

The Message of the Pentateuch

Joshua E. Williams

Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

Fort Worth, Texas

jwilliams@swbts.edu

The Pentateuch, the Torah, the Law of Moses—these designations apply to the first five books of the Bible, Genesis through Deuteronomy. Even though these books have been transmitted as five, they are, in fact, one book.¹ At the same time, this one book is a complex, diverse, and seemingly unwieldy text. It is composed of units of various forms: genealogies, universal narratives, family narratives, blessings, oracles, statutes, case laws, building reports, etc. Beyond the formal differences, there are also significant differences in content: the text moves from the creation of the world to the patriarchs to the exodus, camps out on Mt. Sinai, continuing on to the wilderness wanderings and closing with a series of admonitions by one important national leader on the plains of Moab. Furthermore, even within individual narrative units, there often exist textual peculiarities that strike the modern reader as disjointed or even secondary. Such “irregularities” have resulted in complex reconstructions of various stages of compositional activity in the production of the Pentateuch as it is now.²

One of the challenges for studying the Pentateuch is to answer the question, is there an inner coherence that spans the entire work? My aim is to demonstrate this type of coherence by articulating the message of the Pentateuch. In this context, “message” refers to “an idea that demands

¹The evidence for claiming the Pentateuch as one book may be summarized as follows: 1) Later references to the Pentateuch, especially those of Old and New Testaments (2 Chr 25:4; 35:12; Ezra 6:18; Neh 13:1; Mark 12:26), address it as a book, 2) the Pentateuch is unified by an overall plot beginning in Genesis and concluding with Deuteronomy, 3) literary and thematic threads run throughout the books, and 4) each of the books is tightly joined to the books surrounding it; cf. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to Promised Land*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 97–99; John Sailhamer, *Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 1–2.

²Although much has been written on these theoretical reconstructions, Whybray’s criticism of compositional models is especially insightful, Norman Whybray, *The Making of the Pentateuch*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series [JSOTSup] 53 (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1987).

a response.”³ Such an idea is composed of a subject (topic) and a complement (predicate). The subject states what the text is about. The complement states something about the subject. Combined together, the subject and complement grammatically form a sentence.

Preliminary Considerations

Given this definition of “message,” any given work would have more than just one message. My aim goes beyond finding one of many messages of the Pentateuch to finding the central message, that is, a statement that exposes the coherence of the text from beginning to end. This type of message is closely associated with the literary concept of theme employed by Clines in *The Theme of the Pentateuch*: “the central or dominating idea in a literary work . . . the abstract concept which is made concrete through its representation in person, action, and image in the work.”⁴ However, my purpose is distinct from that of Clines. Although message and theme are closely related, I have chosen the language of message rather than theme because my concern is more than a literary one. Stating the theme of the Pentateuch leads one to its central or dominating idea as a piece of literature, but my concern is to perceive the text as Scripture. The word “message” is more suitable because the expression of the central or dominating idea is one that demands a response on the part of the reader; therefore, it is best suited for the exposition and proclamation of the text in teaching and preaching.

There are some dangers to avoid along the way towards accomplishing the task. In order to summarize the various individual details of the Pentateuch into a single statement, one must abstract them into more general terms. Since a text as complex as the Pentateuch is bound to be filled with certain tensions (e.g. grace and justice), abstracting the details requires that these tensions be resolved, usually by giving certain details of the text more prominence than others. The first danger is to resolve the tension by “shouting” the details that affirm one point while “shushing” the details that are in tension with it. Such a procedure leads to a misconstrued picture of the whole.

The second danger is to interpret the statement of the message of the Pentateuch as the only thing the Pentateuch has to say. As a summary, it cannot possibly say everything that the Pentateuch says, especially the way the Pentateuch says it. The statement of the message is not the kernel

³Bruce Waltke, *Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 49n1.

⁴W.F. Thrall and A. Hibberd, *A Handbook to Literature* (New York: Odyssey, 1960), 486, quoted in David J.A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, 2nd ed., JSOTSup 10 (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1997), 20.

for which the Pentateuch is merely the husk. The impact of the Pentateuch upon a reader cannot be replicated merely by abstracting its message in a general statement. Therefore, the message must not be viewed as a “reductionistic undertaking” but serve “as an orientation to the work.”⁵

The third danger is to interpret the statement of the message of the Pentateuch as the only way to say what the Pentateuch has to say. As my statement, it is affected by the questions, concerns, and values of my context. Although I lean heavily on those who have gone before me so that my understanding of the Pentateuch is not novel or unique, the way in which the various parts are balanced and articulated is my own. This fact does not deny the determinacy of textual meaning or validity in interpretation because the Pentateuch means something and does not mean something else. However, the formulation of its message is a provisional statement that remains open to correction and reformulation. As contexts change, they bring with them unforeseen questions and concerns that may then need to play a larger role in the formulation of the Pentateuch’s message. Since this situation is the case, the statement of the Pentateuch’s message is an invitation to a dialogue rather than the final word.⁶

The fourth danger is to abstract the text in such general terms that it loses its distinct character. For instance, one could abstract the message of the Pentateuch in the following simple statement: God is good. However, such a statement gives no clue towards the content and form of the Pentateuch. To avoid this danger, I will attempt to use the terms and patterns of the Pentateuch to articulate its message as much as possible.

Despite these dangers, the task is worth doing. First, since a person simply cannot hold all the details of a work in full attention at the same time, abstraction is an essential component of understanding. Therefore, stating the Pentateuch’s message should help one understand the whole better. Second, a well-crafted statement of the Pentateuch’s message will help illuminate connections within the Pentateuch that might otherwise be undetected. One measure of a statement’s usefulness is its power to bring about insight into the text and explain the literary “rationale” for its various components.⁷ Third, a statement of the Pentateuch’s message will aid in teaching and preaching the book as the various components are related to the central message. In fact, my primary reason for taking on this

⁵Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, 20.

⁶An attempt to bring the entire Pentateuch together into a single statement is out of step with current trends in biblical scholarship even for those who are sympathetic to understanding the text as a given unit; cf. David Carr, “Untamable Text of an Untamable God: Genesis and Rethinking the Character of Scripture,” *Interpretation* 54 (October 2000): 347–62.

⁷Cf. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, 20.

task is to provide a gateway into the Pentateuch that will aid in putting the various pieces together to facilitate teaching and preaching the various parts as well as the whole.

First Task—Identifying Importance of Creation and Fall

The storyline of the Pentateuch consists of the following elements: the primeval history, the patriarchal history, the exodus, Sinai, the wilderness wanderings, and the days on the plains of Moab in preparation for conquest. Within this overall storyline, there are three significant episodes that influence the other various parts: creation and fall, the call of Abraham, and the covenant at Sinai.

The choice to include creation and fall is significant. The vast majority of scholars view the entire primeval history of Genesis 1–11 as a mere prologue to Abraham and the Law. For this reason, these chapters, especially the Eden narrative of Genesis 2–3, are treated as a marginal text in the Pentateuch as well as the rest of the Old Testament.⁸ Since the study of the Pentateuch has been dominated by questions of its historical development, its interpretation has been linked to its role as specifically Jewish literature. In other words, one of the fundamental assumptions of pentateuchal research is that the Pentateuch must center around Israel because it functions as national literature.⁹ To include the creation and fall is to step outside the bounds of Israel.

My first task is to show that the first three chapters of Genesis, especially the Eden Narrative, serve as an important driving force and integrating factor behind the message of the entire Pentateuch. This influence affects both the Pentateuch's textual shape and its conceptual development. It is important to keep both factors in view because they guard against two dangers: the first is elevating a type scene to undue prominence for the message and the second is abstracting the text into terms that are completely foreign to it. At the same time, priority must be given to the verbal and structural connections in order to allow the text to speak for itself.

Before I can demonstrate this influence, an overall view of the first three chapters must be attained. To do so, I will outline some observations regarding their textual and thematic development. First, the text clearly demonstrates that the Lord God alone is the Creator of the universe. He alone speaks and His Word is done. He alone evaluates His work. He

⁸Cf. T. Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 25–26.

⁹For example, see the recent collection of essays in G. Knoppers and B. Levinson, *The Pentateuch as Torah: New Models for Understanding Its Promulgation and Acceptance* (Winona Lake, IN.: Eisenbrauns, 2007), where it is clear that the Pentateuch's importance is associated with its role in Israelite/Samaritan life.

alone distinguishes between the various parts and names them appropriately. There is no other like Him.

Second, what is good in these chapters is what is beneficial for humanity in fulfilling God's plan (cf. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25; 2:9, 18). Humanity is the pinnacle of His creative work. God transforms a dark, barren, flooded land into a luxuriant garden perfectly suited for human habitation. God evaluates His own activity according to its direct benefit for humanity: it is good in the sense that it is good for humanity. Daylight, dry land, fruitful vegetation, luminaries in the sky, fish, birds, and livestock—all these are beneficial for humanity and therefore good.¹⁰ In contrast, the only thing that is not good is Adam's solitude, at least in part, because he cannot fulfill God's blessing to be fruitful and multiply without a suitable partner. There is also the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but this topic will be addressed below.

Third, God's first words to humankind are blessing, but His final words to them are curses. This contrast at the bookends of the narrative helps show that the movement from blessing to curse is a central concern of the narrative. The work that God has prepared for humankind is marked by blessing; however, after the fateful decision to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, humankind faces a world that is marked by curse.

Fourth, the narrative concerns life and death. Much of the tension in the narrative results from the threat of death that hangs over the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As the serpent begins to convince the woman to eat from the forbidden tree, the tension builds as one wonders whether the serpent is telling the truth, whether the woman will eat, and whether she will actually die. In the end, the woman, along with her husband, eats the forbidden fruit, but what the serpent said would happen happens (her eyes are opened) and without an apparent death.¹¹ However, there is real death, manifested in three ways: 1) God makes the tree of life inaccessible (3:24), 2) God pronounces curses (3:14–19), and 3) man and woman are exiled eastward from the garden (3:23).

Fifth, the narrative's characterization of the choice to eat the forbidden fruit is complex and multilayered. Despite the fact that this choice may appear an act of rebellion, ingratitude, self-exaltation, and the like, the narrative itself focuses its presentation on three aspects: 1) disobedience of a divine commandment, 2) usurpation of a divine prerogative, and 3) an improper search for wisdom.¹² The first aspect is rather transparent in

¹⁰Sailhamer, *Pentateuch*, 88.

¹¹Cf. R.W.L. Moberly, "Did the Serpent Get It Right?" *Journal of Theological Studies* 39 (April 1988): 1–27.

¹²Cf. Trygve Mettinger, *The Eden Narrative: A Literary and Religio-historical*

the narrative, for God gives the commandment not to eat (2:16), but the man and woman eat (3:6). The second aspect emerges from the serpent's conversation with the woman. His main argument is that eating the fruit will make one like God because it allows one to know good and evil (3:5), a claim that is later confirmed in the narrative (3:7, 22). The irony is that the man and the woman were already like God, made in the image and likeness of God (1:26). Despite their likeness to God, they sought this divine privilege without divine permission.

The third aspect stems primarily from the description of what the woman perceives of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It is like the rest of the trees in the garden in that it is good for food and has a pleasant appearance, but it is distinct because it is also desirable for making one wise (3:6). Since the tree is connected with wisdom, the knowledge of good and evil is more likely to be understood in wisdom terms rather than moral terms.¹³ Thus, it is probably better to speak of the knowledge of good and bad or the knowledge of what is beneficial and what is harmful.¹⁴ This understanding lines up well with the use of good (טוֹב) in Genesis 1 since what is good is what is beneficial for man. Therefore, the narrative presents the choice to eat the forbidden fruit as an attempt to gain wisdom, knowing what is beneficial and what is harmful, apart from the wisdom of God demonstrated in Genesis 1.¹⁵

These three aspects are held together in the following way. God alone is wise, knowing what is beneficial and harmful to humanity. When the man and woman eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they break the law that God had commanded in order to gain for themselves what properly belongs to God: wisdom.

Sixth, the narrative presents humanity in kingly and priestly terms. Upon God's creating the man and woman, He blesses them as conquering monarchs who are to subdue the land and rule over its inhabitants (1:28). Such language is clearly kingly. At the same time, this authority accompanies responsibility. The purpose for placing the man in the garden is that he will work it and keep it (2:15). The two verbs used to describe the man's responsibility (עָבַד and שָׁמַר) are associated with worship and

Study of Genesis 2–3 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 60–64.

¹³For summary of the connections between wisdom and the Eden narrative, see Beverly J. Stratton, *Out of Eden: Reading, Rhetoric, and Ideology in Genesis 2–3* JSOTSup 208 (Sheffield: Sheffield Press, 1995), 223–27.

¹⁴Cf. John Sailhamer, "Wisdom Composition of the Pentateuch?" in *Way of Wisdom*, ed. J.I. Packer and Sven Soderlund (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000): 15–35.

¹⁵Such an understanding is similar to although not identical with, e.g., W.M. Clark, "A Legal Background to the Yahvist's Use of 'Good and Evil' in Genesis 2–3," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (1969): 266–78. Clark argues for moral autonomy whereas I am advocating a view towards what is beneficial rather than what is moral in a narrow sense.

keeping the Law, respectively.¹⁶ Therefore, the narrative portrays humans as priestly monarchs who are intended to rule while worshiping and obeying the Lord God.

Seventh, the narrative demonstrates that in the midst of God's punishment for disobedience, He mitigates that punishment.¹⁷ God does not destroy them utterly or instantly. In fact, the curse God pronounces affirms that His blessing to multiply and be fruitful is not annulled, only now accompanied by more severe birth pangs. His blessing to rule over the inhabitants of the land has now brought about dissension rather than communion between the man and woman. His provision of food is still in effect even though now that provision is gathered by hard labor (Gen 3:16–19).

Eighth, God promises the ultimate defeat of the serpent through the seed of the woman. The serpent is representative of an enemy of God. His words are lies and misrepresentations of what God had said. He doubts God's Word and questions God's motives. Those who are his seed are those who are like him. Yet, God promises that ultimately it is the head of the serpent, not his seed, that will be crushed. By contrast, it is not the woman who will crush the serpent, but the seed of the woman. The punishment of the instigator will be final and sometime in the future.

Bringing these observations together, we have the following picture that emerges from the beginning of the Pentateuch: God alone creates a place perfectly suited for humankind, a place of blessing, life, dominion, worshipful service, but humankind forsakes it for curse, death, toil, and exile by disobeying the divine commandment in order to gain wisdom that properly belongs to God. God is gracious even in His punishment as He affirms His prior blessings and promises the ultimate defeat of His enemy, the instigator.

Having established this narrative picture, I can show its influence throughout the rest of the Pentateuch. The first step is to point out where Genesis 1–3 influences the textual shape of the Pentateuch by sampling passages that appear to be intentionally shaped by the vocabulary and narrative structure of these chapters. This type of textual patterning provides a way for the author to connect one narrative event to another and provides a means for comparing and contrasting the elements connected.¹⁸

¹⁶Cf. Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part 1, From Adam to Noah*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes: 1961), 122–23. The significance of this observation will be made sharper in the discussion below regarding the echoes of the Garden in the Pentateuch.

¹⁷See Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, rev. ed. Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 152–53, who lays out this pattern within the first part of Genesis.

¹⁸Berlin brings out the importance of this common phenomenon; cf. Adele Berlin,

The second step is to look at the influence of Genesis 1–3 in the conceptual development of the Pentateuch by drawing attention to passages whose motifs reflect those of these chapters. These passages often share common vocabulary with Genesis 1–3, but are less closely connected in their overall structure.

The Influence on Textual Shape

Textual connections between the flood narrative and Genesis 1 portray the flood as a type of uncreation and then re-creation. As the waters burst forth from the depths and pour forth from the windows of the sky, the land is transformed back to its state in Genesis 1:2. Then, God sends the wind (רוּחַ), the waters begin to recede, the dry land emerges, and God blesses Noah and his family by repeating the blessing He made in Genesis 1:28. Furthermore, Noah himself is a second Adam. On the heels of his deliverance and blessing, Noah plants a vineyard in contrast to God's planting a garden, becomes drunk, and uncovers his nakedness. The one who looks upon his nakedness is cursed while those who cover it are blessed.¹⁹ Although the narrative details do not line up precisely, the textual connections between the presentations of Adam and Noah suggest that Noah also, like Adam, failed and subsequently died (9:29). This same pattern persists forward to the sequence with Lot (Gen 19:30–38) and the episode of Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10:1–11).²⁰

The Pentateuch portrays the Promised Land as a new Eden.²¹ Three examples should suffice. First, the river Euphrates and the river of Egypt that define the land which God promises Abraham compare with the boundaries to the garden and the rivers that flow from it (Gen 2:10–14; 15:18).²² Second, in order to flee his angry brother and secure a non-Canaanite wife, Jacob flees to the land of the people of the east (29:1). As he moves from the east back towards the Land, he encounters angels (32:1–2) and wrestles a man apparently like God in order to secure a bless-

Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), 136.

¹⁹Cf. Sailhamer, *Pentateuch*, 129–30.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 40–41, 174.

²¹By new Eden or returning to Eden, I am not suggesting a physical return to a particular geographical location. Although Eden is a geographical location, it also functions symbolically. It is the symbolic significance of Eden as a paradisiacal land prepared by God that is in view. This new Eden or return to Eden should not be understood in terms of a cycle, but as a movement forward in which the future land is similar to the past but also greater.

²²Cf. Cassuto, *Genesis*, 115–20, who argues that the four rivers form two pairs that are close in proximity, the Euphrates and Tigris, and the Pishon and Gihon. The first pair is associated with Assyria and Babylon while the second pair is associated with Egypt. Thus, the promise to Abraham marks the northern and eastern border while the river of Egypt marks the southern and western.

ing (32:24–31). This narrative structure recalls Eden, the place of blessing, guarded by angels.²³

Third, Deuteronomy portrays the generation of the Conquest as returning to Eden. The sons of Israel are gathered east of the land, awaiting the good land that God has prepared for them. They are described in terms of the first man and woman, not knowing good and evil (Deut 1:39). Furthermore, their continual dwelling in the good land that God has prepared for them requires their obedience to the divine commandments (e.g. Deut 4:39–40; 5:16; 11:8–9; 25:15; 32:47). Finally, among the final words of the Pentateuch, Moses himself closes with a challenge to the sons of Israel that is reminiscent of Eden: “See, I have set before you today life and good, and death and evil in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that the LORD your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it” (Deut 30:15–16).

Apart from narrative material, the legal material at Sinai is also shaped by the first three chapters of Genesis. First, and most notably, the tabernacle is presented in terms of Eden.²⁴ These connections help illuminate the significance of both Eden and the tabernacle. The instructions regarding the tabernacle help clarify the type of activity suitable for Eden, namely worship, and its purpose, that God may dwell among His people, while the Eden narrative hints to the provisional nature of the tabernacle and helps clarify some aspects of the tabernacle’s structure, such as its entrance to the east, the cherubs guarding the way to the holy of holies, etc. Second, the regulations regarding uncleanness (e.g. Lev 13:1–14:57) reflect the same movement as the first man and woman from Eden. An unclean person is forced outside the camp to live alone in a “living death.”²⁵

Conceptual Development

Several passages in the Pentateuch also take up the same themes as Genesis 1–3. The following passages provide a sweep of the Pentateuch from beginning to end. The primeval history culminates at the tower of Babel/Babylon. In this narrative, the Lord descends upon the builders because they are attempting to overstep a boundary (Gen 11:4–6). The tower is an attempt to usurp a divine prerogative.²⁶ The patriarchal history centers

²³Cf. Sailhamer, *Pentateuch*, 197–98.

²⁴Cf. Gordon Wenham, “Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden,” in *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies 9* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1986), 19–25.

²⁵Gordon Wenham, *Leviticus*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 201.

²⁶Cf. Patrick Miller, Jr. *Genesis 1–11: Studies in Structure and Theme*. JSOTSup 8

around the motif of blessing. It begins the section (Gen 12:2–3) and the transition to Isaac (Gen 25:11) and Jacob (Gen 27:1–28:4) and concludes the section (Gen 48:8–49:28). The exodus centers around the motif that the Lord is God and the Lord alone (cf. Exod 5:2; 7:5; 9:14–16; 10:2; 15:11).

Sinai picks up on several motifs. It begins with an invitation that is cast in images of king-priests, “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:6). The overall tenor of the legal material at Sinai resonates with these motifs. In the law, obedience brings blessings and continued habitation in the land prepared by God while disobedience brings curses and exile from the land (cf. Lev 26 and esp. Deut 28). Life and death is a primary concern of the Sinai law as evidenced in the sacrifices with blood since life is in the blood (Lev 17:11–14), the repeated death penalty (e.g. Exod 21:12–17; Lev 20:2–16; 24:16–21; etc.), and certain laws of purification (cf. Lev 11; 21; Num 6:6–11; Deut 14).²⁷ Finally, the law makes clear repeatedly that the Lord is God alone.

Following Sinai, the wandering in the wilderness and Moses’ speeches on the plain of Moab carry on several motifs, especially as Israel draws closer to the Land. The Balaam narrative centers around blessing and cursing. Balaam blesses Israel rather than cursing them as they prepare to enter into the Land. Much of the structure of Deuteronomy reflects on language and concepts of Genesis 1–3. Deuteronomy itself ends with several motifs of Genesis 1–3 including Moses’ blessing, but also his prediction that Israel will disobey the divine commandments, resulting in death, destruction, and exile.

This survey of passages demonstrates that the first three chapters of Genesis are a driving force and integrating factor for the Pentateuch. They accomplish this function by shaping the Pentateuch at the textual and conceptual levels. Furthermore, the passages where they have the greatest textual and conceptual influence are at major junctures in the Pentateuch, especially the beginning and ending of major narrative sections. As a driving force behind the Pentateuch, they present Eden as past, present, and future: past because Eden was once lost, present because it is recast in the tabernacle, and future because it is symbolic of their destination in the Land.

(Sheffield: Sheffield, 1978), 22–24, in which he notes an important textual clue at play in the text as well, the use of the first person plural in a divine pronouncement (Gen 1:26; 3:22; 11:7).

²⁷Cf. Wenham, *Leviticus*, 176–77; 277–78.

Second Task—Exploring the Law

The first task for formulating the message of the Pentateuch was confirming the role that creation and fall play in moving the Pentateuch forward and integrating its various parts. The second task is to explore the way in which the law of Sinai functions in the Pentateuch. There is an important question that remains at the end of Genesis 3: How, if possible, can humankind return to the place of life, blessing, and dominion?

The covenant at Sinai appears to be the key. First, by far, more text in the Pentateuch is devoted to Sinai than anything else. The law and narratives of Sinai constitute Exodus 19–Numbers 10 and Deuteronomy is almost entirely a reflection on Sinai and the law given there. Therefore, understanding Sinai is important to understanding the Pentateuch and appears to be the most obvious place to turn for remedying the situation presented in Genesis 1–3.

Second, the law at Sinai presents itself as the key to recapturing Eden. With the law, there is life, land, dominion, priesthood, communion with God and others, and blessing. The law brings life to those who obey it (Lev 18:5). The law promises Israel an abundant land which the Lord gives them (Lev 20:24; Num 14:8; Deut 6:3, 10–11; 26:9). As Israel arrives at Sinai, God invites them to a covenant in which the sons of Israel become priest-kings, “kingdom of priests and holy nation” (Exod 19:6). The sacrificial system provides a means for making one ritually acceptable to God and restoring one’s place in the community.²⁸ Finally, the law secures blessing upon blessing (Deut 28).

Third, the narratives detailing the covenants with Noah and Abraham point to obedience to divine commandments as the key to recapturing Eden. God makes a covenant with both Noah and Abraham before He makes one with Israel at Sinai. The narratives focus on the obedience of both characters and the rewards of reversing aspects of the Fall. Noah does not die in the flood because he found favor in God’s eyes (Gen 6:8), walked with God (Gen 6:9), and did everything that the Lord commanded him (Gen 6:22; 7:5, 16). As a result, God established a covenant and renewed His original blessing through Noah and his seed (Gen 9:1–7). Abraham follows God’s commandments: he moves from his country (Gen 12:4), he circumcises himself and his household (Gen 17:26–7; 21:4), and he freely offers up Isaac (Gen 22:1–18). As a result, the Lord establishes or confirms His covenant with Abraham and his seed. The covenant promises to

²⁸Cf. Wenham, *Leviticus*, 25–29; Douglas Davies, “An Interpretation of Sacrifice in Leviticus,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 89 (1977): 387–99.

Abraham also look back to the Fall as there is a promise of land, numerous descendants, and blessing (Gen 12:1–3).²⁹

The Pentateuch builds up anticipation that the covenant at Sinai is the key to returning to Eden; however, this anticipation is dashed as the Pentateuch points out that the Sinai covenant does not work. The first reason is found in the law itself. Exodus 19:6 recounts the invitation that the Lord extends to Israel: they are to be a prized possession, kingdom of priests, and holy nation. However, the law that follows at Sinai creates a different picture. Far from producing a kingdom of priests, the law severely restricts those who may serve as a priest. When Korah and the others with him make the claim that all the people are holy (Num 16:3), they are apparently claiming priestly rights for everyone (Num 16:8–10). It appears that since they are under the Sinai covenant, their claim of a holy people in which all are priests is illegitimate and punishable by death. Regardless of what should have happened at Sinai in Exodus 19 and 20, what follows Sinai reveals that the Sinai covenant could not provide the way forward to Eden.³⁰

The second reason is that the sons of Israel do not obey it. In Exodus 19, Israel quickly agrees to a covenant, but in the middle of receiving the commandments, they break the covenant by worshiping an idol. The generation that agreed to the covenant at Sinai perishes in the wilderness. Even Moses and Aaron, the great representatives of the Sinai covenant, perish in exile outside the land. Perhaps most important for the message of the Pentateuch, Moses' final words predict that the sons of Israel will disobey the covenant and suffer exile just as the first man and woman (e.g. Deut 31).

Therefore, although so much of the Pentateuch is devoted to the Sinai covenant and the laws that are a part of it, the Pentateuch shows that obedience to the laws of the Sinai covenant cannot ultimately reverse the effects of the Fall. It is important to point out that this failure of the Sinai covenant is not based on a failure on the Lord's part; He is faithful to operate according to the covenant. The failure lies with the Israelites themselves. They agree to the covenant, but they do not live according to it. Drawing together the observations regarding the Sinai covenant, one recognizes that one component of the message of the Pentateuch is that the Sinai covenant with its laws cannot restore humankind to a place of life, blessing, and dominion.

²⁹Cf. William Dumbrell, "The Covenant with Abraham," *Reformed Theological Review* 41 (1982), 46.

³⁰Cf. Sailhamer, *Pentateuch*, 51–57, for a discussion of the importance of the issue and the interpretive choices to be made.

Third Task—Discovering Hope

If the hope for returning to Eden is not found with the Sinai covenant, then it must come from somewhere else. In order to discover the source of hope, I will begin with the passages that describe the two most important points of failure after Sinai. These two points of failure are the unwillingness of the sons of Israel to possess the land (Num 14:1–12) and the failure of Moses and Aaron to act properly at Meribah (Num 20:1–13). The first failure has serious consequences as the Lord condemns that entire generation to perish wandering in the wilderness. The second failure is surprising and serious as the Lord condemns Aaron and Moses, two leaders instrumental in God's work, to perish without ever setting foot in the land. In both cases, the text characterizes the failure in the same way: a lack of faith (Num 14:11; 20:12).

In contrast, before Sinai the presence of faith characterizes the sons of Israel at the Red Sea (Exod 14:31).³¹ Immediately, following this characterization is Moses' song that looks forward to a day when the Lord will drive out the nations from the land and establish His people at His sanctuary (Exod 15:13–18). Faith is also critical for understanding the life of Abraham. As God affirms Abraham that he will have a child, Abraham believes (Gen 15:6). That faith is immediately followed by the affirmation of the gift of the land in a covenant ceremony.³² In these passages describing great failures and great successes, the theme of faith occurs.³³ Furthermore, faith is connected with the hope for returning to a place of life, blessing, and dominion.

At the same time, the actual return to Eden lies in the future.³⁴ The promises that Abraham believes are promises of the future. A future land, a future seed, a future nation, a future line of kings—these are the promises of the covenant that God makes with Abraham. There is also a significant shift with this covenant: the original blessing of all humanity (Gen 1:28;

³¹In fact, the theme of faith extends to the entire narrative of Exodus 1–14 and beyond; cf. Hans-Christoff Schmidt, "Redaktion des Pentateuch im Geiste der Prophetie. Beobachtungen zur Bedeutung der 'Glaubens'-Thematik innerhalb der Theologie des Pentateuch," in *Theologie in Prophetie und Pentateuch: Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Ulrike Schorn and Matthias Büttner, Beihefte Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 310 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), 225.

³²For an explanation of the significance of the ceremony, cf. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Waco: Word Books, 1987); 332–35.

³³For more details regarding the development of this theme in the Pentateuch, see Sailhamer, *Pentateuch*, 66–77, and Schmidt, 223–30.

³⁴I am speaking of the present and future from the Pentateuch's point of view, not the contemporary age. I make the distinction because I am not attempting to promote a particular eschatological system as fundamental for understanding the message of the Pentateuch.

9:1–2) is now contingent upon the way in which humanity treats Abraham and his seed, for God promises Abraham and his seed that He will bless those who bless them and curse those who curse them (Gen 12:3; 27:29; Num 24:9). Therefore, the future for all humankind is wrapped up in one man and his seed.

The Pentateuch elaborates on this future hope by specifically addressing the end of days (אַחֲרַיִת הַיָּמִים). Sailhamer has pointed out that this phrase occurs at three important junctures in the structure of the Pentateuch: Genesis 49:1, Numbers 24:14; Deuteronomy 31:29.³⁵ Two important themes arise from these sections. First, in both the blessing of Jacob (Gen 49) and the blessing of Balaam (Num 23–24), there is a distinct emphasis upon a coming king from Israel, specifically Judah (Gen 49:9–10). Second, this king will bring judgment upon his enemies (Num 24:18–24). In connection with the Eden imagery, this king will strike through the forehead of Moab as the seed of the woman will crush the head of the serpent.³⁶

In drawing together the picture of faith or the lack thereof and its future fulfillment, one can see that all the themes of hope of a return to Eden are wrapped up in the promises to Abraham and his seed. These promises are oriented to the future, the end of days. However, in the present, faith in the Lord and His power to deliver on His promises is the appropriate course for one's life.

Fourth Task—Formulating the Message

As stated in the beginning of this study, there are three significant episodes that shape the entire Pentateuch: creation and fall, the call of Abraham, and the covenant at Sinai. Any understanding of the Pentateuch that does not take into account these three episodes is deficient.³⁷ Furthermore, a helpful statement of the Pentateuch's message should attempt to show the correlation between these parts. The account of creation and fall (Gen 1–3) present the original goodness that the Lord alone had prepared for humanity and the way in which humanity forfeited it. The call of Abraham and the promises made to him provide the ultimate way of return to the garden through Abraham and his seed. The Sinai covenant appears to

³⁵Cf. Sailhamer, *Pentateuch*, 35–37.

³⁶I should note that the same words are not used in both passages; however, the words are related in sense. Genesis uses the rare term שָׁוִי (“to bruise, crush”) while Numbers uses the more common term מִדָּוָץ (“to strike through, beat to pieces, crush”).

³⁷This is one of the weaknesses of Clines' proposal for the theme of the Pentateuch. It emphasizes the promises to Abraham and his seed to such an extent that creation and fall and the covenant at Sinai become nearly absent from his statement; cf. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, 30.

elaborate on this solution and ensure its fulfillment through Israel. However, the Sinai covenant does not work because of the unfaithfulness of Israel. Therefore, faith in the Lord and His future work is the way to be acceptable before the Lord God.

These observations may be summarized into the following single statement of the message of the Pentateuch: The Lord, who alone is God, prepared a good place for humankind to dwell, but they forfeited it so that the Lord initiated a way back through His future promises to Abraham and his seed, and those who participate in these future promises do so by faith rather than by the Sinai law. The good place that the Lord prepared is a place of life, blessing, communion, dominion, and worship. Humankind forfeits this place through disobedience to the divine commandment in order to secure for themselves the wisdom that belongs only to God. The future promises to Abraham and his seed are promises of a good land, good name, great nation, blessing, and a line of kings. Finally, one should recognize that faith and the Sinai law are not necessarily mutually exclusive. As stated above, the basic inadequacy of the Sinai law is the unfaithfulness of the Israelites who live under it.

My desire is that this statement will help expose inner connections within the Pentateuch and facilitate the proclamation of it. It is a challenge to attempt to work out this message systematically throughout the entire Pentateuch, showing how each and every unit within the text fits into this larger schema. Obviously, I have not done such a task, nor do I think it necessary at this point. My aim has been to provide a sense of coherence to the whole and provide a big picture for a book that is so important and so diverse.

There are also some issues that I have left unexplored. For instance, if Sinai does not hold hope for returning to Eden, then why has it been included in the Pentateuch at all?³⁸ What role does the Exodus play in defining the relationship between the Lord and Israel? What is the nature of faith in the Pentateuch and its relationship to obedience? Furthermore, how does the message of the Pentateuch relate to the rest of the Scriptures. I have attempted to state the message of the Pentateuch without moving beyond its borders. However, I hope that it is not difficult to imagine how my statement of the Pentateuch's message would resonate with other parts of the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments. The answers to these important questions and the connections from the Pentateuch to the rest of the Scriptures are left for the reader to uncover.

³⁸For a helpful discussion of this topic, see John Sailhamer, "The Mosaic Law and the Theology of the Pentateuch," *Westminster Theological Journal* 53 (1991): 241–61.