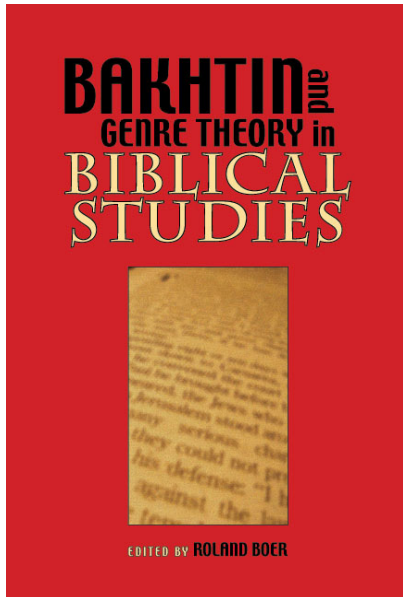


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**Boer, Roland, ed.**

*Bakhtin and Genre Theory in Biblical Studies*

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David W. Williams  
Bible College of New Zealand  
Henderson, Waitakere, New Zealand

In his introduction to this collection of essays loosely centered on Bakhtinian approaches to genre studies, editor Roland Boer suggests that, while Bakhtin has become popular among literary theorists and biblical scholars alike, the intersection of Bakhtin's ideas with older methods of biblical criticism has not been explored. He quite rightly points out that the place where Bakhtinian methods and form criticism cross similar terrain is in the area of genre. While someone who reads "with" or "like" Bakhtin views genre as a window through which the world (of the text/of the reader) can be perceived or as a voice by which a point of view of the world can be heard, the form critic sees form in more rigid terms, as something that excludes rather than embraces. At least that is the general view taken in this volume, which seeks to demonstrate how reading "like" Bakhtin might invigorate genre studies. Most contributors begin with their own evaluation of Bakhtin's value to biblical studies, and in true Bakhtinian style we are given a multivoiced appraisal of his contribution and definitions of his key terms.

There is now no shortage of publications in the field of biblical criticism that seek to outline and describe Bakhtin's theories and where they might aid the biblical scholar. Therefore, most readers familiar with Bakhtin will feel at times like they are traversing old

ground here. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see how each contributor takes something different from Bakhtin.

The real appeal of any new volume on Bakhtinian methodologies, however, is how well it puts his ideas into practice. There is a dearth of good works that demonstrate a working knowledge of Bakhtin's ideas and their direct applicability to the field of biblical exegesis. Bakhtin's ideas emerged from his work on the novels of Dostoevsky, primarily, so it is imperative that biblical scholars using Bakhtin's ideas demonstrate their efficacy in robust exegesis. While a relatively small volume (284 pages and fourteen different contributors) cannot possibly demonstrate the value of Bakhtin's ideas to biblical exegesis in a thorough way, it is good to see that most contributors have given it a go. It is one thing to argue that Bakhtinian genre theory can invigorate form critical studies; it is quite another to demonstrate it. It is also helpful that a range of texts, from Genesis to John, as well as a variety of "genres" are discussed. The approach taken to Gen 28 is quite different from that taken to the genealogy of Matt 1. The results are varied too—not all are totally convincing, but the value of the volume is that it generates a dialogue that seeks to expand the field of genre (form-critical) studies, by suggesting that different genres not be treated in isolation from other genres (forms, voices), but in dialogue with them. If one theme can be said to unify the volume, it is this (although even a reviewer should be wary of seeking to hear a unitary or monologic voice in a polyglot discussion of Bakhtin's genre theories).

Martin J. Buss takes an overview of an often overlooked but nevertheless important point of exegesis in verbal patterns throughout the Hebrew Bible: Who speaks and who listens? Whose words are we actually hearing? Of course, in some sense we are always hearing the words of the writer, but for whom do they claim to speak, and to whom are the words addressed? Buss takes a closer look particularly at the dialogic patterns in law, proverbs, and the Song of Songs to demonstrate that genre can be identified, to some extent, on speech forms. Buss's second point, that genres represent aspects of Hebrew life and "dialogue" with each other, is also well taken. This dialogue also occurs within each genre, since genres are not "internally homogenous" (16)—an idea that counters rigid understandings of form. An application of Buss's ideas to a particular text would have been helpful.

A collection on Bakhtin and genre studies would not be complete without a contribution from Carol J. Newsom. Here she reviews some of the recent trends in genre studies and the theorists they have drawn from, before discussing Bakhtin in a very brief introduction of his "chronotope," the idea that genre is distinguished by the interactions of time and space with the discourse itself. It is a timely introduction to this key Bakhtin concept, since many of the writers in this volume draw upon it.

Christine Mitchell attempts to use the limited space available to her to demonstrate that “genre” is not the same as “form” and that a theory of genre should only be derived inductively. Her argument is worth some attention, since too often we approach the biblical text with theories in hand and impose them upon the text with little attention to the internal (or external) workings of the text itself. Unfortunately, Mitchell does not have the space to do her claim justice. She tests her idea that genre is not just a *given* but also has an *effect* on 2 Chr 13:23–15:15. This leads to a discussion of power and eros, in which Mitchell attempts to demonstrate how genre is transformed.

In Barbara Green’s hands Bakhtin’s theories are richly applied to the story of Jonathan, David, and Saul, primarily in 1 Sam 20. Green not only provides a helpful overview of Bakhtin’s “dialogism” but expertly demonstrates how a knowledge of one of Bakhtin’s fundamental ideas, that the “utterance” is the building block of discourse, shapes our understanding of the inner dynamics of episodes such as this. She argues that the character of Jonathan experiences an “education” at the hands of David and Saul that engages the broader postexilic question of whether royal leadership is possible, or indeed preferable.

Judy Fentress-Williams counters the dominant critical view that Gen 38—the story of Judah and Tamar—is an interpolation by demonstrating how this episode engages dialogically with the larger Joseph narrative that brackets it. She rightly argues that the meaning of the Joseph story would be “limited” (60) if Gen 38 was not placed where it was. It is an “interruption” only if one chooses to see it that way. For Fentress-Williams, it is a play within a play that engages with many of the themes in Gen 37 and 39. Her study is a fine example of how Bakhtin’s theories might overturn long-held positions on certain “problem” texts.

Carleen Mandolfo’s discussion of how the lament form has been reworked in order to give Daughter Zion a “voice” in Lamentations draws on her knowledge of intertextuality, which she also quite rightly links to Bakhtin’s idea that genres *change*: they are fluid by necessity, since they speak to continually new situations. Mandolfo interprets Lam 1–2 as a response to the “culture shock” (70) of 587 B.C.E. The lament genre, which is still recognizable in Lam 1–2 (indeed, for genres to truly *dialogue* it is necessary that they retain their unique and original voices), is nevertheless transformed to address the crisis of exile. Mandolfo’s analogy of the modern retelling of *The Wizard of Oz* is particularly informative, as is her argument that the “didactic voice” that responds to the laments in the Psalms is wrested to the Daughter Zion’s point of view in Lamentations, so that the exiles are not overwhelmed.

David M. Valeta and Michael E. Vines both contribute pieces that tackle the book of Daniel, though with different emphases and employing different Bakhtinian categories. Daniel seems particularly well suited both to Bakhtin's idea of heteroglossia (and polyglossia), considering its use of both Hebrew and Aramaic, not to mention the clearly distinguished genres that comprise the book—which is taken up by Valeta—and to the chronotope, which is taken up by Vines. Where Newsom's article ended by suggesting the concept of chronotope as a useful doorway into apocalyptic studies, Vines goes one step further and seeks to redefine the genre category apocalyptic through a Bakhtinian lens, in order to avoid previously formalistic understandings of the term. Vines rightly argues that chronotope is an ideal concept to apply to apocalyptic, since in terms of time and space the dimensions of apocalyptic are "permeable and limitless" (112). Vines ultimately argues that apocalyptic is a "profoundly monologic genre, since no dialogic response is allowed or even entertained" (115). While he makes a very valid point, Valeta's discussion of the dialogue between genres *within* the book of Daniel demonstrate that the book cannot be categorized too quickly as monologic.

Christopher C. Fuller's use of chronotope to reexamine Matthew's genealogy is a refreshing demonstration of how Bakhtin's ideas can be applied to New Testament studies. Particularly interesting is his application of Bakhtin's idea that genre has memory: genres are a "form of thinking" (121) that accumulate experiences. Where I have concern about Fuller's method is that initially he seems keen to use Bakhtin's description of "creative understanding" (122, citing Bakhtin in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*) as a license to interpret Matthew's genealogy in a reader-oriented manner. Such an approach would be a misunderstanding of Bakhtin's intent, I believe, since while the reader engages dialogically with a text, he or she does not eradicate the unique voice of the text, nor the voices that can be heard engaging with the text through time. However, in practice Fuller does not do this, and the result is an engaging and enlightening exegesis of the genealogy's "cultural memory" (125) of time and space.

Perhaps the highlight of this collection is Paul N. Anderson's take on the Gospel of John and the Johannine "misunderstanding dialogue" that plays out not only in the text but also in the communities in which the text was, and is, heard. Here we see Bakhtin's theories in the hands of an expert exegete, and they are well applied to a text that truly benefits from the fresh insight brought to it in this analysis. Anderson understands Bakhtin well and opens by justifying the application of his theories to the New Testament text—a justification that younger Bakhtin/biblical scholars will find is well worth bearing in mind. Not only that, Anderson also well understands that when one follows Bakhtin's lead, one can never presume that one's exegetical results can claim to be final. They can only ever be preliminary—they begin, or continue, the dialogue.

And that is the best way to summarize this collection. It could go further, because of the point I made at the start of the review. Biblical scholars reading the text *like* Bakhtin need to demonstrate the potential of his ideas on our understanding of the text itself. This volume goes some way to doing that — but it is only a teaser or a taste of what might be. Clearly, Bakhtin/biblical studies are at an early stage, but these essays reveal the potential, and extend the dialogue, in a way that is informed, and at time expert, and that speak to the realization that rigid formalism is being questioned because there are other, fresher voices beginning to say things about genre that are worth listening to.