

## Genres of the Bible

### **Narrative**

Narrative is storytelling or reports of accounts or events, and features throughout the Bible in almost all books. Sometimes it gives us a historical context, sometimes it gives us spiritual meanings. For example Exodus is an epic narrative that tells the story of the Israelites and their deliverance from slavery. Acts tells the story of the first generation of Christians.

Narratives record historical accounts of events and often tell stories of ordinary people, and how their lives are changed by God. For instance we read about the stories of Peter the fisherman, Paul the murderer, and Mary the unwed mother.

Of all the different genres in the bible, narrative is the simplest to understand. Within this genre are two sub-genres: law and history.

### **Law**

These are God's commands for how to live, worship and govern. The first five books of the Old Testament - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy (in Christianity they are referred to as the Pentateuch, in Judaism the Torah) are called 'the law'.

There are commands and prescriptions on how to live. Many of the laws are no longer held but they still teach us about God. Exodus tells us how to treat our neighbours.

Leviticus gives detailed instructions on observing rituals. Some of these do not seem relevant to Christians today because they were written for a particular audience.

### **History**

Historical literature relates factual accounts. There are many in the Old Testament, and some in the New Testament. They are a record of the people of God, and report what happened at a certain time and place, and involve people, nations and events.

Genesis and Exodus describe the beginnings of the people of Israel, their exile in the land of Egypt and Moses giving them the law. Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles also expand upon the history of God's people. Acts relates the history of the early church. Other historical books are Joshua, Ruth, Esther, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John.

### **Genealogy**

Another feature of historical writing is genealogies. These document a family lineage.

In the Old Testament genealogies are found in Genesis 5, Matthew 1, Luke 3. In the New Testament, Matthew and Luke's Gospels also include the genealogies of Jesus.

### **Poetry**

The Old Testament has lots of poetry. Hebrew poetry doesn't rhyme but does have a meter and rhythm, and employs a variety of poetic techniques in its language.

The Psalms are written as songs, and in fact as sung in lots of liturgy. The Song of Solomon is almost like a collection of love letters where two people are expressing their feelings for one another. Poetic elements can also be found the book of Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes as well as in parts of Isaiah and Jeremiah.

### **Wisdom**

Proverbs and wise sayings are short statements of advice and rules for life.

These are found in Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament, and the book of James in the New Testament.

Is it important to understand who is offering the advice? And who are they directing it to? Should the same advice always apply to everyone, regardless?

With books like Ecclesiastes and Job, we need to understand who is speaking or expressing their views. Job is often in despair and in anguish about his situation. As such, we need to bear this in mind in his tone and content.

Ecclesiastes offers a philosophical introspection and contemplation of life. We need to understand that the main protagonist of the story often has two opposing viewpoints or perspectives on life.

That doesn't mean that they are not true or the Word of God.

### **Prophecy**

Prophecy is when God spoke to His people through prophets. They revealed consequences for disobeying God, and announced God's plan of redemption and promise of a Saviour.

It is frequent in the Old Testament, which chronicles the messages of the prophets: four major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel) and the 12 minor prophets (Hosea through Malachi).

Prophecy in the New Testament is a continuation and fulfillment of the prophecy of the Old Testament. Jesus is considered to be the prophet that was promised in Deuteronomy. Jesus himself proclaims prophecies: his death, his return as the Son of Man at the end of the world and the destruction of the Temple.

Prophecy is often foretold in symbolic language, making it difficult to interpret. Some prophecies refer to future events yet to be fulfilled, some refer to the past. When we read a prophecy we need to consider the context. We should consider the people who it was revealed to, to understand the immediate consequences and learn lessons for our own time.

### **Apocalypse**

Within prophecy there is also a distinct category known as Apocalypse. Apocalypse uses highly symbolic language.

In the Old Testament the book of Revelation (and parts of the book of Daniel) are revelations. Like other prophecies, they proclaim urgent messages to their original audiences, in particular, warning.

### **Gospels**

The Gospels are found in the New Testament. There are gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They are accounts proclaiming the life and teachings of Jesus. Although they contain elements of historical narrative, they are more than that. They are faith documents, narrated by the first believers.

As Luke writes in Luke 1:1-4: 'Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled[a] among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.'

### **Parables**

Parables are stories that communicate lessons, often using literary formulas like similes and metaphors. Jesus often used them as a teaching tool and they are found in the gospels of Mark, Mark and Luke in the New Testament, and in a few places in the Old Testament, for instance the Parable of the Ewe Lamb.

Some the most recognisable parables of the New Testament are the Pharisee and Tax Gatherer and the Good Samaritan.

Although parables always had a message, they are not always easy to understand. In Luke 8:10, Jesus explains the purpose of parables to his disciples:

"The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that, though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand."

What do you think this means? The parables reveal Jesus's message to those who believe?

### **Epistles**

Epistles are letters written by various apostles such as Paul, Peter or John. They are found in the New Testament, and cover several topics, but often explain doctrine. Some are written to specific individuals, and are one half of a two-sided conversation, for instance in 1 Corinthians Paul is replying to a series of questions ("now concerning the matters you wrote about," 1 Cor. 7:1). Other are addressed to churches in different regions.

When reading them we need to consider who they were written for. In order to understand the content of the letters we also need to be familiar with the issues they address.

Nevertheless, even though they were written for a particular time in history, they still hold timeless truths. For instance in Romans, Paul illustrates how upholding every single aspect of the law set out in the Old Testament is very hard. He explains however that righteousness and redemption can be found in Jesus, not just by keeping the law:

'So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 21-25)

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Mark off the book of the Bible when you hear it mentioned (note these are not ALL of the books of the Bible)!

<b>BIBLE BINGO</b>				
Acts	Chronicles, 1 and 2	Corinthians	Daniel	Deuteronomy
Ecclesiastes	Esther	Exodus	Ezekiel	Genesis
Hosea	Isaiah	James	Jeremiah	Job
John	Joshua	Judges	Kings, 1 and 2	Luke
Malachi	Mark	Matthew	Proverbs	Psalms
Revelation	Romans	Ruth	Timothy	