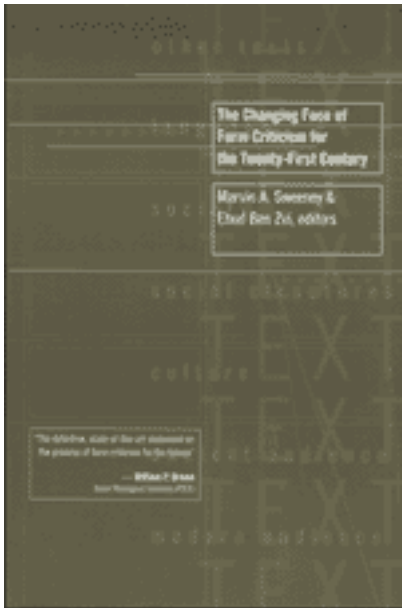


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The Changing Face of Form-Criticism for the Twenty-First Century

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This excellent anthology on form criticism is one of the many “end-of-the-century (and millennium)” products whose purpose is to evaluate the achievements in a given field at that unique calendar point. Although from a purely cultural perspective it is an arbitrary date, as cultural and scientific developments do not yield to the calendar, it still provides an opportunity to look back, to appraise past accomplishments and faults, and to try to suggest the paths scholars should tread in their studies from that point on. The editors of this collection as well as some of the contributors pretended even more than this: to predict the basic trends of the twenty-first century’s form criticism (9–11), as expressed in the title’s “for the Twenty-First Century.” One may wonder whether any cultural prediction is reliable (even when the predictor is a certified biblical scholar whose main field is Prophecy), but in any case they might still be amusing and even illuminating. I liked, for example, H. C. P. Kim’s (“Form Criticism in Dialogue with Other Criticisms” [85–104]) metaphor of form criticism in “its earliest stage . . . as a face drawn by Cézanne,” while the form criticism of the upcoming era “may resemble that of a face drawn by Picasso. . . . The face is one, just as the text is one. . . . Yet its drawing portrays many dimensions just as the biblical text” (103).

The anthology is based upon “a special two-part session at the 2000 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature held in November 18–21 in Nashville, Tennessee” (5). It contains nineteen essays dealing with a wide range of biblical texts and topics from various, in some cases contradictory, points of view, which is understandable given the actual undefinability of form criticism. Indeed, any biblical subject can be discussed in a volume dedicated to form criticism, if one accepts, for example, Buss’s definition (M. J. Buss, “Towards Form Criticism as an Explication of Human Life: Divine Speech as a Form of Self Transcendence” [312–25]) of form criticism as “a procedure that gives simultaneous attention to human life processes (social and psychological), to human thoughts and feelings, and to linguistic formulations. It explores how these relate to one another, not, indeed rigidly, but also not in a way that is altogether arbitrary” (316).

The essays are organized into four parts: “Theoretical Reflections” (15–104); “The Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature” (107–95); “Narrative Literature” (199–265); and “Prophetic Literature” (269–350). Surprisingly and regrettably, no specific part and hardly a single essay are devoted to one of the most important aspects of form criticism: the literature the Psalms. The one essay that does elaborate on specific psalms—R. C. Van Leeuwen, “Form Criticism, Wisdom, and Psalms 111–112” (65–84)—unfolds an attractive discussion of some theoretical *Formforschung* and *Formgeschichte* questions, such as tensions between *Gattung* and *Sitz im Leben*, demonstrated by two wisdom psalms. (A discussion from a generic point of view of another piece of wisdom literature [Eccl 1:12–12:7] is found in T. L. Longman III, “Israelite Genres in Their Ancient Near Eastern Context” [177–95]). However, as far as the psalm literature is concerned, this is less than expected in such a collection. Not only Herman Gunkel, who is justifiably credited in the editors’ introduction (2; see also 17–19, 181–82, 258–59) for his pioneering form-critical studies of psalms deserves more than this, but the very subject of form criticism is thus lacking one of its most important and influential facets.

However, it is unfair to judge this anthology for what it lacks, since what we do have is a variety of intriguing discussions that give the reader an outstanding panorama of and some important insights into “the changing face” of form criticism in past and present. The fact that some overviews of form criticism have already been published before (e.g., J. Muilenburg, “Form Criticism and Beyond,” *JBL* 88 [1969]: 1–18; R. Knierim, “Old Testament Form Criticism Reconsidered,” *Int* 27 [1973]: 435–68; M. J. Buss, *Biblical Form Criticism in Context* [JSOTSup 274; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999]; M. Sweeney, “Form Criticism,” in *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticism and Their Application* [ed. S. L. McKenzie and S. R. Haynes; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999], 58–89), by no means makes such a comprehensive updated anthology redundant.

The editors made the right decision when opening the collection with theoretical articles, which offer the reader a good view and a broad perspective of the main problems and issues of form criticism discussed in the following parts. The general picture depicted by most of the theoretical as well as by many of the other essays is that traditional form criticism has justifiably come to its end. This view is expressed directly or indirectly either by blatant declarations or by rhetorical questions. Such is the question asked by Won Lee (“The Exclusion of Moses from the Promised Land: A Conceptual Approach” [217–39]): “one wonders whether Gunkel’s form criticism is still viable today,” in light of the “larger paradigm shift in biblical studies from the diachronic approaches to the synchronic approaches” (218). Similarly the question of S. Boorer (“Kaleidoscopic Patterns and the Shaping Experience” [199–216]): “Can form criticism, with its roots in a romantic view of history and its functioning within a historical-critical framework throughout the twentieth century, still play a role in the current climate where ahistorical approaches to interpretation are exerting their influence?” (199). It seems that A. F. Campbell’s conclusion of his “Form Criticism’s Future” (15–31) answers unambiguously such questions: “Modern form criticism . . . has a future—if its past is allowed a decent burial” (31; I wonder if this is not a slightly arrogant statement; after all, the new suggested form criticism is built upon the classical one, and no solid building would be established on graves!). Campbell reaches this conclusion after reviewing the first stages of form criticism. In an attempt to understand how and why this school was initiated (“Gunkel turned to form criticism because, for him, the current source criticism lacked . . . attraction” [23]), he also suggests that such a lack of attraction is exactly the reason why form criticism has been relegated now from its high status in the past: it no longer attracts scholars, realizing they can “contemplate the present text and . . . find it aesthetically pleasing” (23). Campbell adds, “The enormous contribution of form criticism to future biblical studies may be in requiring and legitimating” the “view of the whole” (24), and attention should be given to the actual present text rather than to its hypothetical earliest origin (25). In fact, Campbell’s criticism is mainly against the *Formgeschichte* aspects of form criticism, although he also warns against the *Formforschung* tendency of exaggerated genres and subgenres classifications.

The preoccupation with *Gattungen* is also referred to in E. Blum’s “*Formgeschichte—A Misleading Category? Some Critical Remarks*” (32–45). He defines (following C. Hardmeier) genre as “an abstract transindividual pattern of text formation” (33) and agrees that the real text should be studied. However, unlike Campbell’s prediction, his conclusion is that “the question of the written or oral prehistory of biblical texts will remain an essential part one” and that “OT exegesis asking for the historical, intended meaning of the texts will always be dependent on ‘genre investigation’ in Gunkel’s sense. It will be dependent on the question of the form and meaning of the individual text in

their intended reception . . . on the reconstruction of history of transmission” (45). This observation of Blum, his wish not to give up diachronic, historical aspects, appeals to me more than the nonhistorical, purely synchronic approach. Yet I wonder if this diachronic preference justifies Blum’s equation: *Formgeschichte* = form criticism (32). This is a “circular” rendering that makes void any nonhistorical approach toward form criticism. I suggest to consider *Formgeschichte* only as one aspect of form criticism and therefore to consider “form criticism” as an appropriate rendering of *Formforschung*. This is indeed the view advocated by Buss: “Form criticism has often been described as a kind of historical criticism. A simple statement like this is not very meaningful, for the term ‘form criticism’ and ‘historical criticism’ can both be used in a variety of ways. I will show that ‘form criticism’ as I understand it, is not a subdivision of ‘historical criticism’ if that is understood as being interested primarily in the particularity of a text” (312).

Be it as it may, the synchronic, ahistorical approach, as noted above, governs this collection, as can be demonstrated by another essay: R. F. Melugin, “Recent Form Criticism Revisited in the Age of Reader Response” (46–64). The paper is an indirect homage to the two editors: a great deal of it is devoted to Sweeney’s work on Isa 1–39 (1996), and to Ben Zvi’s commentary on Micah (2002). Melugin’s insight is interesting: without plainly declaring it, he actually shows that the danger of overspeculation in diachronic attempts of dating pieces of biblical literature (like Sweeney, whose surmised layers of the book of Isaiah as well as their dating seem somewhat impressionistic), which has caused so much criticism of *Formgeschichte*, lies also at the door of holistic, synchronic works (such as Ben Zvi’s commentary, who may “unintentionally be ‘postmodern’ in the sense that he imaginatively *constructs* his proposed readers of Micah—fictive rereaders who are halfway ancient and halfway modern” [60]). Yet I am afraid that Melugin, by his own examples of “what might be called a *textually portrayed* setting” (58) divulges (unfortunately and, of course, unintentionally) one of the reasons for such shaky speculations: the banality of his short discussion of Isa 1:2–20 (48–50) might explain the intellectual aversion of a mere “aesthetic” discussion and the reluctance of many scholars to follow his advice for “de-emphasis in attempts to reconstruct historical and conventional societal settings” (63).

The characteristics of Ben Zvi’s approach as described by Melugin are indeed reflected in Ben Zvi’s own contribution to this collection: “The Prophetic Book: A Key Form of Prophetic Literature” (276–97). Ben Zvi focuses on the “Prophetic Books” (all considered to have been created in the Achaemenid period) only in their present canonized shape, without any consideration of the possibility that some of them might have been crystallized many years beforehand. (For a favorable acceptance of Ben Zvi’s basic attitude, see M. H. Floyd, “Basic Trends in Form Critical Studies of Prophetic Texts” [298–311]). Consequently, he advocates restricting oneself to the written books and

avoidance of efforts to reveal the “historical speakers” or the “flesh-and-blood prophets” (277). However, his surmised *Sitz im Leben* of the books’ creators (authors; editors; compilers)—the “narrow group of elite literati” (294)—hardly correlates some of the main messages of most of the prophetic books, such as the anticultic condemnations and the harsh social reproaches. I have another problem with Ben Zvi’s speculation, namely, that this narrow group acted according to “a principle of controlled selection and required the existence of some social authority to include and exclude written texts” (283). There simply is no proof of such a selective activity, of censures who excluded existent ancient prophetic books and thus doomed them to oblivion.

M. A. Sweeney’s contribution is indicative of the tendency indicated above: the preference for the synchronic over the diachronic aspects of form criticism. In his 1996 book on Isaiah Sweeney did not refrain from diachronic speculations (in addition to his illuminating systematic synchronic study), while in his present article “Zechariah’s Debate with Isaiah” (335–50) he gives up the diachronic aspects, so that one is left only with the presupposition that Zechariah (the book as a whole) postdated Isaiah (the book as a whole). Consequently, all the claimed affinities between the two books (some of them are rather questionable, to my mind) are necessarily explained as the latter’s response to the former. The form-critical phase of the essay is thus to be found mainly in the structural analysis (348–50) of the whole book of Zechariah, which is very interesting and in some cases rather surprising, such as the bipartition of the book: Zech 1:1–6:15; 7:1–14:21. Such a partition disregards the fact that Zech 7–8 (dated to the fourth year of Darius [7:1]) reflect the situation in Jerusalem of Zerubbabel’s period, just like the other prophecies in Zech 1–6 (1:1, 7; 2:9; 3:1–10; 4:7; 6:9–15), while in Zech 9–14 there is neither a direct nor an allusive reference to this period. Such a difference should not be overlooked or dismissed even when the structural analysis refers to the book as a literary whole. It seems that Sweeney, in preference of the synchronic approach, denies any importance of the primary *Sitz im Leben* of the different texts.

A theoretical debate on *Sitz im Leben* is also found in B. Becking, “Nehemiah 9 and the Problematic Concept of Context (*Sitz im Leben*)” (253–65). Questioning Boda’s view of the **אמנה** ceremony in Neh 9 being a ritual of the ancient **ברית** renewal, his main point is yet methodological, and it relates to the meaning and provability of *Sitz im Leben* as such. Claiming that history should not be considered an (impossible) reconstruction of the past but rather “a tentative narrative on the past” (which does not imply “a minimalistic or revisionistic position” [263]), he advocates the same cautiousness to the concept of *Sitz im Leben*: “A context, or *Sitz im Leben*, should be seen as a hypothesis on the past” (263). I wonder if such a warning is necessary: Is not anyone engaged in history or in the search of *Sitz im Leben* aware of the tentative, surmised character of any depiction of the past events and institutions?

The inclination to give up the quest for a social primary *Sitz im Leben* of biblical texts, forms, and formulas is somewhat alleviated in part 2: “The Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature” (107–95), and in Petersen’s article in part 4.

M. Rösel (“Inscriptional Evidence and the Question of Genre” [107–21]) admits that Mowinckel’s exact *Sitz im Leben* cannot be justified because of the highly speculative task of extracting original *Gattungen* and their *Sitz im Leben* out of later literary texts. However, he suggests that *Sitz im Leben* can still be looked for when one examines authentic, original ancient stuff, such as formulations of blessings in Israeli (e.g., Kuntillet ‘Ajrūd; Deir Alla), Aramaic (Zakkur of Hamat stele), Moabite (Mesha), and Punic (e.g., *KAI* 97; 98) inscriptions. His conclusion is that “the (investigations of the Y.H) inscriptions allow us to draw some careful conclusions about the *Sitz im Leben* and the use of related biblical texts” (120–21).

M. Nissinen’s contribution, “Fear Not: A Study on an Ancient Near Eastern Phrase” (122–61), can also invigorate the classical form-critical search for original *Sitz im Leben* in biblical literature. It is a systematic survey of the Mesopotamian phrase *lā tapallah* or *lā ipallah* (“Do not fear”) in its variegated contexts (private discourse; royal discourses; divine discourse). This is followed by a shorter discussion of the biblical parallel אַל תִּירָא, which convincingly leads to the conclusion that “Both ancient Near Eastern and biblical sources hence point to the origin of the ‘fear not’ formula in the institutions of kingship and prophecy” (161).

Won Lee in his essay mentioned above follows R. Knierim’s idea of “the nature of texts as conceptualized linguistic-semantic entities” (220). According to this idea “the presuppositions of the text [which are revealed in its structure] are more important than its statements” (221). This concept leads to a speculation that reminds one of the Gunkelian quest for the hidden *Gattung*, since both systems give priority to the supposed, implied rather than to the explicit features of the text.

Some of the contributors presented essay on issues that have occupied them for a long time, and it is interesting to see how they relate these topics to form criticism.

D. L. Petersen’s “The Basic Forms of Prophetic Literature” (269–75; “The title is . . . of course, a takeoff on a classical tome, Claus Westermann’s . . . *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*” [269]) is one of the few essays in the collection that stick to the classical concept of *Sitz im Leben*, namely, the social background of the literary *Gattungen* and their users:—the real, historical, nonfictitious prophets. How different is this concept of *Sitz im Leben* from the (post?)modern one suggested by S. Boorer, following P. Ricoeur: “The life situation becomes no longer the original life setting or experience out of which the

form arose and in which it originally functioned, but the *perceived* ‘world of the text’ ” (202). In accordance with his well-known 1981 study *The Role of Israel’s Prophets* and other studies devoted to the prophetic literature, Petersen identifies “four role labels that reflect diverse forms of prophecy in ancient Israel”—איש אלהים, נביא, רואה, חוזה (270)—and another type of prophets “who bear no explicit title” (273). Each of these types, claims Petersen, correlates to typical literary forms, such as vision reports, divinatory chronicle, divine oracles, prophetic sayings, and so on. Among the overall historical and sociological skepticism typical of the collection, this essay, traditional as it is, is still כציר שלג ביום קציר (“like the cold of snow in time of harvest” [Prov 25:13]).

T. Römer, “The Form-Critical Problem of the So-Called Deuteronomistic History” (240–52) protects the search for the historical *Sitz im Leben* although he criticizes the past “OT scholars (who) invented, with the help of form criticism, an impressive number of festivals for almost every sanctuary. . . . Today, we are of course much more cautious” (242). Confronting Westermann and Knauf, he defends the concept of a Deuteronomistic History and suggests that the variety of literary forms in this corpus might be explained by a theory of a “Deuteronomistic Library” (250–52).

M. S. Odell continues her Ezekiel studies in “Ezekiel Saw What He Said He Saw: Genres, Forms, and the Vision of Ezekiel 1” (162–76). Referring to Zimmerli and claiming that most of Ezek 1 does not fit the common pattern of a “call narrative” (165–66) she compares the generic elements of Ezek 1 with Assyrian royal inscriptions. Her conclusion is that the matrix in which to interpret this chapter “highlights the significance of the terms דמות and מראה as a type of discourse about representational art and raises the possibility that Ezekiel 1 is a schematic tableau of divine rule” (175).

P. K. Tull, (“Rhetorical Criticism and Beyond in Second Isaiah” [326–34]) returns to her previous (1997) occupation with Second Isaiah while discussing (mainly) Isa 51:9–10. Examining some interpretations of this section (by Begrich, Westermann, Muilenburg) she arrives at the following methodological conclusion: “To study a matter such as this without maintaining the tension between form criticism and rhetorical criticism would be impossible, since both the typical and the unique must be heeded” (333).

It is expected that the traditional twins *Gattung* and *Sitz im Leben* would affect this praiseworthy collection on form criticism. Unfortunately, it has not, as far as one feature is concerned. How would the future scholar of form criticism comprehend the total lack of two of the most typical and valuable generic characteristics of any publication of the twentieth (certainly the twenty-first) century whose *Sitz im Leben* is the academic world:

indexes and bibliographical list? Such tools are vital in any academic publication, let alone such in a panoramic collection! May I guess that the interest this volume surely raises among scholars will encourage the publisher to print another edition; I therefore hope that this expected new edition will be appended with both tools, thus making the volume deserve even more than now to be praised as תפוחי זהב במשכיות כסף (“apples of gold in picture of silver” [Prov 25:11–12])