

## 4 Recognizing the genres

What are you listening to if it starts like this?

- Once upon a time .....
- There will be scattered showers tomorrow .....
- A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away .....
- Amazing grace, how sweet the sound .....
- An Englishman, an Irishman, and an Aussie walk into a pub .....
- 4 March, 2026. Dear John, .....

Our language has cues that tell us what we're listening to. We recognize when we're reading history or fiction, a song or a joke, a weather forecast or a letter. If English is a secondary language for you, you may not be familiar with the cultural cues.

That's a problem we face as we read the Bible. Their language, culture, and worldview are foreign to us. We're from a different time, and we don't have their local knowledge. What was obvious to them might not be obvious to us.

So, what are we hearing as we read the Bible? Is it prose? Poetry? Fiction? History? Biography? Philosophy? Songs? Prophetic oracles? Apocalyptic visions? Someone's mail? What kind of writing is it?

There are many genres among the 66 books. And recognizing the genres is crucial to interpreting Scripture well. Let's look at some of them.

### 4.1 Law

The first five books of the Bible are what we call the Law (*Torah* in Hebrew). It's not all legal matter in the modern sense, but it was the legal foundation for Israel as a nation: called by God (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), established by the Sinai covenant, living under the LORD'S sovereign authority as his kingdom.

Within the Law, there were specific laws for their society. That begins with the Ten Commandments. The Commandments begin by defining the relationship between the God who reigns over them and the people he rescued from enslavement to human rule:

#### Exodus 20:1-17 (NIV)

- <sup>1</sup> And God spoke all these words: <sup>2</sup> "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.
- <sup>3</sup> "You shall have no other gods before me.
- <sup>4</sup> "You shall not make for yourself an image ...
- <sup>7</sup> "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God ...
- <sup>8</sup> "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ...
- <sup>12</sup> "Honor your father and your mother ...



The Ten Commandments

<sup>13</sup> “You shall not murder.

<sup>14</sup> “You shall not commit adultery.

<sup>15</sup> “You shall not steal.

<sup>16</sup> “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.

<sup>17</sup> “You shall not covet ...”

God’s laws continue for the next three chapters, called *the Book of the Covenant*:

**Exodus 24:7 (NIV)**

Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, “We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey.”

The laws defined justice for their society. For example:

**Exodus 21:22-26 (NIV)**

<sup>22</sup> If people are fighting and hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman’s husband demands and the court allows.

<sup>23</sup> But if there is serious injury, you are to take **life for life**,

<sup>24</sup> eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot,

<sup>25</sup> burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

<sup>26</sup> An owner who hits a male or female **slave** in the eye and destroys it must let the slave go free to compensate for the eye.

What do you make of these laws? Is this God’s ideal society?

Is God okay with slavery, with one person owning another?

Does God want capital punishment, putting murderers to death?

Traditional Judaism treats these commands as absolute. Even before Jesus’ time, rabbis were discussing how to keep these laws. The Rabbinic discussions were published around AD 600 as the *Talmud*. Retribution (*an eye for an eye* etc) is repeated three times (also in Leviticus 24:18 and Deuteronomy 19:21), so the Rabbis viewed it as foundational to the Law. An entire tractate in the Talmud explains how to apply this principle to false witnesses, so whatever punishment a false witness intended their victim to receive should be done to them, even capital punishment.

Is this how our courts should operate in Australia today?

Does the Torah represent God’s ideals for our society?

The problem is that this is not how God himself operated in the beginning. When Cain killed Abel, the family wanted Cain to pay for his crime. They wanted retribution—a life for a life—but God would not give it to them. The LORD placed Cain under royal protection, *so that no one who found him would kill him* (Genesis 4:15).

Capital punishment is not God’s ideal. It’s not how God operated in the beginning, but it is how humans conceive of justice. And because of our preoccupation with violence, God eventually gave us authority to kill the killer (Genesis 9:6). And since the nations (Genesis 10) had that authority, God gave that authority to Israel at Sinai too.

So, the laws of the Sinai Covenant are not God's ideal for human society. The Sinai laws were a stepping stone towards where God wants us to go, but God doesn't take us there in a single leap. With astounding patience and a refusal to give up, God takes us just one step of the way, **accommodating** our needs, our failures, our propensity for violence, and our expectations of justice. Why? Because God is living in the story with us, refusing to walk away.

### ***Jesus' teaching on the Law***

If that's the right way to understand the Sinai law, we can expect God to give further revelation as the story of Scripture unfolds. Does God ever tell us that some of what he permitted in the Sinai covenant was less than his ideal?

There's this moment when Jesus was pulled into an argument the rabbis were having about the grounds for divorce. Some rabbis believed Deuteronomy 24 allowed divorce for any reason. Others believed the Law permitted divorce only if something indecent had happened. Jesus said divorce was never God's ideal in the beginning, that God was accommodating human failure: "*Haven't you read that in the beginning the Creator made them male and female, and said 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife one flesh'?*" (Matthew 19:4-5, quoting Genesis 2:24). The law was an accommodation rather than God's creational ideal.

Does that mean we just disregard the Old Testament? Not at all: it's still a revelation of God, particularly of God's faithfulness to a world that wasn't faithful to him.

It's interesting that Jesus needed to defend himself against the accusation that he was treating the Law as irrelevant:

#### **Matthew 5:17-39 (NIV)**

<sup>17</sup> "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ...

<sup>21</sup> "**You have heard** that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'

<sup>22</sup> **But I tell you** that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. ...

<sup>27</sup> "**You have heard** that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'

<sup>28</sup> **But I tell you** that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ...

<sup>33</sup> "Again, **you have heard** that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.'

<sup>34</sup> **But I tell you**, do not swear an oath at all ...

<sup>38</sup> "**You have heard** that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'

<sup>39</sup> **But I tell you**, do not resist an evil person ...

Jesus was not *abolishing* the Law God had given Israel. As their king, he was *fulfilling* what God asked of his people. But for Jesus, this was not a matter of ticking boxes for all of the 613 commands the rabbis had identified. He taught them to look beyond the law to God's intention in giving it to them.

As the God-anointed king, Jesus gives examples of how their heavenly sovereign wanted them to live.

To paraphrase the verses above:

- *“When you heard, ‘Do not murder,’ God was not saying it’s okay to beat someone within an inch of their life. I tell you, he was calling you to value each other.*
- *“When you heard, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ God was not saying it’s okay to have sex with another in your imagination. I tell you, he was calling you to faithfulness in your relationships.*
- *“When you heard, ‘Do not break your word,’ God was not saying it’s okay to deceive as long as you didn’t swear it. I tell you, he was calling you to authenticity in your relationships.*
- *“When you heard, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth,’ God was not authorizing you to respond to someone who does evil by doing evil in return. I tell you, do not perpetuate their violence by responding as they did to you.”*

The last one was a bombshell. If retribution was the basis for justice in the Sinai Law, Jesus just deconstructed the entire basis of justice. Can he do that?

Jesus was calling 1000 years of tradition into question. King David spent most of his kingship fighting off their enemies. Can this son of David overturn that precedent?

Did we hear him right? Jesus continues:

**Matthew 5:43-45 (NIV)**

<sup>43</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ <sup>44</sup> But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

Jesus goes above David's head. The father of the kingship and the nation is *your Father in the heavens*. That's who we (the kingdom) represent. So, if your Father in the heavens sends sunshine and rain to the nations of the earth, this is how his kingdom must respond to the nations—even the nations that oppressed them (Rome).

King Jesus called his people beyond retribution, to live out the restoration of the world under God's leadership, whatever the cost. That's radical love—so radical that the church fathers of the first three centuries quoted these verses from Matthew 5 more than any passage in the Bible. This is the heart of divine restoration for the earth.

*“You have heard that it was said to those of old...”*

*but I say to you...”*

## ***The Law and grace in the New Testament***

The early church found Jesus' approach challenging. When gentiles became part of the community led by the Jewish Messiah, did they have to keep the Law God gave to Israel? That question divided the church. The leaders met in Jerusalem to prayerfully discern what God wanted. Here's their conclusion:

### **Acts 15:23-29 (NIV)**

<sup>23</sup> They sent the following letter:

*The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings. ...*

*<sup>28</sup> It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: <sup>29</sup> You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.*

No Sabbath keeping. No circumcision. No kosher food laws.

Eating food sacrificed to idols would send the city the wrong message (1 Corinthians 8). Draining blood from our food was something God asked all people to do, since taking a life was never God's ideal (Genesis 9:4). Sexual immorality is the opposite of God's faithfulness. The way we live under Christ represents our relationship to God and creation, but we're not called to obey the Law God gave to Israel in the previous covenant.

How does their discernment of God's intention for new covenant people sit with you?

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The apostle Paul devoted his life to calling gentiles to trust the leadership of the Jewish Messiah. He addressed this issue in his letters, especially Galatians.

Paul was Jewish. He knew his people labelled gentiles as "sinners" (unacceptable to God) since they were not part of the Sinai covenant community. But relationship with God is no longer defined by that covenant:

### **Galatians 2:15-16 (NIV)**

<sup>15</sup> "We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles <sup>16</sup> know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.

In the new covenant, people (Jew or gentile) are *justified* (set right with God) on the basis of loyalty to the Messiah (*faith*), not on the basis of what the Sinai Law required.

That does not mean the previous covenant was a bad thing. It was appropriate for the time when humanity was not yet mature enough to be what God intended.

For little children, you set firm rules, like “Never cross the road without holding my hand!” But childhood rules do not continue into adulthood. You want your children to grow up and take responsibility for themselves:

**Galatians 3:23–25 (NIV)**

<sup>23</sup> Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. <sup>24</sup> So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. <sup>25</sup> Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

We now live under a different covenant:

“*You are not under the law, but under grace*” (Romans 6:14).

*Grace* is the generous way God expresses his reign. God was full of grace in the previous covenant too (e.g. Exodus 34:6). But in the setting of the new covenant, *grace* refers to how God treats us in the Messiah.

*Grace* is God giving his Son to a murdering world.  
*Grace* is the Son taking into his own being the evil, oppression, and death his people have suffered.  
*Grace* is the heavenly throne overturning the assassination of the Son, raising us up to life in him.  
*Grace* is the covenant that re-establishes earth as a kingdom of heaven in the leadership of the Messiah.<sup>19</sup>



Therefore, the identity markers of the old covenant no longer define our relationship with God. We’re not blessed on condition of performing what the Law requires. We’re blessed because we’re in the Messiah. The new covenant makes us a unified, restored humanity in Christ:

**Galatians 3:26–28 (NIV)**

<sup>26</sup> So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, <sup>27</sup> for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

<sup>28</sup> There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Do you have questions about how we approach the Law in contrast to the new covenant in Christ?

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<sup>19</sup> See John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Power of Grace* (Eerdmans, 2020), or this review of his *Paul and the Gift* (Eerdmans, 2015): <https://allenbrowne.blog/2020/05/08/john-barclay-paul-and-the-gift-book-review/>

## 4.2 Narrative, poetry, and prophecy

Many of the difficulties we have with how God treats people in the Old Testament (and the New) disappear when we realize what God is doing. God would not give up on the world that refused to follow him. But God did not force his authority on us. God kept engaging with us in our failures. God **accommodated** us, even when our lives became very messy because we wouldn't follow his leadership.

God journeys with us in our pain, our suffering, the violence we do to each other, until we become all he intended humanity to be, *until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ* (Ephesians 4:13).

That journey is the story of the Bible.

### **Narrative**

Most of the Bible is narrative. It's not a self-help guidebook or an instruction manual for life. It's not an argument in theology or philosophy.

It's a story: the story of the heavenly sovereign's relationship with his earthly realm. The story unfolds as God engages with people: Abraham and Jacob, Moses and Israel, Joshua and the judges, David and the kings, Elijah and Elisha, Ezra and Nehemiah, Esther and Job, the prophets of the fallen kingdom, and then Jesus and his followers.

So where do you find God in the Bible? God is revealed in people. We were designed to *image* God in creation (Genesis 1:27), so it's in the people who partner with God that we see God.

But people don't always reflect God well. Noah introduced slavery (Genesis 9:25-27). Jacob cheated his brother (Genesis 27). Moses murdered an Egyptian (Exodus 2:12). Israel's tribes fought each other (Judges 20). David couldn't be trusted with your wife or your life (2 Samuel 11).

The problem is that the story doesn't always tell us if what they did was right or wrong. There's a case in Genesis 34 where Simeon and Levi (sons of Jacob) slaughtered a village as a revenge killing. Jacob questions what they've done, but they see themselves as heroes defending family honour—a view that made sense in their culture. So, did they do right or wrong? The text doesn't say. Fourteen chapters later we finally hear Jacob condemning their actions (Genesis 49:5-7), but that doesn't always happen.<sup>20</sup>

About three-quarters of the way through the Bible, Jesus arrives. That's when we see the full picture of God, for *the Son is the image of the invisible God* (Colossians 1:15).

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<sup>20</sup> See <https://allenbrowne.blog/2016/11/11/were-simeon-and-levi-justified/>

## Poetry

The Psalms voice a whole range of feelings: from angst and struggle to joy and wonder, from disappointment and failure to trust and gratitude. Poetry and song have an emotional and spiritual brilliance that leaves narrative and prose in the shade.

Poetry weaves us together in shared life with God. Poetry is a blanket when life leaves us cold, calling us into the warmth of God's presence.

But poetry is less obvious than prose. What do the metaphors mean?

### Psalm 22:12-13 (NIV)

<sup>12</sup> Many bulls surround me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.

<sup>13</sup> Roaring lions that tear their prey open their mouths wide against me.

What's going on? To help us out, many Psalms have a heading with the background we need to understand the Psalm. Whose voice are we listening to in Psalm 22? The heading says it's *A Psalm of David*. So, if this is the king of Israel, the metaphor refers to his enemies. Rulers of the surrounding nations attacked like animals, trying to kill him and take his people into their herd.

The kings of Israel and Judah all knew this feeling. That includes Jesus—the son of David, born to restore the fallen kingdom (Matthew 1). So, Jesus quoted this Psalm to describe how he felt: the King of the Jews surrounded by enemies intent on killing him (Matthew 27:46). David felt pinned down by his enemies. His poetic description fits Jesus even better: *They pierce my hands and my feet* (verse 18).

As you read the poetry of the Old Testament, hear it within the story of God's people. Ask **what it meant to them** before you ask what it means to us. At the heart of their struggles, you'll often find Jesus bearing in his own body the pain of God's people.

Here's a clue to help you understand what the Hebrew songs are saying. If you don't get it the first time, the next line gives it to you in a **parallel** way:

- In Psalm 22:12, *Many bulls surround me*.  
Another way to say that is: *strong bulls of Bashan encircle me*.
- In verse 13, David was facing *Roaring lions that tear their prey*.  
Another way to say that is: *they open their mouths wide against me*.
- Verse 13 is also parallel to verse 12. If you took *bulls* literally in verse 12, when the image changes into *lions* in verse 13, you realize, "Ah, this isn't about animals threatening his life; these are people behaving like animals."

The parallelism builds up a composite picture, like the brush strokes of an impressionist painting. Parallelism helps us understand and treasure the poetry of the Old Testament.

And this isn't just the Psalms. The Prophets and much of the wisdom literature are poetry. Any recent translation shows that by setting out the parallel lines for us to see.

## Prophecy

The prophets delivered the heavenly king's instructions for his nation. They recorded *the word of the LORD* in poetic form. This slows us down. We hear what God says repeated in a parallel way.

*The word of the LORD* calls his people back to covenant relationship with him. Each prophet's message is specific to a nation (Israel or Judah) at a particular time (usually when things aren't going well). The prophets have two primary messages:

- They warn about disaster ahead if the people keep walking away from God.
- They declare God's faithfulness to his people. God will restore them to life under his leadership if they return to him.

These themes are the promises and sanctions of the covenant: blessing for obedience, trouble for disobedience (Deuteronomy 28).

The prophets were not predicting a fixed future. They say God is living in the story with his people, so how we respond affects the outcome:

### Jeremiah 18:5-10 (NIV)

<sup>5</sup> Then the word of the LORD came to me. ...

<sup>7</sup> "If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, <sup>8</sup> and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.

<sup>9</sup> "And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, <sup>10</sup> and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it."

The kingdom lives in covenant partnership with its heavenly king, and the king does not use his sovereignty to overrule our responsiveness. We can spoil what God is making. When we do, God starts over like a potter when the clay doesn't turn out as intended. That's God's faithfulness. The whole project takes longer, but the potter faithfully continues until the project is complete. This was the word of the LORD at the time when the kingdom of God was about to fall to Babylon.

The New Testament has one book of prophecy. **Revelation** is a series of prophetic visions God gave John when he'd been exiled for his testimony that Jesus is the King of Kings, the God-appointed ruler of all the peoples of the earth.

Some have imagined Revelation as a map of the future, events they expect to see in their lifetime or the near future. But relegating it to a time that's still future for us misses the point of the prophetic message that Jesus is king for all people in all eras.

Revelation is addressed to the seven churches John had been caring for (Revelation 1:11). As the *son of man*, Jesus received the authority of the fallen kingdom and holds the communities of the earth in his hands. The *Living One* was raised up to reign, as death lost its power (1:12-18). Jesus is Lord, so the prophet John delivered the word of

the Lord to the churches who represented his kingship in seven cities of Türkiye (Revelation 2–3).

John saw the throne of God in the heavens (Revelation 4). The resurrected Lamb shares the throne with God and releases God’s script for life on earth by breaking the evils that have sealed up what God intended (Revelation 5–6). The gospel announces the restoration of heaven’s reign to the earth in Christ: “*The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.*” (Revelation 11:15).

Babylon—representing every power that tried to take the world from God—falls (Revelation 18). The fallen city of Jerusalem returns as a gift from heaven that fills the known world (Revelation 21).<sup>21</sup> At the end of the story, earth has all the characteristics of the garden God planted in the beginning (Revelation 22).

The most important verse in Revelation could be 21:5, since this is the first time we hear from *the one who is seated on the throne*. The heavenly sovereign says, “***Behold I am making all things new.***” That’s the word of the Lord. That’s what the prophecy of Revelation is all about.<sup>22</sup>

The word of the Lord makes the story we’re living in meaningful.

### 4.3 Conclusion

Scripture is richly textured: Law, narrative, poetry, prophecy, and letters. At its heart, the revelation of God arrives in Christ who expands the kingdom of God to all the peoples of the earth in a new covenant established with his death and resurrection.

Bible Interpretation cannot be reduced to a set of rules, but listen well. Hear what it meant to the audience who first received it as a revelation of God. Then hear how Christ’s leadership calls us to respond today.

I hope you’ve enjoyed this tasting plate of the different genres in Scripture. For more to chew on, try: Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Zondervan, 2014).

Your thoughts?

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<sup>21</sup> The city is described as 12,000 stadia (2200 kilometres) in all three dimensions (Revelation 21:16).

<sup>22</sup> For podcasts and notes on Revelation, see <https://allenbrowne.blog/2024/10/02/formed-in-gods-story-book-of-revelation/>