

How to Study the Bible: Genre

Old Testament

HOW TO STUDY THE PENTATEUCH

GENESIS

EXODUS

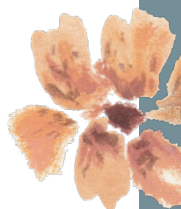
LEVITICUS

NUMBERS

DEUTERONOMY

The first five books of the Bible are called the Pentateuch. Written primarily by Moses, these books describe creation, God's relationship to Israel, narrative of Israel's history, and the law of God. The Pentateuch lays a foundation for God's plan of salvation to be fulfilled in Jesus Christ by establishing his covenant promises to his people despite their sinful rebellion.

As you study the Pentateuch, remember that these laws were originally given to Israel to set them apart as God's holy people and that "all of the Old Testament laws come from the heart of God and so reveal his nature, values, and purpose."¹ The law reveals our need for a Savior—Jesus Christ, who came to fulfill the law (Matt. 5:17) and restore our relationship with the one true God.



HOW TO STUDY OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY

JOSHUA

JUDGES

RUTH

1 SAMUEL

2 SAMUEL

1 KINGS

2 KINGS

1 CHRONICLES

2 CHRONICLES

EZRA

NEHEMIAH

ESTHER

¹ Mark L. Strauss, *How to Read the Bible in Changing Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 24.

These books of the Bible detail Israel's history and all have a setting, characters, and a plot. In order to follow the entire story, conflict, and resolution of a historical book, it must be read in order. These books have two main purposes: "1. To chart the ongoing progress of salvation history, and 2. To provide illustrations of God's nature and purpose and the appropriate (and inappropriate) responses of people to God's purposes."²

As you study Old Testament historical books, remember that they are true accounts of Israel's history that display God's love for his covenant people. Focus on God's character and the greater purpose of salvation rather than looking for a moral lesson or example in the people in these accounts.

HOW TO STUDY WISDOM AND POETRY

JOB

PSALMS

PROVERBS

ECCLESIASTES

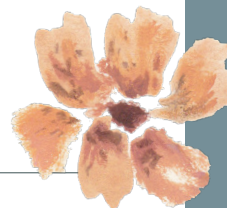
SONG OF SOLOMON

LAMENTATIONS

The poetry and wisdom books of the Bible beautifully and powerfully express the broad array of human emotions in light of God's consistent character and faithfulness. They also address many of life's questions, struggles, and doubts.

Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes represent wisdom literature. These books reveal what it looks like to fear the Lord and honor him in everything. Psalms, Song of Solomon, and Lamentations are poetry. The book of Psalms includes psalms of lament, praise, wisdom, confession, messianic prophecy, and thanksgiving. They reveal ways to communicate with God and the nature of his character. Song of Solomon is a book of love poetry about God's good intentions for the sexual union of a man and woman in the context of covenant marriage. The poetry in Lamentations expresses grief over the fall of Jerusalem. Overall, these books of the Bible reveal who God is and what it looks like to live a life that honors him.

As you study the books of wisdom literature and poetry, keep in mind that they use figurative language, metaphors, and similes to express particular purposes or messages. Know that the biblical



² Strauss, *How to Read the Bible in Changing Times*, 110.

wisdom included in these books is descriptive rather than prescriptive—general rather than universal truths that are meant to point us to the holiness of God and call us to live in light of who he is.³

HOW TO STUDY PROPHECY

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

The Old Testament prophets were sent by God to proclaim his message to the nation of Israel. This message was a declaration of God's covenant faithfulness and a call to repent and return to the Lord before impending judgment. Prophets also foretold the future, including the coming of Christ.

To understand these specific books and their meanings, we must know their historical contexts. It's helpful to read the Prophetic Books in relation to the law and to Israel's history. Ask yourself these questions when studying Prophetic Books:

1. *What do you know about the prophet?*
2. *What was happening in Israel at the time?*
3. *Was this a period of security, peace, and prosperity or a period of famine, war, or exile?*
4. *Who was reigning in Israel and/or Judah and what was their reign like?*
5. *Did they follow the Lord or worship idols?⁴*

As you study prophecy, remember who God is and consider what these books reveal about his character. Keep in mind that, just like the Israelites, we are prone to idol worship and that God calls us to repentance and to covenant faithfulness through Christ.



³ Strauss, *How to Read the Bible in Changing Times*, 146.

⁴ Strauss, *How to Read the Bible in Changing Times*, 132.

New Testament

HOW TO STUDY THE GOSPELS

MATTHEW

MARK

LUKE

JOHN

The Gospels represent the climax in redemptive history when Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah, was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, proclaimed the kingdom of God, died on a cross for sinners, rose from the grave to conquer sin and death, and ascended to heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father until his triumphant return. Each Gospel features accounts of Jesus' life and ministry from different perspectives. Though the Gospels focus on different aspects of the same accounts, the message is all the same: Jesus Christ is the promised Messiah, the Son of God, who came to earth to fulfill the law, die in the place of sinners, and grant eternal life to those who trust in him for salvation.

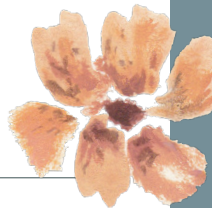
As you study the Gospels, keep the context and the original Jewish audience in mind. Read the Gospels in light of the Old Testament, for the coming of Christ cannot be understood apart from knowing the Old Testament implications of Christ's birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

HOW TO STUDY NEW TESTAMENT HISTORY

ACTS

The book of Acts is a historical narrative detailing the foundation of the church following the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It takes place over about thirty years and tells of the ministry of Jesus' early followers as they preach the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

As you study the book of Acts, remember that it's not prescriptive instruction on how to do church but rather historical accounts that "teach the nature, mission, power, and potential of the church."⁵



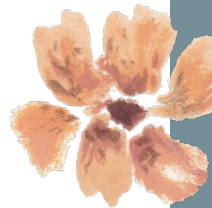
⁵ Strauss, *How to Read the Bible in Changing Times*, 178.

HOW TO STUDY THE EPISTLES

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			

The New Testament epistles (or letters) were written to instruct, encourage, and exhort the early church. These letters were composed with specific purposes, by particular authors, to certain groups of people. They all follow a similar structure, beginning with a greeting followed by the author's purpose for writing and his teaching, and concluding with a benediction. Originally these letters were read publicly in the church body when they were received.

As you study the epistles, pay close attention to the author's purpose for writing and the original audience. Understanding what and whom the author is addressing will aid you in your understanding of these books. Pay attention to the specific themes and progressions of the letters. This can be done through repetitive reading and outlining the main points of the text to follow the purpose and instruction in each letter.



HOW TO STUDY APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

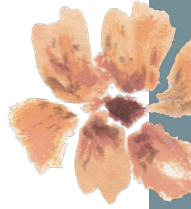
REVELATION

The book of Revelation is a recording of what is to come, revealing the future of the world and all of humanity. It details the consummation of God's kingdom, when all will be made right through Christ's return, eternal reign, and final triumph over evil and Satan. It highlights and proclaims God as the

central figure of all history—the Alpha and the Omega, the Faithful God, the One who was and is and is to come.⁶

Revelation begins as an epistle, so it should be studied in the same way you study the other New Testament epistles. The next section in the book of Revelation is full of prophecy. God is reminding his people to remain faithful to him to the very end. The last portion of the text is highly symbolic and often hard to grasp, but we can trust God with our future.

As you study Revelation, aim to read the book within its original context. Don't skip to comparing it to today's circumstances and crises. Keep in mind the symbolic nature of Revelation. Remember that this book is the consummation of God's story. Revelation reveals that God has always been in control and he always will be. He will restore all broken things and redeem them for his glory, and we will live in perfect, unbroken fellowship with him for all eternity!



⁶ Strauss, *How to Read the Bible in Changing Times*, 194.