An Introduction to Biblical Genres and Form Criticism

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

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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 personal prayer (**Ps**)
- **Prayers/Laments** - words addressed by people to God, esp. reflecting situations of crisis or lament (**Lam**)
- **Proverbs** - generalized sayings and aphorisms with 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**)