The Bible and Bread

Context, Themes, and Word Study

Form and Genre

2026 Week 6

John 1:1-14

John 1:1–5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Threlfall-Holmes, Miranda. How to Read the Bible: 21 Ways to Enjoy and Understand Scripture (p. 116). John Murray Press. Kindle Edition.

John 1:6–14

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

AI Overview

A genre is a category for art (like books, movies, or music) that groups works by shared characteristics, style, or theme, acting as a "type" or "kind" to help audiences understand what to expect, such as "horror," "romance," or "sci-fi".

Key aspects:

Classification:

•Genres sort creative works into understandable groups.

Shared Traits:

•Works within a genre share common elements, like plots, settings, or moods.

Examples:

•Literature: Fiction, Nonfiction, Poetry, Drama, Mystery.
•Film: Comedy, Action, Western, Horror.
•Music: Jazz, Country, Classical.

Purpose:

- Genres provide a framework for creators and help consumers find things they enjoy.

The Book of John is primarily classified as a **Gospel**, a genre of ancient religious literature that functions as **theological, Greco-Roman biography**. It differs from the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) by focusing more on symbolic, theological, and philosophical reflections on the life and divinity of Jesus Christ.

Key aspects of the genre of John include:

- Theological Narrative: Unlike modern biographies, John uses historical events to foster faith and explore the divine nature of the "Word" (Logos).
- Greco-Roman Biography: While it shares similarities with ancient bios focusing on a person's life, it is heavily infused with theological interpretation rather than just raw history.
- Symbolic/Dramatic: The book contains long, reflective dialogues (e.g., "I Am" statements) and dramatic scenes intended to evoke belief.
- Distinctive Structure: It is considered the most unique or "apart" of the four Gospels, often referred to as the "spiritual gospel" due to its elevated, theological language.

It is important to note that when people refer to "the Book of John" in this context, they are referring to the Gospel of John, which is distinct from the later New Testament letters known as 1, 2, and 3 John, which are in the genre of epistles.

Genre, and being aware of what genre we're encountering, matters.

You can easily recognise a fairy tale, in English, because it starts 'Once upon a time'.

Threlfall-Holmes, Miranda. How to Read the Bible: 21 Ways to Enjoy and Understand Scripture (p. 117). John Murray Press. Kindle Edition.

Form criticism arose out of a wave of interest in and study of folk tales and oral storytelling traditions in the nineteenth century.

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The study of genre and the concept of oral tradition that preceded the written text, came together in form criticism, which initially aimed to reconstruct the oral tradition that lay behind the Old Testament. In doing so, form critics hoped to understand better the social and historical contexts in which these texts were composed, transmitted, told, retold and finally written down.

Threlfall-Holmes, Miranda. How to Read the Bible: 21 Ways to Enjoy and Understand Scripture (p. 118). John Murray Press. Kindle Edition.

The ultimate aim was to reconstruct the Sitz im Leben – the 'situation in life' or historical context – in which each element of the tradition arose.

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Modern scholarship tends therefore to speak of 'genre' criticism instead of form criticism, and the study of the editing process has its own specialist name: 'redaction' criticism. Form, genre and redaction criticism rely on considerable knowledge of ancient languages and linguistics. They also involve detailed comparison with other forms of ancient literature, changing as our understanding of these grows with each new discovery.

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…an awareness of genre and the process that the New Testament books have gone through to take the form we read today can be enlightening…For example, Mark's Gospel makes frequent use of the Greek connective word 'kai': 'and then'. This gives the narrative a somewhat breathless immediacy and urgency, but form criticism adds the knowledge that 'kai' is a tell-tale marker of a rabbinic technique known as pearl-stringing, where stories, images or examples are picked from the tradition and strung together on a central thread or theme.

Threlfall-Holmes, Miranda. How to Read the Bible: 21 Ways to Enjoy and Understand Scripture (p. 120). John Murray Press. Kindle Edition.

Perhaps the best-known and most widely accepted insight of form criticism is that certain passages, such as the Prologue to John's Gospel… almost certainly pre-date the book that we read them in, preserving older early Christian traditions. These texts, identified by differences in grammar, language and form from the texts that now surround them, give us a glimpse into what the earliest Christians, even before the books of the New Testament were written, found central – and into what the Gospel and letter writers thought it was essential to pass on.

Threlfall-Holmes, Miranda. How to Read the Bible: 21 Ways to Enjoy and Understand Scripture (p. 120). John Murray Press. Kindle Edition.

Ultimately, form criticism reminds us that the books of the Bible use a variety of different forms and genres, and are to some extent shaped by the norms and expectations of those genres. One of the fascinating things to realise is how the various authors didn't simply use the genres available to them, but at times subverted them (like those satirical news sites) or played with their readers' expectations to drive home their point. This is a way of reading the Bible that takes seriously the fact that the texts we read today have been through a long process of compilation, editing and adaptation, and that this was not accidental.

Threlfall-Holmes, Miranda. How to Read the Bible: 21 Ways to Enjoy and Understand Scripture (pp. 120-121). John Murray Press. Kindle Edition.

…we can all ask the questions that genre criticism gives us, while online searches can supply a wealth of information very quickly. Try asking, for example:

- What genre is this particular passage? What does the fact that the author chose this genre add to my understanding of the text?

Threlfall-Holmes, Miranda. How to Read the Bible: 21 Ways to Enjoy and Understand Scripture (pp. 121-122). John Murray Press. Kindle Edition.

- If I consider the idea that this might be a different genre from the one that seems most obvious to me, how would that change my understanding of it?

- For example, what if this were a parable or myth, rather than a historical record? What if it were a letter or poem rather than a rule? How do I feel about those possibilities and why?

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- What is the context, the form, of the whole book, letter or section that this passage occurs in? Has the way the material been arranged been chosen to draw out a particular point or suggest a particular comparison? Should this story be read in a compare-and-contrast way, for example, with something that immediately precedes or follows it?

- Can we tell anything about the history of the time, either the time this text was originally composed, or the time over which it was transmitted or preserved, from the fact that this story was one that was chosen to be told and retold?

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In the beginning… Genesis?
Word…
with God…
life…
light…
darkness…
John…
a witness to testify to the light…
world…
did not know him…
did not accept him…
believed…
power…
children of God…
born not of flesh…
Word became flesh…
lived among us…
glory…
grace…
truth…