Genres, Authors, and Audiences

Why You Can’t Read Genesis the Same Way You Read Corinthians

Do you believe the universe was created in 6 literal days? If not, are you denying the inerrancy of the Bible?

Both Jesus and the Bible are the Word of God. Just as Jesus is true man in everything but sin, the Bible is true literature in everything but error. The Bible is a library, a collection of books written over the course of 1500 years by various human authors inspired by the Holy Spirit. We do not have to read its books in order, and we cannot read them all in the same way.

# **The Old Testament**

Language: mostly Hebrew; some parts are in Aramaic or Greek.

Also known as the Hebrew Bible, Jews often refer to it as the Tanakh, an acronym of the three major sections:

1. Torah (Teaching)
2. Nevi’im (Prophets)
3. Ketuvim (Writings)

The material in the Old Testament belonged to oral tradition long before it was written down. In an oral culture, the details of a story may change while the meaning remains intact. We live in a documentary culture, meaning we write down everything we think is important and are suspicious of change. Oral cultures are more generous in this respect. The Holy Spirit guided this oral culture just as He inspired the authors who eventually wrote the Scriptures down.

The Church recognizes 4 main divisions of the Old Testament:

1. Torah (Hebrew for “teaching”)/Pentateuch (Greek for “5 books”): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
2. Historical books: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Tobit, Judith, Esther, 1 and 2 Maccabees
3. Wisdom books: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom, Sirach
4. Prophetic books: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Baruch, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

Not fixed classifications: books often fall into multiple genres

* Exception: the Pentateuch
* Secular literature: *Hamlet* is a tragedy, a play, and a poem, and also contains some prose passages.
* Ruth: a festival scroll read at the Jewish Feast of Pentecost, but the Church regards it as historical.
* Song of Songs: a love poem that the Church also reads as an allegory and a wisdom book.

Scripture is multilayered: it can carry a wealth of interpretations in harmony with one another. When Isaiah wrote, “Unto us a son is given” (Isaiah 9:6), he was originally referring to the birth of Hezekiah. While that meaning stands, it also refers to Jesus, even if Isaiah did not realize it. The human authors can say one thing and the Holy Spirit much more.

Because these writings are so ancient, it can be difficult to ascribe authorship. Som traditional attributions include:

* King David: most of the Psalms
* King Solomon: Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, and Wisdom
* Moses: the Pentateuch
  + Problem: Deuteronomy contains his death
  + Most likely written by someone else in the tradition of Moses
    - Pseudonymity (from pseudonym, “penname”)=attributing writing to someone else
    - Material originated with Moses, but he himself did not write it down

Noncontradiction: different books provide complementary answers to the same questions

* Work in harmony to provide the complete picture
* The order in which books appear in the Bible is not necessarily the order in which they were written.
* Theodicy=the problem of evil: why does God allow evil?
  + Deuteronomy: obedience brings good fortune, disobedience misfortune
  + Postexilic (after the return from the Babylonian Exile): more complicated
    - E.g. Ecclesiastes, 1 and 2 Chronicles
    - Job: terrible things happen to him despite his righteousness. The answer to suffering is not an answer at all, but a relationship with God.

## **Genesis**

CCC 289 treats the beginning of Genesis, which it says holds a special place in matters of the Creation and Fall. There are multiple creation accounts that probably came from different sources. Genesis is somewhere between history and myth.

The Church has set forth certain doctrines which the faithful are required to believe:

* Monogenesis=we had a single pair of First Parents who sinned through their own free will in the Original Sin.
* Beyond such doctrines, the Church allows a great deal of interpretive freedom.
  + We may believe Eve literally came from Adam’s rib and fell by eating a fruit, but we do not have to.
* Something does not have to be fact in order for it to be true.
  + The Parable of the Prodigal Son does not have to have occurred in order for Jesus to teach with it
  + Same applies to Old Testament books like Genesis or Jonah
  + It does not wreck His credibility or that of the Church if science shows them to be fiction.

Allegory=the representation of abstract principles by characters or figures; a symbolic representation which can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning. George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* is an allegory of the Russian Revolution.

Allegorical interpretation of Genesis is not a product of heliocentric cosmology or the theory of natural selection. In other words, it existed long before Galileo or Darwin. In *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, St. Augustine says the following:

In matters that are so obscure and far beyond our vision, we find in Holy Scripture passages which can be interpreted in very different ways without prejudice to the faith we have received. In such cases, we should not rush in headlong and so firmly take our stand on one side that, if further progress in the search for truth justly undermines this position, we too fall with it. (1:41)

# **The New Testament**

Language: Koine Greek, translated into the Latin Vulgate by St. Jerome in the 4th century.

There are 3 main divisions of the New Testament: historical books, epistles, and an apocalypse.

## **Historical Books: Gospels and Acts**

### **The Gospels**

From Old English godspel (“glad tidings”), used to translate Latin evangelium, from Greek euangelion (“good news”)

Euangelion: originally, a Roman public proclamation by or about the emperor—his military victories, welfare policies, or deification. The Evangelists’ use of this term signifies a religious challenge to Roman authority: the Romans were worshipping Caesar as a godman; the Gospels proclaimed the true Godman.

Genre: ancient biography

* Authors intended them to be read literally
* Many modern Biblical scholars believe otherwise, citing such things as lack of information on formative years.
  + Lewis’s trilemma: Jesus gives us only 3 choices for how to think of Him: Lord, liar, or lunatic. Nonbiographical classification offers a 4th option: legend.
  + Genre hybrids, but more like ancient biographies than these scholars would have us believe. See Brant Pitre’s *The Case for Jesus* for more information.

Authors

* Matthew (also called Levi): tax collector turned Apostle
* John Mark: companion of Barnabas, Peter, and Paul
* Luke: gentile physician and friend of Paul
* John: the Beloved Apostle

Audiences: existing congregations

* Matthew (before 100AD): fellow Jews
  + Goes to lengths to show how Jesus fulfills Messianic prophecy
  + Gives the genealogy of Jesus back to Abraham
* Mark (50-67): Roman gentile Christians, unfamiliar with Jewish practices
* Luke (60-80): gentiles
  + Gives the genealogy back to Adam
  + As a physician, interested in Jesus’s nativity
* John (c. 90): communities needing correction
  + The most explicitly Christological and Trinitarian Gospel
  + Addressing misconceptions and doctrinal errors
  + Jesus’s teaching style: discourses rather than parables

Contrast with the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), which give similar, in many ways parallel, accounts and may have used one another as sources. Heavy on narrative and parables.

### ***The Acts of the Apostles (Acts)***

Luke’s sequel to his Gospel

Dedicatee: Theophilus, a Christian patron

## **Epistles (Letters)**

Pauline Epistles

* Author: St. Paul
* Audience: established congregations whose names are the titles
* Purpose: theological explication
* Hebrews is the only anonymous New Testament book, lending credibility to the attribution of the rest of them.
  + Differences in writing style lead us to conclude that Paul himself did not write it.
  + Paul may have delegated the task to a secretary, assistant, etc. Thus, the letter is Pauline in that it was written under Paul’s authority.
  + Cannot be classified as a Catholic Epistle because it was written to a specific congregation.

Catholic/Universal/General Epistles

* Various authors, most of them apostles; their names are the titles of the books
* Audience: the general Church, not individuals or congregations

## **Revelation/Apocalypse**

Genre: apocalypse, a Latinate translation of Greek meaning “unveiling”

* Not a timetable of the end times. Literal interpretation ignores the highly symbolic nature of Revelation.
* Well-known during John’s time: Daniel, Ezekiel, and Isaiah contain apocalyptic material and are typologically crucial for interpreting Revelation.
* Presents a new theodicy in the midst of persecution: God unveils the invisible spiritual forces of light and darkness at play and promises that there will be a better order someday.

Remember, Scripture is multilayered. Revelation describes all of the following:

* The destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70AD
* The end of the world (what we think of as the apocalypse)
* The heavenly liturgy, including the unveiling of Christ’s bride the Church and the consummation of their love in the Eucharist.

See Scott Hahn’s *The Lamb’s Supper* for an in-depth discussion.

4 main lenses for interpreting Revelation:

1. Preterist=most of the events of Revelation happened in the past.
   1. “Fallen is Babylon the Great” refers to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70AD.
   2. The Mark of the Beast (666) is a numerical representation of the name of Emperor Nero.
2. Historicist=most of the events of Revelation, with the exception of the Second Coming of Christ, have been occurring throughout history.
3. Futurist=most of the events of Revelation have yet to occur. This is the perspective we hear from the most.

Dispensationalism: a kind of futurism condemned by the Church. It originated with John Nelson Darby in the 1830s. This is the interpretation that talks about the Rapture, Tribulation, and Millennium literal reign of Christ on Earth. It forms the backbone of the *Left Behind* novels. Dispensationalists view the Church as a “parenthesis in history” and anticipate a Jewish kingdom with temple sacrifices during the Millennium.

1. Spiritualist=Revelation is an allegory of spiritual realities.

The Church allows all 4 of these lenses, and most scholars use a combination of some or all of them. The Church has no doctrine concerning the precise nature of the Apocalypse. Jesus tells us that no one knows the hour it will happen. Among the things we do know, however, are that there will be a Second Coming but no Rapture. Rather than dictate predictions of the future, the Church follows the example of Our Lady, who treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

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