

BUSS, MARTIN J., *The Changing Shape of Form Criticism: A Relational Approach* (Hebrew Bible Monographs, 18; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010), pp. xiv + 340. £45.00 (£22.50 for scholars). ISBN 978-1-906055-54-7.¹

Form criticism was applied to the Bible throughout last century. At its simplest it classified different forms of written or oral material, such as psalms, laments, prayers, laws, saga, myth and so on. In ever finer detail, theories were produced about the origins and nature of these classifications and their sub-classifications. This interest in forms came from the widespread belief that the text of the Bible had a rich oral background, as stories were told, collected, and edited. Hermann Gunkel was a key scholar to establish the approach in Old Testament studies, and his students and colleagues have developed this central idea. Martin Buss has researched this material over his academic career, much of which gives shape to this book. Buss draws heavily on interdisciplinary approaches and is sure-footed on anthropology, sociology, psychology and history. He distances himself from historicizing tendencies (that is, using form criticism to hypothesise on earlier forms of the text, or on historical events). He suggests ways of enriching textual interpretation (exegesis) and also of helping the text to relate to life and attitudes today (hermeneutics). Thus he relates forms to the social sciences, to become forms of human thinking, believing and behaving.

This book is a compilation of papers from the 1960s to today on form criticism, containing critique of claims and developments. 'Forms' are structured ways of thinking and communicating which can be used creatively. A strength of the work is his appeal to a range of disciplines concerned with human interactions and relations (e.g. anthropology, sociology, psychology). The emphasis on human relations (the *relational approach* of the title) is linked to functionalism (via the anthropologist Malinowski for example) and against evolutionist historicism in which forms are vestiges of an earlier stage. He accepts that literary forms, like other social phenomena, can express both function *and dysfunction*. Buss traces an ethical stance within social science which he attributes indirectly to Christian influence, and links to a critique of colonialism. He traces a dialectic between historicism and scepticism towards balance, which sees a place for forms (typical communication types) used creatively and relationally.

¹ A short form of this review will appear in the annual Book List (2011) produced by the Society for Old Testament Study.

The book begins with ten chronological previously published papers since 1964 covering form criticism, *Sitz im Leben* ('setting in life'), communication, and morphological criticism. Ch 10 is interesting: he claims that these generalized forms both assist our exegesis, but also help our everyday understanding (hermeneutic) so the chapter focuses on how form criticism can inform our everyday lives. Thus, 'setting in life' is concerned with general setting in human life, not historically located as a setting in Jewish history.

Part 2 is titled 'Interdisciplinary Ideas of *Sitz im Leben*', tracing the history of the phrase and various meanings of 'life settings' as a concept in philosophy, sociology, psychology, anthropology and history. *Sitz im Leben* is described as general and not specific, multidimensional and complex, and enriched by interdisciplinary studies. That is to say, a form of communication comes from type of human situation that can be defined, which helps our understanding of the communication. A prayer for example has psychologically a life setting in which anxieties need to be assuaged: externalisation of the inner discussion (think out loud as if to another) helping our articulation. Socially, a prayer might be healing and binding. Part 3 is an 'Appendix' on 'Relational Forms in Various Disciplines', a survey of social and ethical perspectives on a broad canvas. This book is academic rather than popular, with advanced students in mind.

These last comments are about form, criticism, and life settings. The form of a prayer, or hymn of praise to God, is a structured utterance which is rooted in assumptions and theocentric conceptualisation. Wittgenstein, cited by Buss, talked about the creative use of language, which he called 'language games'. Writing 'to the glory of God' means writing honestly to the best of my ability – the theocentric language hiding human aspirations. 'God' is a visualisation of everything good (or everything powerful, depending on the culture), human attributes being given to abstract concepts. A prayer's meaning may seem obvious to a theist, but have broader significance to a psychologist and an anthropologist taking an outsider's view. A creation story speaks more about purpose than about history and causation. There are distinct forms in the Old Testament – songs, sagas, myths, laws (apodictic and casuistic). Studying them as forms may help our understanding of society *then* (but with no guarantees) and if creatively interpreted may assist our thinking *today*. However, to attempt to use form criticism to recover oral traditions has been tried and has failed. The biblical texts are *written*, by authors for specific purposes. Beyond this we tread with peril.

S.F. BIGGER