

Catholic

UPDATE

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FINDING YOUR WAY THROUGH THE OLD TESTAMENT

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When I was twelve, I wanted a Bible for Christmas—and received a beautiful, gilt-edged volume with the aroma of aged leather. I was thrilled. Just holding it in my hands was a solemn experience.

My gift was an old English translation whose wording and phrasing could not by any stretch of the imagination be considered modern. Undaunted, I picked up my cherished gift, opened it to the beginning and resolved to read one chapter per day until I finished. This I did, completing the task two years and eleven months later.

I had plunged in, assuming I was about to read a book cover to cover, unaware that I was actually entering a library where not one, but seventy-two books awaited me: books of poetry, songs, letters, allegories, historical sagas, and more. I had treated them all alike under the impression that, no matter where you open it, the Bible is the Bible is the Bible. I now know there are better ways to approach the Bible.

Familiarity is the key. The more at home you feel in any library, the easier you'll find your way around. If familiarity is the key, the door that it opens is literary form. With the type of book you're reading clearly in mind, the door is wide open to pleasurable, profitable Scripture reading.

It's helpful to know that the Old Testament is divided into four groups:

1. **The Pentateuch** (Greek for “five rolls” or “five books”) also known as the *Torah* (Hebrew for “the Law”)
2. **The Historical Books**
3. **The Wisdom Books or The Writings**
4. **The Prophetic Books**

Knowing what we can expect to find within each of these groups puts us on firmer footing as we find our way around the Old Testament.

Before we begin, we should realize that what Christians call

the Old Testament is, in reality, the Hebrew Scriptures. The word *testament*, moreover, can also be interpreted as “covenant” (a solemn agreement between two parties). It is this notion of covenant, or the union between God and the Chosen People, that underlies the Hebrew Scriptures as a whole.



THE PENTATEUCH

The Greek prefix *penta* meaning “five,” we find five books here: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These works are the heart of the Hebrew Scriptures and the most treasured traditions of Judaism. Here, we discover the very earliest memories in the Jewish and Christian tradition.

Genesis. Genesis 1:1—11:26 contains stories so old they are subtitled Primeval or Prehistory, referring to that period predating written records. The tales told in these first chapters found their way by word of mouth from generation to generation for a very long time before being committed to writing.

Until recently, the books of the Pentateuch were ascribed to Moses—much that they contain is attributable to his influence. However, we really don't know who the authors were. Thanks to modern biblical scholarship, we now recognize four distinct threads that were eventually woven into a single account. These four (Yahwist, Elohist, Priestly, and Deutero-