in an attempt to properly understand these Scriptures, and has variously understood the relationship between the old and new covenants. The OT should be given equal authority and canonical status as the NT.