
THE BOOKS OF MOSES

A General Introduction

Names

The five books of Moses (Genesis – Deuteronomy) are often referred to as “the Pentateuch,” a term derived (via Latin) from the Greek *penta* (five) and *teuchoi* (books). By the Jews the books are usually referred to as “the Torah,” a Hebrew word that means *teaching* or *instruction*. The Torah is generally what is referred to in the New Testament when mention is made of “the law” (Matt. 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; 12:5; 22:36; Rom. 2:12; 3:21; 5:13; Gal. 4:21ff.; etc.).¹

Author

Although we are never specifically told in the Torah itself who its author was, the natural conclusion to draw is that it was Moses, who is the most prominent character, at least from Exodus 2 to the end.



On several occasions God commanded Moses to write certain things down.

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven” (Ex. 17:14).

And the LORD said to Moses, “Write these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel” (Ex. 34:27).

Now therefore write this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for me against the people of Israel (Deut. 31:19).

With these explicit commands, compare the following passages:

¹ Even the non-legal portions of the Torah are referred to as the law (e.g., Gal. 4:21). There are times, however, when “the law” appears to refer to the entire revelation of the Old Testament. See, for instance, Romans 3:9-18 where Paul quotes passages from Psalms, Proverbs, and Isaiah, and refers to these passages as “the law” in verse 19, “Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law...” See also 1 Corinthians 14:21, where Paul introduces a quotation from Isaiah by saying, “In the Law it is written...”

Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, “All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.” And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD (Ex. 24:3-4).

Then Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel (Deut. 31:9)

So Moses wrote this song the same day and taught it to the people of Israel (Deut. 31:22)

We also read of Moses recording Israel’s travels.

These are the stages of the people of Israel, when they went out of the land of Egypt by their companies under the leadership of Moses and Aaron. Moses wrote down their starting places, stage by stage, by command of the LORD, and these are their stages according to their starting places (Num. 33:1-2).

Presumably he wrote other the other narrative material as well.

In addition to this we have the words of Jehovah introduced fifty-nine times from Exodus to Deuteronomy in these words, “The LORD spoke to Moses, saying...”

Beginning immediately after Moses’ death, the Torah is frequently referred to as “the law of Moses,” or is in one way or another attributed to Moses (*e.g.*, Jos. 1:7; 8:31-35; Josh. 20:2; 22:5; 23:6; 1 Ki. 2:3; 2 Ki. 14:6; 18:6, 12; 23:25; Ezra 3:12; 6:18; 7:6; Neh. 9:14; 13:1; Dan. 9:11, 13; Mal. 4:4; Matt. 8:4; 19:7-8; 22:24; Mk. 7:10; 12:26; Lk. 2:22; Jn. 1:17, 45; 7:19, 22; 8:5; Acts 3:22; 13:39; 15:5, 21; 28:23; Rom. 10:5, 19; 1 Cor. 9:9; 2 Cor. 3:15; Heb. 9:19; 10:28).

Jesus quotes or alludes to the Torah many times. On a handful of occasions he makes a direct reference to the Torah as being the work of Moses.

“If you believed Moses, you would believe me; *for he wrote of me*” (Jn. 5:46).

“Has not Moses given you the law?” (Jn. 7:19; cf. v. 23)

In addition to these general statements, Jesus also refers to specific portions of the Torah as being written by Moses. These portions come from at least three of the five books, and possibly four.

Genesis	John 7:22 (Gen. 17:1-14 or Lev. 12:3) ²
Exodus	Mark 7:10 (Ex. 20:12); Mark 12:26 (Ex. 3:6)
Leviticus	Matthew 8:4 (Lev. 14:1-32); John 7:22 (Lev. 12:3; but see above)
Numbers	None
Deuteronomy	Mark 10:3-4 (Deut. 24:1-4)

Date

The Torah was written during the life time of Moses (ca. 1571-1452 B.C.). We may date the composition of Exodus and Leviticus and the first third of Numbers to the year of Israel's departure from Egypt and the time of their encampment at Sinai (ca. April 1491 to May 1490).³ The remainder of Numbers, which records the people's journey to Kadesh Barnea, their rebellion in refusing to enter the land, and the consequent judgments the Lord inflicted on them, as well as other events in the wilderness, were probably written as the events unfolded. Deuteronomy was written just before Moses' death. At what point during the forty years in the desert Moses wrote Genesis is more difficult to tell.

Chronology

The Torah covers redemptive history from creation to the death of Moses, from ca. 4004–1452 B.C., a period of 2,552 years.

A word or two is necessary about these dates. In giving dates for various events in the history of the Old Testament, I will generally be following the chronology of Floyd Nolen Jones, whose dates are very similar to those of Archbishop James Ussher (1581-1656). I believe along with these two men that it was Moses' intention to give us a true and accurate history of creation and the early generations of the human race, and that the lapse of time

² "Moses gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath" (Jn. 7:22). Is this a reference to the fact that the origin of the rite of circumcision is recorded by Moses in Genesis 17:1-14, or to the fact that Moses himself gave them commandments about circumcision (*e.g.* Lev. 12:3)?

³ Here is a table of dates relating to these events:

Event	Month	Day	Year	Elapsed time (reckoned from the Exodus)
Exodus (Ex. 12:1-17)	First (Nisan: March-April)	14 th	1491	--
Arrival at Sinai (Ex. 19:1)	Fourth (Tammuz: June-July)	1 st	1491	2 ½ months
Left Sinai (Num. 10:11-12)	Second (Iyyar: April-May)	20 th	1490	1 year, 1 months, 6 days
Arrival at Kadesh (Num. 20:1)	First (Nisan: March-April)		1489	1 year, 1 month, -- days

given in the genealogies of Genesis (and elsewhere in Scripture) ought to be taken at face value.⁴

Theme/Purpose

The grand theme of the Torah is that Israel belongs to the God who made heaven and earth. He has set Israel apart from the nations as his own special people, whom he relates to by way of the covenant he made with Abraham. Of all the peoples on the face of the earth, Israel is his elect people, his treasured possession (Ex. 19:4).

The Torah tells the story of how this came to be. It sets the stage in the early chapters of Genesis by demonstrating that the God who called them to be his people is the almighty and eternal Creator. Everything in heaven and on earth and in the great deep originates with him. He is the fountainhead of all being, and thus he is the only true and living God. When this is understood it undermines the very foundation of idolatry and all pagan belief because whatever else the various gods of the pagan world claimed for themselves, none claimed to be the Creator.

After recounting God's activity in creating the universe, including as the pinnacle of his work the creation of man in his own image, the Torah proceeds to give us an account of the Fall, which explains the presence of evil in God's good creation. From there we are given a brief account of the early generations of the human race and how they had corrupted themselves to the point that God determined to wipe them out, except for Noah who was a righteous man.

In subsequent chapters we are told of how the human race came to be divided into many nations and languages, and how God chose one man, Abram, from Ur of the Chaldeans, and made a covenant with him and blessed him, and made his descendants into a great nation. We read of how God preserved them, delivered them, established them, gave them a land and a law.

All of this is foundational, not only to the rest of the Old Testament, but to New Testament, as well.

⁴ From creation to the death of Moses (4004-2552 B.C.) represents more than 42% of world history! More than 27% of world history occurred before the flood.