

'Overview of the Old Testament

A comprehensive study exploring the foundational books of Hebrew Scripture, examining their literary structure, historical context, and theological significance for understanding God's revelation to humanity.



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Overview of the Pentateuch





Defining the Pentateuch

The Five Books

The term Pentateuch is commonly applied to the first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. This Greek expression means "five scrolls" and was apparently popularized by Hellenistic Jews of Alexandria in the first century A.D.

Hebrew Designations

Hebrew-speaking Jews traditionally referred to these five books as "Torah" (or "instruction"). Other designations include the "Book of the Law," emphasizing covenant stipulations, and the "Law of Moses," highlighting the human mediator.

Canonical Significance

The Pentateuch was the first divinely inspired literary collection recognized as Scripture by the Jewish community. As such, it is the most important part of the Hebrew canon, always appearing at the beginning of the threefold division of the Old Testament: Law, Prophets, and Writings.

Superior Position

Its superior position in the Old Testament canon regarding authority and sanctity is evidenced by its placement and separation from other books in the Septuagint.

Careful Translation

The careful translation of the Hebrew Pentateuch into Greek confirms the great respect for this collection in the Jewish community.



Theme and General Content

The division of the Pentateuch into "five books" is actually a secondary compartmentalization of what was designed to be a literary unity. The best way to consider the Pentateuch is as a "five-volume book."

David J. A. Clines convincingly argued that the Pentateuch has two basic divisions: Genesis 1-11 and Genesis 12-Deuteronomy 34. Due to man's fall and the broken relationship between God and humanity, the first part poses the question: "How can this relationship be restored?" The second provides the answer to the human dilemma described in Genesis 1-11.

The Covenant Solution

1

The Problem

Genesis 1-11 reveals humanity's fall and broken relationship with God

2

The Solution

Genesis 12:1-3 presents God's covenant with Abraham as the foundation for restoration

3

The Fulfillment

Genesis 12-Deuteronomy 34 develops this covenant theme throughout Israel's history

This passage constitutes the focus of the second part and summarizes the main themes of Pentateuchal narratives: Yahweh's covenant, Abraham's posterity, divine election and grace, and the granting of the "promised land."



Two-Part Structure

Part 1: Genesis 1-11

- Origin of the world and humanity
- Nature and purpose of human beings
- Entry of sin into God's perfect creation
- Divine character that judges sin (flood account)
- God's mercy toward fallen creation (grace to Noah)

Part 2: Genesis 12-Deuteronomy 34

- Israel becomes Yahweh's chosen covenant people
- God's instrument to reveal Himself
- Restoration of the broken relationship
- Hope for all nations through Abraham's blessing



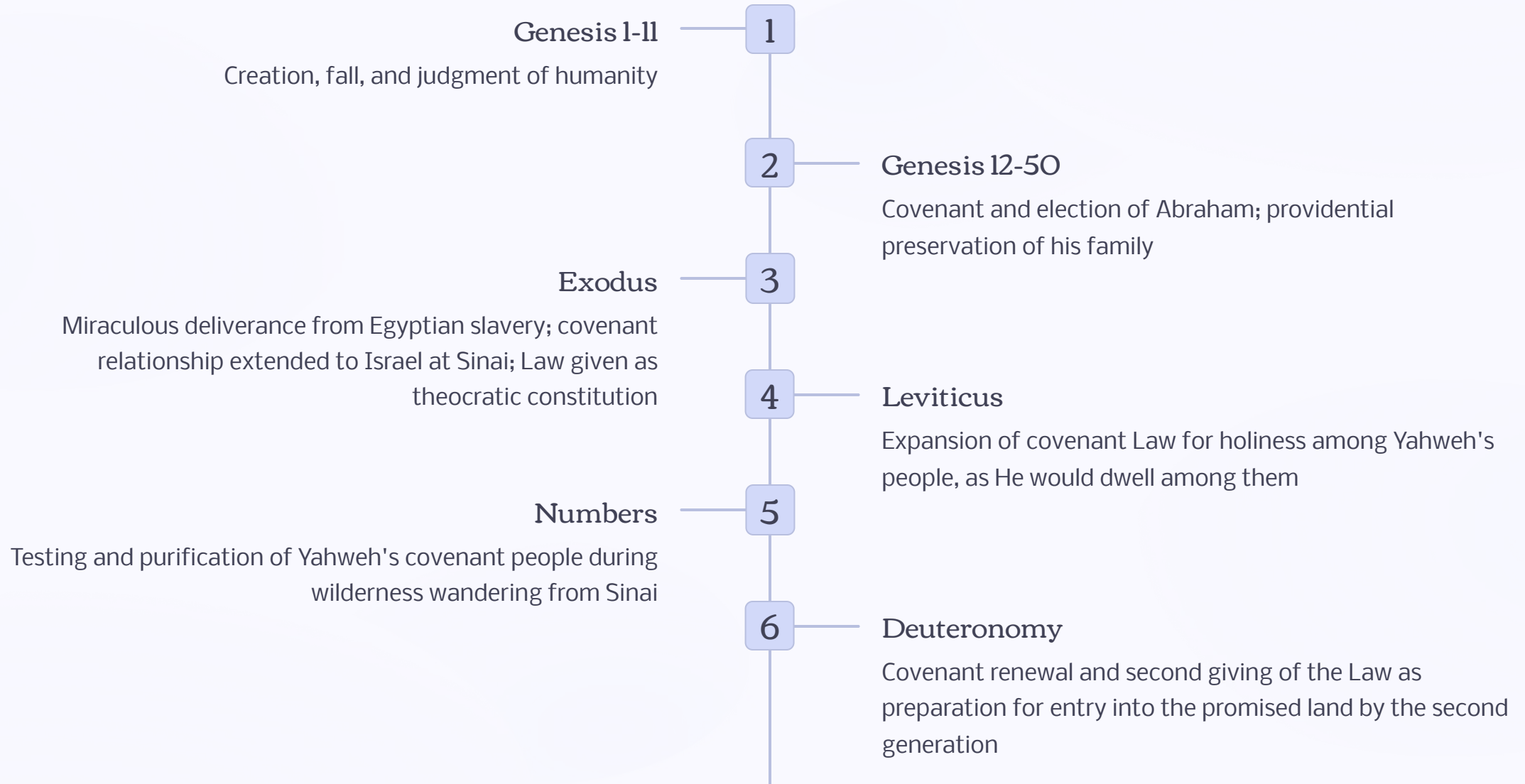
The Unifying Theological Theme

"All peoples on earth will be blessed through you" - Genesis 12:3

The unifying theological theme of the Pentateuch is Yahweh's promise made to Abraham in Genesis 12:3. What humanity could not accomplish despite their pride and self-sufficiency (symbolized in the Tower of Babel), God initiated through His covenant promise.

The literary structure of the Pentateuch is merely an expansion of the threefold covenant promise made to Abraham, demonstrating God's faithfulness across generations.

Literary Plan of the Pentateuch



Literary Diversity

The Pentateuch, or "Book of the Law," is a rich collection of literary genres or types. This diversity of forms enhances the artistic nature of the work and reinforces the main unifying theological themes of the anthology.

This complex literary diversity has been directly responsible for ongoing debate about the composition and dating of the Pentateuch among biblical scholars throughout history.



Narrative Prose

The majority of Law literature is narrative prose. It is simple yet direct and expressive. The text is almost entirely a third-person account of ancient Israelite history interspersed with prayers, declarations, and other types of direct discourse.



Historical Accounts

Chronicles of events with theological interpretation woven throughout



Direct Discourse

Abraham's intercession for Sodom, Yahweh's speech to Moses, dialogue between Pharaoh and Moses



Skillful Combination

Historical records blended with theological interpretation, creating more than mere chronological listing

Language Characteristics

The language of the Pentateuch is simple and beautiful, employing anthropomorphic language (attributing human characteristics to God) and frequent references to theophany (God's visible and audible manifestation to humans).

The detailed characterizations and repeated plot patterns in the stories have led some scholars to use terms like myth, saga, folklore, and legend to describe parts of the Pentateuchal narratives, especially Genesis. However, traditional evangelical scholars have avoided using these titles to prevent the accounts from being considered fiction.



Ancient Poetry in the Pentateuch

The Pentateuch contains some of the oldest examples of Hebrew poetry in the entire Old Testament. Careful analysis of spelling, word meanings, and sentence organization has indicated the ancient nature of several poetic passages.

Moses' Song of the Sea

Exodus 15 - celebrating victory over the Egyptians

Balaam's Oracles

Numbers 23-24 - prophetic utterances about Israel's future

Jacob's Blessing

Genesis 49 - patriarchal blessing on the twelve tribes

Moses' Song and Blessing

Deuteronomy 32-33 - final words of the great lawgiver

The dating of the current form of these poetic texts varies between the 13th and 11th centuries B.C., according to technical analysis.

Specific Poetic Forms

Prayers

Aaron's blessing (Numbers 6:22-27)

Victory Hymns

Yahweh's triumph over the Egyptians in Moses' sea song

Prophecies

Yahweh's pronouncement to Rebecca about twins; Balaam's oracle

Songs of Praise

Miriam's song (Exodus 15:21); Israel's song (Numbers 21:17-18)

Family Blessings

Rebecca's blessing (Genesis 24:60); Jacob's deathbed blessing

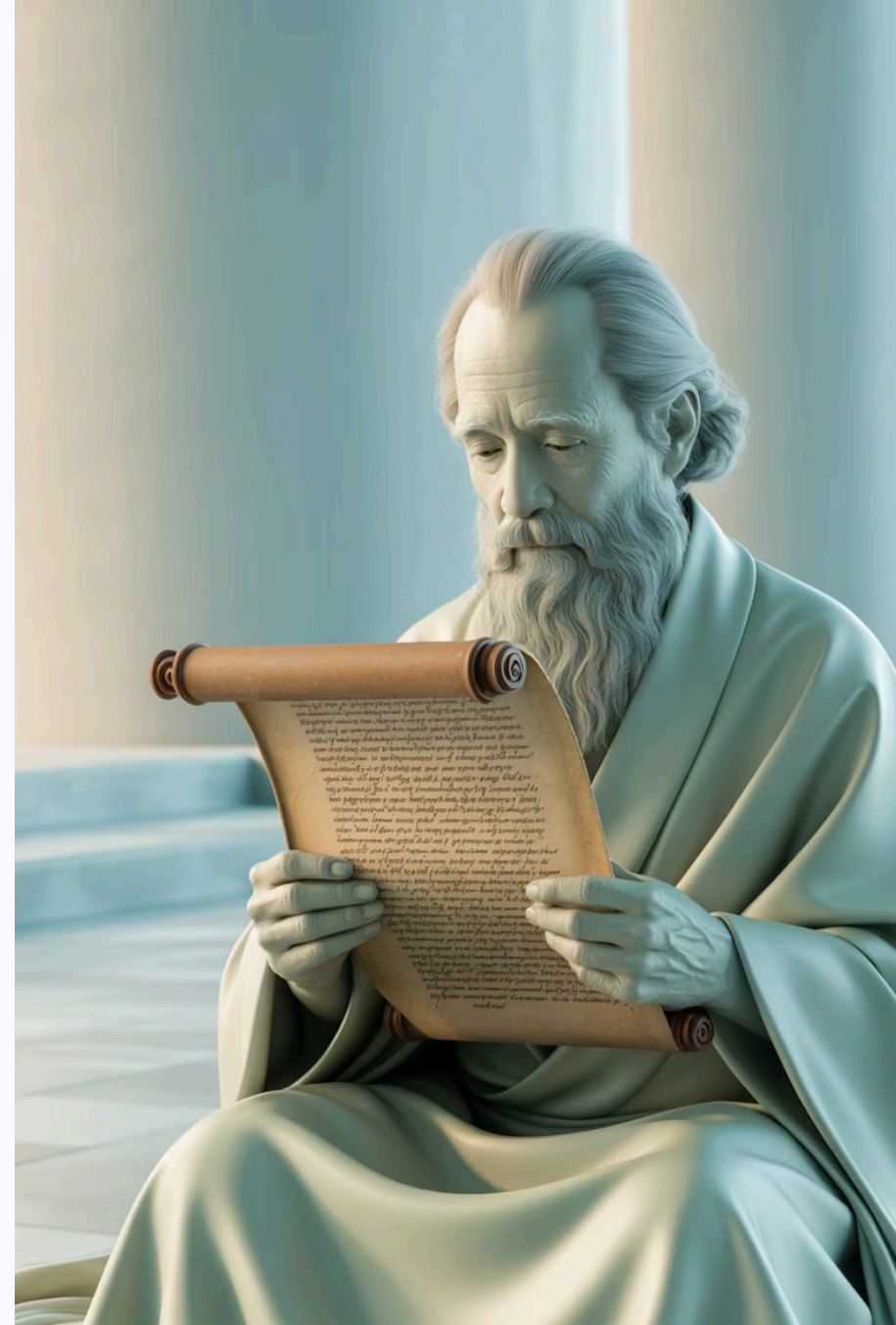
Covenant Promises

Yahweh's promises to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1)

Prophetic Revelation

Prophetic literature in the Old Testament includes predictions or divine revelations and expositions or interpretations of revelation focused on God's covenant with Israel. The Pentateuch contains examples of both.

Prophetic revelation in the Law occurs in both prose narratives and poetic forms. Examples include Yahweh's revelation to Abraham regarding his descendants' oppression and slavery (Genesis 15:12-16) and the prose prediction about the prophet who would appear in Israel (Deuteronomy 18:17-20), fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth according to John 1:45.





Law in the Ancient Near East

The concept of law was not restricted to the Hebrews in the Ancient Near East. Law collections were published in Mesopotamia as early as 2000 B.C., about five centuries (or more) before Moses' time.

1

Sumerian Laws

Ur-Nammu (2964-2046 B.C.) and Lipit-Ishtar (1875-1864 B.C.)

2

Babylonian Laws

Laws of Eshnunna (19th century B.C.) and Hammurabi (1792-1750 B.C.)

3

Hebrew Law

Mosaic legislation building on ancient traditions while maintaining divine origin



Hebrew Law Characteristics

The Pentateuch is generally associated with Law, as many Hebrew titles of the five books attest. The word "law" translates the Hebrew word "torah," and Old Testament law includes commandments, statutes, and ordinances.

There are more than six hundred laws in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The purpose of biblical legislation was to organize and regulate Israel's moral, religious/ceremonial, and civil life according to the holiness necessary to maintain the covenant relationship with Yahweh.

Categories of Biblical Law





The Pentateuch as History

The five books of the Law narrate the period from creation to Moses' death on Mount Nebo in Moab, just before the Israelite conquest of Canaan. While it's impossible to determine the exact date of our planet's origin, creation is best considered a "dateless mystery."

Roughly, the Pentateuchal narratives from Abraham's call (Genesis 12) to Moses' death (Deuteronomy 34) can be attributed to the Middle and Late Bronze Ages of Ancient Near Eastern history. This means the Patriarchal Period extended from approximately 2000 to 1600 B.C., while Moses and the Exodus date from 1500 to 1200 B.C.



Overview of the Historical Books



The Historical Books Collection

The current order of Old Testament historical books includes Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.

Former Prophets

In Hebrew organization: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings - classified as prophetic due to their theological nature

The Writings

Ruth, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther form part of the Hebrew canon called "the Writings"

The Deuteronomistic History Theory

In the first half of the 20th century, source critics generally analyzed the books of Joshua-Kings in the same way as the Pentateuch. However, Martin Noth in 1943 presented a theory that Deuteronomy-2 Kings was a unified work, written largely in exile.

Noth's Contribution

Noth called it "Deuteronomistic History" because he believed it was created to demonstrate how Deuteronomistic theology was reflected in Israel's history. This theory still provides the framework for most current research on the historical books.

Modern Consensus

Today, the most common position is that the initial compilation occurred during Hezekiah's time (late 8th century), with the first edition largely resulting from Josiah's reform (late 7th century), and final completion around 550 B.C.

Characteristics of Deuteronomistic History

The so-called Deuteronomistic History shares with Deuteronomy a common perspective on history and theology. Israel's history is viewed in terms of covenant loyalty.

1

Covenant Obedience

Obedience to the Law and faith in the Lord bring covenant blessings and prosperity

2

Covenant Disobedience

Disobedience and apostasy bring curses and judgment upon the people

The dependence on recurring expressions and rhetorical use of speeches for recapitulation at important moments are among the stylistic similarities throughout these books.



The Deuteronomistic Message

The Deuteronomistic message is highlighted through repetition. Recurring formulas identify the main authorial interests. For example, failure to abandon Jeroboam's sin constitutes the condemnation of all Northern Kingdom kings.

Northern Kings Standard

All evaluated against their continuation of Jeroboam's idolatrous practices, leading to inevitable judgment

Southern Kings Standard

Davidic dynasty evaluated by comparison with David in faithfulness and success in centralizing worship in Jerusalem

Prophetic Warnings

Constant presence of prophetic word confirmed God's patience and provided opportunity for repentance

Concept of History in Israel and the Ancient Near East

When historians study civilization records, they seek to identify what model of history these documents use. Western civilization has adopted a linear model - history as a straight line from point A to point Z through continuous time, with cause and effect viewed in strictly naturalistic terms.

In contrast, cause and effect in the Ancient Near East were analyzed almost entirely in supernatural terms. Even when natural cause and effect were evident, this was insignificant compared to the supernatural aspect.



Cyclical vs. Linear History

Cyclical View

History follows regular patterns like seasonal cycles, with fixed phases returning to origin



Recurrence Patterns

Ancient Near East emphasized recurring patterns discovered through omens and divine activity

Israelite Covenant

Israel's monotheism simplified the system
- conformity to covenant rather than ritual manipulation

Purpose of Historical Recording

In the Ancient Near East, there were various genres of historical recording, but historiography rarely aimed to present an objective view of what actually happened. Generally, propaganda was clothed as history to benefit the powerful.

Ancient Near Eastern Practice

Royal inscriptions were typically self-serving documents through which kings could boast of their deeds, exaggerating positive aspects, ignoring negative ones, and occasionally taking credit for predecessors' achievements.

Israelite Difference

Hebrew historical narratives were motivated by theological interests, showing how the Lord acts in history to fulfill His promises and achieve His purposes - revealing who God is through what He did.



Overview of the Poetic Books

Hebrew Poetic and Wisdom Literature

The boundaries of Old Testament poetic literature are not easy to determine, as little is known about the exact nature of biblical Hebrew poetry. Unlike classical and modern counterparts, ancient Hebrew poetry lacks a distinct scheme of accentuation, meter, or rhythm that differentiates it from prose.

Bishop Robert Lowth made the most significant ancient contribution to Hebrew poetry study in the mid-18th century. He observed parallelism or correspondence of ideas in phrases as the fundamental characteristic distinguishing Hebrew poetry from prose. His delineation of various parallelism types remains the foundation of Old Testament poetic structure knowledge.



Identifying Hebrew Poetry

Old Testament texts exhibiting prose particle densities of 15% or more are considered prose, while those demonstrating densities of 5% or less are considered poetic. Prophetic literature with density between 5-15% is classified as "oracular prose," denoting its poetic tendency.

33%

Poetry in the Old Testament

Approximately one-third of the Hebrew Old Testament consists of poetry

5

Fully Poetic Books

Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Lamentations, and most of Job

Poetry and Wisdom in the Ancient Near East

Israel inherited a long and well-developed literary tradition in the Ancient Near East. Despite the oldest remaining Hebrew poetry dating from the 13th or 12th centuries B.C., Egyptian poetry rudiments can be traced to a pharaoh's triumph hymn from around 3200 B.C.

Poetic pairs appear in the famous pyramid texts of Dynasty V (c. 2350 B.C.), and corresponding pairs appear as early as 2300 B.C. in Pepi I's victory hymn. Scholars have long recognized similarities between Psalm 104 and Akhenaten's sun hymn, as well as between Egyptian love songs of the New Kingdom and Song of Songs.



Mesopotamian Poetic Traditions

The same types of poetic traditions developed simultaneously in ancient Mesopotamia. Pairs already appear in Gudea's wall inscription, prince of Lagash (c. 1900-1800 B.C.). The Old Babylonian period canonized earlier Sumerian literature, including poetic hymns and prayers.



Epic of Gilgamesh

Contains the Babylonian flood story, demonstrating ancient narrative poetry techniques



Enuma Elish

Babylonian creation epic showing sophisticated poetic structure and theological themes



Hymn to Shamash

Demonstrates ancient Near Eastern praise poetry with universal themes

Ugaritic Poetry Connections

Perhaps most important parallels between Near Eastern and biblical poetry are found in Canaanite literature discovered at Ras Shamra or Ugarit. Ugaritic poetry dates between 1400–1200 B.C. approximately, likely preceded by at least two centuries of oral transmission.

Ugaritic poetry resembles Hebrew poetry in vocabulary and style. Hundreds of parallel word pairs appearing in Hebrew poetry indicate that Old Testament poets used a common parallelistic poetic tradition. The epic cycles of Baal, Aqhat, and Keret contain poetic devices like chiasm, numerical climax, and synonymous and synthetic parallelism.



Wisdom Literature in the Ancient World

Biblical wisdom literature, like Hebrew poetry, must be analyzed in international context. The Bible praises wisdom traditions of Egyptians, Edomites, Arabs, and Babylonians. Remaining Egyptian wisdom literature consists of two basic types: instructions and debates.

Egyptian Instructions

Largely from pharaonic court as kings prepared sons for monarchy administration

Wisdom Debates

Speculative wisdom including political satire and skeptical treatises on life's ironies

Maat Principle

Egyptian wisdom essence embodying truth, justice, and order



Literary Character of Hebrew Poetry

Hebrew poetry's two peculiar characteristics are sound and thought structures. Sound structure is the regular pattern of stressed or unstressed syllables, plus repetition of sounds through devices like alliteration or assonance.

Thought or sense structure is the balance of ideas in a structured or systematic way. The primary vehicle for transmitting thought structure in biblical poetry is the characteristic called "parallelism and constituent terms," widely used throughout Ancient Near Eastern literary circles but developed with great skill by Hebrew poets.

Types of Parallelism

1

Semantic Parallelism

Use of synonyms, similar terms, pairs, and opposites based on word usage

2

Progressive Parallelism

Cause and effect, sequence, deduction, metaphors, and explanation based on logical sequence

3

Grammatical Parallelism

Parallel rhetorical elements, word order, and ellipse based on grammatical form choices

The Concept of Wisdom

The concept of wisdom stems from the need to deal with the human reality of simple survival. The desire to master life through the power of reason represents one of the universal phenomena of ancient and modern societies.

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" - Proverbs 1:7

The concept of "fear of the LORD" differentiated Hebrew wisdom in the Ancient Near East. For Israel, wisdom and divine knowledge were inseparable because God was the source and dispenser of discernment. This "divine inclination" meant that knowledge of God had implications for both Israel's emotional and spiritual life and their physical and empirical life.

Overview of the Prophetic Books



Introduction to Prophetic Literature

A prophet is someone who speaks on behalf of another person. In the Bible, the prophet is generally God's spokesperson. Like a presidential press secretary or ambassador, prophets are spokespersons who convey the opinions, reactions, intentions, and very words of God when necessary.



Divine Calling

The most frequent title is "nabi," indicating the prophet was "the called one" who received divine commissioning



Crisis Ministry

Biblical prophetic ministry tended to increase during times of crisis - religious, political, or identity crises



Covenant Focus

Prophets announced God's "program," making them unique in the ancient world through their covenant-based message

The message of the prophets reveals God through His intended actions in history, demonstrating His sovereignty and faithfulness to His covenant promises across all generations.

Defining Elements of Prophecy

The role of a prophet in ancient Israel was multifaceted, shaped by a unique divine calling and a critical responsibility to convey God's message during pivotal moments in history.

Divine Commissioning

Prophets were not self-appointed but divinely called, receiving a direct mandate from God to speak on His behalf, often signified by the title "nabi" or "one called."

Crisis-Driven Ministry

Their ministries frequently intensified during times of national or spiritual crisis, providing divine guidance, warning, and comfort when society faced moral decay, political upheaval, or existential threats.

Covenant Fidelity

Central to their message was the unwavering emphasis on God's covenant with Israel, calling the people back to obedience and reminding them of the blessings and curses associated with covenant faithfulness.

Understanding these core aspects reveals the profound significance of prophetic literature as both a historical record and a theological testament to God's active involvement in the life of His people.

Conclusion: Overview of the Old Testament

Our journey through the Old Testament reveals a rich tapestry of divine interaction with humanity, laying the groundwork for understanding God's character and His redemptive plan. We've explored the foundational texts, historical narratives, profound poetry, and urgent prophetic messages that collectively tell a story of covenant, human response, and enduring hope.



Pentateuch

Foundational laws, covenants, and the origin story of God's people.



Historical Books

Narratives of Israel's journey, kingship, and divine providence.



Poetic & Wisdom

Expressions of worship, human experience, and the pursuit of divine wisdom.



Prophetic Books

God's messages of warning, comfort, and future hope for Israel and nations.

Each section contributes uniquely to the overarching narrative, demonstrating God's consistent involvement and unchanging nature throughout history.