

Understanding What Genre You're Reading in Scripture

It makes a difference what kind of literature you are reading. You wouldn't read *Romeo & Juliet* the same way you read *National Geographic*, or a Presidential address the same way you hear a love song, or listen to Anne Frank the same way you do with Harry Potter, so don't read all the books in the Bible the same way. There are at least five major literary genres in Scripture to be aware of.

Story. *Read it like History or News.*

Just because it did happen doesn't mean that it truly should have happened. In that sense, you read story genre in scripture like you would news or history. We don't know if God thought the events to be good/bad/indifferent unless God's voice inserts itself into the scene to say it's good/bad/indifferent.

Poetry. *Read it like Lyrics, Romance, or an Emotional Interview.*

Images, longings, and frustrations meet inflated words like "always" and "never" in the poetic literature of the Bible. It's figurative language, and it communicates a figurative truth from the heart. Try to hold figurative truth to the same standards of literal truth, and you'll make a mess of poetic literature.

Letters. *Read it as a Mentor's Wisdom.*

Usually, these are letters from a pastor back to a church they planted. They get delivered with very pointed practical wisdom, but also very particular to the predicament the audience was in. Familiarizing yourself with the audience and predicament will help you extract the principle from these mentors to be applied as truth for today.

Prophetic. *Read it like Warnings on an Instruction Manual.*

No one reads the warning labels until something has gone wrong, however, in long seasons of prophetic literature things were going very wrong. These books are painfully repetitive with almost every chapter delivering a warning to the effect, "Stop sinning, or else." In that sense prophetic books are not fortune tellers, they are future commentators - what happens later if you keep doing this now.

What makes the prophets even harder to read is that you aren't always given the setting in which these words were delivered. It's like hearing a randomly recorded phone conversation, all audio with no screenplay. Just keep cruising during these readings to gather the big picture more than getting caught in any one prophecy.

Apocalypse. *Read it as Social Commentary, with Future Reality, in Cinematic Flare.*

Symbolic language and futurist content are chiefly responsible for difficulties in reading Revelation and the second half of Daniel. Some images are constant; others morph (lion is the lamb). Some images clearly refer to a specific thing, others to a general concept (7 lamp stands = 7 churches, yet the four horses do not express a specific form of conquest, war, famine, or death). Some timelines double back (or triple back!) and repeat themselves).

The real problem we have in reading apocalyptic literature is that we have nothing like it to compare it to today. It was not a strange unfamiliar genre to the original recipients, so they got the point much more readily. You can simplify your appreciation for any line by remembering your book ends: It starts with perseverance required for today and it ends with Jesus reigning on his throne forever.

OLD TESTAMENT

STORY

GENESIS
EXODUS
LEVITICUS
NUMBERS
DEUTERONOMY
JOSHUA
JUDGES
RUTH

1 SAMUEL
2 SAMUEL
1 KINGS
2 KINGS
1 CHRONICLES
2 CHRONICLES

EZRA
NEHEMIAH
ESTHER

POETIC

JOB
PSALM
PROVERBS
ECCLESIASTES
SONG OF SOLOMON

PROPHETIC

ISAIAH
JEREMIAH
LAMENTATIONS
EZEKIEL
DANIEL
HOSEA
JOEL
AMOS
OBADIAH
JONAH
MICAH
NAHUM
HABAKKUK
ZEPHANIAH
HAGGAI
ZECHARIAH
MALACHI

NEW TESTAMENT

STORY

MATTHEW

MARK

LUKE

JOHN

ACTS

APOCALYPTIC

REVELATION

LETTERS

ROMANS
1 CORINTHIANS
2 CORINTHIANS
GALATIANS
EPHESIANS
PHILIPPIANS
COLOSSIANS
1 THESSALONIANS
2 THESSALONIANS
1 TIMOTHY
2 TIMOTHY
TITUS
PHILEMON
HEBREWS
JAMES
1 PETER
2 PETER
1 JOHN
2 JOHN
3 JOHN
JUDE