

HOW TO READ THE BIBLE "LITERALLY"

— AN ILLUSTRATED GUIDE —

BILL FOSTER

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WHERE AM I?

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The first thing we should recognize when interpreting a biblical passage is where we are in the Bible itself (i.e., what kind of literature/genre we are reading). To illustrate this concept of literary location, we will diagram the Bible as if it were a city.

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Suppose the Bible were a city named *Bibliopolis*, consisting of five boroughs or sectors of interconnected streets and blocks, each with its own style:



THE LAW [GENESIS–DEUTERONOMY]

Writing Style – *Prose Narrative* (ordinary language that records historical events in the order they occur) plus occasional *Poetry* by people within the accounts

Purpose – Record the foundations of humanity and trace the patriarchs of Israel from Abraham to Joshua

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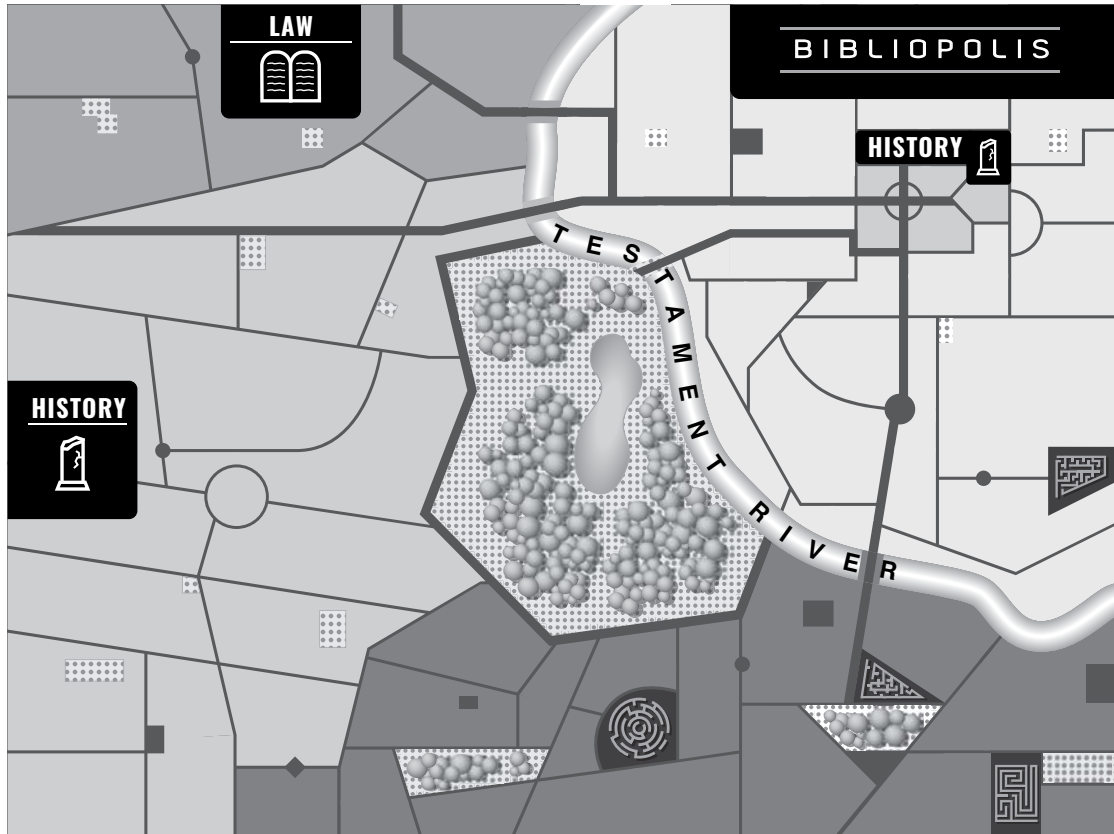


HISTORY [JOSHUA–ESTHER | 4 GOSPELS & ACTS]

Writing Style – *Prose Narrative*

Purpose – [JOSHUA–ESTHER] Record the history of the nation of Israel

[4 GOSPELS & ACTS] Describe the life of Christ and the spread of the gospel by early church planters (apostles) such as Peter and Paul





POETRY/WISDOM [JOB – SONG OF SOLOMON + LAMENTATIONS]

Writing Style – *Wisdom Literature (Hebrew literary devices and figures of speech)* & *Poetry* that also appear sprinkled throughout the other parts of the Bible

Purpose – Offer guidance, assurance, and warnings on a range of human experiences, including relationships, prosperity, pleasure, praise, and suffering.

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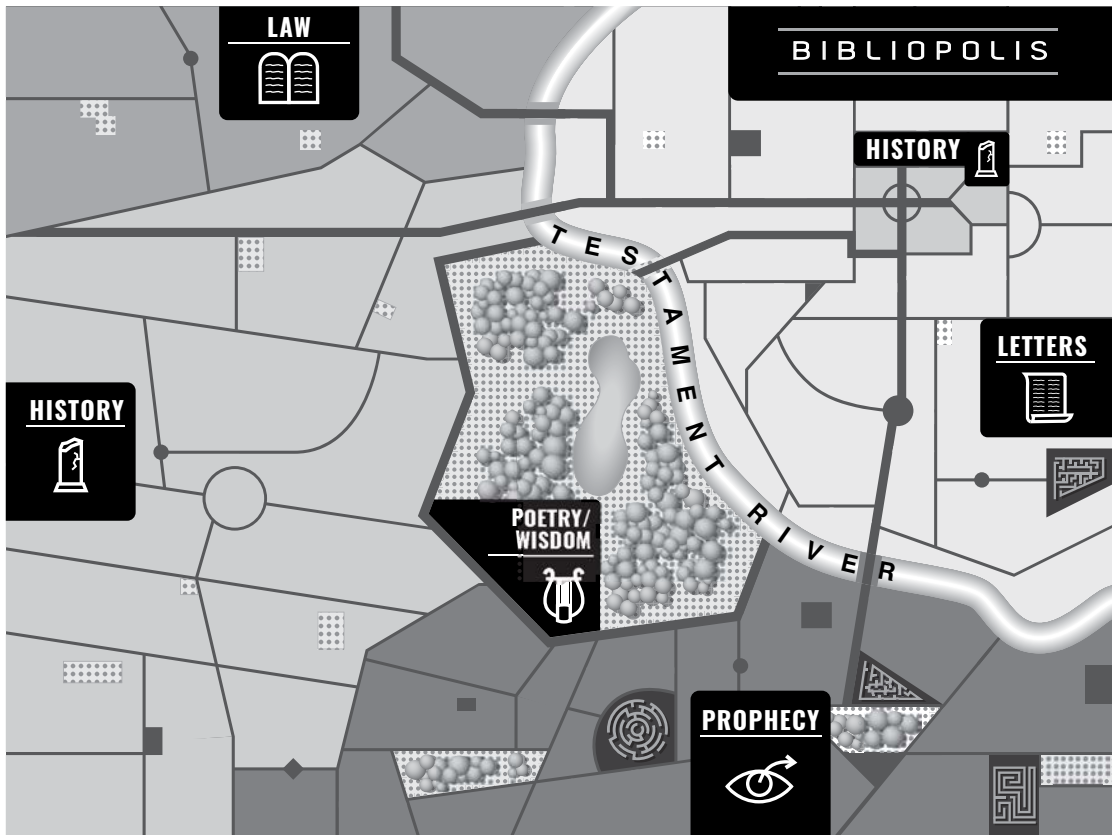


PROPHECY [ISAIAH – MALACHI + REVELATION 4-22]

Writing Style – *Symbolic and Poetic*

Purpose – Describe events many years beyond the date of the writing

Prophecy remains a shadowy maze for many people due to its use of highly figurative language and enigmatic symbols that *do not resemble the things they describe (apocalypse writing, p. 30)*. However, they are some of the most rewarding books once the reader understands the symbolism. They are also critical in affirming the supernatural nature of the Bible by revealing things mere humans could not know or predict.



New Testament River divides the books of the Old Covenant (laws stating how God expects us to live) from the books of the New Covenant (the good news of Jesus fulfilling God's standards on our behalf).



LETTERS [ROMANSTO REVELATION 1-3]

Writing Style – *Prose (plus some symbolic language in Rev. 1-3)*

Purpose – To instruct and encourage Christ-like living and to explain doctrines relating to sin, salvation, and the dual nature of Christ.

.....

If we attempt to read all parts of the Bible the same way and do not recognize the distinct writing styles contained in these different locations, we will come to misguided conclusions about what the Bible authors are trying to tell us. So a good first question to ask ourselves is, **“Where am I?”**

WHERE AM I? *[example]*

Here is an example of a preacher who should be familiar with this principle but who is instead teaching an errant reading of a passage because he is ignoring where he is in Scripture (i.e., what kind of literature he is reading):

.....

“Jesus didn’t show up perfect; He grew into His perfection... And somebody said, ‘Well, Jesus came as God!’ Well, how do you know? The Bible says **‘God never sleeps nor slumbers.’**”
And yet, in the book of Mark, we see **Jesus asleep in the back of the boat**...This ain’t no heresy. I’m not some false prophet. I’m just reading this thing out to ya out of the Bible.”⁵

– Creflo Dollar, Televangelist, World Changers Church International

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Jesus' identity as God is perhaps *the* central doctrine of our faith. Indeed dismissing it *is* heresy. Dollar attempts to justify his belief that Jesus isn't God by confusing two very different areas of Scripture: Poetry/Wisdom and Letters.

The phrase, "*God never sleeps or slumbers*," is located in **Psalm 121:4** – an overtly poetic book within Poetry/Wisdom. It is an *anthropomorphism*, a figure of speech ascribing human attributes to God to make His nature more relatable (see "Figures Of Speech," Ch. 3). Verse 3 adds that, "*he will not let your foot slip*." If we read this as Dollar reads verse 4, are we to believe that God will never let us slip on a wet floor? The meaning of this psalm is that God is an omniscient protector who watches over His people. It is not a commentary on His sleeping habits.

However, Jesus asleep in the boat is found in **Mark 4:38**, a book of History. It is a straightforward, prose account of what happened when the disciples had to awaken Jesus when terrified by a sudden squall threatening them on the Sea of Galilee. As God clothed in humanity, His need for physical rest in no way negates any of His Godly attributes. In fact, His response to the storm, a rebuke followed by immediate calm, is a testimony to His Godhood – a refutation of Dollar's original premise.

When faced with passages that appear to conflict, first ask, “**Where am I?**,” and recognize what kind of literature you are reading. Give precedence to passages that are written with straightforward, easily discernible meanings and weigh other less clear passages according to any literary devices they use.

