



Year of the Word

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First five biblical books start the story

By Claudia C. Neira

The first five books of the Bible — Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy and Numbers — are known as the Pentateuch (Greek for five scrolls). The Hebrew term is Torah, a word that means “teaching.” These books articulate something with which every person of faith can identify: the search for a relationship with our Creator through our community.

Genesis means “beginning.” It tells of the creation and introduces the covenant between God and Abraham. This relationship is significant for the Jewish, Christian and Muslim faith. Exodus takes us through the journey of the Israelites, the chosen people and their covenant with Yahweh. Leviticus spells out laws that deal with worship. Numbers includes a census and summarizes the entire journey of the Israelites from Egypt to the border of the promised land. Deuteronomy, from the Greek for “second law,” repeats and summarizes many of the laws given in the earlier books. It is framed as the final speech of Moses to the people gathered on the eastern side of the Jordan River, prepared to enter the promised land. Deuteronomy motivates the people to stay faithful to the covenant with God.

Nowhere in the Pentateuch is there any indication of who the author is or how the books were composed. In ancient times books were often the result of a long process involving oral traditions being put into written form and written documents going through several editing stages. However, a tradition did develop that Moses wrote the Pentateuch. Biblical scholars now hold that the Pentateuch is not the work of one single author writing at one time, but was composed over several centuries by people responding to different circumstances.

Scholarly work on the Pentateuch has developed a “documentary hypothesis” which refers to possible sources for the material in it. They include the Yahwist Source, which wrote near the beginning of the Israelite monarchy, during or sometime after King Solomon; and the Elohist Source, which wrote after the reign of King Solomon, when the nation split into two separate kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

The Elohist Source is especially concerned with ethical issues. It offers an image of a remote God who communicates with people indirectly through dreams or angels or, at most, a voice from heaven.

Deuteronomist Source refers primarily to the collection in the book of Deuteronomy which seems to have developed separately from the other books in the Pentateuch. The role of prophets is emphasized, and Moses is described as the ideal prophet.

Finally, the Priestly Source wrote after Israel was conquered by Assyria in the year 722 and Judah by Babylonia in the year 587, when both the Northern and Southern kingdoms came to an end. Judah was forced into exile in Babylon. During the exile more material was added to the Pentateuch. The Priestly Source shows God in complete control and doing everything in an orderly harmonious way. After the exile, the Yahwist and the Elohist Sources were combined into a single narrative by the Priestly Editor.

The Pentateuch comprises an essential part of the Christian Bible. It is present in the writings of the New Testament authors. Frequently texts of the Jewish Bible are used for the sake of argument, in expressions such as “For it says...” or “For it is written....”

The New Testament is in continuity with the Sinai covenant, a new covenant foretold by the prophets and established in the blood of Jesus. This covenant is the same covenant between God and Israel. For this reason, it is important that as people of faith, we engage in the study of these books in order to understand our own salvation history.

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