

# Paradise to Promised Land

A Bible study about the history of the Old Testament

## Before the Promised Land

Today we're taking a look at the first five books of the Old Testament, the Torah/Pentateuch, and its historical context.

- **When you think of the Torah, what kinds of things come to mind?**

## Meet the Author: Moses

It is important to remember that there is one author to the Torah, Moses. Moses was writing around the 1200's BC. We are unsure as to when he took the time to write down his account, and it seems that it was likely an ongoing account. What we do know of Moses is that he was a Hebrew who was raised in the court of Pharaoh. Moses' childhood in Pharaoh's household would have given him the necessary literary skills. Moses then went on to be the leader of Israel, leading them to the upper Mesopotamian region of Canaan.

Some scholarship only attributes the basic kernel of the books to Moses. This theory, known as the JEDP theory of the Torah, attributes a kernel to Moses and his contemporaries, and further edits up to the post-exilic times. While our church body does not hold to this theory, it is an important theory to know about in Biblical studies.

- **Read Deuteronomy 31:24-39 – This is traditionally held at the strongest point for Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch.**
- **According to the text, why does Moses write the Torah?**

## Major Events in the Text

There are several major events that are covered in the Torah. These include:

- Primeval history including the creation of the world and the stories of early figures
- The stories of the Patriarchs and the beginnings of the 12 tribes of Israel
- The story of Moses himself
- The story of God's rescue of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt
- The establishment of YHWH worship in the desert
- The arrival at the promised land of Canaan

These stories form the normative sections of the Old Testament and of Hebrew religion in general. They are as central to understanding Judaism as the Gospel accounts are central to understanding Christianity.

- **Looking at these major events from the text, how would you synthesize these things into one overall message of the Torah?**

## Historical Connections: The Patriarchs and the Nuzi Texts

The Nuzi texts were stone tablets that were uncovered in the late 1800's AD and seem to date back to around 2000 BC and the time of Patriarchs. While there are no direct correlations between the Old Testament and the Nuzi texts, the Nuzi texts do seem to provide similar examples to things that we find in the stories of the Patriarchs. These examples are interesting because of how they counter the Law of Moses. The Nuzi texts

and the Patriarchs all seem to approve of sexual/marital relations between half-siblings (e.g. Abraham and Sarah), the giving of a family blessing to junior siblings (e.g. Jacob and Esau), and pagan religious practices such as the erecting of towers and the planting of trees (e.g. Jacob at Bethel and Mamre). The Nuzi texts seem to shine a light on the Patriarchs especially because they show that the Patriarchs were most likely acting in a “business as usual” way that later gets specifically condemned by the Law. What would not fit well is if Moses wrote a book in which the Patriarchs were abiding by the Law revealed to Moses before Moses received it.

- **Paul says that knowledge of sin comes with the reception of the Law. What does this story prove about Paul’s point?**

## Historical Connections: Egypt

Likely the greatest historical connection in the Torah is how it corresponds with Egyptian history. The Merneptah Stele, an Egyptian memorial stone from around 1213 BC records the first reliable record of the word “Israel”. The memorial stone mentions Israel offhandedly, but says “Israel does not waste its grain.” Scholars think that this may be in relation to the story of Joseph or a general understanding of the Israelite people.

Speaking of Joseph, it is likely that Joseph was in power around 1275 BC. This would have fit with the warring nature of the Pharaoh Ramesses I. Having been credited with many victories on foreign battlefields, it is likely that Ramesses would have needed a vizier (think prime minister) who would have overseen national affairs while he was abroad.

Later in the early 1200’s BC the son of Ramesses I, was building entire warehouse cities in Egypt named Pi-Ramesses and Pithom. It is likely these projects that the Hebrews were conscripted as slaves to build. By the time that we move into the 1100’s BC, Israel had already departed for elsewhere in Mesopotamia.

- **How does the story of Egypt affect the Biblical story?**

## The Book of Job

The book of Job is not a part of the Torah, but is dated by some to be written even before the Torah. Tradition holds that Job was a Hebrew who served as an advisor to Pharaoh Ramesses II who ordered the killing of the Israelite babies. There is no evidence for this particular tradition, but there are several Hebrew forms in the text which seem to evidence an early date – even around the time of Joseph.

- **Beginnings are important. Consider how our reading of the Bible might be different if we started off with the Book of Job.**

## Torah

Moses’ account of the Torah forms the same basic place as the Gospels hold in the New Testament. **Compare and contrast how the Torah is similar to and different from the Gospels.**