Biblical Genres and Form Criticism

adapted from material by Felix Just at: myweb.lmu.edu/fjust/Bible/Genres.htm
and from
Mark Allen Powell’s, The Gospels, 20-23

GENRE
- A category or type of literature (or of art, music, etc.) characterized by a particular form, style, or content
  - Verbal / Non-verbal
  - Prose / Poetry
  - How or where published
  - Large genre can be composed of a variety of smaller genres

FORM CRITICISM
- The branch of biblical studies that
  - Classifies the various literary genres
  - Identifies the probable function of the unit in the 'life setting' (Sitz im Leben) of the community that preserved it
  - Attempts to reconstruct what the unit was like before being incorporated into the tradition

Major Genres within the Hebrew Bible (OT):
- Foundational Myths & Legends
- Legal Codes
- Genealogies
- Annals
- Prophetic Books
- Psalms & Odes
- Prayers
- Proverbs
- Wisdom Literature
- Apocalypse

Major Genres within the New Testament
- Gospels - Mark, Matt, Luke, John
- Acts
- Letters - Paul's letters
- Church Orders - 1 Tim, Titus
- Testament - 2 Tim & 2 Peter
- Homily/ Sermon - Heb
- Wisdom Collection - James
- Epistles/ Encyclicals - 1 & 2 Peter
- Apocalypse - Rev

Typical Forms within the Gospels
- SAYINGS
**Typical Forms within the Gospels**

- **SAYINGS**: memorable quotations preserved apart from any specific context
  - Legal
  - Eschatological (prophetic or apocalyptic)
  - Proverbs (gnomic or wisdom sayings)
  - "I" sayings

**Mark 2.27**
And he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath."

**Mark 9.1**
And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power."

- **PRONOUNCEMENT STORIES**: (apophthegms or paradigms) short narratives of incidents that provide context for memorable sayings
  - Biographical Stories
  - Controversy Stories
  - Didactic Stories

**Mark 11.15-17**
Clearing out the Temple… "My house shall be called a house of prayer… but you have made it a den of robbers."

**Mark 12.13-14**
Then they sent to him some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap him in what he said. ... "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

**Mark 3.31-35**
Then his mother and his brothers came; ... And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?"

**Mark 3.31-35**
Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

- **PARABLES**: narrative accounts of people displaying supernatural (divine or demonic) power
  - Exorcisms
  - Healings
  - Resuscitations
  - Nature Miracles
  - Feeding Miracles

**Typical Forms within the Gospels**

- **SAYINGS**
- **PRONOUNCEMENT STORIES**
- **PARABLES**
- **COMMISSIONING STORIES**
- **MIRACLE STORIES**
- **HYMNS**
- **GENEALOGIES**
- **LEGENDS**
- **MYTHS**
Identifying Forms

- Break the unit down into its component parts (i.e., outline the logic and flow of the unit)
- Compare it with other similar units
- Identify the core components