

The Bible has been described as a library of different types of books.

- **The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-21)**
- **Hannah's Song of Thanks (1 Samuel 2:1-10)**
- **Israel Restored) Isaiah 52:13-53:12)**
- **The Transfiguration (Mark 9:2-13)**
- **The Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20-49)**
- **The Prologue (John 1:1-18)**

An enquiry into the importance of literary genre for the appreciation of **one** of the above biblical texts by believers today

Title H.2.

Root of Title

Topic 3.1 The language of story

LCRE Syllabus, p81

Unpacking Title

- Enquiry
- Importance
- Literary Genre
- Appreciation
- Believers today

Reference	Genre
The Ten Commandments Exodus 20:1-21	Unconditional form: 8 negative, 2 positive
Hannah's Song of Thanks (1 Samuel 2:1-10)	Ancient poem
Israel Restored (Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12) – (Suffering Servant)	Poem with report, framed by utterances of God
The Transfiguration (Mk 9:2-13)	Language of symbol
The Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20-49)	Sermon
The Prologue (1 John 1:1-18)	Hymn

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.

Source: Margaret Davies in 'A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation', Edited by R.J. Coggins & J.L. Houlden, SCM Press, London, 1990, p256

Major Biblical genres:

Hebrew Bible	New Testament
Foundational myths & legends Legal codes Genealogies Annals Prophetic Books Psalms / Odes / Songs Prayers / Laments Proverbs Wisdom Literature Apocalypses	Gospels Acts Letters Church Orders Testament Homily / Sermon Wisdom Collection Epistles / Encyclicals Apocalypse Sub-genres include: narrative genres, discourse genres, mixed genres, miracle, psalms/hymns etc

Genre:

When reading a piece of literature it is important to be clear about the genre because that will determine the way the text is understood. A number of genres are found in the Bible: myth, story, novel, letters, apocalypse, poetry, wisdom and prophecy and each of them with the characteristics of its type.

The language of reflection is the process whereby a people attempts to crystallise its feelings, understanding, hopes and dreams through the medium of poetry.

The language of symbol, myth & epic: these are media of communication that attempt to say something real and at the same time convey the conviction that the realities dealt with transcend the means of human communication.

'The Bible: Literature and Sacred Text' by Benedict Hegarty, Veritas, Dublin, 2003 pp73-74

The most profound religious thinkers have a deep sense of the limitations of their knowledge and an openness to the insights of other faith traditions. Conversely, a superficial clarity distorts religious truth and can lead to fanaticism and intolerance

Hegarty, p74

Hymns:

It is instinctive in the human person to praise what we value, and invite others to join in that praise. 'Wasn't it a wonderful performance'...When the psalmist invites us to praise God, he is working from a profound conviction that God's loving will underpins all creation and the fortunes of his people and individuals.

Hegarty, p91

The Language of Symbol:

Much religious language is symbolic since it deals with humans in relationship to what is not perceived through our senses in everyday life experience. Theological language is analogical. It points to realities a fragment of whose truth is caught in our daily language. Words used suggest rather than define the content of analogical statements. We describe God as light, shepherd or father – which God is, but not in the literal understanding of those words. Religious language is very conscious of its limitations. It is necessarily open-ended. One symbol suggests another. None capture the full reality.

Adapted from 'The Bible: Literature and Sacred Text' by Benedict Hegarty, Veritas, Dublin, 2003 pp93-94

Religious language evokes feelings & moods & persuasive motivations leading to action. It leads to commitment and encounter rather than detachment and analysis.

Symbolic language is a type of pictorial expression, designed to engage feelings and the imagination as well as the mind.

Adapted from 'The Bible: Literature and Sacred Text' by Benedict Hegarty, Veritas, Dublin, 2003 pp93-94

Prologue:

All 4 Gospels begin with a Prologue. The Fourth Gospel, in the Prologue, goes to the limits of the created order and beyond it, to the timeless presence of God, to the time before time. Jesus as Word is the distinctive feature of the Fourth Gospel's witness. The central theme of the Prologue is revelation. Unambiguous commitment to revelation is at the heart of the author's thinking.

It focuses on the presence of eternal love, manifested in the Passion. The Fourth evangelist is trying to convey the idea that the universe is at its deepest level friendly and loving and therefore liberates people to be friendly, peaceful and loving themselves.

Adapted from 'The Bible: Literature and Sacred Text' by Benedict Hegarty, Veritas, Dublin, 2003 pp115-116

This energy is experienced as an energy that reaches towards us to transform us – described in terms of the ‘Holy Spirit’.

The Gospel starts with a statement of revelation coming out of eternity: ‘In the beginning...’ There is a Word who was there before creation who was God’s instrument in creation. The Word is in Jesus of Nazareth.

The evangelist sees Word and Wisdom together in Jesus Christ. We are told that at that defining moment in the beginning, at the start from nothingness to existence, he was in a state of continual being – he was being.

The Word was ‘with the God’ in v.1. This points forward to the Son ‘in the bosom of the Father’, v.18 which ends the prologue. There is a technique of Hebrew composition called ‘inclusion’ – the first and last themes echo and repeat each other.

Ibid; p117

Word & World

v.3 Repeated emphasis on the presence of the Word in all creation means that existence itself is revelatory. In v.4 the Word is the bearer of life – this is his reason for coming (Jn 10:10). Genesis 1 is evoked in these verses. God said 'let there be light' v.3. In the context of chaos, shapelessness, stormy waters, raging winds, with light came the emergence of clarity, form and meaning in the universe.

John pursues the theme of light and darkness, v.4-5, but in the context of human affairs, moral conduct and the direction of life.

v.6-8 John the Baptist witnesses to the role of the Word as light.

Ibid; p117

Word & Israel

v.11 He comes in the choice of Israel as God's special people 'to his own people'. The roots of this idea are found in the Wisdom themes of the Old Testament: Sirach 24:6-8. [Jn 8; 1 Cor 10:4].

Word & Incarnation

The climax of revelation comes with the incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ, v.14. This verse is loaded with meaning. There is reference again to Word – this Word became flesh. *'Here we have an explicit statement of incarnation, the first and indeed only such statement in the New Testament'* – J. Dunne, 'Christology in the Making', 2nd edition, London: SCM, 1989, p241

The flesh...is not just another neutral word for saying 'human'; it is becoming a human person in all its transitoriness, helplessness and vanity [Is 40:6, Rom 8:3]

Ibid; p119

The word 'dwelt among us' – a literal translation from the Greek would read 'The Word tabernacled among us'. The flesh of Christ is the new localisation of the divine presence on earth and the replacement of ancient tabernacles, Jn 2:19-22.

The phrase 'full of grace and truth' is redolent of Old Testament associations. The grace of God is His kindness; and his truthfulness to himself and his promises; he is loyal to his covenant.

'We saw' – the quality of sight / faith of those who were involved with Jesus during the period of his earthly ministry, Jn 20:22... More than physical vision, but includes it.

Ibid; p120

The Prologue – John 1:1-18

- **Seems to elaborate on an early hymn**
- **Comments about John the Baptist have been inserted in vv6-8, & about revelation through Jesus in contrast to Moses in vv 17-18**
- **The rest of the Gospel does not speak of Jesus as the pre-existent, creative Word. Some interpreters suggest that the hymnic introduction was added after the Gospel had been completed**
- **Although the term 'logos' / Word is linked with the immanent divine spirit that pervades & orders the cosmos in Stoic philosophy, there is no other hint of philosophical terminology in the Gospel**

PHEME PERKINS, 'The Gospel according to John' , pp 943-944

Prologue:

- **The parallel structure of the sentences in this section of the Gospel, the use of 'logos', 'word', which is not part of the rest of the Gospel, the narrator's interruptions in the structure (vv6-8, 9?, 13-15), and the use of 'his own' in v11 contrary to its meaning in 13:1, all suggest that the prologue has adapted earlier traditional material. The tradition used by the evangelist appears to fit the pattern of a Christological hymn.**
- **The hymn celebrates the pre-existent word in guiding & illuminating humans, who often reject divine wisdom (vv9ab,10-12), & the incarnation of the Word, which has enabled humans to partake of divine fullness (vv14, 16)**

Perkins, p951

- **V1-2: 'In the beginning...the Word was with God'. This recalls Genesis 1:1 as well as the traditions of Wisdom with God at the creation (Prov 8:30, Wis 7:25). John goes beyond the careful formulations of the Wisdom tradition, which would never suggest that Wisdom had any form of equality with God ('theos' is used of Jesus in 1:18)**
- **v3-4 All things came into being through him.**
- **v5 The light shone in the darkness – some exegetes think that this expression was added by the evangelist in anticipation of the darkness of unbelief (8:12, 3:19, 12:35,46).**
- **v6-8 A man sent from God – The first of a series of passages on the role of John the Baptist; he is not a Messianic figure but a witness. This insertion into the hymn at this point shifts the focus of what follows from the activity of the Logos in salvation to the incarnation.**

Perkins, p951

- **v9 The true light – This may be an addition by the evangelist referring what follows to the incarnation**
- **v10-11 His own did not receive him – rejection of the Logos/Light upon coming to its own place & its own people recalls the rejection of Wisdom in 1 Enoch 42:2 ‘Wisdom went out to dwell with the children of the people, but she found no dwelling place; (so) Wisdom returned to her place & she established herself among the angels’**
- **v12 He gave them the power to become the children of God – This may have originally referred to Wisdom finding a dwelling in the souls of the righteous (e.g. Sirach 1:9-10). It has been re-cast to reflect the soteriology (*doctrine of salvation*) of the Gospel (2:23, 3:18 – believe in his name.**

Perkins, p951

- **V13 Begotten from God – Jn 3:3-8 attributes divine ‘rebirth’ to the activity of the Spirit**
- **v14 The Word became flesh – reference to the Word becoming flesh goes beyond the Old Testament images of divine glory & wisdom dwelling with Israel (Ex25:8-9, Joel 3:17, Ezekial 43:7 the ‘name’ of God is to dwell with Israel forever)**
- **v15 John testified – reference to John the Baptist’s testimony alludes to the words in 1:30**
- **v16 From His fullness we have received – The only use of ‘fullness’ in John probably alludes to the fullness of God’s grace (Psalms 5:8, 106:45) or mercy (Ps 51:3)**

Perkins, p951

The Transfiguration (Mark 9:2-13)

- **The first incident (9:1-8) establishes Jesus' glorious identity as the beloved Son of God, & the second incident (9:9-13) places his divine sonship in the context of Jewish expectations about the Kingdom and resurrection.**
- **The discussion about Elijah's coming (9:9-13) is linked to the transfiguration story through their common reference to Elijah. The external link enables Mark to balance the glorious aspects of Jesus seen in the transfiguration with references to his death and resurrection, especially when Jesus' fate is taken in connection with the fate of John the Baptist. Once more the implication for discipleship is that, as the master goes, so the disciples must go.**

Nardoni, E; 'La Transfiguracion de Jesus y el dialogo sobre Elias', Buenos Aires, 1977 in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Eds Raymond E Brown, Joseph A Fitzmyer, Roland E Murphy, p615

• v1 Until they have seen the Kingdom come with power – the most obvious meaning of Jesus’ promise is that it refers to the full flowering of God’s kingdom at the end of human history. The Kingdom will come before some of the bystanders die. In the present context the saying may refer to the anticipation of the Kingdom in Jesus’ death & resurrection (8:32), the Judgment (8:38) or the transfiguration (9:2-8). The most convincing explanation is that mark presents the transfiguration as a preview or anticipation of the final coming of God’s Kingdom, & this as a commentary on Mk 9:1

M. Künzi, ‘Das Naherwartungslogion Markus 9:1’ par [BGBE 21:
Tübingen, 1977

- **v2 After 6 days – There may be some connection to Israel’s preparation & purification at Sinai (Ex 24:15-16). Or since the 7th day occurs after 6 days, there may be an anticipation of passion week in Jerusalem.**
- **Peter, James & John – Lk 9:28, says that Jesus went up the mountain to pray; Mk does not tell us why he went up ‘a high mountain’. Among the traditional identifications of the mountain are Tabor & Hermon. Mountains are the usual setting for supernatural revelations & theophanies (*appearance of a deity to a person*).**
- **Jesus was ‘transformed before them’ – the term ‘metamorphóthé’ indicates that the form of Jesus was changed. The disciples are granted a glimpse of him in his glorious state, which is to be his eternal state after the death & resurrection (2 Cor 3:18). There may be a connection with the glorification of Moses**

Nardoni, p615 in The New Jerome Biblical Commentary

- **v4 Elijah with Moses – If the two Old Testament figures represent the Law & the Prophets, the order is strange. (Mt 17:3). There may be some reference to their having been taken up into heaven (2 Kings 2:11; Deut 34:6) or their expected roles in the coming of the Kingdom (Mal 3:23-24; Deut 18:15,18)**
- **v5 Rabbi, it is good for us to be here – The address of Jesus as ‘rabbi’ is strange; Mt 17:4 has ‘Lord’ & Lk 9:33 has ‘master’. The reason why it is good was the unique & glorious nature of the experience. Peter’s suggestion to construct 3 booths aims at prolonging the experience; there is probably a reference to the feast of Tabernacles (Lev 23:39-43)**

Ibid; p615

- **v7 A cloud was overshadowing them – Given the allusions to Exodus in this account it is best to take the cloud as the vehicle for God’s presence as in Ex 16:10; 19:9; 24:15-16; 33:9). The voice from the cloud is a divine voice – this is my beloved Son – the heavenly voice corrects Peter’s confusion, 8:29 and alludes to the identification of Jesus at the baptism 1:11. The command to hear Jesus may point to his passion predictions (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34)**
- **v8 Alone with them – The experience ends abruptly. Its visionary character establishes it as a preview of Jesus’ eternal glory. But before that state can begin he must make his way to Jerusalem.**

Ibid; p615

- **v9 As they were coming down from the mountain – This phrase ties the conversation about Elijah’s coming to the transfiguration story, thus giving the latter a more obvious connection with Jesus’ passion.**
- **Until the Son of Man arise from the dead – Unlike the other commands to silence, this one has a good chance of being obeyed (because only 3 disciples are involved) and has a definite time limit.**
- **v10 Questioning what it is to be raised from the dead – The disciples’ problem was how Jesus could be raised from the dead before and apart from the general resurrection, which was to occur at the coming of God’s Kingdom.**

Ibid; p615

- **v11 The scribes say that Elijah must come first – According to Mal 3:23-24 Elijah’s return will precede the coming of the great awesome day of the Lord. The disciples’ predicament was how Jesus could be raised from the dead when Elijah came first.**
- **v12 Should suffer many things & be treated with contempt – While conceding that Elijah must come first, Jesus also insists that his own passion and death will precede the resurrection.**
- **v13 Elijah has already come – The statement indirectly identifies Elijah as John the Baptist. The fate that John the Baptist met (6:14-29) foreshadows that of Jesus, the Son of Man.**

Ibid; p615

Video clips: The Transfiguration

http://www.tangle.com/view_video.php?viewkey=4f4b75a6a54a1ad777eb (13.14 minutes)

The Ten Commandments

http://www.tangle.com/view_video.php?viewkey=0f0831959bf96553e495 (1.46 minutes) List of 10 Commandments

http://www.tangle.com/view_video.php?viewkey=5da6575b04a28519c09e (3.20 minutes) Purpose of the 10 Commandments

http://www.tangle.com/view_video.php?viewkey=2c0b301906f2819ae126 Display of 10 Commandments in public places

Literary criticism:

- refers to the exploration of such historical issues as

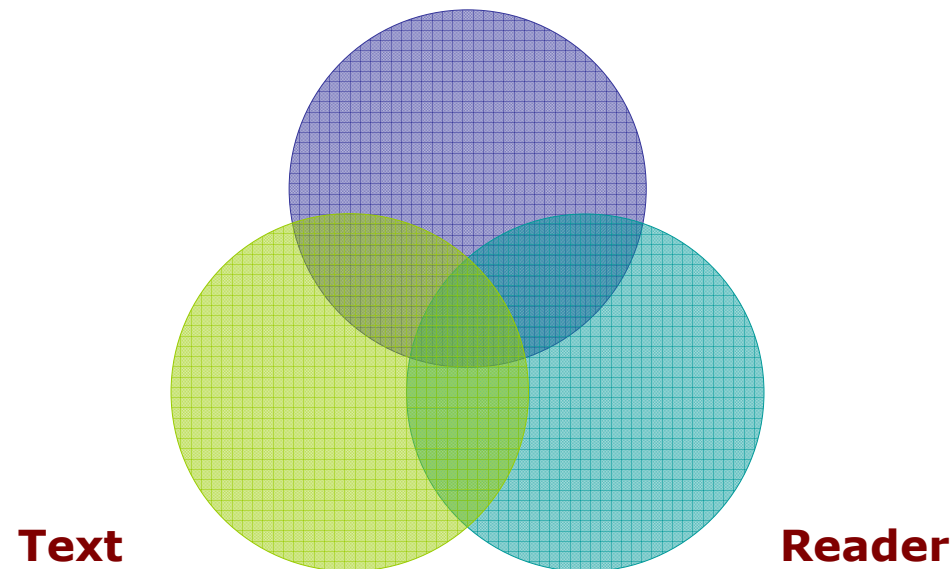
- author**
- time & place of composition**
- nature & provenance of sources**
- socio religious implications of literary forms**

- **The study of the Bible as literature has been impeded in the past both by an exaggerated concern for the uniqueness of canonical Scripture and by a narrow restriction of 'literature' to self-consciously literary productions a designation that would apply to relatively little of the Old Testament or the New Testament.**
- **in recent years the growing appreciation of language as mediation of being rather than a system of verbal labels & thus of the intimate relationship of content to form in all texts, including canonical ones, has suggested the possibility of a theologically responsible use of literary-critical methods in Biblical interpretation. Literature consists of the texts that a society values. Consequently, both theologically and literarily we must treat Biblical texts as literary works.**

The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, Prentice Hall, New Jersey,
1990, pp1158-1159

- **Central to contemporary hermeneutical theory is the conviction that all historical (as opposed to mathematical or scientific) understanding is dialogical in nature. The interpretation of texts involves a 'dialogue' between reader and text and about the subject matter with which the text is concerned.**

Subject matter



This raises 3 questions:

- 1. What is the subject matter, or referent of the text?**
- 2. How does the text 'work' to engage the reader?**
- 3. How does the subjectivity of the reader influence the process of interpretation?**

Literary criticism views the text as a 'mirror' reflecting a world into which the reader is invited. The referent of the text as such is not the 'real world' of history (e.g. Exodus or crucifixion) but the literary world signified by the text (escape from Egypt as divine liberation for covenant life; death of Jesus as paschal mystery).

Ibid; p1158

- **The concern of the literary Biblical interpreter, then, is not the reconstruction of the historical events but the self-transformative understanding i.e. appropriation, of the subject matter with which the text is concerned.**
- **Current literary approaches to texts: 2 basic types:**

Non-contextual approaches	Contextual approaches
Text-centred	Audience – centred: the work is not the text, but comes into being when text and reader interact

Ibid; p1159