

Understanding the Pentateuch

UNDERSTANDING THE
OLD TESTAMENT, PART I

Understanding The Pentateuch

INTRODUCTION

We are going to embark on a trip together through the Old Testament. This will be a survey and not an in-depth study. The purpose will be to provide you a new, fresh way to see 26 of the 39 books in the Old Testament.

In each part of our study, we will look through the lens of a unifying theme: the covenants. The patriarchal covenants (Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic) provide a touchstone for our global understanding of the Old Testament.

Whatever text we might be reading at any given time, we can use the touch-points of these covenants to understand exactly what was happening between God and his people (Israel) and why.

What we will uncover together is quite amazing: God shows love and grace to his people in very specific and identifiable ways that are consistent through the entirety of redemptive history and ultimately realized in the person and works of Christ. This is an important anchor both for our understanding of the Old Testament and our understanding of the Christian faith, because this perspective provides us with a lens to rightly view Christ: the fulfillment of all the covenant promises. We will see together that God is unchanging and the bible is a *unified narrative*.

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Christ, the fulfillment of all the covenant promises

The covenants give us a roadmap to understand the unity of the biblical narrative much better than we could by breaking the texts down into small pieces or breaking the eras of the biblical narrative into segments with different themes. We should start instead with a ‘big picture’ understanding: the entire narrative of the bible presents a consistent picture of the triune God. There is a unity in the biblical canon which can be clearly seen by those who take the time to examine it.

Using the covenants is just one of many ways to track this unity. Once we get that big picture understanding, however we achieve it, we can more readily see how each small part makes sense in the whole. That opens up a whole new dimension to our bible reading time and as a result, our intimacy with God.

The purpose of this three-part study is to provide a big picture understanding of the unity of the biblical narrative, so that any Old Testament book you pick up in the future will fit into your global understanding of the narrative.

When we look at the Pentateuch (and the Old Testament at large) through the filter of this threefold covenant theme, one theme may appear to dominate book by book. Stephen Dempster comments, “The different books treat the aspects of the one promise variously: Genesis stresses descendants, Exodus and Leviticus the relationship with God, and Numbers and Deuteronomy mainly land” (Dempster 2003).

But don’t be misled. Using the covenants as an anchor for the Old Testament narrative is not a weak device. As you will see from just the small selection of verses we will review together, there is a consistent and intentional use of these elements to anchor God and his people together.

The unifying theme of land, seed (descendants), and divine relationship is actually so prevalent in the Old Testament that it becomes hard to argue against. Mark Gignilliat provides a great overview, “[t]he Pentateuch reveals God as Creator and redeemer, the one who elects Israel to himself yet has an eye toward the blessing of all the nations. We see the promise of land...the liberation from Egypt...the beginning of the worshipping life of Israel, the promise of Abraham’s descendants emerging and the giving of Torah. The people are given all the tools by their prophetic leader Moses to enter the promised land and live in covenantal harmony with their God.” (Gignilliat 2017)

As Israel progresses on the kingdom calendar, the covenants are mirrored and expanded in 2 Samuel 7 with renewed promises to David. Those Davidic promises, in turn, anticipate Jesus. By careful examination we see God’s cohesive plan for all nations and all people, starting in Genesis 1 and culminating in Revelation.

THE BENEFIT OF HINDSIGHT

If you are familiar with the Old Testament, you already know that the covenants come into the narrative at different times and are named for the patriarch they engaged: Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic. So, you might ask, how do we look backwards and view all of the Old Testament through the lens of covenants before they even happened?

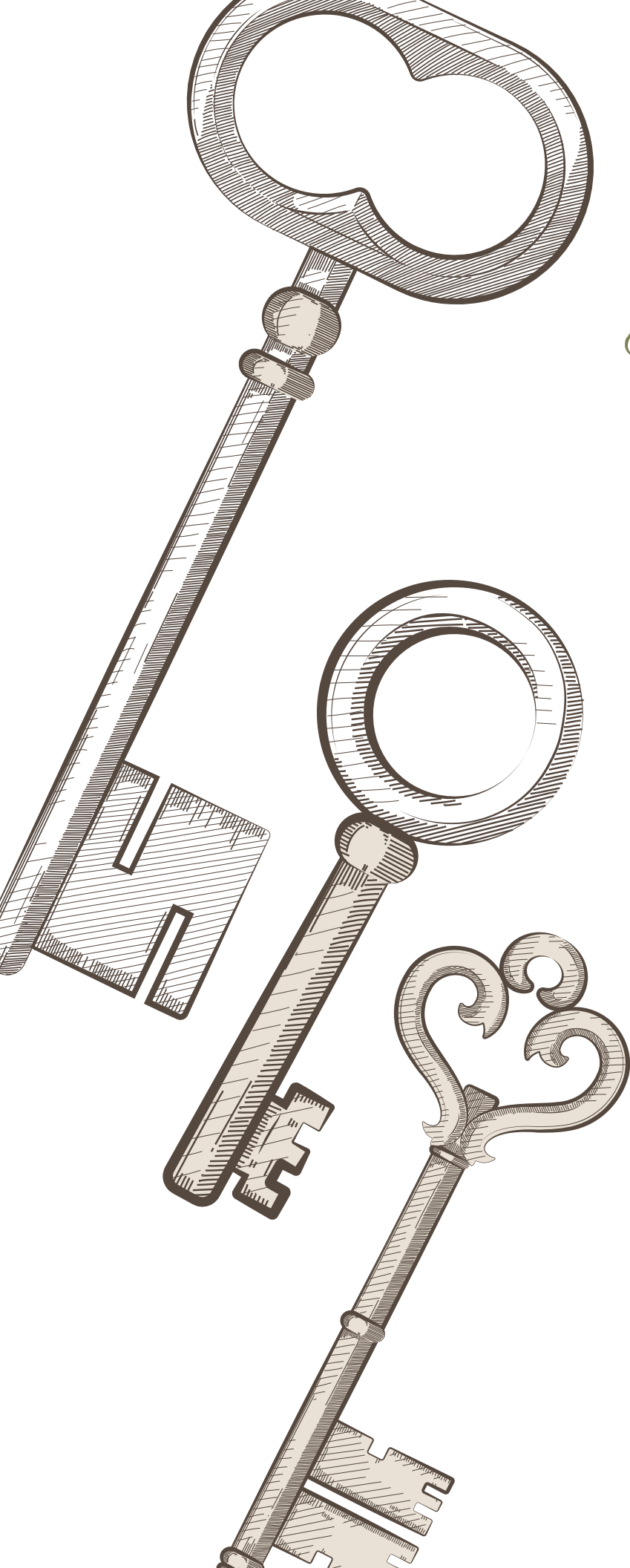
You actually already know the answer to this, because you are blessed to be a New Covenant believer. As such, you can see the entire bible in the light of Christ. Don't you love to look at the prophecies he fulfilled, the metaphors for him that show up in the Old Testament, and even the pre-incarnate physical appearances (aka: Christophanies)? You know that Christ was the purpose and plan all along, and because you have that realization you can understand the Old Testament better. Hindsight is, after all, 20/20.

The same is true for the covenants. Each one reveals a bit more to us about God and his ultimate plans for Israel (and for "all nations, peoples and tongues" -Revelation 7:9). As we examine each covenant, we can see that God anticipated it in his commands, promises, and grace even before he formalized it with one of his beloved patriarchs.

Israel struggled to follow Yahweh consistently and this is wholly due to the influence of sin. But they also didn't have as complete a picture as we do now. We get the blessing of reading the Old Testament through Christ-focused eyes. We have a distinct advantage in unpacking exactly how it all led up to him.

In this first unit of our study, the Pentateuch, we'll start by examining the threefold theme common to each covenant. Then we will look at the Pentateuch and pull out a small subset of the examples where these covenant elements show up, considering the implications for Israel and for ourselves.

This exercise is meant to inspire you to look even deeper on your own time. You'll continue to find ways that you see these three threads running through the entire Old Testament. Some are more obvious at first, but as you build your covenant lens, you will see more and more examples you may have overlooked before. Our time together might inspire you to think differently about the promises that God made to the patriarchs and how personal they can be for you today. Begin your study, as every bible study, with prayer that God will reveal to you the beauty and simplicity of his redemption plan, for you and for all people, in new and exciting ways.



Biblical Covenants

WHAT IS A BIBLICAL COVENANT?

R.C. Sproul calls God the Promise Keeper. (Sproul 2020) This is a critical way to think of the covenants and the God who initiates them. The covenants we are examining are covenants of grace, which means they are promises dependent upon God to fulfill.

One thing remains consistent through the biblical narrative: humanity's need for grace. God provides this grace from the beginning, understanding and loving his people all the way to the finished works of Christ on the cross.

Bruce Waltke reminds us that Israel's "election, not their own merits, constitutes the sole basis for all that follows. In other words, the Torah is an outgrowth of their election through Abraham. Moreover, I AM, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, not humans, authors the holy covenant." (Waltke 2007) As we consider the covenants, let's bear in mind the burden is on God to see them to completion - humanity never could. Waltke goes on to remind us that "to keep covenant denotes fidelity and devotion, not perfection." God does not institute these covenants just to watch us fail. The covenants are rooted in the love God has always had for us and the good plan he had for us from the beginning, the very beginning, even as far back as creation.

The Three Keys

The three key components of each covenant are land, descendants, and a special relationship with Yahweh. They are emphasized in the life of Israel in different ways and different times, each administration allowing her to better understand herself and her God.

As much as we want to have a good theological foundation for understanding the Old Testament, we also want to understand the personal application. Take some prayerful time below to reflect on the questions. As best you can, hold on to these personal reflections about the covenant themes as we dive into the biblical text together. Refer back to this part of the study often, so that you can continue to hold on to the personal ramifications of these covenants, even as you apprehend the theological ones.

LAND

What do you think of when you reflect on the biblical ‘promised land?’

Changing the word ‘land’ to ‘home,’ how do you feel about this concept? Describe your feelings about home:

If you have people in your life whom you love, one of the desires you might have for them is ‘home.’ When reading the Old Testament, which can often feel distant and not particularly relatable, it’s helpful for us to imagine these concepts in a more personal way. Share any thoughts you have about God’s demonstrated love for his people Israel (and us) through the promise of ‘land.’



DESCENDANTS

What do you think of when you think of biblical descendants?

Changing the word ‘descendants’ to ‘family,’ what feelings are evoked in you?

How does the idea of ‘family’ add to your reflections on ‘home?’ How are these ideas related to each other?

Spend time reflecting on God’s love as it is exemplified in family and home:

RELATIONSHIP

The third element in the covenantal promises is a special relationship with God. Relationship is a big word, so start with your reflections on a biblical understanding of relationship:

Now think about your own relationships. Don’t be shy. We all know that sometimes they are joyful, sometimes complicated. As you write about that here, try to include any reflections you might have on what causes relationships to be joyful and what causes them to be complicated:

BRING IT ALL TOGETHER

Let's pull all of the elements together to synthesize the totality of these covenants. Think again about home and family. You reflected on the partnership of these ideas earlier, now add relationship to this. Mix up these three concepts, adding and removing any of the three, and write your reflections here (family and relationship with no home, home with no family or relationships, etc.):

Finally, take each of these elements together and reflect on God's demonstrated love for Israel (and for you) through the promises of land, descendants, and relationship.

REMEMBER an important point: we are not promoting a prosperity gospel which implies that God's love is tied to your material wealth (land). Not at all. A helpful way to understand is this: **concepts which occurred physically in the Old Testament often occur spiritually in the New Testament.** As God was leading up to his grand redemption in Christ, he orchestrated the Israelites lives to be a witness to that fulfillment. He set the Israelites apart by providing them a safe and fruitful land, protecting the actual family descendants so that his promise would be fulfilled, and maintaining relationship with them even in the face of their disobedience. He had a plan - nothing and no one (even Israel) could thwart it.

With that in mind, reflect on your own parallel experiences with God in these three ways:

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Genesis

Two of the four covenants we want to address in this Old Testament study appear in Genesis. They are named for the patriarch they engaged: Noahic, Abrahamic. The Mosaic covenant appears in Exodus, and the fourth covenant, the Davidic covenant, appears in 2 Samuel 7. The Davidic covenant is foundational to the works of the prophets and, in fact, cast a light towards the ultimate fulfillment of all covenantal promises in Christ.

It's important for us to keep our eye on the trajectory of the covenants even as we examine them in greater depth. Take a moment to reflect on the careful planning God executed as he rolled out the plan for Israel and for all people:

THE FIRST COVENANT

The first covenant that occurs in the bible is sometimes called the 'covenant of works:'

You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die. – Genesis 2:16-17

R.C. Sproul explains it best, "The covenant of works refers to the covenant that God made with Adam and Eve in their pristine purity before the fall, in which God promised them blessedness contingent upon their obedience to His command. After the fall, the fact that God continued to promise redemption to creatures who had violated the covenant of works, that ongoing promise of redemption is defined as the covenant of grace. Technically, from one perspective, all covenants that God makes with creatures are gracious in the sense that He is not obligated to make any promises to His creatures. But the distinction between the covenant of works and grace is getting at something that is of vital importance, as it has to do with the Gospel. The covenant of grace indicates God's promise to save us even when we fail to keep the obligations imposed in creation. This is seen most importantly in the work of Jesus as the new Adam." (Sproul, The Covenant of Works 2006)

The covenant of grace indicates God's promise to save

WRITE YOUR REFLECTIONS on the difference between a covenant based in works and grace here:

At its heart the creation story is a story about land, descendants, and a special relationship with God. God designs and develops his creation in the way that he sees fit for perfection. When he adds Adam to this creation, he has begun the process of relationship which he will sustain despite humanity's downfalls. He places Adam in a perfected land - Eden. As early as Genesis 1:28 God shows the desire for his first patriarch to "be fruitful and multiply" which, alongside Genesis 3:15, looks forward to the element of descendants through all the covenants. Before we even leave the garden, we see God's divine intention for his image bearers to have relationship with himself, a multitude of descendants, and a fruitful and beautiful land.

WRITE YOUR REFLECTIONS on the creation story and how it aligns with the threefold theme of land, descendants, and relationship:

IN GENESIS 9:1-17 God renews his desire to establish his beloved Noah with land, descendants, and a special relationship with himself. Read this passage and make note of the places where land, descendants, and relationship appear:

IN GENESIS 12:1–3 this covenant is clearly laid out again with Abraham. “God unconditionally grants his faithful servant Abraham a fief that consists of eternal seed, sustained on an enduring land, and includes kings to rule the nations. Obviously, these eternal rewards far exceed a lifetime of investment and so are packed full of God’s grace.” (Waltke 2007) Read the passage and pull out our trifold theme:

This theme is supported through the rest of Genesis. In chapter 15 we observe the theme in verse 4, “...count the stars..so will your seed be,” verse 7, “...I ... give you this land to inherit” and verse 40, “...I am Yahweh your God. (relationship).” The theme persists in chapter 17, verse 2 “I will multiply you exceedingly,” verse 8, “I will give to you, and to your seed after you, the land of your sojourning, all the land of Canaan” and verses 16-17 where the repeated use of ‘bless’ reinforces the promise of relationship. Genesis 22:16ff mentions seed three times, including a second thematic element in tandem, “Your seed will possess the gates (land) of your enemies.”

In chapter 26:3 this thematic stacking happens again: “to you and your seed I will give all these lands and I will fulfill the oath that I swore to Abraham your father.” The last element, less readily visible, is the fulfillment of the covenant which recalls the relational component of our theme. In chapter 28:13, observe “[to Jacob] I am Yahweh, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac [relationship]; the land on which you lie, to you I will give it and to your seed.” Finally, though not as exhaustively as is possible from the entire body of Genesis, we can see the theme from verse 48:21, “God will be with you [relationship] and will bring you again to the land [land] of your father’s seed [descendants].”

Longman notes Genesis “contains a unity of narrative plot that takes the reader from the creation of the world to the sojourn in Egypt.” (Longman/Dillard 2006) This sojourn is marked with a reiterative emphasis on the three important elements of the covenants.

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO NOTE about Genesis, in the covenants, the examples of the theme, or both?

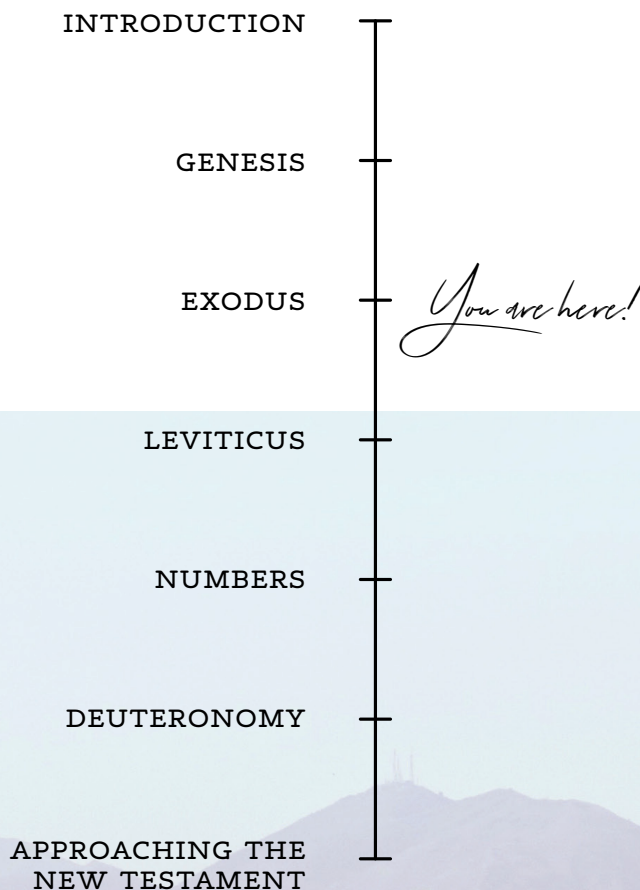
WHAT OTHER EXAMPLES can you find in Genesis that reiterate this theme?

Exodus

The Exodus is the greatest act of salvation in the Old Testament and as such, it's steeped in the loving and grace-filled relationship between God and his people. God calls Moses in a watershed moment at the burning bush (Ch. 3). In this interaction he begins a new chapter of intimacy with his people by revealing his name (v. 14) and his plan to Moses. Don't move too quickly past this moment, it is one of the greatest acts of intimacy in the Pentateuch. The closeness that God invites Moses into at the burning bush foreshadows the relationship with Israel which he will ask Moses to mediate in the years to come. "A consideration therefore of Israel's call to which the name Yahweh has been attached cannot be made in isolation from the detail surrounding the revelation of the divine name to Moses in Exodus 3:13-15." (Dumbrell 2013)

As he prepares the nation for exodus, God reminds Israel that he has elected them for this special relationship in the past (3:6, 3:15, 4:5) and he promises to continue to do so in the future (3:12). God reiterates the plan for relationship and deliverance in chapter 6, reinforcing Moses' call to the task.

By his mighty acts God delivers Israel from Egypt because he desires for them to worship him in this special relationship (4:23, 5:1, 6:6ff, 7:16, 8:1, 8:20, 9:1, 9:13, 10:3). In the wilderness he abides with them in intimate, albeit sometimes terrifying, experiences (chapters 19-20). Chapters 25-27 and 35-40 carry detailed architectural plans which allow Israel to step into the Tabernacle: a representation of heaven on earth.

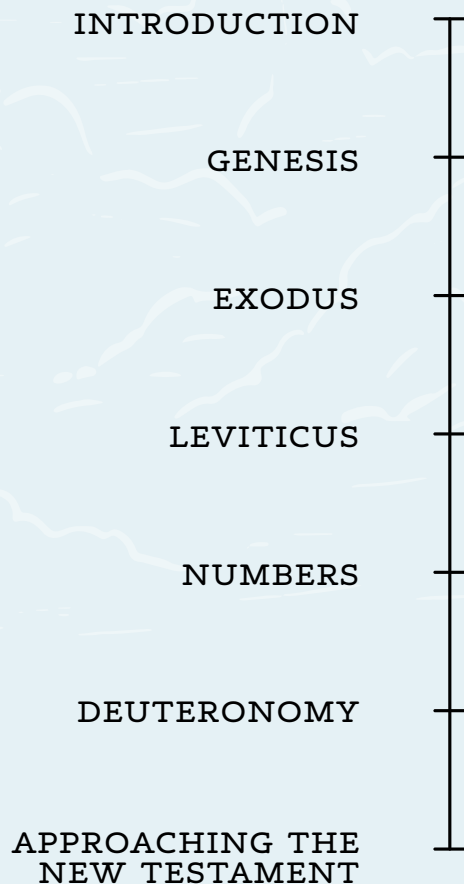


Even the laws given from Sinai create intimacy and a ‘set apart’ relationship status between Israel and Yahweh.

Wedge into this narrative of law and tabernacle, however, is Israel’s misstep with the golden calf in chapter 32. This moment shines a light on the import God places upon relationship with Israel and the covenantal promise of descendants. When the nation betrayed him in this way, God could have wiped them out. But instead he protects the covenant of descendants and balances justice with grace. God had blessed this nation with descendants even in Egyptian oppression (1:7, 9, 12, 20) and he would surely continue to bless them with descendants as they moved into the promised land. The physical movement of the people was as real an act of deliverance as the movement of their hearts.

God was making a sweeping readjustment to bring his nation out of Egypt back to the land where he wanted them to reside. As we examine the book for our theme verse by verse, let us not become blind to the setting and movement of this book: getting Israel out of Egypt so that they can inhabit the land God has for them (3:8, 3:17, 6:6ff, 23:23-33, 34:24). This overarching theme of land is so tightly connected to the deliverance/relationship element in Exodus that the three are completely interdependent. As we look far forward to the exile, we recognize just how symbiotic these covenantal elements really are.

CHOOSE A SELECTION OF THE VERSES ABOVE & WRITE YOUR REFLECTIONS ON THE THREEFOLD THEME AS EVIDENCED IN EXODUS.



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Leviticus

The book of Leviticus emphasizes the relationship between God and his people as it lays out proper worship in great detail (chapters 1-7). “The priestly content of Leviticus focuses on maintaining the Covenant relationship between God and His people.” (Gignilliat 2017) Witness the interplay between land and relationship, especially highlighted in chapter 26, which describes blessings for obedience that are connected to the land, like rain for the land to increase its yield (v. 4) and peace in the land from enemies (v. 6). In verse 12 God reminds Israel of his desire for this relationship and appeals to them to honor him as he has delivered them: “I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect.” (v 13).



In the second half of chapter 26 God reveals the result of disobedience: broken relationship. How that broken relationship plays out will be felt as a punishment to Israel, both personal and corporate. Panic, disease, and fever will afflict the individual, and the land will not yield wealth for Israel but rather for her enemies (v. 16). This chapter goes on to list the awful outward manifestations of broken relationship with the God of all creation who is sovereign over everything that happens to and through Israel.

In chapter 26 we also have a new reflection on God's love for the land which underscores the value he places on it and, by extension, Israel: that "the land shall rest" and "have its Sabbaths" is mentioned three times, reminding us that God has love and care for this land even when Israel does not. In keeping his covenant to Israel, he will preserve and restore the land from their abuse of it, even as they have abused their relationship with Him.

All throughout Leviticus the narrative includes the current generation and the generations to follow (descendants), as God shows the nation how the covenant will be enacted in years to come, for example, 26:45. This naturally leads to the book of Numbers where the theme of descendants becomes more prominent.

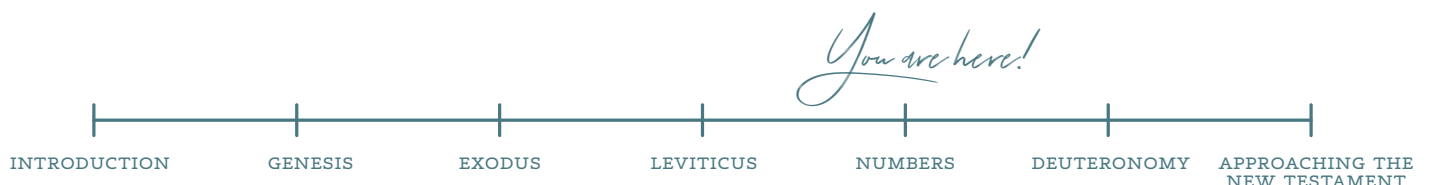
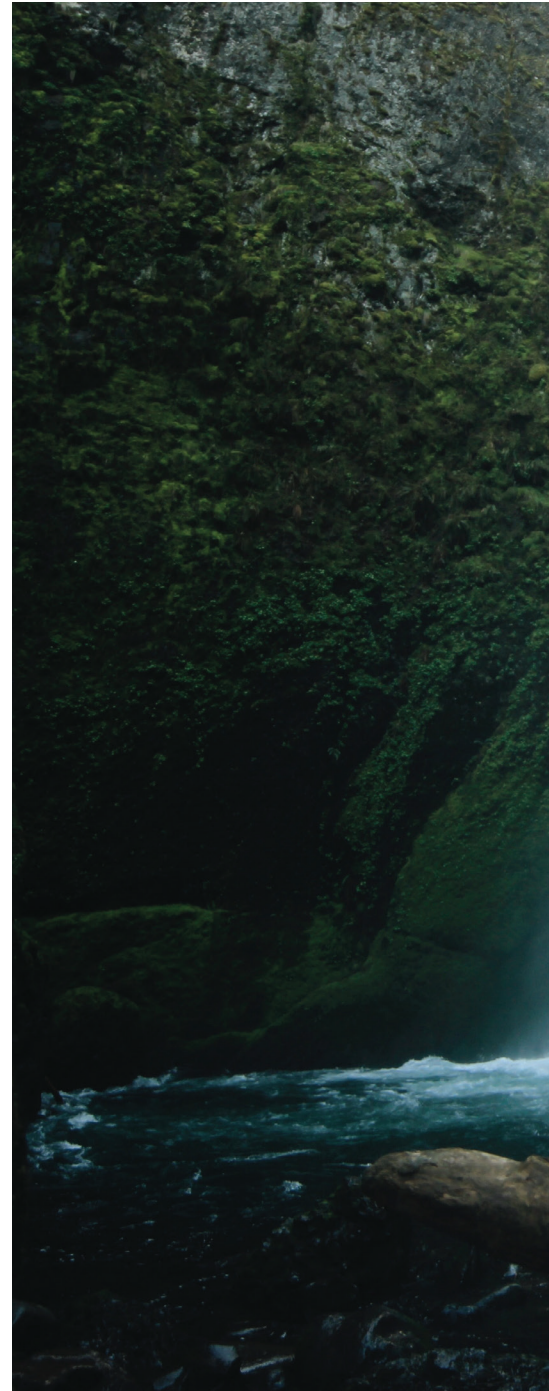
Choose a selection of the above verses and write your thoughts on the three-part theme in the book of Leviticus:


Numbers

There is significant narrative in Numbers regarding the land but the first several chapters (1-9) are saturated in sections on descendants (the census texts), and relationship – the priestly offices and services devoted to maintenance of the relationship between God and Israel. “The meaning of the priestly rituals in the book of Numbers is not located in one law but in the intersection of all the laws that precede them. Laws can’t be isolated, but they must be examined in concert with the whole. The priestly ritual in Numbers has symbolic meaning: the interrelation of God, humans and the created order.” (Gignilliat 2017) Notably 9:15-23 provides a beautiful visual of the relationship between God and his people.

In chapter 10 the nation is on the move and the text begins to focus again on the covenant of land (10:29). As the nation progresses toward the promised land, God continues his relational provision for them in both social (11:16-30) and physical (11:31-34) ways. Moving into chapters 13 and 14 we see Israel approaching the land but experiencing a crisis of confidence in her God and his promises to them. Once more we see the interplay of the three elements in the Pentateuchal theme: Israel sends spies into the land (Ch. 13), doubts the relationship with God as provision for it (Ch. 14), and sees a consequence for her descendants (14:20-38).

At the end of Numbers Israel is at the edge of the promised land. In 26:1-5 another census is taken for the allotment of land, stacking the themes of descendants and land together from the covenantal promise. This leads us into Deuteronomy where Moses gives his last instructions for how Israel is to live in the land in relational peace with her God.





The priestly ritual in
Numbers has symbolic
meaning: the
interrelation of God,
humans and the
created order.

CHOOSE A SELECTION OF VERSES FROM
ABOVE AND WRITE YOUR REFLECTIONS
ON THE TRIPARTITE THEME AS IT SHOWS
UP IN NUMBERS:

Deuteronomy

“Possessing the land in the first place and keeping it in the second are both tied to Israel’s obedience to God’s commands (4:25–31; 11:26–28; 28:1–2; 30:15–20).” (Longman/Dillard 2006) As the people are at the edge of the promised land, the connection between the land and their relationship with God is tightly bound. “Deuteronomy portrays what an ideal Israel would be. It presents an Israel with ‘one God, one people, one land, one sanctuary, and

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Specifically, chapters 6 and 7 shed light on the overarching narrative of land, descendants, and relationship by epitomizing the importance of the Mosaic covenant in the context of all the patriarchal covenants. “By keeping I AM’s command, Israel will ‘fear I AM’ (i.e.: enjoy a relationship with him by obedience to his word out of awe for his person), and enjoy long life and prosperity in the land (Deut. 6:1-3).” (Waltke 2007) In 6:20-25, Israel is reminded of the law not as a slavish call to obedience but rather as an outcropping of their love for God. Gignilliat puts it this way, “I will love you with all my mind soul and strength by attending to your call on my life.” (Gignilliat 2017) In 7:7-9, Israel is reminded of her election not because she can or does keep the law but because God has promised to keep his covenant to her. In this all-important moment, God reiterates the covenant with Moses (Chapters 19-24) and goes into great detail on how it will play out.

As Moses recounts the law given to Israel at Sinai he is also calling their minds back to the root of relationship with God: his promises in the previous covenants. This lens provides theological significance to the entire Old Testament and provides Israel with her marching orders into the land: keep the covenant and live there in peace.

Chapter 26 recapitulates evidence of God’s saving hand in Israel and their right-minded relational response. “The commands about the first fruits convey a simple elegance that makes the Yahweh-Israel relationship sound loving yet powerful.” (House 1998)

The promise of descendants is “reinforced by strategically located references to the ‘God of the fathers,’ one of several epithets that appears in apposition to the divine name YHWH...in order to emphasize YHWH’s sovereignty over past, present, and future eras of Israel’s history.” (Hwang 2012) Examples can be found in 1:8, 1:10f, 1:20, 4:37, 5:3, 6:3, 6:10, 6:18, 6:23, 7:8, et al.

Deuteronomy sits squarely in compliance with the tripartite theme of the covenants and elegantly anticipates how this theme will continue throughout the remainder of the Old Testament.

*Deuteronomy portrays what an ideal Israel would be.
It presents an Israel with one God, one people, one
land, one sanctuary, and one law.*

Approaching the New Testament

The threefold theme of land, descendants, and relationship applies not only to the Pentateuch but to the entire Old Testament. Understanding the theme here, early in the reading of the narrative, helps us to make sense of the rest of scripture. By tracing this theme through the Pentateuch and beyond we can make connections we might have otherwise missed.

These covenants are *only partially fulfilled* in the Old Testament. When we appreciate that partial fulfillment, we can anticipate complete fulfillment in Christ. Read the following passages and reflect on the ways they relate to the foundational principles we have developed in this study:

HEBREWS 3-4 (LAND)

GALATIANS 3 (DESCENDANTS)

JOHN 1:9-14 (RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD)

Clines makes a short but power-packed statement that the covenant promises affirm “the primal

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divine intentions for humanity.” (Clines 2004) If we take seriously the depth and breadth of this theme in the first five books of the bible, we must also take seriously the implications for us today.

However, many modern Christians experience a disconnect here. “In recent years there has been a growing awareness of a theological and spiritual crisis in Western Culture not unlike that in ancient Judah. The Bible has been lost as far as its essential message is concerned, or if it has been found, it has been cut up into a thousand pieces and thrown into the fire.” (Dempster 2010)

Understanding the unified message of the bible is primary to adopting that message and its implications. “[I]f one is constantly using the zoom lens on a piece of sculpture such as Mount Rushmore, one will note the worn surface of some rocks and the sedimentary contours of others. But unless one is able to step back with a wide-angle lens and take in ‘the big picture’ the point of it all has been lost.” (Dempster 2003)

WRITE SOME REFLECTIONS ABOUT HOW, AS A RESULT OF YOUR STUDY HERE, YOU ARE TAKING IN THE BIG PICTURE OF THE BIBLE WITH A WIDE-ANGLE LENS:

By examining God’s unified theme in the Pentateuch, we prepare ourselves to see that unity throughout the entire bible. This is the way that we properly orient ourselves in awe of God’s plan for his beloved image bearers throughout time. With the proper point of view we can see God’s cohesive plan for all nations and all people, starting in Genesis 1 and culminating in Revelation. A canonical approach to all of the bible means that when reading a single verse or an entire section we see the bigger narrative that points us to Jesus. This helps us to appreciate our own place in God’s salvation plan.

*The bigger narrative
points us to Jesus.*

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