

Unveiling the Scriptures - The Mosaic Period

We continue this series with an examination of the Scriptures in the Mosaic period.

The Mosaic Period

It was with Moses that the first written records of God's dealings with His people began to be written. But even then, the main gift was that of presence, not message. When God appeared to Moses at the burning bush, He came with fire, not with a text. And He promised to liberate His people from Egypt, despite the protests and counter-action of Pharaoh, head of the greatest super-power in the world. And liberate them He did, smiting Egypt with ten blows and then leading His people through the *Yam Suph* to freedom. Once on the other side, He fed them with manna from heaven, and water from the rock. And still He gave them nothing on paper. Note: He gave them *commandments* — e.g. “gather the manna every day except the seventh day of rest” — but nothing that was written down. Their relationship with God was based on His abiding presence with Him and their loving response to that presence.

It was not until they came to Sinai that anything was written. And even then, the gift was primarily one of presence. And quite a terrifying presence at that: there were thunders and lightnings atop the mountain of revelation, along with a thick cloud and the blast of a trumpet. And the Ten Commandments (literally “the Ten Words”) were given orally, which terrified them even more, so that they begged Moses to ask God to stop speaking to them like that. Let God talk to Moses instead, and he could tell them what God said!

When God condescended and granted their request, Moses came down from the mountain with the Ten Words written on stone tablets—the first time anything (as far as the Pentateuchal narrative is concerned) that God had said had been written down. And here we must decisively forget about Charlton Heston, lugging down two huge stone tablets from the mountain top, each one of which must have weighed about a hundred pounds. The stone tablets looked more like the small tablets with cuneiform writing we see in museums—i.e. small enough for one tablet to be held in the palm of a man's hand. The fact that there were two tablets was probably an instance of the ancient practice of the provisions of covenants being written in duplicate—one copy for each of the two parties in covenant. Anyway, the tablets were small enough to fit easily into the small chest or box that was the Ark of the Covenant.

There were other written instructions as well—instructions for living life in the Promised Land. These had to do with provisions for dealing with one's slaves, with criminal offenses, with sexual matters, and with a cultic calendar of worship. A summary of them can be found in *Exodus 21-23*—they are that short. These instructions were also sufficiently concise that they could be written on a white-washed stone and set up where anyone could see them (*Deuteronomy 27:2, Joshua 24:26*). This functioned as much as a reminder of the covenant as a rehash of its details, since at that time few people could actually read.

Given this widespread lack of popular literacy, what did these written provisions mean? In that culture, when covenants were made between kings and vassals, the provisions of their covenant or treaty were always written down for posterity—and for handy reference should the provisions of the covenant be broken and the promised punishments for breaking it go into effect. That was in part the reason for writing down all the commandments. The priests knew the details (or were supposed to know the details) and they functioned as teachers of the people. In an oral culture, knowledge, law, and lore were mostly transmitted orally, so one must not imagine the priests consulting books like scholars at a university consulting their libraries. The lore was passed down from father to son, like everything else in an oral culture.

The truth is that we do not precisely know when the books of the Bible known now as the Pentateuch (or, come to that, the *Books of Joshua and Judges*) came to be written, and scholars entertain varied and conflicting opinions about it. I myself believe that there is a core of written material that goes back to Moses, so that the so-called “Book of the Covenant” contained in *Exodus 21-23* dates from his time. Certainly the record of the various stops in their wilderness wandering before they reached Canaan (found in *Numbers 33*) must go back to that period, for the various locations named as their stopping places came to be rapidly lost later on, and later authors would hardly make them up.

But one thing is certain: the texts as we currently have them cannot have been written by Moses or his immediate successors. For one thing, Moses could hardly have recorded his death in *Deuteronomy 34*, or characterized himself as “the meekest man on the face of the earth” in *Numbers 12*. Also, the current text contains references to events that happened long afterward (e.g. *Genesis 21:34*, which mentions Canaan as being the land of the Philistines, who in fact did not enter Canaan until much later). Obviously our present text is the result of many later additions and revisions to an evolving story, written down to preserve earlier oral traditions. This does not detract from its authority or authenticity. But it does make precise dating of the final text more difficult. The final text was the result of centuries of revision of a written story which recorded the laws and history passed down through the generations. This by no means makes the history less reliable, for oral cultures were quite capable of preserving their own history.

The main point here is that during the Mosaic period and later on when Israel was living in Canaan under the Judges, the people had no access to literary documents, and most could not have read them if they did have access. They all lived in an oral culture, and the written documents and stories of the patriarchs and the epic story of their liberation from Egypt and the giving of the Law during their wilderness wandering—whenever they came to be written down for the first time—existed to undergird this oral culture. For Israelites back then, religion did not mean reading a book, but worshipping a God, and encountering Him at the altar of sacrifice. Obviously they would pray privately too and keep domestic rituals such as the Sabbath rest, and would orally instruct their children. But literacy played little part in all this. Israelites were not People of the Book, but People of the Mosaic Covenant.

Next: Scripture in the Period of the Kings