



*BIBLE CLASSROOM FOR BUSY PEOPLE*

**NOTES ON GENESIS**

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**What Is Torah?**

- Torah is the name given to the first 5 books of Hebrew Bible (HB or Old Testament) which were written by Moses.
- The entire Torah was written on a single scroll, often referred to as Torah Scroll.
- All 5 books were written on one scroll and they are intentionally connected to each other.
- A quick examination of the connectors allows us to view the Torah as a five-part book.
  - Genesis. The first Torah book begins with stories about beginnings (the world and Israel) but ends with stories about ‘the sons of Israel.’
  - Exodus. The second book contains stories about Israel and the Sanctuary. It begins with the story about ‘the sons of Israel’ and ends with ‘Tabernacle’.
  - Leviticus. The third book contains laws for Israel and the Sanctuary. It begins with ‘Tent of Meeting’ and ends with ‘the Lord commanded Moses on Mt Sinai.’
  - Numbers. This is a collection of stories about Israel’s wilderness journey. The book begins with ‘the Lord spoke to Moses in the Sinai desert’ and ends with ‘the commandments of the Lord through Moses.’
  - Deuteronomy. The final book, a collection of Moses’ last sermons to Israel, begins with ‘the words which Moses spoke.’

**Who Wrote Torah?**

- The authorship of the Torah is a rather perplexing question and there is no consensus in today’s Bible scholarship.
- Traditional and conservative views accept Moses as the author and date the books to the 15<sup>th</sup> century BC.
- Critical scholars have strenuously challenged this traditional view and replaced it with a system of 4 sources (referred to as source criticism). Source Criticism has been the chief approach to Torah books by most modern scholars. In this system, there are four sources of materials, J, E, D and P. Each source is from a different time period stretching all the way to the post-exile period. Despite the popularity of this system in modern scholarship, there is not sufficient evidence to abandon the traditional view. In recent years, more and more scholars are moving away from Source Criticism.
- This theory asserts that the Torah was probably completed only after the Exile and its materials came from 4 different sources.
- However, there is no convincing reason to reject the traditional theory.

- Both Jews and Christians have accepted Moses as author of Torah for thousands of years.

### **The Special Place of Torah**

- Torah has been an important part of Jewish worship over the centuries.
- At the time of Jesus, the Torah was read in every Synagogue (worship place for Jews), every Sabbath.
- Reading schedule (called Lectionaries) were made so that the whole Torah was read in 1 year.
- Torah was considered the 'most holy' part of Scripture and was treated as something very special.
- This concept is still practised by the Jews even today. Torah reading is the most holy act of worship in Judaism even today. This has not changed for over 2,000 years.

### **The Laws of Torah**

- The Torah has often been mistakenly translated 'law'. This happened because of the many laws in Torah.
- The word 'Torah' does not mean 'law' but rather 'instruction'.
- Moreover, only the book of Leviticus is really a law book in the modern sense, but there are rules and regulations in Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.
- Genesis contain no rules, while Exodus and Numbers have many stories and speeches and Deuteronomy is made up of speeches.
- The Torah laws cover every area of life—worship, lifestyle, food, family, work, farming, marriage and many other subjects.
- The important part of these laws is the idea that they belong to the covenant God made with Israel.
- There are 2 types of laws or rules.
  - Prescription laws which say what happens to people if they break the rule.
  - Description laws which do not say what happens if the rule is broken.
- Another important concept of Torah Law is that they are given by God and spell out a proper lifestyle for covenant relationship with him.
- Some laws clearly applied to local culture and geography at that time, while others have principles for people of every age. It is important to recognise this difference or we may misunderstand the laws.

### **Jesus and Torah**

- Jesus used the word 'law' whenever he spoke about the Torah (see Matthew 5:17-20).
- In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus did several things with Torah laws (Matthew 5:17-42).
  - He said the instructions of Torah cannot be done away with until they are fulfilled. He stated that his work was to make this happen.
  - He said those who observe Torah law will be considered great in his kingdom. This means these laws are still important for believers today.
  - He reinterpreted some of the rules; he added to their meaning. For example, Jesus taught that being angry with someone is the same as 'killing' that person.

- He made the laws more about thought and motives than action. Our thoughts and desires often dictate what we actually do. The laws pointed to the actions, but Jesus pointed to the thoughts and feelings.
- He also completely changed some laws. For instance, Torah law allows some form of 'getting even' like 'an eye for an eye' as a way to balance human behaviour. However, Jesus taught that we should not take revenge at all. Instead, we should learn to 'turn the other cheek'.
- Therefore, to Jesus Torah laws are still valid, but he made them more about our thoughts and even changed some of their meanings.
- Throughout the New Testament (NT), the word rendered 'law' in English is 'nomos' in Greek. Jesus, and later John and Paul, used 'nomos' as the word for Torah. It did not mean 'law' as in the modern sense. The word was also not applied to the Ten Commandments. Often, both Jesus and Paul would use the phrase 'law and prophets' as code for HB (OT). Both Hebrew and Greek differentiate between 'law' and 'commandment'. 'Law', in the NT is 'nomos' which stands for Torah.

### **Overview of Genesis**

- Genesis is best understood through the eye of a camera zoom lens. The photograph begins with a wide angle, 'the heavens and the earth,' and zooms to the stories about Jacob's children.
- This is the zoom structure of Genesis and with each stop in the zoom, the focus is clearer and more detailed.
- The first Torah book is Genesis and consists of two large narrative cycles.
- Pre-Patriarchal Cycle.
  - This is made up of two smaller cycles, the Adam Cycle (Genesis 1-5) and the Noah Cycle (Genesis 6-9).
  - This segment relates stories about the beginning of the world and humans and a second beginning brought about by the flood.
- Patriarchal Cycle.
  - This Cycle concentrates on the life and times of a particular family, starting with Abraham.
  - It is divided into three smaller narrative cycles
    - Abraham-Isaac Cycle (Genesis 11:27-25:11) tells about Abraham and his son Isaac.
    - Isaac-Jacob Cycle (Genesis 25:19-35:29) relates stories about Isaac, but especially about Jacob
    - Jacob and sons Cycle (Genesis 37-50) is the last narrative cycle and tells stories of Jacob and his sons.
- Most of Genesis zooms on to the story of a single clan or family. Chapters 12-50 actually begin with a larger picture of the creation of a clan, but end up with focusing on one specific family.

### **Creation Stories**

- Creation Episodes. The creation stories involve general creation (Genesis 1:1-2:4a), the specific creation of humans (Genesis 2:4b-25), and the fall of humans (Genesis 3).
- General creation depicts the order of creation in 2 panels plus 1 structure.

- On days 1-3 we meet the creation of environments for life, light, water and land respectively.
- On days 4-6 these life environments are filled with objects, light objects, water objects and land objects (including humans).
- Day 7 is a unique day called Sabbath on which God stopped his creation work.
- The specific creation of humans comprises the creation of a garden home (Eden), the first man (Adam) and the first woman (Eve).
- The fall narrative accounts for the appearance of sin which spoils the paradise God had made. The humans had to leave their garden home because they disobeyed God.
- Genesis contains 2 creation accounts, chapters 1 and 2. They are very different in content of creation, manner of creation and time of creation. A quick comparison shows that in Genesis 2 creation is by divine action, in contrast to divine word of Genesis 1. Also, the details in Genesis 2 are difficult to synchronise with the time frame of Genesis 1. However, Genesis is neither history nor science; it is first and foremost narrative. It should be understood that way.

### **Flood Story**

- The stories of Genesis 6-11 address the question of how God responded to the great evil created by human sin. The catch word for God's action in HB is 'judgement'. The Flood is the first judgement of God.
- The Flood narrative (chapters 6-9) can be broken down into smaller units.
  - Genesis 6:1-4 reveal God's assessment of the evil that filled the earth. The world had become so evil it had to be cleaned up.
  - Genesis 6:5-8 unveil the judgement pronounced against an evil planet. God would send a Flood so that the water will clean up the sin.
  - Genesis 6:9-7:24 speak of the warning provided through Noah and the execution of the judgement in the form of a universal Flood. This Flood changed the face of the planet by covering everything, including the tallest mountains.
  - Genesis 8:1-22 show God recreating the earth and then making a promise to never flood the earth again. Once the Flood had ended, Noah's family were able to start again with humans getting a second chance.
  - Genesis 9:1-29 tell of a covenant God made with Noah and the new humanity. The story ends by showing that despite all this, the world of humans is not truly changed; sin still causes havoc.
- Genesis 10-11 document the aftermath of the flood and the dispersion of humans. These included the Table of Nations in Genesis 10 and the cause for this dispersion in Genesis 11.

### **Abraham Stories**

- The Abraham stories are arranged in panel form capped by a three-part piece involving Sarah and Abraham's death as well as Isaac's marriage.
- The stories come in pairs which tells us that the stories sort of repeat themselves or are similar types of events.
- The best way to follow Abraham's life is to trace these paired stories and read them side by side.

- We can observe that Abraham meets 2 different kings, Egyptian and Canaanite. He also separates from 2 people, Lot and Ishmael. There are 2 rescue and 2 birth stories.
- The panels are enveloped by the call (Genesis 12) and test of Abraham (Genesis 22).

### **Stories of Jacob and Sons**

- The Jacob Cycle has its own distinctive arrangement. It is made up of 3 main parts separated by 2 stories about Bethel (which means 'house of God').
- Conflict is the primary feature of this cycle. Every story about Jacob shows him in conflict with someone, his brother, his uncle, his wives and even an angel.
- Genesis 37-50 is the final cycle of the book and tells the contrasting stories of two of Jacob's sons, Joseph and Judah.
- The story of Joseph is a roller-coaster of elevation and de-elevation, whereas Judah's story is a continuous rise to the top of family hierarchy and historical supremacy (see Genesis 49).
- Most readers of Genesis are enamoured by Joseph, but he was not the chosen of God. In the story Joseph is the narrative foil to misdirect the reader, while the real story line is following Judah. Joseph played a short-term part, while Judah had eternal destiny. God's choice of Judah was eventually acknowledged by Jacob (Genesis 49) and confirmed by the psalmist (Psalm 78).