

PART  
**1**



# THE **OLD** TESTAMENT



## ● Why Do We Read the Old Testament?

The Old Testament prepares us for the coming of Christ and is an indispensable part of Sacred Scripture.

## ● Classifying and Arranging the Old Testament Books

The *New American Bible* arranges the Old Testament in four main categories: Pentateuch, Historical Books, Prophetic Books, and Wisdom Books.

## Why Do We Read the Old Testament?

Catholics know the Old Testament to be several important things. It forms the longest part of the most important book of all time, the Bible. It contains laws and lessons for living that have been applied and lived by people throughout the generations. It is also a written record of the social structures, legal systems, and ordinary religious life that have shaped, and continue to form, most every aspect of our Western civilization.



All of these facts about the Old Testament are important and true. However, the most essential reason for reading, studying, and praying with the Old Testament is that it contains God's Revelation. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that the "Old Testament is an indispensable part of Sacred

Scripture" (CCC, 121). It is the true Word of God that is "to prepare for the coming of Christ, the redeemer of all and of the messianic kingdom, to announce this coming by prophecy (*Dei Verbum*, 15). The Old Law, or Law of Moses, contained in the Old Testament is a preparation for the Gospel. St. Irenaeus wrote, "The Law is a pedagogy and a prophecy of things to come." The Old Testament is important in several other ways:

- It contains the truth of God's promises to the Chosen People, and through them, to all people.
- It reveals our true identity as God's special creatures. Our own personal stories as individuals and as human communities are reflected in the many Old Testament stories.
- It records the experiences of our ancestors in faith. In fact, Jews, Christians, and Muslims acknowledge Abraham as a significant person in their faiths.
- It reveals a living God, who meets us when we read and pray with these words of Sacred Scripture.

The Second Vatican Council further taught that "God, the inspirer and author of both Testaments, wisely arranged that the New Testament should be hidden in the Old and the Old should be made manifest in the New" (*Dei Verbum*, 16).

This part of *Sacred Scripture* is intended as an overview of the part of the Bible that Christians refer to as the "Old Testament." Catholics include forty-six books of the Old Testament (forty-five if Jeremiah and Lamentations are counted as one book). Added to the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, these form the canon of Scripture.

The Old Testament is really a *collection* of books written over the course of a millennium, approximately between 1000 BC and 150 BC. The books were written predominantly in Hebrew. The early Church, however, differed with early Judaism in the decision of the Old Testament canon ("Biblical Translations Today," page 20). The Church included seven books

(1 and 2 Maccabees, Judith, Tobit, Baruch, Sirach, and Wisdom) not included in the Hebrew scriptures that were mostly written in Greek after 300 BC. These seven books are known as **deuterocanonical** to show that they are not accepted in the Jewish canon. Some deuterocanonical books include chapters added to older Hebrew books, such as Daniel and Esther.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, the reformers adopted a canon created by Jewish rabbis around AD 90. They dropped the seven books written in Greek. Many Protestant Bibles today print these books in a separate section at the back of the Bible and refer to them as the *Apocrypha*, which means “hidden.”

## Review

1. Why is the Old Testament important for Catholics?
2. In what language was the Old Testament composed?

## Reflect

What are two of your favorite stories or people from the Old Testament? Explain why they are your favorites.

## Classifying and Arranging the Old Testament Books

The way the Old Testament is classified and arranged varies slightly. Jews traditionally divide the books of the Hebrew scriptures into three distinct sections:

1. Law (in Hebrew, “Torah”)
2. Prophets (in Hebrew, “Neviim”)
3. Writings (in Hebrew, “Ktuvim”)

If you put together the first letter of the three words of the Hebrew names for the sections you get the acronym TaNaK, which is the term often used as a shorthand by modern Jews to refer to the Hebrew scriptures.

The Old Testament in the *New American Bible* is arranged slightly differently, under these classifications:

- Pentateuch (in Greek, “five books”)
- Historical Books
- Prophetic Books
- Wisdom Books

Part 1 of this text will survey the books in each of these classifications, with slight adaptations. The books of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth will be examined as a historical era that precedes the time of Israel’s monarchy and featuring especially the books of 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. Discussion of the Wisdom books will precede the prophetic books, as the latter form an explicit and clear bridge to the latter part

### deuterocanonical

A term meaning “second canon.” Books included in the Catholic Old Testament but not in Hebrew scriptures. These additions are 1 and 2 Maccabees, Judith, Tobit, Baruch, Sirach, Wisdom, and parts of Esther and Daniel.

of the Bible—the New Testament and the full Revelation of God in the coming of his Son, Jesus Christ.

## Review

Explain the difference between how Jews divide the books of Hebrew scripture and how Catholics divide the books of the Old Testament.



1A



# THE PENTATEUCH

## ● Understanding the First Five Books of the Bible

The first five books of the Bible are called the “Book of Moses” or “The Pentateuch,” a Greek term deriving from “five” combined with “books.”

## ● Narrative and Development of the Pentateuch

At least four major sources may have gone into the composition of the Pentateuch.

## ● How We Read the Pentateuch

The Pentateuch contains mainly two kinds of writing: narrative stories and collections of Mosaic Laws.

## ● Ancestor Stories in the Book of Genesis

The ancestor stories in the Book of Genesis are divided into two main sections: primeval stories and the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs.

## ● The Beginning of God’s Revelation

God’s Revelation to humans came about when he made himself known to our first parents.

## ● The Great Flood

The covenant God made with Noah, centering on the story of the Great Flood, is part of the next stage of Revelation.

## ● Abraham and the Patriarchs

Abraham was the “father of a multitude,” God’s Chosen People, who led his people to a new land.

## ● The Blessing of Jacob

The patriarch Jacob tricks his brother into receiving a blessing, and then later humbles himself to seek reconciliation.

## ● Joseph and His Brothers

Genesis 37, 39-50 is a literary masterpiece that revolves around Jacob’s twelve sons, especially his favorite son, Joseph.

## ● The Book of Exodus

The Book of Exodus focuses on the call and life of Moses, Israel’s liberation, the Passover event, and the Sinai Covenant.

## ● The Wandering of the People in the Wilderness

Exodus 15-18 details a story cycle of traditional stories—including the establishment of the Sinai Covenant—while God’s People were wandering in the wilderness.

## ● The Mosaic Law Codes

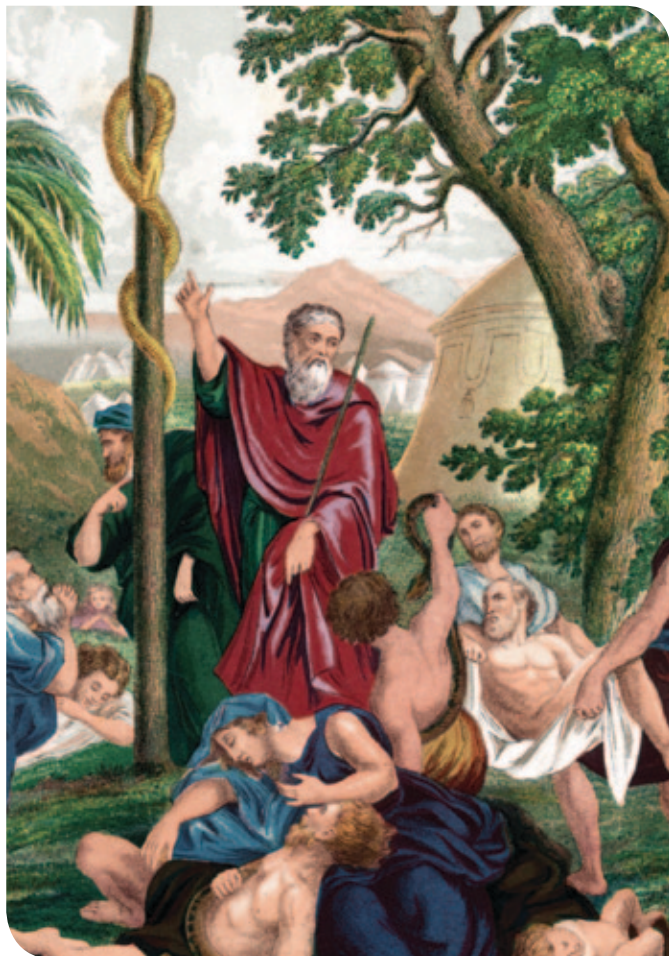
The Covenant Code, Deuteronomic Code, and Levitical Code are three different collections of the Law in the Pentateuch.



## Understanding the First Five Books of the Bible

Reading the Bible begins with the opening books. A traditional way that Catholics understand the first part of the Old Testament is as “The Book of Moses” or “The Pentateuch” (a word constructed from two Greek terms meaning “five” combined with “books”). This latter term is rooted in the traditional idea that the first section of the Bible consists of five books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

The other description—“The Book of Moses”—is based on the idea that Moses was the author of this material. As mentioned before, passages such as that in Deuteronomy 34, describing the death of Moses, indicate that Moses was not the author of the books in the modern sense, but there is no reason to doubt



the events named in the Pentateuch. Even later laws added to the parts of these books are presented in the tradition of Moses. He is the unique figure of the Old Testament, one who had a central role, especially as lawgiver. Moses’s influence on these books should not be diminished.

However, more recent study has attempted to name how several historical traditions or sources have come together in the first five books of the Bible. Each brings to these books its own language, theological viewpoints, and various interpretations of God’s Revelation. Traditionally, four of these sources have been named as so-called Yahwist, Elohist, priestly, and Deuteronomistic strands. They are abbreviated as J, E, P, and D. Each of these collections bring with them some differences in language and theological viewpoints. Though a speculative approach at studying the Pentateuch, it does offer an interesting theory for explaining the formation of these books.

As you proceed with studying the backgrounds and sources of human authorship of the Pentateuch, never forget that God himself is the author of Sacred Scripture, and that the Church reminds us that Scripture is to be read from both a literal and spiritual sense. These meanings will also be addressed in this section.

### Review

Name the books of the Pentateuch.

### Reflect

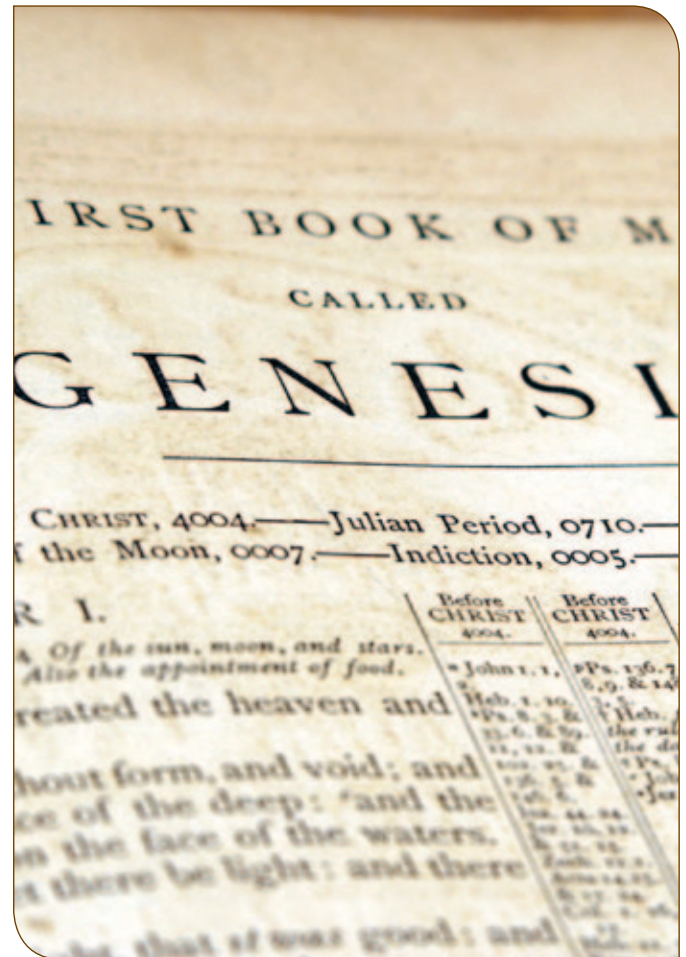
Rate your level of familiarity with the first five books of the Bible.

## Narrative and Development of the Pentateuch

The theory of four strands coming together to form the Pentateuch brings out some unique details of each strand. These details are often noticeable in examples of *doublets*, that is, stories told twice, but with slight differences. For example, two creation stories are included in the Book of Genesis. (These will be briefly analyzed in the following sections.) The differences are noticeable by the fact that some parts of the Pentateuch use different names for God.

In your Bible translation, it should be easy to spot that some stories use “God” as the name for God, while others use “Lord God” or “Lord.” The English “God” translates to the Hebrew word “Elohim.” “Lord” translates to a different name for God: “YHWH” (pronounced “Yah-way”). Two of the “sources” of the Pentateuch have been named according to the sections that use those terms for God: Yahwist (called the “J” source for the German translation of YHWH, “Jahweh.”) and Elohist (called the “E” source for the name Elohim).

Because the Book of Deuteronomy is written in a very different style than the other four books of the Pentateuch, a third strand was identified and named “D” for Deuteronomist. Some biblical scholars also identified a fourth strand that occasionally is present in Genesis. This strand seems particularly concerned with ritual times of blessing and uses the same phrases when these events occur. Note that in key parts of the Book of Genesis—the creation of humanity (Gn 1:27–28), the re-creation after the Great Flood (Gn 9:1), the promises made to Abraham (Gn 17:5–7), Isaac’s blessing of Jacob (Gn 28:3–4), and Jacob’s name change to Israel (Gn 35:10–12)—God’s blessings are accompanied in each case by a phrase directing the parties to “be fertile and multiply.”



Consider that Genesis is filled with genealogical lists that always begin with the introduction, “these are the descendants of . . .” (see, for example, Gn 10:1, 11:10, and 25:12). These passages focus on, among other things, “being fruitful” and tracing descendants. Similarities were noted between these lists and the detailed concerns of the Book of Leviticus, which consists largely of priestly laws about ritual, sacrifice, and purity (note, for example, the detailed list of animals in Leviticus 11). Thus, the fourth strand was identified as “P,” the priestly strand or source.

With this hypothesis identifying four strands of writing in the Pentateuch, another issue is to attempt to date the particular writings. It is commonly held that the Yahwist (“J”) strand came first because the material is the most “primitive” in its theology (e.g., a humanlike image of God who “walked” in the garden

**anthropomorphic**

The attribution of human motivation, characteristics, or behavior to inanimate objects, animals, or natural phenomena.

of Eden, etc.). The material may have been gathered together during King Solomon's reign; that is, before 922 BC. This time was chosen because of the belief that Solomon ruled over a "cultural flowering" of ancient Israel—a time of wealth and prosperity in which scribes could have been commissioned to collect and record these materials.

The Elohim, or "E" portions, of the Pentateuch are often associated with the northern kingdom of Israel after its break from the southern kingdom, Judah, meaning that these sources would be dated sometime between 922 and 722 BC, the later date being the time when the Assyrian Empire conquered the northern kingdom. Sometime after this, it was thought that both versions were joined together. Others believe that it made much more sense that the "E" strands simply supplemented the older "J" account with a few insertions edited in that highlighted northern concerns, rather than drafting a completely separate document.

The Deuteronomist ("D") material is associated with King Josiah's scroll, discovered when he started to clean up the Temple (2 Kgs 22:8). The unique actions that Josiah instituted in his reforms (described in 2 Kings 23) are only specifically demanded in Deuteronomy (rather than Exodus or Leviticus). Where this scroll came from is an open debate. The traditional view is that it was an older scroll of the Law, perhaps from the north, and deposited by refugees from the Assyrian conquest of the north for safekeeping in the Temple until Josiah's helpers accidentally found it. Another group of scholars argue that Josiah intentionally drafted Deuteronomy as a reform of Moses's Law for his times, and as a basis for his reforms. Either way, the material in the Book of Deuteronomy became part of the traditional group of writings sometime after 640 BC.

Finally, it is noted that the only leadership left to the Hebrew people after the conquest of Jerusalem in 587 BC were the priests. So, it is possible that the priests edited the entire Pentateuch, added some relevant material for their times, and the work was completed. Thus, the assumption is that when Ezra brought "the scrolls of the law" (Neh 8:1–2) then the "Pentateuch" ("Torah") was complete.

To refer to the Pentateuch as a combination of "strands" identified by the letters "J," "E," "D," and "P" can be charted in graphic form:



Source	Style	Where/ When	Examples	Themes	Comment
Yahwist (“J”)	Uses the personal name YHWH for God; vivid, earthy style; <b>anthropomorphic</b> view of God: “YHWH walks and talks with us”; refers to Mount Sinai as place of the Mosaic covenant; refers to natives of Israel as “Canaanites.”	Origin in the southern kingdom (Judah) prior to 922 BC during King Solomon’s monarchy when pride was high.	Second creation account (Gn 2:4b-25) Egyptian plagues (Ex 7:14-10:29)	God’s promises to the patriarchs: 1. The blessing of Israel as a people 2. The promise of land	The “J” tradition provides the basic outline of the Pentateuch: human origins, patriarchs, slavery in Egypt, the Exodus, the desert wandering, Mount Sinai covenant, and entrance to the Promised Land
Elohist (“E”)	Uses the term Elohim for God; God is more abstract; refers to Mount Horeb as the place of the Mosaic covenant; refers to natives of Israel as “Amorites.”	Origin in Ephraim in the northern kingdom between 922 and 722 BC.	Abraham and Sarah (Gn 20:1-18)	Marked by the emphasis of Elijah and Elisha; great emphasis on prophecy; covenant is central: God’s relationship to Israel is understood by covenant promises.	E retold J’s stories from a northern point of view. The south emphasized the role of the monarchy while the north (E) was more concerned with the covenant. Abraham is a central figure in the Elohist accounts. Perhaps around 750 BC an editor combined J and E into one narrative without bothering to drop repetitions or contradictions.
Deuteronomist (“D”)	God is YHWH; emphasis on morals and the law; central role of several long speeches by Moses; meant to be spoken aloud to remind people of the demands of the covenant.	Possibly composed and/or edited after 640 BC by a priest in the northern kingdom at the shrine at Shechem. It may have been completed in Jerusalem.	The speeches of Moses (Dt 1:1-30:20)	Interprets Israel’s history in a cycle of reward for fidelity and punishment for sin; Israel should respond to the covenant and the Law in worship; “Listen, Israel” is a constant refrain: the covenant is <i>now</i> .	Israel’s fidelity to God’s law is the uppermost concern of the Deuteronomist; obedience to God’s law brings rewards and disobedience brings certain adversity.
Priestly (“P”)	God is Elohim; formal style; interested in census lists and genealogies; concern for numbers, dates, ways of worship, Temple ceremonies, clean and unclean animals.	Composition often dated to the Babylonian exile (587-538 BC) to strengthen the faith and hope of the people; may have been completed as late as 400 BC.	First creation account (Gn 1:1-2:4a) Priestly laws (Lv 1:1-27:34)	Great emphasis on worship; sees life and God’s action in the history of Israel as a liturgy.	Because it may have been the last source written, P gives a coherent framework to the Pentateuch. Priestly editors under Ezra gave the first five books of the Bible their final form.

Literary criticism of the Pentateuch provides a hypothetical tool for appreciating the origins, arrangement, and sources of the first five books of the Bible. Recognizing these strands is especially useful in helping us to understand the scriptural texts about creation that occupy the first four chapters of the Book of Genesis. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that

from a literary standpoint these texts may have had diverse sources. The inspired authors have placed them at the beginning of Scripture to express in their solemn language the truths of creation—its origin and its end in God, its order and goodness, the vocation of man, and finally the drama of sin and the hope of salvation. Read in the light of Christ, within the unity of Sacred Scripture and in the living Tradition of the Church, these texts remain the principal source for catechesis on the mysteries of the “beginning”: creation, fall, and promise of salvation. (CCC, 289)

The next subsections unpack the two creation stories in Genesis and some other *doublets* found in the Pentateuch.

## Two Creation Stories (Genesis 1:1-4:26) and Other Doublets

Everyone has a desire to know how life began. So did the ancient peoples, including the Hebrews. Their ideas about creation are in the Book of Genesis. The word *genesis* means “beginning.” But an examination of the first four chapters of Genesis reveals something very interesting: there are two creation stories, not one! The first story in Genesis 1:1–2:4a is the familiar “seven days of creation” in which creation progresses for six “days” before God “rests” on the seventh day. Note that the setting for the beginning of the story is



in water. Also note that man is created at the same moment and *both* male and female are said to be in the “image of God”:

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the *waters*. (Gn 1:1–2)

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground.” God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; *male and female he created them*. (Gn 1:26–27)

In the second creation story (Gn 2:4b–25), the setting is not water, but rather barren land:

At the time when the LORD God made the earth and the heavens—while as yet there was no field shrub on earth and no grass of the field had sprouted, for the LORD God had sent no rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the soil. (Gn 2:4b–5)

Also, in this version, the order of creation is different: humans, then plants, and finally animals. (In the first creation story, the order is plants, then animals, and finally humans.) The second story reveals God as a crafter of humans. He makes man out of the mud, and actually “breathes life” into man. This is also the creation version where the names Adam and Eve are given, the Original Sin and its effects are described, and the promise of Redemption is offered. More information on these elements will be covered in “Ancestor Stories in the Book of Genesis” on pages 41–43. For now, note these important religious truths revealed in the stories of creation:

1. *There is only one God.* Differing from other creation myths of the time, the biblical author emphatically insists that there is only one God and that he created everything in existence.
2. *God planned creation.* Creation is not the result of chaotic forces or warring gods. Our God created the world in an orderly way to share his life and goodness with us.
3. *Everything God made is good.* Other ancient peoples believed that much of material reality was evil and constantly at war with the spiritual elements in the universe. In the Jewish and Christian understanding, Genesis presents a positive view of created reality, telling us that God was pleased with everything, especially human beings made in God’s image and likeness, and trusted with responsible development of the rest of creation.
4. *The Sabbath is a special day of rest and worship.* The priestly writer reveals that God rested on

the seventh day. Obviously, God does not need to rest. But we need to take time to be renewed by stopping our ordinary activities one day out of the week. Also, we need to recognize a kind and loving God as the source of our existence and worship him in prayer and thanksgiving.

Together, the two creation stories are an example of a *doublet*—stories told twice, but with slight differences. There are also two different narratives of the Great Flood (Gn 6:1–23). However, rather than standing back-to-back, as with the creation stories, the Great Flood narratives have been woven together so that it is more difficult to see that there are two separate stories. The evidence for two Great Flood stories includes:

1. Humanity is described as corrupt in both Genesis 6:5 and 6:11–12.
2. Noah’s family enters the ark in Genesis 7:7, yet seems to enter it again in 7:13.
3. Genesis 6:19–20 says that Noah should bring two of every creature into the ark; Genesis 7:2 is different: “Of every clean animal, take with you seven pairs . . . .”
4. In Genesis 7:10–12, 17, and 8:6–7, the flood is described as lasting “forty days,” but in Genesis 7:24 and 8:3, the duration is one hundred and fifty days.

These differences are also noticeable by looking at the way the different sources or strands name God; in this case, the “J” and “E” sources.

## Review

1. What are some differences between the first and second creation stories?

## Reflect

What is an example of a family story that has been told to you to teach a lesson?

2. How was it determined that the third author, “D,” was involved in the composition of the Pentateuch?
3. How do we recognize a fourth voice of authorship that occasionally turns up in Genesis? How is the fourth author identified?
4. Explain how the four authors of the Pentateuch are dated.
5. What names for God are used by each of the four sources: “J,” “E,” “D,” and “P”?



## GOD IS THE AUTHOR OF SACRED SCRIPTURE

The text of the Bible has been written down under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. How so? God *inspired* the authors of Scripture. The authors had the freedom to choose the words they wrote, including the stories and incidents they chose to share. As the Second Vatican Council explained, God chose the authors of the Bible:

and while employed by Him (2) they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them, (3) they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted. (*Dei Verbum*, 11)

Related to this understanding of inspiration is another fact: the Jews of biblical times, up to and including Jesus, were great storytellers. In reading the Old Testament, we must understand the difference between a story intended to teach a lesson and the description of a historical event, all the while remembering that the text is inspired. God intended for us to read it—both history *and* stories.

For example, the proper response to the fall of humankind and the flood narrative of the Book of Genesis is to appreciate the religious lessons of moral responsibility, God’s care for humankind, and humankind’s stubborn resistance. Joining an expedition to find pieces of the “authentic” ark of Noah on Mount Ararat in modern Turkey (to cite one popular example of people who supposedly take the Bible “seriously” by insisting on a literal flood) is not the most appropriate response to the biblical texts, because it misses their central message and attempts to make these texts into something that they are not—literal history. Rather, it is more important to learn from God’s response to the Great Flood that he continues to love humanity despite its sinful nature, which demands correction and punishment. Sometimes we must use our best judgment to determine the differences between history and story, while some passages are more obvious.

Much of this religion textbook is devoted to looking at the religious meaning of the Old Testament, while providing some brief background on the context of a particular book.

## How We Read the Pentateuch

One of the criteria for reading and interpreting Scripture taught at the Second Vatican Council is that the reader should be especially attentive “to the content and unity of the whole Scripture” (*Dei Verbum*, quoted in *CCC*, 112). This important lesson provides a format for how we should read the Pentateuch specifically. No matter the various sources and human authors of the Pentateuch, Scripture must be read as “a unity by reason of God’s plan, of which Jesus is the center and heart, open since his Passover” (*CCC*, 112). Any and all parts of Scripture must be read and interpreted in relation to the whole.

Primarily because of the different sources involved in the Pentateuch’s composition, the first five books of the Bible have been understood in various ways. Consider whether or not the first five books of the Bible were intentionally arranged in some kind of set. Certainly that is the tradition of the Jewish and Christian understanding, and that is the primary way that Catholics explore the meaning God intends and the Church teaches about the content of the Pentateuch.

But before proceeding, consider this question: Why would this first great “section” of the Old Testament end at the fifth book (Deuteronomy) when the people of Israel have still not arrived

in the Promised Land, and Moses has just died? A possible answer is that the priest-editors intended the first section of the Bible to end after five books because the end of the Pentateuch paralleled their own story. As the Hebrews in the Torah were exiles first in Egypt and then in the desert, so too were the people at the time of its final composition in exile in Babylon. But, on the other hand, this seems to be an odd place to end the first major section—almost as if the reader is not privy to the final scene of a movie! It may be an interesting study to read the history of the Chosen People beyond the perspective of the Pentateuch to include the other historical books of the Old Testament that also speak of the rise and fall of Israel and the creation of a **Diaspora** people throughout the world.

However, let’s return to the traditional Judeo-Christian understanding of the Pentateuch as the “Book of Moses”—a way to read and understand what God wants revealed in these books. We do this so that we can survey some interesting and important issues regarding its study. Before we proceed further, let’s recall that the writings of the Bible are foremost valuable and powerful helps in our learning

### Diaspora

A group migration or flight away from the homeland into one or more other countries. The word can also refer to people who have maintained their separate identity (often religious, but occasionally ethnic, racial, or cultural) while living in those other countries after migration.





**exegesis**

A word that means “leading out.” Exegesis involves critical explanation or analysis, especially of written text.

about God, and learning about how God builds up his Kingdom. The judgment that these writings are inspired by God comes from the experience of the Church with these writings. The Magisterium read and studied them and realized that they were inspired. The Pontifical Biblical Commission wrote: “What characterizes Catholic **exegesis** is that it deliberately places itself within the living Tradition of the Church. . . .” All Catholics can join in the process of understanding the meaning of Scripture. It is ongoing prayerful dialogue and study. With this understanding of the Church’s primary role in arbitrating the meaning of Scripture, we proceed in our study of the Pentateuch and the rest of the Old Testament.

## ***Appreciating Story and Law in the Pentateuch***

One of the most important tools of a journey through the Bible is an appreciation of stories. All ancient travelers collected stories. The Greek historian Herodotus is sometimes called “the founder of history writing”—but even his great history source is loaded with *stories* that he heard during his travels. Why are stories so important? For many reasons. Sometimes stories are based on real events, and we can reproduce historical events by listening carefully to stories.

But even if they are not based on historical events, they can often accurately reflect a culture and its values—what a people think to be important, valuable, and good. To understand a people, we need to learn to listen carefully to their stories. The most important question to ask from the stories is *not* “Did that really happen?” but rather, “What can we learn from this story?”

The ancient Hebrews loved to tell stories. They not only simply enjoyed the telling and retelling, but they also appreciated the fact that stories often teach religious lessons more powerfully than any other way of teaching. Jesus himself was a master storyteller, and many of his stories have become so widely known in the world that people can refer to them easily. Sometimes people don’t even realize that they are quoting Jesus. For example, in everyday conversation, someone might say about a good person that he or she is a real “Good Samaritan” or describe a person who has returned home after a long time as a “prodigal son.” Gospel stories and other stories from the Bible have become a part of our day-to-day culture. Stories are powerful and lasting!

So, one reason that Jesus told stories was that Jesus was a Jew—and the Jews were (and many modern Jews still are) brilliant storytellers. But the Hebrews began telling stories far back into their history. The creation stories were among the most powerful stories that they told. The creation stories helped them to think about where they came from, and



how God was involved in their lives. Did they take it seriously? Certainly they did. But that is not the same thing as believing that the creation stories were a literal report of history.

So, to begin to suggest ways to read the stories of Genesis, let's recognize that the Pentateuch contains mainly two kinds of writing:

1. Narrative stories collected in two main groups—the “Ancestor Stories” of Genesis, and the Moses/Exodus Story.
2. The Collections of Mosiac Laws.

Let us consider each of these two kinds of writing—story and law—as we proceed.

## Review

1. What is a possible reason that the priest-editors decided to end the first section of the Bible after five books?
2. What are two main kinds of writing contained in the Pentateuch?

## Reflect

Think about your day. What experience from today could translate into a story with a religious lesson?

## Ancestor Stories in the Book of Genesis

The ancestor stories in the Book of Genesis are divided into two main sections: the so-called primeval stories that pertain to all of humanity (creation, the fall, Redemption) in Genesis 1–11, and then the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel collected together in Genesis 12–50. In these collections of stories about famous biblical ancestors like Adam and Eve; Abraham and Sarah; Jacob, Rachel, and Leah; and Joseph, the writers of the Bible discuss how certain traditions, groups, and even places were organized, named, and involved with God. What are ways that we can read and understand the importance of these stories? This section looks first at ways these ancestor stories are related to one another; second, it examines in more detail some of the meanings of these stories.

## *God's Relationship with Humanity*

The ancestor stories of Genesis—including the creation narratives—outline the stages of God's relationship with the Israelites. These stages include a series



### covenants

Binding and solemn agreements between human beings or between God and people, holding each to a particular course of action.

of **covenants** made between human beings and God. The various covenants are easy to chart in the Book of Genesis. Recall the priestly author's use of the descriptive phrase "be fertile and multiply" to mark the creation of humanity (Gn 1:28), the re-creation of humanity after the Great Flood (Gn 9:1), the covenant with Abraham (Gn 17:6–7), the continuation of the Abraham covenant when Isaac speaks to Jacob (Gn 28:3–3), and Jacob's taking on the name Israel (Gn 35:10–12). This phrase is a milepost to help the reader recognize the making of a covenant.

Consider also that the theme of the phrase—"be fertile and multiply"—continues well beyond the covenants of primeval history and is also used to prefigure the necessity of God's great covenant with Moses, the giving of the Law. Note the description of the Israelites when they were enslaved in Egypt:

But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific. They became so numerous and strong that the land was filled with them. Then a new king, who knew nothing of Joseph, came to power in Egypt. He said to his subjects, "Look how numerous and powerful the Israelite people are growing, more so than we ourselves! Come, let us deal shrewdly with them to stop their increase; otherwise, in time of war they too may join our enemies to fight against us, and so leave our country." (Ex 1:7–10)

Viewing the Old Testament as a series of covenants in history allows us to come to a clearer understanding of the final and New Covenant established in the life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the final covenant, Jesus commands his disciples to be fruitful in another way:

Then Jesus approached and said to them, "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age." (Mt 28:18–20)

The Old Testament serves as a prelude to the New Testament and God's full Revelation in Christ. Though God's Revelation is complete, it is not explicit. It remains the task of the Church, and our own task, to understand its significance over the course of centuries.

### Reflect

Why is it important for you to understand the significance of God's Revelation for your own life?

## *The Truths of Creation*

The creation of the world and the creation of man and woman was YHWH's first step at forging a covenant with

Israel. It is easy to understand why the Hebrew biblical authors addressed creation with two stories, and why these stories come first in the Bible. As the *Catechism* teaches:

The inspired authors have placed them at the beginning of Scripture to express in their solemn language the truths of creation—its origin and its end in God, its order and goodness, the vocation of man, and finally the drama of sin and the hope of salvation. (CCC, 289)

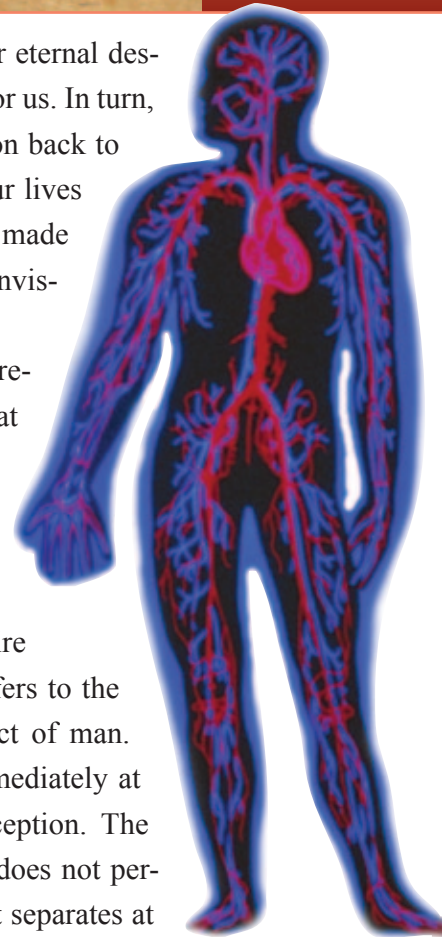
God’s creative actions also reveal several other important truths about him, including:

1. God alone created the universe freely, directly, and without any help. He began everything that exists outside of himself, he alone is the Creator, and everything that exists in the world depends on God, who gives it being (Gn 1:1).
2. God created everything through the eternal Word, his begotten Son, Jesus (Col 1:16–17).
3. Creation is the common work of the Holy Trinity. God the Father made all things “by the Son and the Spirit” (CCC, 292, quoting St. Irenaeus). The prologue to the Gospel of John likewise teaches that the Father created everything by his eternal Word, his beloved Son (Jn 1:1–5, see “Christology in John’s Gospel, page 228). The Church also professes the Spirit’s role as the “giver of life” (CCC, 291). The image of wind (“a mighty wind swept over the waters”) in Genesis 1:2 attests to the presence of the Holy Spirit at creation.

God created the world to show his glory and to communicate it. God’s perfection is shown through the gifts he offers us, his creations. Human beings are unique because we are made in the image and likeness of God. We are called to share “by knowledge and love” (CCC, 356) in God’s own life. God, as a

means for us to reach our eternal destiny, created everything for us. In turn, we are to offer all creation back to him by reproducing in our lives the image of God’s Son made man, the “image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15).

The first story of creation also reveals a great deal about the human person. We have been created by God with both a body and a soul. The “soul” refers to the entire human person. It also refers to the innermost, spiritual aspect of man. God creates the soul immediately at the time of human conception. The soul is also immortal. It does not perish with the body when it separates at death, and it will be reunited with the body at the final resurrection. The human body, too, shares in the image of God because it is intended to be the temple of the Holy Spirit. Also, we are to regard the human body as good and to honor it, since God has created it and will raise it on the last day.



## Review

1. What descriptive phrase helps to mark the covenants in the Book of Genesis?
2. In the New Covenant, how does Jesus command his disciples to be fruitful?
3. Name two truths about God revealed in creation stories.

## Reflect

Tell three ways that God has made you unique.