An Introduction to Biblical Genres and Form Criticism

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Definitions and Modern Examples:

"GENRE" = *a category or type of literature* (or of art, music, etc.) *characterized by a particular form, style, or content.*

There are many possible ways to classify or categorize human communications:

- One could start by distinguishing between *verbal* and *non-verbal* communications:
  - verbal communications (using words) could be *oral* (spoken & heard) or *written* (reading & writing)
  - non-verbal communications could include signs & symbols, body-language, etc.
- The largest division of literary works is between *poetry & prose*;
  - but one could also consider rhetoric, film, drama, comedy, laws, etc. as separate divisions.
- One might also distinguish *how or where* the material is published:
  - such as books, journals, magazines, newspapers, newsletters, flyers, posters, letters, etc.
- There are many different *large literary genres* (whole books):
  - biographies, histories, technical manuals, textbooks, poetic anthologies, legal codes, etc.
- There are also many *smaller genres* or *subgroups* within each of these larger categories:
  - for example, newspapers contain news articles, editorials, sports results, financial reports, obituaries, comics, classified ads, movie reviews, etc.

"FORM CRITICISM" = the branch of biblical studies that classifies the various literary genres, studies their features, and considers how and where such forms were actually used in the "life setting" of the religious communities.
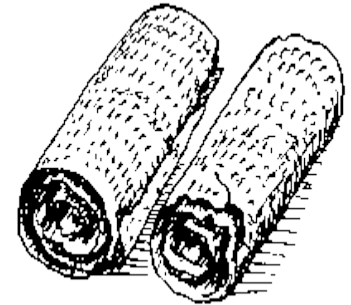
- **Modern biologists** classify plants and animals into different classes, orders, families, genus, and species:
  - they describe each category in detail, and study how one genus or species differs from another
  - they also consider how each genus or species interacts with and is affected by its environment
- **Biblical scholars** do similar things in classifying each biblical text as part of a certain genre or sub-genre
  - they describe each genre or form, and study the characteristics that distinguish one form from another
  - they also consider when and where ancient Jews and/or Christians first used such materials

Major Genres within the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament):

- **Foundational Myths & Legends** - stories about the origins of the world, the first generations of humans, or the early years of a nation, intended to provide a
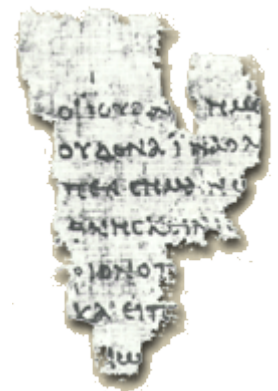
foundational world-view upon which people base their communal and individual lives (**Gen**, parts of **Exod, Num, Deut**)

- **Legal Codes** - collections of laws and instructions by which the people are to live (**Lev,** parts of **Exod, Num, Deut**)
- **Genealogies** - lists of inter-relationships between peoples, either of successive generations or of different nations (parts of **Gen**, much of **Num**)
- **Annals** - semi-historical narrative accounts of select events in a nation's life, focusing especially upon political and military exploits of its leaders, since usually written under royal sponsorship (**Josh, Jdg, 1 & 2 Sam, 1 & 2 Kings**, etc.)
- **Prophetic Books** - collections of the oracles or <u>words</u> of God spoken to the people through human intermediaries (prophets) and the symbolic <u>actions</u> they perform at God's direction for the people's benefit (**Isa, Jer, Ezek**, etc.)
- **Psalms/Odes/Songs** - poetic lyrics of songs/hymns intended for communal worship and/or individual prayer (**Ps**)
- **Prayers/Laments** - words addressed by people to God, esp. reflecting situations of crisis or lament (**Lam**)
- **Proverbs** - generalized sayings and aphorisms containing advice on how to live well: "do good and avoid evil" (**Prov**)
- **Wisdom Literature** - various types of inspirational stories that encourage people to live wisely (**Job, Wis**, etc.)
- **Apocalypses** - symbolic narratives that interpret historical crises through God's eyes to provide hope for a better future (**Dan**)

Major Genres within the New Testament:

- **Gospels** - proclamations of the "good news" about Jesus intended to establish and/or strengthen people's faith in him; quasi-biographical, semi-historical portraits of the life, teachings, and actions of Jesus (**Mark, Matt, Luke, John**)
  - The NT Gospels contain many sub-genres of literature (see below)
- **Acts** - a partial narrative account about the beginnings and the growth of early Christianity; not a complete history of the early Church, since it focuses only on the actions of a few missionary leaders (**Acts**)
- **Letters** - real letters addressing practical and theological issues relevant to particular communities (**esp. Paul's**)
- **Church Orders** - collections of instructions for the practical organization of religious communities (**1 Tim, Titus**)
- **Testament** - a document that gives a dying person's last wishes and instructions for his/her successors (**2 Tim & 2 Peter**)

- **Homily/Sermon** - an exegetical sermon that cites and interprets older biblical texts in reference to Jesus (**Heb**)
- **Wisdom Collection** - a collection of general instructions on how to live an ethical Christian life well (**James**)
- **Epistles/Encyclicals** - more stylized works in letter format; "circular letters" intended for broader audiences (**1 & 2 Peter**)
- **Apocalypse** - a vividly symbolic narrative that "reveals" God's views about a historical crisis, in order to provide encouragement for a difficult present and hope for a better future (**Rev**)

Smaller Genres and Sub-Genres within the New Testament:

- There are many other *smaller genres* found within the various biblical books.
- For example, the NT Gospels contain narrative materials, discourse materials, and some mixed genres:
    - *Narrative* **genres** include the following:
        - **genealogies**
        - **narrator's introductions, transitions & summary passages**
        - **[miracle stories](#)**
        - **call & sending stories**
        - **conflict or controversy stories**
        - **vision reports**
        - **legends & myths**
        - **etc.**
    - *Discourse* **genres** include the following:
        - **[parables](#) & allegories**
        - **hymns & prayers**
        - **laws & legal interpretations**
        - **short exhortations: individual sayings or proverbs**
        - **longer speeches: discourses or monologues**
        - **etc.**
    - *Mixed* **genres** include
        - **longer narratives that contain extended dialogues**
        - **"pronouncement stories" or "apothegms"** (short narratives that climax in a short saying or proverb)
- Many of these sub-genres can also be *further sub-divided*; for example:
    - "[Miracle stories](#)" can include healings, [exorcisms](#), restoration miracles, nature miracles, etc.
    - "[Psalms](#)" include enthronement psalms, processional songs, individual laments, hymns of praise, etc.
    - "Sayings" include legal sayings, eschatological sayings, [prophetic sayings](#), wisdom sayings, "I am" statements, etc.
- The above lists are *not comprehensive*, but include only the more prominent categories of biblical literature.