

# The Bible Genre Cheat Sheet: The Master Resource

## The Bible is a Library, Not A Book

Before you read any passage, remember the core principle: your physical Bible is a **Library**, not a single, continuous book. It is a collection of 66 books written by approximately 40 authors, containing 8 main literary genres.

Your goal is to identify the "section of the library" you are reading before you begin. Reading a poem (Poetry) with the same expectations you have for a legal contract (Law) is the number one cause of misinterpretation.

## The Genre Decoder: Rules for Interpretation

The 8 genres below are your essential rules for reading the Bible correctly.

### 1. Law (The Legal Contract)

- **What it is:** The strict rules, commands, and requirements God gave specifically to the nation of ancient Israel (the Mosaic Covenant) regarding worship, civil life, and sacrifice.
- **How to read it:** Read this as a **specific, historical contract** for Israel that shows God's perfect standard. Focus on the *principle* behind the law (justice, holiness) rather than applying the literal, sacrificial commands to your life today. Go to the Genre Decoder section to learn more about this Genre and how to read it.

### 2. History (The Factual Record)

- **What it is:** Straightforward accounts of real people, places, wars, and political events (from the creation of the world to the lives of the early apostles).
- **How to read it:** Read to understand **what happened** and why God acted the way He did. Use these accounts to understand the circumstances that set up the rest of the Bible's story. Go to the Genre Decoder section to learn more about this Genre and how to read it.

### 3. Narrative (The Storyteller's Lesson)

- **What it is:** A crafted, focused story about people, often biographical (like the Gospels), designed to teach a specific lesson or reveal a facet of God's character.
- **How to read it:** Focus on the **main point** or lesson the author is trying to teach through the story's overall flow and resolution. Avoid building entire doctrines on minor, non-

essential details. Go to the Genre Decoder section to learn more about this Genre and how to read it.

#### 4. Wisdom (The Common-Sense Guide)

- **What it is:** Practical observations and short sayings about how life generally works. They offer guidance for skillful living, but they are based on common human experience.
- **How to read it:** Read for **general, common-sense life guidance** and moral lessons. **Do not** read them as guaranteed, absolute promises or mathematical formulas that will always come true, because life can be complicated. Go to the Genre Decoder section to learn more about this Genre and how to read it.

#### 5. Poetry (The Expression of Emotion)

- **What it is:** Creative writing used to express deep human feelings—worship, sadness, joy, love, or despair—using rhythm, vivid imagery, and powerful metaphors (like songs).
- **How to read it:** Read to understand the **emotions** and **metaphors** used by the author. The meaning is in the feeling or comparison (e.g., God is a "rock" for protection), not in a literal, rigid doctrine or historical fact. Go to the Genre Decoder section to learn more about this Genre and how to read it.

#### 6. Epistles (The Formal Letter)

- **What it is:** Formal letters written by early Christian leaders (like Paul, Peter, and John) to specific church communities or individuals to give instruction, correct mistakes, and clarify Jesus's teaching.
- **How to read it:** Treat it like a **one-sided conversation**. To understand the answer, you must know the original **problems** or questions the recipients were dealing with. Never read a verse in isolation; understand the full flow of the argument from start to finish. Go to the Genre Decoder section to learn more about this Genre and how to read it.

#### 7. Prophecy (The Warning and Foretelling)

- **What it is:** Messages from God, delivered by a prophet, that give urgent warnings about current behavior, call people back to God, or predict future events (near or far).
- **How to read it:** Look for the **main warning** and the overarching plan of God. Most prophecy was spoken to people living at that time and dealt with *their* future, though some points far into the Messiah's coming. Go to the Genre Decoder section to learn more about this Genre and how to read it.

#### 8. Apocalyptic (The Symbolic Vision)

- **What it is:** A very specific type of prophecy that uses intense, often bizarre **symbols and dramatic imagery** (beasts, strange numbers, heavenly visions) to communicate truths about world crisis, good versus evil, and God's final victory.
- **How to read it:** Interpret the **symbols** by checking how they are used in the *rest of the Bible*. **Do not** make up your own modern interpretation. Focus on the certainty of God's victory rather than the specifics of the timeline. Go to the Genre Decoder section to learn more about this Genre and how to read it.

## The Old Testament Books by Genre

The Old Testament (39 books) primarily contains Law, History, Poetry/Wisdom, and Prophecy.

**The Pentateuch (Law / History)** These books form the foundation of the law and history of Israel.

- Genesis is primarily History and Narrative.
- Exodus is a mix of Law and History.
- Leviticus is primarily **Law**.
- Numbers is a mix of Law and History.
- Deuteronomy is a mix of Law and History.

**History Books (History / Narrative)** These books record the history of Israel from entering the promised land to their return from exile.

- Joshua is History and Narrative.
- Judges is History and Narrative.
- Ruth is a pure Narrative.
- 1 & 2 Samuel are History and Narrative.
- 1 & 2 Kings are History.
- 1 & 2 Chronicles are History.
- Ezra is History.
- Nehemiah is History.
- Esther is a pure Narrative.

**Poetry and Wisdom Books (Poetry / Wisdom)** These books focus on philosophical questions and emotional expression.

- Job is Wisdom and Narrative.
- Psalms is primarily **Poetry**.
- Proverbs is primarily **Wisdom**.
- Ecclesiastes is Wisdom.
- Song of Solomon is Poetry.

**Prophets (Prophecy / Apocalyptic)** These books contain warnings, calls for repentance, and predictions.

- Isaiah is Prophecy.
- Jeremiah is Prophecy.
- Lamentations is Poetry and Prophecy.
- Ezekiel is Prophecy and Apocalyptic.
- Daniel is History and Apocalyptic.
- Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are all Prophecy.

Go to the Genre Decoder section to learn more about each of these Genres and how to read them correctly.

## **The New Testament Books by Genre**

The New Testament (27 books) primarily contains Narrative, History, Epistles, and Apocalyptic literature.

**The Gospels (Narrative)** These books are biographical accounts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

- Matthew is Narrative.
- Mark is Narrative.
- Luke is Narrative.
- John is Narrative.

**History Book (History)** This book records the beginning of the early church.

- Acts is pure History.

**The Epistles (Letters)** These are the letters written to churches and individuals in the New Testament.

- The Pauline Epistles (Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon) are all **Epistle**.
- The General Epistles (Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, & 3 John, and Jude) are also all **Epistle**.

**The Apocalypse (Prophecy / Apocalyptic)** This is the final book of visions and prophetic declaration.

- Revelation is Apocalyptic and Prophecy.

Go to the Genre Decoder section to learn more about each of these Genres and how to read them correctly.



## Your Reading Action Plan

Every time you open your Bible, follow these steps to set yourself up for Bible reading success:

1. **Identify the Book:** Find the book you are about to read in the lists above (e.g., you open to the book of Psalms).
2. **Determine the Genre:** Note the primary genre (e.g., Psalms is **Poetry**).
3. **Go to the Decoder:** Immediately reference the "**Genre Decoder: Rules for Interpretation**" section above. Remind yourself that the rule for Poetry is to look for emotional truth and metaphor, not literal commands.
4. **Read with Confidence:** Only then should you begin reading, knowing that you have set yourself up to find the author's original intended meaning.

Remember to use the rest of your keys to unlock the Bible in context. Discover the whole series here: [https://youtube.com/live/gh\\_nVKJtHEY?feature=share](https://youtube.com/live/gh_nVKJtHEY?feature=share)

Learn more about our ministry at: [www.YourJesusJourney.com](http://www.YourJesusJourney.com)