

Different Kinds of Literature in the Bible

From the American Bible Society

Most books fall into one particular category of literature or another. An instruction booklet for making something uses technical language. A novel will use some kind of fictional narrative language. A book of poetry may use rhymed or non-rhymed verse; and a book of history uses factual narrative writing. The type of book almost always determines the kind of literature used. The Bible is bound as one large book, but it is really made up of many different books written using many different kinds of literature. This makes the Bible both challenging and exciting to read.

When studying the books of the Bible, it is important to look not only at the information a book contains but also at the literary form that the author has used.

The kind of literature used can give clues about what the author was trying to say. For example, look at 1 Sam 1.1-28 and compare it to 1 Sam 2.1-10. These passages from the same book use two different kinds of writing. The first section is more like prose, or story, while the second section is a prayer or song in poetic form. Noticing the change from prose to poetry can give a reader more to think about regarding the text. A brief example from the New Testament is the story of Jesus' birth. Luke 2.1-21 tells of the events of Jesus' birth and gives many details regarding the birth itself. In contrast, John does not use a story to tell about Jesus' birth. Instead, it begins with a poem (1.1-14), which refers to Jesus as "the Word" and "the true light" that became "a human being." How do these different kinds of literature influence the way we think about who Jesus is? Why has the writer of each of these Gospels emphasized different aspects of Jesus' birth and identity? Looking at the way a writer chooses to share information can open the way for new ways of understandings what the Bible has to say. The Bible includes a great number of types of literature. Some forms of literature describe an entire book. In the Bible the most important of these forms are laws and rules, history, poetry and songs, wisdom sayings and proverbs, Gospels, letters, and apocalyptic writings. Other forms of literature describe sections within a book.

The most important of these forms are prose narrative, prayers, parables, prophesies (oracles), and long family lists (genealogies).

Laws and Rules Many ancient Near Eastern cultures developed law codes. One of the most famous was the Code developed by the Babylonian leader named Hammurabi who died around 1686 B.C. The first five books of the Jewish Scriptures (Old Testament) make up the section known as the Law, or "*Torah*". Not all of the literature in these five books includes laws, but much does. These laws include both laws that forbid things ("Do not...") and laws that encourage things ("Do..."). They were given to the people of Israel in order to help them worship correctly and treat one another with respect and care. The most well-known law literature in the Bible is the Ten Commandments found in Exodus

20.1-17; Deuteronomy 5.6-20. Other examples are found in Numbers 6.1-21; Numbers 35.16-34; James 4.11,12.

History In the Old Testament, history writings tell the story of Israel's history from the settlement of Canaan in 1250 B.C. to the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. These books describe the activities of such important figures as the prophets Elijah and Elisha, and the kings of Israel and Judah, including King David and King Solomon. These books also include information about the events of the two Israelite kingdoms after the split in 931 B.C. Examples of history books in the Old Testament are Joshua and 1 and 2 Kings. In the New Testament, Acts tells the history of the early church.

Poetry & Songs This is a large category that includes different forms. Poetry is used especially in Psalms, Job, and the Song of Songs. But poetry can be found in many books of the Bible. Some of the poems in the Bible are examples of old hymns or songs. Many of the Psalms were meant for use in worship and prayer. The speeches of the prophets include poetic forms of language. Translating Hebrew poetry into English is not simple, and sometimes special techniques that are effective in the original language cannot be meaningfully carried over into English. One important feature of Hebrew poetry is the repeating of a single idea in two similar but different ways. This is called "parallelism" and an example is Psalm 22.9,10. Some other examples of poetry in the Old Testament are Exodus 15.1-18; Job 22.1-17; Psalm 23; Isaiah 5.1-7; and John 2.2-9. Poetry is also used in the New Testament. Some examples are Luke 1.46-55; Philippians 2.6-11; Revelation 15.3,4.

Wisdom Sayings & Proverbs The large division of the Old Testament called "Wisdom and Worship" literature includes poetry, psalms, stories, and more. Here, wisdom sayings and proverbs have a unique style, which makes them read like common sense sayings and reflections about the world, God, and the place of human beings. Wisdom sayings fill a book like Proverbs, but they can also be found in other books. Books like Ecclesiastes and Job offer wisdom along with the kinds of philosophic reflections listed above. Wisdom writings usually do not give much direct information about Israel's history. Instead, they raise questions about moral issues, and ask hard questions about life. Some of these wisdom writings are attributed to Solomon because he was known as Israel's wisest king, but were probably written after his time and credited to him as a way of honoring him. Besides the books already mentioned, Ps 1 and Ps 37 are good examples of wisdom literature. Wisdom sayings are also an important part of the New Testament. Examples can be found in Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" and in James 3.2-8; 4.13-17.

Gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the four books of the New Testament which tell about the life and teachings of Jesus. These books are called "Gospels." The word "gospel" comes from the Greek word *euangelion*, meaning "good news."

Letters A number of books in the New Testament are letters written by the

apostle Paul or others. These letters are written in the formal Greek letter-writing style of the first century A.D. The person writing a letter is identified first (Romans 1.1-6). This is followed by the name of the persons being written to, and a greeting (Romans 1.15). The largest section of a letter is the "body" (Romans 1.15-15.33). In most of Paul's letters, a prayer of thanksgiving follows the greeting (Romans 1.8-15), and a final greeting and blessing closes the letter (Romans 16.1-27). Within each letter a number of different kinds of literature can be found, including prayers, instructions, teaching, wisdom, warnings, hymns or songs, and personal news.

Some writings in the New Testament that have also been called "letters" deal with more general questions that would be of concern to Christian communities almost anywhere. Hebrews is an example of this type. Brief letters to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor appear in Revelation 2,3. The Bible books that are letters or written in the style of letters can be found after Acts and before Revelation.