
FAQ

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Torah, Before Mount Sinai (Abraham)

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I have heard many Messianic Believers claim that the Torah existed before Mount Sinai, and that Abraham kept it. To what degree is this actually true?

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When the Instruction of God was finally codified, it was given to the people of Ancient Israel. But *torah* (תּוֹרָה) as God's Teaching, contrary to what many contemporary Christians might know, certainly pre-dated Mount Sinai. Genesis 26:5 affirms how the Patriarch Abraham **"obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws."** The Hebrew translated "laws" in most Bibles is *torotai* (yt'(roAt) or "My Torahs" (ATS), also "teachings" (NJPS) or "instructions" (TNIV). Abraham surely obeyed God, and knew a wide degree of what He considered acceptable and unacceptable prior to the formal giving of the Torah to the Ancient Israelites.

In Genesis 26:5 affirming that Abraham obeyed God's "laws," what these various "Torahs" would have likely included would have been a series of instructions primarily relating to ethics, morality, various sorts of animal sacrifice, and other practices that would mark him out as serving the One True God and not the gods of Mesopotamia or Canaan.¹ The usage of the plural *torot* (תּוֹרוֹת) could imply that as Abraham grew in his relationship with the Creator and fellowshiped with Him, that he was taught more laws by Him as time progressed, such as the rite of circumcision and the significance it would have for his descendants.² Originally having to answer the call of the Unseen God to leave Ur (Genesis 12:1; 15:7), Abraham was surely not told everything he was to do all at once.

A common Jewish interpretation of Genesis 26:5, as the *Soncino Chumash* notes, holds that "Abraham fulfilled all the laws of the Torah before they were revealed at Sinai, arriving at a knowledge of them through inspiration."³ In some cases, Jewish interpreters have taken the plural *torot* or "laws" to be both the Written Torah and Oral Torah,⁴ the latter of which composes literature like the Mishnah and Talmud. While it is very possible that among the various "laws" Abraham followed could include those various oral explanations that would aid Ancient Israel with the keeping of the commandments codified at Mount Sinai, the main point to be taken from Genesis 26:5 is that Abraham's faith in the Unseen God was in no way incompatible with him being obedient to whatever instructions such a God gave him. Abraham could not remember the Passover, which is clearly rooted in the Exodus of the future nation of Ancient Israel from Egypt. But among those things which could be clearly given to him, Abraham was faithfully obedient. In his Genesis commentary, John Calvin correctly detected the main focus of what Abraham following God's "laws" means:

¹ Cf. J.H. Hertz, ed., *Pentateuch & Haftorahs* (London: Soncino, 1960), 95.

² Genesis 17:10-27.

³ A. Cohen, ed., *The Soncino Chumash* (Brooklyn: Soncino Press, 1983), 145.

⁴ Cf. Nosson Scherman, ed., *ArtScroll Chumash, Stone Edition* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 2000), 129.

“[A]lthough laws, statutes, rites, precepts, and ceremonies, had not yet been written, Moses used these terms, that he might the more clearly show how sedulously Abraham regulated his life according to the will of God alone—how carefully he abstained from all of the impurities of the heathen—and how exactly he pursued the straight course of holiness, without turning aside to the right or to the left.”⁵

John H. Sailhamer similarly concludes, “by showing Abraham to be an example of ‘keeping the law,’ the writer has shown the nature of the relationship between law and faith. Abraham, a man who lived in faith, could be described as one who kept the law.”⁶

Of course, many readers of Genesis 26:5 do not know what to do with the assertion that Abraham followed God’s “laws” or “Torahs.” The critical tradition, which views the Pentateuch as being a compilation of different sources after the Babylonian exile, might view this only as a statement of the so-called J source or Yahwist,⁷ which has been read into the account and is largely fictional. While it is easy to disregard such a liberal opinion, even conservative Christian readers issue objections to the mere thought that Abraham observed any of what would later be codified as the “Mosaic Law.” Objections are often made on the basis that Abraham married his half-sister, which is clearly prohibited.⁸ Later, Jacob married two sisters,⁹ and also erected a pillar to God.¹⁰ Worst of all, Abraham took his wife’s handmaiden Hagar to conceive a child,¹¹ a definite practice of Ancient Near Eastern paganism which has never been viewed with the greatest of compliments in the Scriptures.¹²

The answer to much of this can elude some people, but these oversights—aside from the obvious fact that these people were limited mortals and were by no means perfect—is that there was a period when the Patriarch Abraham was an idolater, and such influences are not always easily removed. Joshua 24:2 states,

“Joshua said to all the people, ‘Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, “From ancient times your fathers lived beyond the River, *namely*, Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, **and they served other gods** [*elohim acheirim*, אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים].””

It is true that the Torah would not be formally codified or written until Mount Sinai. But, it is to definitely be noted that a large part of the Torah being given to Ancient Israel in such a written form was to help establish the Levitical priesthood (Galatians 3:19), and with it regulate atonement for sins via animal sacrifice in the Tabernacle or Temple until the arrival of the Messiah (Hebrews 10:1, 3). The plural *torotai* is undoubtedly used in Genesis 26:5 to describe the obedience of Abraham, because he had to learn all of the instructions—*mitzvotai chuqotai v’torotai* (מִצְוֹתַי חֻקֹתַי וְתוֹרֹתַי), “My commandments, My statutes and My laws”—directly from God, albeit somewhat loosely in some cases.

J.H. Hertz, in his *Pentateuch & Haftorahs*, suggests that the commandments (*mitzvot*, מִצְוֹת) Abraham received were “Laws dictated by the moral sense, *e.g.* against the crimes of robbery, bloodshed, etc.,” that the statutes (*chuqim*, חֻקִּים) were “Laws ordained by God which we are to observe although reason cannot assign an explanation, *e.g.* the prohibition of swine’s flesh,” and laws (*torot*, תּוֹרוֹת) were “Customs and traditional ordinances orally transmitted from generation to generation.”¹³ Passing any of this down orally to the succeeding generations would have been highly difficult, because of how various pagan, Ancient Near Eastern practices are seen interspersed within the early narratives of Genesis, and would have required an authority like Moses to finally and formally deliver via the transcription of the Pentateuch or *Chumash*.¹⁴

Generally speaking, all mature Christians agree that Abraham is an example that born again Believers are to follow (cf. Romans 4:16), but any argument that Abraham lived his life and conducted himself entirely on blind faith, *with no instructions or commandments of any kind* to follow, is most unsupportable.

⁵ John Calvin: *Genesis*, trans. and ed. John King (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 2:60.

⁶ John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis,” in Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. et. al., *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 2:187.

⁷ Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, revised edition (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), pp 270-271.

⁸ Genesis 20:12; prohibition: Leviticus 18:9, 11.

⁹ Genesis 29:15-35; prohibition: Leviticus 18:18.

¹⁰ Genesis 28:22; 31:13; prohibition: Leviticus 26:1; Deuteronomy 16:22.

¹¹ Genesis 16.

¹² Cf. Galatians 4:25.

¹³ Hertz, *Pentateuch & Haftorahs*, 95.

¹⁴ At least in terms of the narrative materials from Genesis 1:1-37:2, a conservative scholar like R.K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), pp 548-551 holds that this material could have originally survived on eleven clay tablets that could have later been used by Moses in the composition of the Pentateuch.