

# A QUICK GUIDE TO BIBLICAL GENRES

## HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

- Historical narrative is ***Scripture that gives factual retellings of real events.***
- These books of the Bible are not based in myth, they are based in fact.
- As we read, it's important for us to pause and reflect on the fact that these events *actually* happened!
- Historical narrative comprises 43% of the Bible. God loves to tell stories of His faithfulness.
- Old Testament narrative is found in:
  - Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther
  - Parts of Job and the Prophets
- New Testament narrative is found in:
  - Matthew, Mark, Luke, John (see 'The Gospels' below for more) and Acts

## THE LAW

- Biblical law is ***Scripture that outlines God's commands to His covenant people.***
- Laws come in several forms:
  - Moral Law- laws about how to live, for all people in all times
  - Ceremonial Law- laws about tabernacle and temple worship for the Israelites
  - Civil or Judicial Law- laws that governed, preserved and protected Israelite society
- It's important for us to note that the law was given after God redeemed the Israelites out of Egypt. *Grace came before the law.*
- The law was designed to be used by governing authorities, not individuals.
- Biblical law is found in
  - Leviticus, parts of Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy

## POETRY

- Biblical poetry is ***Scripture written in verse.***
- This type of Scripture is full of symbolic language, metaphors, word pictures and expressions of feeling.
- Psalms make up the majority of biblical poetry, but poetry can also be found in:
  - Song of Solomon, Lamentations, and several OT narratives
- There are several authors of Psalms, with David being the most well-known author.
- Types of Psalms (*Psalms have been categorized in many different ways. These come from the ESV Study Bible.*):
  - Laments (laying a troubled situation before the Lord and asking for help)
  - Hymns of Thanksgiving
  - Hymns of Praise
  - Hymns Celebrating God's Law
  - Wisdom Psalms
  - Songs of Confidence
  - Royal Psalms (dealing with the Davidic monarchy and the coming Messiah)
  - Historical Psalms
  - Prophetic Hymns

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## WISDOM LITERATURE

- Wisdom literature is ***Scripture that reveals the collected wisdom of generations of godly people.***
- Wisdom literature invites us to consider the complexity of wise living and gives us general rules for life.
- These sayings, proverbs and writings communicate principles that are usually true, but not universally true. *Here we find principles, not promises.*
- Wisdom Literature is found in:
  - Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes

## PROPHECY

- Biblical prophecy is ***Scripture that recounts visions or specific messages from God about the future.***
- Prophecies were directed at God's own people, but also to other kings and countries during the time of the prophets.
- Some prophecies were meant only for their original audience, some were meant for an audience much later in the future, and some for both.
- Not all prophets have their own books of the Bible! There are also prophecies interwoven throughout historical narrative in both Testaments.
  - Old Testament examples are Moses, Balaam, Elijah and Elisha.
  - New Testament examples are John the Baptist and John the apostle.
- Books dedicated totally to prophecy are separated into major and minor categories; not due to the level of their importance but due to their length.
  - Major Prophets include Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel
  - Minor Prophets include Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi

## APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

- Apocalyptic literature is ***Scripture that describes what the end times will be like.***
- This genre uses symbolic language and numbers, word pictures and images that often seem strange to us.
- In the Old Testament, apocalyptic literature is sometimes mixed in with narrative, which can make interpretation difficult.
- Old Testament apocalyptic literature can be found in:
  - Parts of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Zechariah and Daniel
- New Testament apocalyptic literature can be found in:
  - Matthew 24-25, Mark 13, 2 Thessalonians 2 and Revelation

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## THE GOSPELS

- The gospels are **Scripture that includes eyewitness testimonies about the life of Jesus.**
- Gospels are a special type of historical narrative that focus completely on Jesus.
- The four gospels in the Bible are:
  - Matthew, Luke, Mark and John
- Each gospel has a different author and includes a different retelling of Jesus' life. Some of the events overlap, but many do not.
- Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the "synoptic gospels" because they include many of the same events.

## THE EPISTLES

- The epistles are **Scriptures written in the form of a letter.**
- Letters take up half of the New Testament. As we read, it's important to consider who the authors and recipients were and what reason the author had for writing a letter.
- The twenty one epistles were written by six authors:
  - Paul, Peter, James, John, Jude, and the anonymous writer of Hebrews
- Some letters were written to individual recipients, while others were meant to be read aloud as sermons to entire churches.
- The epistles, by author:
  - Paul: Romans, 1-2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon
  - Peter: 1-2 Peter
  - James: James
  - John: 1-3 John
  - Jude: Jude
  - Anonymous: Hebrews

## A FINAL NOTE:

*We can't know a book's genre with 100% accuracy. Some genres are disputed (Genesis 1, for example- narrative or poetry? Literal or not?) Some books have several styles and genres within them. They are flexible and they flow into one another. Because of this, **we must not let the proposed genre of a book be the only tool we use to find meaning in the text.***

## FURTHER RESOURCES:

- [DWITW Genre Reading Plans](#)
- [DWITW Podcast Season 6](#)
- [Literary Styles of the Bible Video](#) by [The Bible Project](#)
- [How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth](#) by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart
- [Women of the Word](#) by Jen Wilkin
- [Dig Deeper](#) by Nigel Beynon & Andrew Sach
- [Zondervan Handbook to the Bible](#) by David and Pat Alexander
- [Jesus on Every Page](#) by David Murray