

Old Testament Survey

Week 2 — Torah: Israel as God's kingdom



Review

The 39 books of our Old Testament are arranged according to genre:

- a) Torah (Genesis – Deuteronomy): the foundation of God's rule
- b) History (Joshua – Esther): the story of Israel as God's people
- c) Poetry (Psalms – Song of Songs): worship and wisdom
- d) Major Prophets (Isaiah – Daniel): God's messages to his nation
- e) Minor Prophets (Hosea – Malachi): shorter messages from God.

To understand these books, we need to grasp what God was saying to Israel in their situation, their culture, their time. Only then can we grasp what he is saying to us in our situation, our culture, our time.

These books were written by many people, and cover a period of 1000 years. Yet they form a single story: the story of God's reign over his world, the kingdom of God.

Genesis reveals that earth belongs under heaven's rule, but humans have grasped at God's power. The abuse of that power has devastated God's good creation, introducing murder and anarchy. After cleansing his world (in the flood), our heavenly ruler re-planted his kingdom through Noah. He conceded human government, but we instantly turned that power into slavery (Gen 9:25-27) and conquest (Gen 10:8-12). He planned to establish a representative nation through Abraham, to restore the nations under his care (Gen 12:1-3).

The Abrahamic family struggled with that calling, yet God covenanted himself to them (Gen 15, 17). Genesis therefore focuses on the story of this chosen family:

- **Abraham** and Sarah eventually have the promised son, Isaac.
- **Isaac** and Rebekah have twins: Esau and Jacob.
- **Jacob** is renamed Israel. He has 12 sons, the 12 tribes of Israel.
- **Joseph** finally rules, helping Pharaoh to rule wisely.

That was the initial expression of the kingdom of God in Genesis.

We now turn to how this unfolds in the rest of Torah.

Exodus: God's representative kingdom

Four centuries later, Egypt's rulers have forgotten about Joseph. Jacob's descendants are slaves in Egypt (Ex 1:11). Oppressive rulers do anything to keep people under their power: even killing babies (1:16). Moses tries physical force against oppression (2:12) but you cannot beat tyrants that way! Moses flees to the wilds of Sinai, settling down with the Midianites (2:21), far from Egypt's palaces and power struggles.

Map
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Source: *Standard Bible Atlas*. (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 2006), 7.

Fire and drought are the biggest threats in the wilderness, so when Moses sees a fire he stops to check it out. But this fire is YHWH’s messenger (Ex 3:2). Here in the wilds far from earthly conflict, Moses has stumbled across the palace of the ruler of heaven and earth. The sovereign commissions him to return to Egypt to confront Pharaoh with his demand, “The Hebrews are not yours; they’re mine. **Let my people go!**” Moses doesn’t want the job. He knows how Egypt’s power works: they kill anyone who they perceive to be a threat, even babies. Pharaoh will perceive this message from another king as a declaration of war.

Moses goes. It is the strangest war! YHWH gradually convinces the king of Egypt that he has no option but to release the Hebrews. With ten mighty acts (plagues), YHWH reveals that Pharaoh is not really in control of Egypt at all. The water is bloodied. Frogs, gnats, and flies corrupt the land. Animals die. Boils, hail, and locusts strike the land of Egypt (but not the Hebrews). It goes dark for three days. Pharaoh is not in control! The Egyptians begin to realise Pharaoh is powerless to protect them. In the final plague, Pharaoh cannot even protect his own son. Every house loses its heir, ... except the Hebrews: death “passes over” them. Humiliated, Pharaoh releases the people to YHWH.

Jacob's descendants are now ruled by God instead of Pharaoh. In the original creational order, heaven's rule over earth was symbolised by the sun by day and the moon by night (Gen 1:16). Now their ruler is present in a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night (Ex 13:21). He leads them through the Red Sea. Pharaoh's power is literally drowned: the army and chariots by which he held power over them are sunk. Moses and the Israelites celebrate the song of YHWH their liberator, the ruler who "will reign forever and ever" (Ex 15:18).

In practice they struggle to trust his leadership, yet he provides water and bread for the journey. Moses leads them to Sinai where they enter into a formal treaty (**covenant**) that makes them the representative nation of the divine sovereign to the other nations of the earth:

Ex 19⁵ Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; ⁶ and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

He gives them his laws (20:1-17), but having God speak directly is too frightening so they ask God to rule only through a mediator (20:19). Once again, God's rule is through humans.

The kingdom that God established in Israel was not the perfect representation of his rule, because he was dealing with very broken humans. He did not in a single moment radically change their society and ideas of worship. The laws he gave them did not ban slavery; rather he required that they ultimately free their slaves (Ex 21:2). Likewise, women were not treated equally to men. For the picture of ideal society, you have to go back to Genesis where women and men ruled equally (Gen 1:27-28), and we learned that slavery sprang from abusiveness (Gen 9). Nevertheless, YHWH's laws required them to take responsibility and to care for disadvantaged people (Ex 22-23).

Now that the nation of Israel has been formed as the representative nation of the heavenly ruler, their first task was to build a house where their sovereign could live among them. The tabernacle was not a big tent where all the Israelites gathered to sing songs and read Scripture. It was the palace of their king: only his royal servants (the priests) were permitted inside. It was holy space, fenced off from the profane world, with a private chamber where even the priests could never enter (the "Most Holy Place"). In there was the ark—a throne for Israel's invisible God, with guardian sentries (cherubim) protecting this holy space. In this inner room, YHWH sat "enthroned between the cherubim" (1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; 1 Chron 13:6; Psa 80:1; 99:1; Isa 37:16). From this inner sanctum, their sovereign ruled the nation with his guidance and laws:

Ex 25²² There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel.

His royal servants functioned as meditators between the king and his people: they represented the people to God (prayer) and God to the people (governance). They maintained relationship between the sovereign and his nation (at-one-ment). Each day they provided food for their sovereign (sacrifices) and they ate the food as an expression of the fellowship between God and his people (29:42-46, as in 24:11).

The tabernacle represented that partnership between the heavenly sovereign and his representative nation. Even the construction of the tabernacle was a partnership, for the Spirit of God filled the craftsmen (31:3). At least, that's how it was intended to be as Moses received the instructions from the sovereign about the kind of house they should build for their king.

But the people did not wait for these instructions. They built a golden calf and bowed before it as if they could worship YHWH through this image (32:1-6). This disobedience compromised them, disqualifying them as useless for God's kingdom restoration project. They made themselves not the representatives of King YHWH but just one more idol-worshipping corrupted nation on the messed-up earth (32:7).

Moses pleaded with God on behalf of his people—exactly the role the priests were called to take. He restored fellowship, revealing what an astoundingly unique sovereign Israel had:

Ex 34⁶ YHWH, YHWH, a ruler compassionate and generous, not easily angered, richly loyal and faithful,
⁷ committed to his numerous people, forgiving the guilt of their crimes and rebellion, yet always dealing with the guilt that keeps impacting his society—the children, grand-children, great- and even great-great-grandchildren (original translation).

Through Moses' intercession, the covenant relationship between YHWH and his nation was re-established. They set to work to provide the house their sovereign had requested. When they completed this project, the one who had guided them all along in the pillar of cloud moved into the house they had constructed for him. From there he directed them as a nation. So the Book of Exodus closes with the heavenly ruler guiding his representative kingdom on earth:

Exodus 40³⁸ For the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys.

Leviticus – Deuteronomy

Leviticus: God's holy kingdom

The Book of Leviticus is entirely concerned with maintaining relationship between the holy God and humans who are part of a defiled world. This was the task of the priests who came from the tribe of Levi (hence the name of the book). Priests were royal servants, tasked with maintaining the relationship between the heavenly sovereign and his representative nation.

This relationship was symbolically maintained by providing food for their sovereign. For example, Lev 1:9 pictures the smoke of **burnt offerings** rising to the heavens as a gift. YHWH accepts the pleasing aroma, symbolising YHWH's acceptance of those who offered it.

The royal servants also offer **fellowship offerings** (peace offerings) e.g. Lev 3:1. The priests eat the meal that has been offered to YHWH. They are effectively sitting with YHWH at his meal, enjoying it as a symbol of the fellowship between YHWH and his people.

They also offer **sin offerings** (purification offerings) e.g. Lev 4:1. These resolve the problem of impurity that threatens relationship with YHWH. The goal is always atonement (at-one-ment), reconciling any rift, maintaining the relationship.

Since the priests serve as go-betweens—maintaining the people's relationship with their holy God—they must also maintain their own holiness (Lev 8-9). They must follow their sovereign's requirements, not their own ways (Lev 10).

Having described how the priesthood maintained relationship with their holy sovereign (Lev 1–10), the book instructs the people how to keep their lives pure, by avoiding things that make them unclean:

- Unclean foods: Clean land animals have cloven feet and chew their cud (11:3). Clean seafood has fins and scales (11:9).
- Body secretions (e.g. childbirth, menstruation, ejaculation)
- Spreading growths (household mould, leprosy/skin diseases)
- Prohibited sexual relations (incest, homosexuality, bestiality)

In case people violated any of their sovereign's laws without realising it, a day was set aside to maintain relationship. The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) was an annual ceremony dealing with unintentional guilt (Lev 16).

The goal of all these laws was a society on earth that reflected the character of their sovereign: *You must be holy, because I—YHWH your ruler—am holy* (19:2, compare 11:44-45; 20:7, 26; 21:6).

Holiness involved staying clear of things that made people unclean or impure, but it was more than that. Holiness means whole-hearted devotion: "You shall be devoted to me, because I am devoted to you." The *Holy One of Israel* (Isa 1:4 etc) is the one devoted to Israel.

A society-devoted-to-YHWH is one where the people love their neighbours (19:18) and provide for those who cannot own land (19:34). Everyone honours the weekly (Sabbath) and annual (festivals) celebrations of their sovereign (Lev 23). They practice forgiveness and generosity (Lev 25). Complying with his laws brings his blessing, whereas disregarding his laws brings trouble (Lev 26). They must do what they have promised they would do (Lev 27).

Numbers: God's wayward kingdom

We now know who Israel was: the representative kingdom of God among all the nations that belong under his governance. He has liberated them from Pharaoh's oppressive government, established them as his nation through a legal covenant, and given them his laws. They have built a house where he lives among and them and rules them (Exodus). They know how to live as the pure society that pleases him, and they have the appropriate mechanisms for maintaining their communal relationship with him (Leviticus). They are now ready to enter the land he promised, to establish their society there.

But there were already people in Canaan. The nations had spread out and claimed God's world for themselves. They were not about to just walk off their land. Israel will have to fight them. This will be war.

The Book of Numbers begins with Moses numbering all the able-bodied adult males fit to fight this war. They count 600,000 fighters (Num 1:46). The disorganised ex-slaves are organised into military units, based on tribe, clan and family. The Levites (priestly tribe) are not fighters: their job is to maintain Israel's relationship with their heavenly king (Num 3-4). All the fighters must remain pure if they are to have their sovereign's blessing (Num 5-6). Everything depends on the one who lives in the tabernacle (Num 7-8), the one who brought them out of Egypt and leads them on (Num 9-10).

But people are not satisfied with how YHWH is leading them through these arid lands (Num 11), nor with Moses his messenger (Num 12). The spies sent into Canaan report that they cannot win this war (Num 13). God has brought them to the boundary of the Land, but they won't trust him to lead them in. The kingdom of God is a partnership, but these people refuse to partner with their sovereign. God declares that this whole unbelieving generation will die here in the wilderness, before he takes the next generation into the Land (Num 14). That's a major difference between God and earthly rulers: God lives on!



Source: Thomas V Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas*. (Nashville, TN: B&H, 1998) 71.

We now have a **40-year delay** in God's kingdom project. There are all manner of struggles and dissatisfaction with their sovereign among this unbelieving generation (Num 15–20). They win a couple of battles (Num 21). The king of Moab hires a prophet named Balaam to announce their demise. Balaam wants his money, but cannot curse the people who are blest and protected by YHWH (Num 22–24). The seedy prophet eventually reveals how they can defeat Israel: the Moabites must seduce them into impurity, so will YHWH oppose them (Num 25, compare 31:16).

Eventually the generation that came out of Egypt dies off. Once again they take a census, organising the new generation for war (Num 26). They must obey their sovereign's laws (Num 27–30). They finally defeat Moab (Num 31). Some settle east of the Jordan River (Num 32). They retell the story that defines who they are (Num 33), as they prepare to take the Land that God promised and discuss life in the Land (Num 34–36).

Deuteronomy: God's on-going kingdom

Deuteronomy repeats Israel's story and laws for the next generation who were about to enter the Promised Land. Each generation must make its own commitment to be YHWH's covenant people.

Deuteronomy reviews Israel's journey so far (Deut 1–3). It exhorts the new generation to obey their sovereign's laws (Deut 4 – 11). Again, it spells out the terms of their covenant with YHWH (Deut 12–26). It spells out the blessings they can expect if they obey, and the trouble they can expect if they disobey (Deut 27–30).

The book closes with Moses looking towards the future of the twelve tribes, and handing over responsibility to Joshua. Moses dies just before they enter the Promised Land (Deut 31–34).

The whole book of Deuteronomy reads like an ancient covenant document. Many of the surrounding nations had covenants that laid out in writing the responsibilities of the people to their sovereign (obedience) and the responsibilities of the sovereign to his people (blessing). But none of the surrounding nations had such a covenant with their gods.¹ The covenant with a God was unique, for only Israel had God as their king (the kingdom of God). So the covenant was with God their ruler, and each generation needed to recommit to the covenant—precisely what Deuteronomy asked them to do.

Summary

These five books constitute the Torah, the foundation of God's dealings with humanity. In **Genesis** we saw that earth should be under the rule of heaven. Sin is grasping power that should belong to God, for he alone is the true ruler. After the flood, our heavenly sovereign conceded human government to the nations. They introduced the evils of slavery and conquest. God created his own nation through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (renamed Israel), and his twelve sons. Joseph fulfils the promise of the Abrahamic family helping a powerful king to rule for the saving of lives.

¹ M. Weinfeld, "berith" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* Vol 2 ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis (Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 1977), 278.

In **Exodus**, we saw YHWH release his people from earthly rule, to be a kingdom of God. They entered a covenant with him, as partners revealing to the nations what God's rule is like. Their heavenly sovereign gave them his laws, and asked them to construct a tent where he would live among them, providing for, guiding, and ruling them. Instead they constructed a metal cow, preferring to serve that. It was almost the end of them. Yet, this disastrous move revealed the amazing character of their sovereign: merciful and gracious, slow to anger, always loyal and faithful to his covenant people. He forgave them. They built the tent for their king. He moved in.

In **Leviticus**, YHWH explained how to maintain relationship with their holy God. The priests maintained atonement through burnt offerings, fellowship offerings, purification offerings etc. He explained how to keep themselves from impurity and defilement. They must be holy, for the king they represent is holy.

In **Numbers**, they balked when it came to trusting their sovereign to lead them into the Land. The unbelieving generation died in the wilderness.

Deuteronomy reminds subsequent generations that they must make their own commitment to be partners of the covenant with YHWH. They must obey their sovereign's laws. They will have blessing if they do, and trouble if they don't.

So what?

That is the foundational story of the kingdom of God. God's kingdom is a partnership, where he is sovereign over our lives, and we are willing subjects, living lives that honour our sovereign, caring for each other and for his realm (creation) in the way he cares for us.

But the restoration of the kingdom of God in a world where people grasp for power is no simple story. There are many twists and turns as the Biblical narrative unfolds. Eventually the kingdom comes into focus in a descendant of Abraham who refuses to grasp power and kill his enemies in order to become king—Jesus. Instead, he confronts the powers by giving his life! It is only when God raises him from the dead that he is revealed as the human who restores God's rule.

That's how Jesus became Lord, the king who receives all authority in heaven and on earth. The "good news" is that earth is now freed from its enslavement to evil, and is being restored under God's governance, his kingdom. That is how the New Testament understands what Jesus has done. That's the big story we live in. This is how Paul understood his role in the story of the restoration of the kingdom of God:

Rom 1:1-5 From Paul, slave of King Jesus, his appointee assigned to announce God's good news, the message he promised through his prophets in the Old Testament about his Son, the physical descendant of David who was named "Son of the divine ruler with power" by the cleansing Spirit when he raised up King Jesus from the dead. Jesus is therefore our ruler, and we've received his favour—appointing us to call all the nations into trusting obedience under his authority (original translation).

In fact, the story of the kingdom is not complete until the nations are restored under God's rule. That's why Paul concludes Romans as he began, with a picture of the nations back under King Jesus' authority:

Rom 16:25-27 To the one who has the power to make you strong according to my good news, the proclamation of Jesus the King. This reveals the mystery that was quietly there all along, brought to light through the prophetic Scriptures as the eternal God commanded, resulting in the trusting obedience of all the nations. All recognition be given to the only wise Sovereign, through King Jesus, throughout all ages! Amen (original translation).

The story of the kingdom of God is not complete until Jesus reigns over all those who have opposed his authority, until every knee bows and every tongue acknowledges his kingship.

Memory verse

Exodus 19:5-6 (NIV)

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant,
then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.
Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Take home exercise

Think back over the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. What do you see as the essential story line that develops through the narrative? We have suggested it's all about God's kingship over humanity (the kingdom of God). Do you see the thread of that story? How do you understand the kingdom of God? What is it? If God is king, why don't things always work out the way they should? How do you see this problem being resolved in the long term?

In preparation for next week, read these four chapters:

- **Joshua 1:** After that generation died off in the wilderness, Joshua led them into the Land.
- **Judges 2:** With God ruling them, every generation struggled with rulers oppressing them.
- **1 Samuel 8:** Israel can't make it work with God as their ruler: they want a human king.
- **2 Samuel 7:** God promises the kingship will remain with David's dynasty.