

COVENANT COMMUNITY
Meta-stories in the Pentateuch

LESSON ONE: PENTATEUCH AND TORAH

Opening Prayer

Lord of time and space, our minds are feeble tools for understanding Your ways and purposes. Consecrate all our senses that we may see and taste and touch and smell and feel Your holiness in the universe around us. Give us hearts receptive to the mystery and wonder of a living covenant with You. Amen.

Navigating this lesson

This first lesson introduces words that are not part of our every day vocabulary. Don't be discouraged. Think of them as tools for cracking open a richer meaning of familiar Bible stories. The words include Pentateuch, *Torah* and meta-story. The first is Latin, the second is Hebrew, and I thought I made up the third word but Google found it first. A meta-story is a story about one story embedded in another; it's a story about stories themselves.

Read as much of *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers* and *Deuteronomy* as you can; dabble in each to get a "flavor." If a story or narrative catches your imagination read it to the end.

Focus texts: Genesis 17:1-22, Exodus 33:1-23, Luke 2:41-52, Luke 4:16-30

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Jesus and his family had two options for public worship. They could attend the neighborhood synagogue in Nazareth. This was a simple "meeting house" where Jews gathered on Friday evenings for worship and Saturday mornings for study. Everybody was welcome for Friday evening worship, though the men and women probably sat separately. Only the men and boys returned on Saturday mornings for study of the *Torah*.

The second option for Jesus and his family was the great Temple in Jerusalem. As devout Jews Joseph and Mary did their best to visit the Temple once a year even though the walk to Jerusalem took several days.

Worship in the local synagogue meant ritual prayers and readings from the Hebrew scriptures. Worship in the Temple meant offering blood sacrifices to atone for sins. The poorest people bought a pigeon or a dove for the priests to sacrifice on their behalf. The richest people dragged sheep and goats and bulls into the Temple. The stone floors of the Temple had trenches for draining off the blood from all the animals sacrificed on the altars.

Luke records that Jesus' parents took him to the Jerusalem Temple when he was twelve. They traveled from Nazareth to Jerusalem as a group, picking up pilgrims from various towns along the way. Once they had offered whatever sacrificial creatures they could afford, they all set off for home. The youngsters quickly found one another and began playing together. Joseph and Mary assumed Jesus was somewhere in the group of young people but when it was time to bed down for the night – no Jesus! So they raced back to Jerusalem.

AFTER THREE DAYS THEY FOUND HIM IN THE TEMPLE, SITTING AMONG THE TEACHERS, LISTENING TO THEM AND ASKING THEM QUESTIONS. AND ALL WHO HEARD HIM WERE AMAZED AT HIS UNDER-STANDING AND HIS ANSWERS. {LUKE 2:46-47}

Jesus was not pulling his “answers” out of thin air. That would have failed to impress the teachers. The Temple teachers were students of the *Torah*. They were interpreters of the *Torah*. If twelve year old Jesus could amaze the Temple teachers, it was by showing them a superior understanding of the *Torah*.

Two things are “amazing” about this incident:

- Jesus was a village lad, but he could read,
- Jesus had a clear understanding of what he had read.

Mary did not teach Jesus how to read because women were almost without exception illiterate. If Joseph was the village carpenter he was unlikely to be able to read and less likely to have time to tutor his son. The best assumption is that Joseph took Jesus to the Nazareth synagogue where some of the men taught him to read.

The only “books” in the synagogue would have been scrolls - the sacred scrolls of Jewish scripture – the *Torah*. That makes sense of what happened later.

There is no record of what happened next because there is no record of Jesus from age twelve until age thirty (more or less). When he reappears he is baptized in the River Jordan, spends 40 days and nights in a desert retreat, and

then returns to his hometown, Nazareth. In Nazareth he visits the local synagogue. It would have been wonderfully familiar. There were the hand-copied



scrolls, the very ones the village men took down when Jesus was a boy and taught him to read. The scrolls were shelved by category (not chronology): the prophets, the wisdom, the histories, and the *Torah*. The *Torah* was kept separate in a special cabinet called the Ark of the Covenant.

Rebuilt replica of Nazareth synagogue

WHEN [JESUS] CAME TO NAZARETH, WHERE HE HAD BEEN BROUGHT UP, HE WENT TO THE SYNAGOGUE ON THE SABBATH DAY, AS WAS HIS CUSTOM. HE STOOD UP TO READ, AND THE SCROLL OF THE PROPHET ISAIAH WAS GIVEN TO HIM. HE UNROLLED THE SCROLL AND FOUND THE PLACE WHERE IT WAS WRITTEN: “THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE HAS ANOINTED ME TO BRING GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO LET THE OPPRESSED GO FREE, TO PROCLAIM THE YEAR OF THE LORD’S FAVOR.”

AND HE ROLLED UP THE SCROLL, GAVE IT BACK TO THE ATTENDANT, AND SAT DOWN. THE EYES OF ALL IN THE SYNAGOGUE WERE FIXED ON HIM. THEN HE BEGAN TO SAY TO THEM, “TODAY THIS SCRIPTURE HAS BEEN FULFILLED IN YOUR HEARING.” {LUKE 4:14-21}

Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. We cannot know what Jesus meant when he proclaimed, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing,” unless we know what those sacred Jewish scrolls contained. We will never “get” Jesus unless we understand the Judaism that shaped him.

The *Torah* consists of five documents. Biblical scholars call these five documents the Pentateuch.

penta = Latin for five (for example: a pentagon has five sides)
teuch = Latin for “instrument”

So the Pentateuch is five instruments. We call them *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers* and *Deuteronomy*, the first five “books” in the Bible. The Jewish side of our family call them the *Torah*.

The Bible contains a multitude of stories and most of them are stories within larger stories. Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Jeremiah, Ruth, Jesus and Federated Church together form a meta-story of **covenant**. Joseph and his multi-colored coat is part of a meta-story of **providence and grace**. It includes Abraham and Jacob and the grumbling Israelites and Paul and Phillip and the early Church and Martin Luther, and our Sunday School teachers and our time and place. The Hebrew tribes and the laws in *Leviticus* and the twelve disciples and the Samaritan woman and Priscilla’s house church and desert monasteries and Federated Church Women are all part of the meta-story of a **holy community**.

These meta-stories begin in *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers* and *Deuteronomy* and they continue to unfold in our lives and in the life of Federated Church. We are called to live in **covenant** with the God of Abraham and Moses. We are shaped by the same mysterious **providence** that enabled Joseph to save his brothers. We are encouraged to **practice holy living** and to shape a **community that mirrors God’s nature** – just like the first “twelve” tribes. God is still creating and redeeming this world and we are part of the process.

When Jesus’ elders opened the Ark of Covenant and gave him one of the scrolls of the Pentateuch, teaching him to sound out the Hebrew words, he was learning stories that we are still adding to today.

This study is to help us discover our part in the story God is telling.

The Bible is divided into two major sections. Most of us grew up calling these two sections the “Old Testament” and the “New Testament.” Let’s try to refer to the “Hebrew Scriptures” instead of the “Old Testament.” Practice saying that. God established a covenant with the Jews and this covenant has never been cancelled or repudiated. Jews are called to be Jews and to be faithful to the covenants God made with our Jewish ancestors.

THEY ARE ISRAELITES, AND TO THEM BELONG
THE ADOPTION, THE GLORY, THE COVENANTS,
THE GIVING OF THE LAW, THE WORSHIP, AND THE
PROMISES; TO THEM BELONG THE PATRIARCHS,
AND FROM THEM, ACCORDING TO THE FLESH,

COMES THE MESSIAH, WHO IS OVER ALL, GOD
BLESSED FOREVER. AMEN. {ROMANS 9:4-5}

In The Good Book, Peter Gomes writes: *“The Torah of the Jews was, and remains the way of salvation for them. Paul’s argument is that the cross of Jesus is to Gentiles what the Torah is to Jews, and that both are means of salvation and righteousness. In other words, Jews need not become Christians to obtain the promises - in the Torah they already have the promises as Jews.”*

Scripture struggles to describe what cannot be described. Not even Moses got to see God “face to face.” He was granted a glimpse, and only a glimpse of God’s “back” as God’s “glory” swept past.

MOSES SAID, “SHOW ME YOUR GLORY, I PRAY.”
AND [GOD] SAID, “I WILL MAKE ALL MY
GOODNESS PASS BEFORE YOU, AND WILL
PROCLAIM BEFORE YOU THE NAME, ‘THE LORD’;
AND I WILL BE GRACIOUS TO WHOM I WILL BE
GRACIOUS, AND WILL SHOW MERCY ON WHOM I
WILL SHOW MERCY. BUT,” [GOD] SAID, “YOU
CANNOT SEE MY FACE; FOR NO ONE SHALL SEE
ME AND LIVE.”

AND THE LORD CONTINUED, “SEE, THERE
IS A PLACE BY ME WHERE YOU SHALL STAND ON
THE ROCK; AND WHILE MY GLORY PASSES BY I
WILL PUT YOU IN A CLEFT OF THE ROCK, AND I
WILL COVER YOU WITH MY HAND UNTIL I HAVE
PASSED BY; THEN I WILL TAKE AWAY MY HAND,
AND YOU SHALL SEE MY BACK; BUT MY FACE
SHALL NOT BE SEEN.” {EXODUS 33:18-23}

“The Lord” is an English translation of the Hebrew YAHWEH. In the Hebrew scriptures YAHWEH is spelled without vowels. How would you pronounce YHWH? At most it would be a breath. The Pentateuch is about a God so holy that his name cannot be spoken. Even Moses on Mount Sinai must shield his eyes lest he catch more than a glimpse of the “glory” of God and the trailing wind of God’s presence. This God is so holy, so “Other”, so overwhelmingly majestic and demanding that his name must never be spoken aloud. YHWH is the Holy Breath animating the entire universe.

On this side of the Resurrection Jesus encourages us to call God “Father” or even “Daddy” (“*Abba*”). But Abraham and Joseph and Moses were just getting acquainted with their new God and they were not yet on such familiar terms! *YHWH* gives a better sense of their experience of the One with whom they were called into covenant.

“Pentateuch” and “*Torah*” are sometimes used interchangeably. Both refer to the first five books of the Hebrew/Christian Bible. But *Torah* means more than five documents; *Torah* is the lively, evolving, dynamic Spirit that infuses the written words in the Pentateuch. *Torah* is the meaning that escapes the pages of the scrolls. *Torah* is written on our hearts, not merely on paper. If, as has been said, religion is caught, not taught, then the Pentateuch can be taught but the *Torah* must be “caught,” like an enthusiasm or an insight or a contagion that forever changes the way life is lived.

THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH
THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL AFTER THESE DAYS, SAYS
THE LORD: I WILL PUT MY LAW WITHIN THEM, AND
I WILL WRITE IT ON THEIR HEARTS; AND I WILL BE
THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE.
{ JEREMIAH 31:33 }

As Jewish worship begins (Friday evening after sundown) the *Torah* scroll (the Pentateuch) is lifted out of the Ark of the Covenant in the synagogue sanctuary. The scroll is often carried around the perimeter of the sanctuary by the rabbi or by a lay leader of the congregation or by a youth celebrating his *bar mitzvah* or her *bat mitzvah*. People sometimes leave their seats to touch or kiss the *Torah* scroll as it passes by. Then it is laid on a table (the *bema*) in the front of sanctuary. The scroll is unrolled revealing the passage that will be translated and interpreted by the rabbi that night.

In Jewish tradition the *Torah* is the “mind of God.” Here are the foundational narratives of the Jewish people: their trials and tribulations, their faithfulness and their unfaithfulness, their distinct way of life embodied in annual rituals, religious obligations and moral teachings.



When I was pastor of a United Methodist congregation in Santa Rosa, California, we shared our sanctuary with a Jewish congregation. It was a young congregation, a start-up, begun because the population of the town was growing. On the night of their formal recognition an older rabbi gave the congregation their name: *Shomrei Torah*. He translated this as “Keepers of the *Torah*”. The congregation was entrusted with an ancient parchment scroll on which all the words of the Pentateuch were hand written in Hebrew – the same words Jesus would have puzzled over in the Nazareth synagogue. But the rabbi admonished the congregation to keep *Torah* alive in their hearts and lives, not just on the page.

When the sanctuary of that church was set fire by an arsonist, Christian members raced in to rescue *Shomrei Torah’s Torah* scroll before saving anything else. They understood how sacred *Torah* is to both Jews and Christians. Jesus would have understood how important it was to rescue the *Torah*.

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SOME QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION FOR REFLECTION, PONDERING, and CONVERSATION

Why is it important to understand the Jewish roots of Jesus’ life?

Bob claims that Jews are called to be faithful Jews, not to be converted to Christianity. Do you agree?

Moses saw only a tiny portion of God, because anyone exposed to the full glory of God would “surely die.” How did Moses experience God?

How did Jesus experience God?

How do you experience God?

A Jew who observes ritual purity obligations (keeping *kosher*) and who observes the Jewish holy days (*Yom Kippur, Purim, Seder,*) is known as a practicing Jew. What constitutes a practicing Christian? Is it possible to be a non-practicing Christian?