

# Your Guide to Biblical Genre

When you go to your mailbox, it is often likely that you will retrieve from it several different types of mail. It might be a letter from a friend or relative, a postcard inviting you to vote, an enticing sales flyer, etc. A letter, postcard, and a flyer or different types of genre that we recognize and handle everyday without having to analyze what type of literature it is.

Genre refers to a category of literature or other form of art or entertainment (such as paintings or music) based on certain defining criteria. Genres change over time. Some become unpopular and go away while new ones spring up as trends emerge.

Genres can be very broad or very narrow. The broadest literary genres are fiction and nonfiction.

Understanding the genre – or type – of writing you've got in front of you when you open your Bible will make a huge difference to how you interpret the text. If you're new to the idea of biblical genre, or want a refresher, let this guide give you the basics.

## Law

The books of the law are made up of rules, statutes and instructions, and are generally concerned with how people live.

**Aim:** They're meant to instruct and lay out the conditions of God's covenant with the nation of Israel.

**Biblical books in this genre:** Genesis (though it also includes lots of narrative), Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

**What they tell us about God:** He's concerned with justice, caring for the poor and outsiders and a healthy, functioning community. He's so concerned about good relationships that he makes a way for people to reconcile with him and one another when the law is broken, for any number of mistakes.

**To bear in mind:** Most of these books provide the blueprint for a new nation released from slavery. There was no constitution or Harvard Business Review! While surrounding nations sacrificed children to gods, these laws marked a huge leap in terms of justice and ethics and were the exemplar of a new, life-honoring way to live.

**Example:** *'If your brother becomes poor and sells part of his property, then his nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what his brother has sold. If a man has no one to redeem it and then himself becomes prosperous and finds sufficient means to redeem it, let him calculate the years since he sold it and pay back the balance to the man to whom he sold it, and then return to his property. But if he has not sufficient means to recover it, then what he sold shall remain in the hand of the buyer until the year of jubilee. In the jubilee it shall be released, and he shall return to his property.'* (Leviticus 25.25–29)

## Narrative

The narrative books or portions of the Bible give us a history, or a story meant to capture the experience of the people of God. In the Old Testament, they span 1,000 years of Israel's history; in the New they tell the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and the birth of the Church.

**Aim:** To document communal stories and histories for official record and to faithfully pass them on to future generations, and to show God at work in the lives of his people.

**Biblical books in this genre:** Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts.

**What they tell us about God:** He's involved in human lives and human stories and works in and through human experience.

**To bear in mind:** Some of the stories are shocking and you'd avoid telling them in Sunday school. In many cases, the narrator doesn't explicitly express an opinion about them – but there's usually a clear implicit message. As with many stories, we're forced to draw our own conclusions from what we've read.

**Example:** `Then the Spirit of the Lord was upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh and passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites. And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering." So, Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them, and the Lord gave them into his hand. And he struck them from Aroer to the neighborhood of Minnith, twenty cities, and as far as Abel-keramim, with a great blow. So, the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel.

Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah. And behold, his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and with dances. She was his only child; besides her he had neither son nor daughter. And as soon as he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow." (Judges 11.29–35)

## Wisdom

Ranging from the pithy sayings of Proverbs to the cyclical laments of Job, wisdom literature is concerned with making sense of life and how to live well. It includes advice for navigating conflict, how to achieve a sense of perspective, and the painful cry of the heart as the realities of loss set in.

**Aim:** To make sense of the meaning of life as experienced and observed.

**Biblical books in this genre:** Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job. Some people include Song of Songs, and some of the psalms.\*

**What they tell us about God:** He's comfortable with all our different moods and musings at life. There's an order and a pattern to life that helps us live wisely but when we're not sure why or when it all falls apart, he doesn't shy away from our suffering.

**To bear in mind:** The three books of Wisdom literature each work together to make a whole. The Book of Proverbs deals with generalizations and Job deals with what happens when it doesn't all work out. Meanwhile Ecclesiastes captures the search for meaning: what does all this 'wisdom' and good living count for anyway? Together they reflect the reality of life in its brilliant, tragic and mundane fullness.

**Example:** 'So I hated life because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless.' (Ecclesiastes 2.17–19)

*\*This collection of books is sometimes classified as poetry.*

## **Prophets**

What was God saying? God spoke to the nation of Israel through prophets who acted, sang, spoke, and sometimes wrote down these messages. Other times a school of scribes or prophet documented them during or after the time they gave their message.

**Aim:** To share God's direct message to the people of Israel, calling them back from sin and giving them hope and comfort.

**Biblical books in this genre:** Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

**What they tell us about God:** He cares passionately about his people living up to their calling. He will discipline them as a parent does a child and will draw them back to him.

**To bear in mind:** If some of the responses seem harsh, look back to the law which documents the 'covenant' or contract between God and his people. You'll see that God is holding up his side of the bargain when Israel has broken the contract.

## **Example:**

'When Israel was a child, I loved him,  
and out of Egypt I called my son.  
The more they were called,  
the more they went away;  
they kept sacrificing to the Baals  
and burning offerings to idols.  
Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk;  
I took them up by their arms,  
but they did not know that I healed them.  
I led them with cords of kindness,  
with the bands of love,  
and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws,  
and I bent down to them and fed them.

They shall not return to the land of Egypt,  
but Assyria shall be their king,  
because they have refused to return to me.  
The sword shall rage against their cities,  
consume the bars of their gates,  
and devour them because of their own counsels.  
My people are bent on turning away from me,  
and though they call out to the Most High,  
he shall not raise them up at all.

(Hosea 11.1-7)

## **Letters**

The letters – or 'epistles' – written to the early churches capture the challenges and theology of the early Church as Christianity began to spread across the Roman empire. They contain practical, theological and relational instruction as well as evidence, and take on a standard format.

**Aim:** To encourage, teach, instruct and sometimes to make practical arrangements.

**Biblical books in this genre:** Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1,2 and 3 John, Jude, Revelation\*

**To bear in mind:** The writers were addressing a particular problem or circumstance rather than trying to document their theology. They're writing to different group with different challenges, so if you think one letter seems to contradict another, consider the different situations being addressed. How wonderful to have truth and wisdom for so many different circumstances!

**Example:** 'I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.' (Philippians 1.3–11)

*\*Although sent as a letter, Revelation is considered Apocalyptic literature because of visions and prophecies about the end of the world. The book of Daniel also fits this category.*