The first five books of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament (Genesis–Deuteronomy) are generally called the Pentateuch among Christians and some biblical scholars. In Jewish tradition the Five Books of Moses are known as the Torah. The Hebrew word *torah* literally means “teaching” or “instruction” and refers to what is the heart of the Hebrew Scriptures in both content and importance. The story lines within this collection stretch from the creation of the world and humanity to Moses’s last speech on the plains of Moab as the Israelites prepare to enter into the land of promise. The Pentateuch, however, contains various forms of literature from many time periods. These five books have played a formative role in the religious beliefs and imagination of many Christian, Jewish, and Muslim traditions. The Pentateuch has also been one of the primary points of emphasis in modern biblical scholarship. In fact, one can trace the developments in the scholarly study of the Bible by surveying the history of Pentateuchal research. With such well-known stories as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Noah and the flood, the Akedah (or “Binding” of Isaac), the exodus, the Ten Commandments, and God’s provision of manna in the wilderness, it is no wonder that these texts have inspired generations of people for millennia.

One must distinguish between the narrative arc found within the Pentateuch, beginning with creation and ending on the plains of Moab, and the historical contexts out of which the traditions in these books emerge. Historically, scholars agree that the Pentateuch is a compilation of sources, traditions, folktales, and legal material from different historical
The basic structure of the Pentateuch follows a narrative progression from creation to the journey of a particular ancestral family that becomes a nation. Here is an outline:

- Genesis: Creation to the ancestors
  - Genesis 1–11: Stories about creation and early humanity
  - Genesis 12–50: Stories about the ancestors
Exodus: Liberation from Egypt to revelation at Sinai
Exodus 1:1—15:21: Exodus from Egypt
Exodus 15:22—40:38: Journeys in the wilderness and revelation at Sinai

Leviticus: Revelation at Sinai continued
Leviticus 1:1—27:34: Laws concerning worship and holiness

Numbers: Wanderings in the wilderness
Numbers 1:1—25:18: The first generation in the wilderness
Numbers 26:1—36:13: The second generation in the wilderness

Deuteronomy: Re-proclamation of the covenant
Deuteronomy 1:1—30:20: Moses re-proclaims the covenant
Deuteronomy 31:1—34:12: Moses’s farewell and death

The plot line of the Pentateuch starts universally, beginning with the creation of the world and humanity. Genesis 1–11 contains universal stories about the beginning of human civilization and addresses common themes such as mortality and death (Gen 3, Garden of Eden), violence between human beings (Gen 4, Cain and Abel), God’s comprehensive judgment through flood (6–9), and the creation of different languages and cultures (Gen 11, Tower of Babel). In 12–50, the narrative focuses on the particular family line of Abraham and Sarah, from whom God promises to make a great nation (Gen 12:2). This couple’s progeny eventually become the tribes of Israel. A persistent theme throughout the ancestral stories is how the divine promise reaches fulfillment in spite of the circumstances and human decisions that threaten it. The theme of barrenness is frequent and appears in the stories of Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel. In each case, God eventually opens the woman’s womb. The most significant story that involves an endangerment of the promise is in Genesis 22, where God tests Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, as a burnt offering.

At the end of Genesis, Jacob and his family migrate south to Egypt, where Joseph had found favor in the household of Pharaoh. The book of Exodus begins with how the Israelites fell out of favor with a later pharaoh and were subjugated to slavery. Exodus 1–15 describes how the LORD delivers Israel from their bondage in Egypt. After a series of plagues, the Israelites are released. The climax of Israel’s liberation occurs with the event at the sea, where the LORD delivers them miraculously. In the wilderness of Sinai, Moses receives the revelation of God, which will become the basis of Israelite community (Exod 19:1—34:35). The book of Leviticus, an extensive collection of laws with a primary focus on worship, is placed in the middle of the Torah and is set in the context of God’s revelation at Sinai. The largest section