

**Religious Education Support
Second Level Support Service**

Literary genre

What is genre?

Genre is a kind of literature or literary species, e.g. tragedy, comedy, novel, biography, romance, history, essay, or letter. Each genre makes use of a particular style in its treatment of specific subjects & motifs within a structure whose unity gives meaning to its parts. E.g. tragedy arouses fear & pity by using elevated language to depict important actions which carry disastrous consequences for the main character because of a conflict of values; biography provides a history of a person's life. Recognition of the genre therefore brings with it expectations about content, style & structure, in the service of a coherent meaning. Mistaking the genres, e.g. mistaking a novel for history, can lead to complete misunderstanding. Genres are not static entities, however & texts belonging to the same genre exhibit family resemblances rather than identical traits. (p256)

Biblical genres:

There is a wide range of genres in biblical literature which exhibits both continuities & discontinuities with contemporary literature from the Ancient Near East & the Greco-Roman world. E.g. myth & history in Genesis have much in common with some forms of Canaanite & Babylonian myth & history, yet Genesis is distinguished from them by its depiction of a single, all-powerful, all-knowing God, whose purpose gives meaning to human activity & form to the narrative.

Biblical history has many varieties: myth, legend, saga, tribal or national history, histories of Kings, priests, prophets with biographical histories. All share one characteristic: the omniscient narrator gives information about the eternal purpose of God and the secret's of peoples' hearts. The Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles vary in their combinations of elements from biography, history, apocalyptic and wisdom, but each shares with Old Testament histories both the perspective of the omniscient narrator and the theological form. All four Gospels are deeply indebted to scriptural stories of prophets, especially Moses in Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Elijah & Elisha in 1 and 2 Kings, for their arrangement of material (narratives, interspersed with teaching and miracles), for their general form (rejection by the people & vindication by God) and for their motifs, vocabulary and style. Although Jesus is presented as Messiah, his role is that of a persecuted prophet. For example, the belief in demons who corrupt people and make them ill, shared by some Jews, Greeks and Romans in the first century, gives us Jesus the exorcist. The Fourth Gospel, by contrast, has no exorcisms, although it mentions Satan, and exhibits more influence from Wisdom literature and Deuteronomy while not completely abandoning a future eschatology, at least in the Gospel's present form. In spite of the variations, however, these four Gospels belong to the same genre. They are theodicies, vindicating God's purpose by telling the story of Jesus. (p257)

Genres are defined to facilitate appreciation of the text as a whole, placing the points within a comprehensive and meaningful unity which serves a general purpose. This activity, therefore, is similar to but different from form criticism. Form criticism deals with short passages, separates them from their literary context, defines the form of each to discover the purpose and relates it to the social context in which the individual form functioned, for example, cult legend or prophetic wise sayings. Genre definition deals with longer units from Genesis to 2 Kings, highlights the repetition of motifs and themes, balances juxtaposed features and relates the whole complex to broader social functions like that of providing a national and religious identity during the Babylonian exile. (p258)

Adapted from: Margaret Davies in 'A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation', Edited by R.J. Coggins & J.L. Houlden, SCM Press, London, 1990, pp256 – 258

Interpreting the Bible as literature is no new endeavour. R.G. Moulton's 'The Literary Study of the Bible (1895) was published at a time when most biblical scholars were interested in questions of history, reaching behind the texts to their source, and the events which gave rise to them (literary criticism / source criticism). What distinguishes modern criticism from earlier descriptive research, however, is its inquiry into how texts communicate, and what constitutes meaning.

Author - Text - Reader: literary criticism has changed its focus through this pattern over the last 20 years...

Redaction criticism reflects the view that the final redactor/author expresses a theological and pastoral intention in producing a text by editing and re-writing.

Meaning...is a cultural and social phenomenon, not a matter of individual fact...If the meaning can be discovered from the book itself, without recourse to the author's mind, it is because genre is more important than individual intention.

The identification of a number of genres in biblical literature – myth, legend, saga, biographies, oracle, prophecy, apocalyptic, proverb, hymn – continues to enliven biblical interpretation.

Adapted from : Kenneth Stevenson, 'Literary Criticism' in 'A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation', Edited by R.J. Coggins & J.L. Houlden, SCM Press, London, 1990, pp402-404

An Introduction to Biblical Genres and Form Criticism

by Felix Just, S.J., Ph.D.

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.

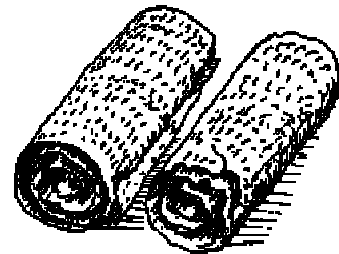


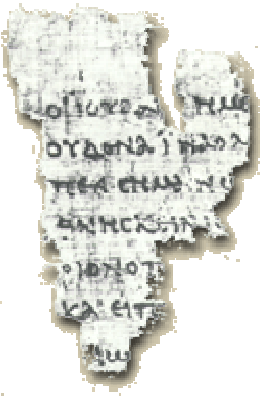
"FORM CRITICISM" = the branch of biblical studies that classifies the various literary genres, studies their features, and considers how and where such forms were actually used in the "life setting" of the religious communities.

- **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 words of God spoken to the people through human intermediaries (prophets) and the symbolic actions 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**)
- **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 **genealogies; narrator's introductions; transitions & summary passages; miracle stories; call stories; conflict or controversy stories; vision reports; etc.**
 - **Discourse genres** include **parables & allegories; hymns & prayers; laws & legal interpretations; exhortations, short individual sayings or proverbs; longer speeches, discourses or monologues; etc.**
 - **Mixed genres** include longer narratives that contain extended dialogues, and "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.
- The above lists are *not comprehensive*, but include only the more prominent categories of biblical literature.

Source: <http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Genres.htm>

Biblical genre

A **Biblical genre** is a classification of Bible literature according to [literary genre](#). The genre of a particular [Bible](#) passage is ordinarily identified by analysis of its general writing style, [tone](#), form, structure, [literary technique](#), content, design, and related linguistic factors; texts that exhibit a common set of literary features (very often in keeping with the writing styles of the times in which they were written) are together considered as belonging to a genre. In Biblical studies, genres are usually associated with whole books of the Bible, because each of its books comprises a complete textual unit; however, a book may be internally composed of a variety of styles, forms, and so forth, and thus bear the characteristics of more than one genre (for example, chapter 1 of the [Book of Revelation](#) is prophetic/visionary; chapters 2 and 3 are similar to the epistle genre; etc.).

Within the discipline of literary analysis, the existence and subjectivity of genres is a matter of some debate. This is reflected to a lesser degree in academic discussion of Biblical genres. However, isolating the broad genres of the Bible and discerning which books/passages belong to which genre is not a matter of complete agreement; for instance, scholars diverge over the existence and features of such Bible genres as [gospel](#) and [apocalyptic](#). Furthermore, some detect subgenres—more narrowly defined compositional categories within a genre—in surrounding historical literature, and speculate that certain books and passages of the Bible may be better denominated by subgenre (e.g., it may be claimed that the book of Philemon is not simply a generic letter, but a *personal* letter). Despite such differences of opinion within the community of Bible scholars, the majority acknowledge that the concept of genre and subgenre can be useful in the study of the Bible as a guide to the tone and interpretation of the text.

By way of literary comparison with the Bible, the Qur'an is largely a recitation by Allah to the prophet Muhammed in didactic form, and so does not have the degree of genre diversity that is evidenced in the Bible. In contrast, the Bible was inspired by God and organically written and compiled by many authors over a very long period of time, and so takes a wide variety of forms.

Genres in the Bible

Among the generally recognized genres and categorizations of the Bible are the following (note that other systems and classifications have also been advanced):

- Historical narrative/epic: [Genesis](#) and the first half of [Exodus](#), [Numbers](#), [Joshua](#), [Judges](#), [Ruth](#), 1 and 2 [Samuel](#), 1 and 2 [Kings](#), 1 and 2 [Chronicles](#), [Ezra](#), [Nehemiah](#), [Esther](#), [Jonah](#)
- Law: the last half of [Exodus](#); also [Leviticus](#), [Deuteronomy](#)
- Wisdom: [Job](#), [Proverbs](#), [Ecclesiastes](#)
- Poetry: [Psalms](#), [Song of Solomon](#), [Lamentations](#)
- Prophecy: [Isaiah](#), [Jeremiah](#), [Ezekiel](#), [Daniel](#), [Hosea](#), [Joel](#), [Amos](#), [Obadiah](#), [Micah](#), [Nahum](#), [Habakkuk](#), [Zephaniah](#), [Haggai](#), [Zechariah](#), [Malachi](#)
- Apocalyptic: [Daniel](#), [Revelation](#)
- Gospel: [Matthew](#), [Mark](#), [Luke](#), [John](#), and possibly [Acts](#)
- Epistle (letter): [Romans](#), 1 and 2 [Corinthians](#), [Galatians](#), [Ephesians](#), [Philippians](#), [Colossians](#), 1 and 2 [Thessalonians](#), 1 and 2 [Timothy](#), [Titus](#), [Philemon](#), [Hebrews](#), [James](#), [Peter](#), 1, 2, and 3 [John](#), [Jude](#)

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_genres

Form criticism

A systematic method of analyzing the genres of the basic oral units preserved in literary works to clarify the history of their formation. The term comes from the title of a 1919 book by [Martin Dibelius](#), *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums* (literally: the form history of the gospels). Fifty years before Marshall McLuhan popularized the idea that "the medium is the message," Dibelius insisted that

- nothing is remembered or communicated without some form; &
- the form in which something is preserved shapes the contents.

From ancient times students of literature, linguistics & folklore have been trained to distinguish the different patterns of speech used to make a point: poetry & prose, proverb & [parable](#), commandment & oracle, miracle story & myth, lament & joke, etc. Some of these are clearly identified in the Bible: the OT book of Proverbs & the [NT](#) parables of Jesus, for example. Church lectionaries also made it clear that the synoptic gospels were composed of small self-contained units.

It was only at the beginning of the 19th c., however, that scholars began to pay serious attention to these units as relics of the earliest stages of the formation of Christianity. [J. G. von Herder](#) was the first to call attention to the importance of oral forms such as sayings, parables, & tales in the composition of the gospels. Yet it took a work by the OT scholar Hermann Gunkel, *The Legends of Genesis: The Biblical Saga and History* (1901), to prompt research on the oral formation of the gospel tradition.

Gunkel formulated several basic principles that were later adapted by NT form critics:

- biblical writers are not authors so much as collectors & editors;
- the forms of oral story telling reflect the social situation (*Sitz im Leben*) for which they were originally composed;
- changes in social situation lead to changes in forms of communication;
- oral forms follow set patterns; so, stylistic inconsistencies (gaps, digressions, etc.) indicate later alteration of the original material.

These principles allowed Gunkel to reconstruct the social history behind the written sources of the Hebrew Pentateuch. On the basis of careful formal analysis of the biblical narrative he traced passages to early or late stages of the oral tradition or to the editorial work of some later scribe.

Gunkel's achievement led Dibelius & other NT scholars to relate the oral forms preserved in the synoptic gospels to social settings in the earlier period when Christianity was taking form. Form critics pointed out that the narrative framework of each gospel was composed by the *writer* & thus was not the original context in which the individual units took form. Since the oral Jesus tradition was filtered through Christian preaching & worship in a Greek world, form critics concluded that the stories & sayings in the gospels reveal more about the early Christian community than about the historical Jesus himself.

The most influential form critic was [Rudolf Bultmann](#), whose *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (1921) is still regarded by scholars as an essential tool for gospel research. Bultmann announced the historical significance of the consequences of his research in no uncertain terms:

Just because literary forms *are* related to the life and history of the primitive Church, I am definitely convinced that form criticism not only *presupposes* judgments of facts alongside judgments of literary criticism, but must also *lead to* judgments *about* facts (the genuineness of a saying, the historicity of a report & the like)...

The aim of form-criticism is to determine the original form of a piece of narrative, a dominical saying or a parable. In the process we learn to distinguish secondary additions and forms, and these in turn lead to important results for the history of the tradition.

The immediate historical effect of Bultmann's research was to put the brakes on most research on the life of Jesus for the next half century. To analyze the life of any person one needs

- historically reliable data &
- a chronologically accurate sequence of material.

If the gospel stories & sayings were molded by early Christian preachers for situations *after* Jesus died & *if* the narrative framework of the gospels was created by even later writers, then writing a historically accurate biography of Jesus is virtually impossible. The British form critic, R. H. Lightfoot, concluded:

For all the inestimable value of the gospels they yield us little more than a whisper of his [Jesus'] voice; we trace in them but the outskirts of his ways. [*History & Interpretation in the Gospels* (Brampton Lectures 1934, NY: Harper & Bros.), p. 57].

Some scholars criticized Bultmann & other form critics for excessive skepticism regarding the historical reliability of the gospel *narratives*. Yet form critical work on the synoptic *sayings* tradition laid the foundation for the resurgence of Jesus research in the last quarter of the 20th c.

If the form in which something is communicated is a window into the mind that originally formed it, then sayings that can be traced to Jesus (& no one else) should reveal a lot about him. Bultmann himself provided a criterion for identifying authentic Jesus sayings. He called it dissimilarity, but later scholars prefer to call it distinctiveness. The criterion works this way:

- *If* a writer credits a saying to Jesus &
- *if* the form & content of that saying *differ* from the author's own style & characteristic ideas &
- *if* that saying is *not* common opinion &
- *if* there is *no close parallel* in ancient Christian, Jewish or Greek literature
- then that saying is not apt to have been formulated by anyone other than Jesus.

One form of speech in early Christian literature is ascribed *only* to Jesus: the [parable](#). So, the gospel parables were recognized as a window into Jesus' distinctive personal views on God & the world. Thus, form criticism prompted half a century of research on the parables of Jesus by many scholars including J. Jeremias, C. H. Dodd, R. W. Funk & J. D. Crossan.

This led to research by J. D. Crossan & others on the form of the [aphorism](#), which in turn provided the basis for the Jesus Seminar, the largest international scholarly research project on the sayings & deeds of Jesus ever assembled. Despite a wide range of personal viewpoints, more than 70 members of the Jesus Seminar were able to reach consensus that at least 90 sayings which the gospels ascribe to Jesus can reliably be traced to him. Thus, the century that began with form critics skeptical about the historical value of information in the gospels ended with their intellectual heirs using form critical principles to identify a solid core of authentic sayings from the mouth of Jesus himself, in spite of years of oral transmission & editing by gospel writers.

Note: Excerpts from the English translation of the *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), pp. 5-6. Bultmann's German sentences are often hard to turn into readable English. I have taken the liberty of rearranging John Marsh's version of the first excerpt to improve clarity & emphasis (italics mine).

[For further introduction, see E. V. McKnight, *What is Form Criticism?*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969.]

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Other On-line Resources:

- [Introduction to Biblical Genres & Form Criticism](#) - Felix Just defines terms used by form critics (Loyola Marymount U).
- [Form Criticism](#) - Catherine Murphy outlines form critical method & provides basic bibliography (Santa Clara U).
- [Form Critical Timeline](#) - schematic outline of period of oral transmission between Jesus & the composition of the gospels ([Biblical Criticism Page](#) of Kings School, UK also posts paper by A level NT students on [Form Criticism & Miracles](#)).
- [Rise & Persistence of Form Criticism](#) - Carl W. Conrad clarifies the legacy of the form critical method in a 1995 email debate (archived by *BGreek* e-list).

Source: <http://virtualreligion.net/primer/form.html>