

## Genres of the Bible

There are different ways to categorize the genres of the Bible. The way we have described them is a common way, although there can be different schools of thought. Many books of the Bible contain two or more genres in it. For example, Exodus contains both narrative and law. This document is a helpful place to start if you are new to considering genre and context.

Before digging into a book of the Bible, try to learn who wrote the book, who the book was written to, when the book was written, what genre the book is, and why the author wrote the book. Historical, cultural, and literary context are extremely valuable for correctly understanding and interpreting the Bible.

*“A text [like the Bible] cannot mean what it could never have meant for its original readers/hearers.” ~Gordon D. Fee*

### **Law: (Genesis - Deuteronomy)**

The Law contains various commands that God tells His people to follow. When reading law, it is important to know the historical context because there is a great divide between our modern context and the time these were written. God gave these laws to Moses as he was leading the Israelites from Egypt to the promised land. Some of the laws were meant to last forever, while others were only meant for the Israelites in the land of Canaan (promised land).

### **Historical Narrative: (Joshua - Esther, Acts)**

Historical Narrative consists of history. These books contain accounts of what happened at that time. It is helpful to keep in mind that we may not be able to take a verse from these stories and directly “apply it” to our lives. They tell the story of God and his plan for the Israelite people. Historical context is particularly helpful to understand this genre.

### **Poetry & Wisdom: (Job - Song of Songs)**

Hebrew poetry does not rhyme, as most of the poetry today. Instead, Hebrew poetry mostly uses parallelism and imagery. Parallelism means that the first line will say something, and the second line will rephrase or restate it. Poetry is meant to be figurative, not literal. The wisdom books are also written in poetry, but they serve a slightly different purpose. They discuss some of life’s existential questions and provide wisdom on how to live.

*“Wisdom literature uses language to communicate principles that are generally true, though not universally true. Reading a proverb as a promise can lead to heartache and doubt. Understanding it as a general rule for life can point us toward wise decision-making.” ~ Jen Wilkin*

**Prophecy: (Isaiah - Ezekiel, Hosea - Malachi)**

Prophecy in the Old Testament is not typically a depiction of the future, but it is mostly a message from God spoken by the prophet to the people of that time. There were predictions about the future (like the destruction of Jerusalem or the Messiah), but the vast majority of the prophecies of the Bible were about the time period the prophecy was said. When reading this genre, it is best if you know the historical context and to learn what the prophecy meant on the day that it was given.

**Gospel: (Matthew - John)**

The Gospels are biographies of Jesus. The word “gospel” means “good news” and thus the Gospels describe the good news of Jesus, his birth, his life on earth, and his death and resurrection. Each Gospel was written to different audiences by different people. Each Gospel starts with Jesus’ birth and ends with His death. However, the rest of each Gospel is not necessarily in chronological order. Rather, those narratives are placed with a theological perspective in mind. And within the gospels are parables. Parables were spoken by Jesus; they are stories used to illustrate a truth that Jesus was teaching on. Although they can contain various elements, each parable has one overall meaning. These stories contain items and practices that were common at the time, so we may need to spend time learning the cultural context for a clearer understanding.

**Epistles (Letters): (Romans - Jude)**

The letters were written to the early Christians. They cover many topics that serve to clarify the gospel for the early church, navigate their questions, and teach them how to live a godly life. Each letter was written to a church or individual regarding their trials, shortcomings, or questions. This context is important to understand when a letter is addressing an issue of the time or when it is applicable to our lives today. To best understand an epistle, look at the flow of the argument the author is making.

**Apocalypse: (Daniel, Revelation)**

The final genre is apocalypse. This word means “uncover” or “reveal” and thus God “uncovers” or “reveals” His plan for the world. These books are highly symbolic and most commonly describe the end of the age. Reading these books to estimate the time of the end is an improper function. They were written during periods of great turmoil and strife, so their main purpose was and is to remind and encourage people that God is the King over everything and everyone.