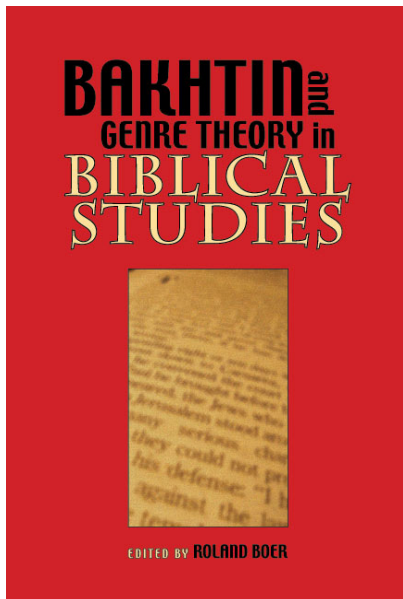


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Bakhtin and Genre Theory in Biblical Studies

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The core of this volume consists of several essays that were originally presented as papers at the 2004 Society of Biblical Literature's Annual Meeting in San Antonio in a session entitled "Bakhtin and Genre." The book, however, includes "a number of additional essays" (1) as well. The editor describes the aims of the volume as an effort to offer a "gentle meeting between genre theory in biblical studies and the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, the great Soviet era Russian literary critic" (1). Although the contributors to this book appropriate Bakhtin in diverse ways and certain essays in the volume are more persuasive than others, together they demonstrate well how biblical scholars who tend to the insights of theorists such as Bakhtin can produce new and nuanced readings of biblical texts or extend the insights and interpretive directions of others.

Following an introduction by the editor, the initial two essays focus broadly on the study of form and genre within and beyond biblical studies. Nine essays offering readings of biblical texts that draw on insights from Bakhtin follow. Two responses close the book, which also includes a list of works consulted, a list of contributors, and indices of ancient sources and authors.

Roland Boer begins the volume ("Introduction: Bakhtin, Genre and Biblical Studies") by

presenting a very brief introduction to Bakhtin and offering working definitions of some of the most important of Bakhtin's concepts, including "the contrast between *monologic* and *dialogic* narrative" (1), the *chronotope*, *polyphony*, *unfinalizability*, *heteroglossia*, and the *carnavalesque* (2, emphasis here and below original). The introduction also includes brief resumes of each of the book's essays.

In a chapter entitled "Dialogue in and among Genres" Martin J. Buss rejects a static understanding of genre and argues for a dialogic understanding of biblical genres. In developing his position he contends that "*address form is a basis on which a genre, or speech type, can be identified*" (9). He also believes that the Hebrew Scriptures are by and large "*arranged according to what appear to be culturally significant genres.*" Each of these genres, moreover, "*engage metaphorically in a dialogue with each other*" (13). For Buss, however, dialogues also "*exist metaphorically within genres*" (16), and the Bible can "*enter into a dialogue with other literary complexes*" that may be quite distinct from biblical literature, the "Hindu canon," for example, to which Buss explicitly alludes (17).

In "Spying Out the Land: A Report from Genology," Carol Newsom next offers a "brief and selective" survey of certain "trends in genre theory" and offers some reflection as to "their possible usefulness in biblical studies" (20). She uses the findings and approach reflected in the widely accepted definition of the genre of "apocalypse" presented by the SBL's Apocalypse Group (*Semeia* 14, *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* [1979]), not to criticize the work of that group, but to note "how more recent developments in genre theory might change the assumptions, approaches, and questions to be posed in a study of the genre of apocalypse" (20). In her survey, Newsom reviews briefly the "family resemblance" approach to genre developed by Alastair Fowler, who has "adapted and popularized" (22) Wittgenstein's famous notion, as well as the related intertextual approach of Jonathan Culler and the "prototype theory" (prototypical examples of a genre function as a template by which other examples are viewed) emerging from the work of Eleanor Rosch. She likewise sketches the work of cognitive theorists Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, whose suggestions about how "mental schemata are brought together and integrated" may prove valuable for the study of genre, for example when considering "how late prophetic vision accounts, parabiblical narrative, historical resumes, and other such forms are creatively blended to produce what we recognize as apocalypses" (29). Newsom also notes how "for Bakhtin and his colleagues" genres are a "means of seeing" (Medvedev) and are "ideological instruments" that are "expressions of mental structures or worldviews" (29–30).

Christine Mitchell ("Power, *Eros*, and Biblical Genres") next seeks to integrate Bakhtin's theory of genre with Foucault's notion of power and an understanding of *eros* as "the motivation behind power" (39). She concludes that "[g]enre, then, is an effect, an

operation. Power operates on genre in order to achieve the genre effect,” and “power is motivated by *eros*.” (42) Along the way Mitchell demonstrates how her insights illumine aspects of Chronicles—for example, by helping us to recognize how “through the heteroglossic text of Chronicles, the genre of Judges ... is shifted into something else: perhaps theology?” (35).

Barbara Green, after helpfully sketching Bakhtinian notions important for her essay (“Experiential Learning: The Construction of Jonathan in the Narrative of Saul and David”), such as “*dialogism*” and the “*utterance*” (44–47), offers a careful and nuanced reading of especially 1 Sam 20, a text she suggests portrays the “education of Jonathan.” Green adopts Clark and Holquist’s (*Mikhail Bakhtin*, 1984) description of the Bakhtinian utterance as “the simultaneity of what is actually said and what is assumed but not spoken” (45). By tending closely to the characters’ exchange of utterances in Samuel, she demonstrates what Jonathan has learned; he has “ceased to resist or reform his father in the matter of David” (58).

Judy Fentress-Williams’s “Location, Location, Location: Tamar in the Joseph Cycle” takes a Bakhtinian “dialogic approach” (60) to the story of Tamara and Judah in Gen 38 to argue for the integral role that chapter plays in the larger Joseph cycle—a view articulated generally by others (e.g., Robert Alter in *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 1981, whom Fentress-Williams mentions, but also, e.g., Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories*, 1987). For Fentress-Williams, Bakhtin’s notion of the “*chronotope*” as described in *The Dialogic Imagination*—the “organizing center for the fundamental narrative events of the novel”; “the place where the knots of the narrative are tied and untied”—is particularly important. Indeed, she claims that “certain motifs, such as meeting/parting, loss/acquisition, search/discovery, recognition/nonrecognition,” which are all present in Gen 38, are, “chronotopic in nature” (62).

In “Dialogic Form Criticism: An Intertextual Reading of Lamentations and Psalms of Lament,” Carleen Mandolfo draws on the Bakhtinian insight that texts do not so much “belong” to genres as participate in them to achieve rhetorical ends. She aptly demonstrates how the lament psalm is reworked in Lamentations “to craft a response to the prophetic rhetoric that exploited the marriage metaphor as a staging for its accusations against Israel” (71). Mandolfo demonstrates clearly how the “didactic voice” of lament psalms, which regularly undergirds the supplicant’s “shaky faith in God’s justice” by presenting a confident traditional orthodoxy (“God is a just judge!”), is transformed in Lamentations (75). Rather than promoting orthodoxy, the didactic voice in the lament of Lamentations identifies with the broken and beaten Daughter Zion whose punishment by YHWH is portrayed as exceeding “the bounds of fairness” and whose “story” is not exhausted by the prophetic presentation of matters (87). In

Lamentations, Zion counters the prophetic rhetoric that “ostensibly provides a rationale for her experience” (90). The didactic voice, which “is the one place in the lament psalms that most logically lines up with the divine position of the prophets,” is astonishingly “reworked to reflect her point of view” (90).

David M. Valeta (“Polyglossia and Parody: Language in Daniel 1–6”) next suggests that Bakhtin’s concept of “heteroglossia or the presence of multiple conflicting voices in a text” (93) opens up new avenues for understanding the tales of Dan 1–6. Valeta explains that heteroglossia “is typically indicated by the presence of different ideological voices in the text and is occasionally made obvious by the presence of two different sociological or even national languages,” which is clearly the case in the Hebrew-Aramaic Daniel (93). In particular, Valeta contends that “the multiple voices and multiple languages of Dan 1–6 illustrate how they contribute to the overall menippean structure and satiric nature of the court tales” (94). He suggests that different characters in Dan 1–6 promote different ideologies and argues that the presence of Hebrew alongside the Aramaic in Daniel is best explained as an intentional rhetorical strategy, “an essential feature of its dialogism and satiric artistry” (108). The text, for example, “uses Aramaic, the official language of the royal court ... in some very unofficial ways to express humor and satire toward the king and his empire” (98). Valeta likewise identifies a number of “wordplays” in Dan 1–6 that he claims “demonstrate ... that the court tales are a highly complex creation designed to judge king and empire” (99).

In “The Apocalyptic Chronotope,” Michael E. Vines revisits the SBL Apocalypse Group’s description of “apocalypse” in order to “see what additional insights a Bakhtinian approach can provide into the nature of the genre” (109). Vines notes that for Bakhtin genre is less “about the presence or absences of particular literary forms” and is much more about “a work’s meta-linguistic form” (110). For Bakhtin, what is essential is the work’s “architectonic form” or its “form-shaping ideology” (110). Vines proposes to “probe the nature of apocalypse” by considering chronotope (the way in which “time and space is constructed”), author and hero, and the dialogism of apocalypses (112). For Vines, time and space in an apocalypse is “permeable and limitless” (112–13). This “unboundedness” permits a God’s-eye view on human history and activity that has “become opaque” (113). Unlike the prophet, the hero of an apocalypse is “almost completely passive” (114), while the emphasis in an apocalypse is on the “heavenly message” and its interpretation “rather than the action of the hero,” as in prophecy (114). Vines finally contends that the passivity of the hero permits the author to present a “finalizing vision” and that therefore apocalypse is a “profoundly monologic genre.” In describing the “ideological connection” between prophecy and apocalyptic, Vines understands both as revelatory literature interested in offering “a divine perspective” (115). However, in contrast to prophecy, which tends to understand redemption to be

possible in the present, “apocalypse despairs of the possibilities of reforming the present” (115).

Christopher C. Fuller (“Matthew’s Genealogy as Eschatological Satire: Bakhtin Meets Form Criticism”) applies Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope to the genealogy of Matt 1. Fuller notes how this genealogy is not only concerned with time but also evokes a sense of the spatial dimensions of Israel’s salvation history (explicitly by alluding to the Babylonian exile). According to Fuller, departures from well-known patterns of genealogy in Matt 1, namely, “the subversion of primogeniture” (127) and the inclusion of four women whose irregular status might be accounted for in a number of ways (127–30), results in a “pattern of otherness” (130). “It is not,” Fuller claims, “by culturally defined notions of direct descent that Israel’s Messiah arrives at the turning point of salvation,” but rather through “cultural and social irregularities” (130). For Fuller, these aspects of Matthew’s genealogy “correspond with” Bakhtin’s understanding of menippean satire (131), the hallmarks of which—“scandal, eccentricity, impropriety, and cultural convention” (131)—all become evident in Fuller’s reading of Matthew’s genealogy.

In the longest essay of the volume (with the longest title as well, “Bakhtin’s Dialogism and the Corrective Rhetoric of the Johannine Misunderstanding Dialogue: Exposing Seven Crises in the Johannine Situation”), Paul N. Anderson highlights Bakhtin’s claims regarding the important role “not understanding” or incomprehension plays in certain texts in John. Anderson explains that for Bakhtin such incomprehension in literature is “always polemical” and exposes “vulgar conventionality” (133–34). Anderson applies this insight from Bakhtin to the “Johannine misunderstanding dialogues,” where individuals and groups in the narrative who “fail to understand” aspects of Jesus’ teaching are corrected. Anderson sees these dialogues as “addressed rhetorically” to particular crises that confronted the Johannine community at different stages in the development of Johannine tradition. Corrected are not only the individuals and groups in the narrative who do not comprehend, but also “*the persons and groups in the audience they represent*” (135, 139–40).

Drawing on Bakhtin’s notion of “*dialogized heteroglossia*” (163), Bula Maddison (“Liberation Story or Apocalypse? Reading Biblical Allusion and Bakhtin Theory in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*”) sketches the manner in which different languages or “*belief systems*” are brought together, or “*interanimate*” in Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* (163). In her study Maddison discovers at least four “languages” at work and in dialogue with one another in *Beloved*: the African American slave narrative; African cosmology; the conventional love story; and the Bible. Maddison tends especially to biblical allusion and the manner in which the “African American imagination maps the story” (164) of the exodus onto African and African American slave experience and strivings toward

freedom in the United States. What Maddison however reveals as “missing from the lineup” of the exodus retelling—the victory at the Red Sea—is most telling. Maddison contends that Morrison’s novel indirectly configures this missing aspect of the narrative in terms of a horrible reversal, the crossing of the American sea—the Middle Passage. For Maddison, Morrison’s novel poses fundamental questions: “Is there a freedom story for blacks in America?” (174) “Can black *and white* Americans acknowledge the horrors of our common past, the unspeakables that the novel has finally spoken—and thus be reconciled at last?” (174).

Two responses to the essays noted above close the volume. Keith Bodner (“Response—Beyond Formalism: Genre and the Analysis of Biblical Texts”) appreciatively reviews the work of Mitchell, Green, Fentress-Williams, Mandolfo, and Valeta and develops reflections that build on, and stand in dialogue with, the essays he assesses. Vernon K. Robbins engages the remaining six essays (Buss, Newsom, Vines, Fuller, Anderson, and Maddison). He notes that “the contributors to this volume either discuss or refer in the introduction to nine topics or subtopics that appear in the 1981 glossary of Bakhtin’s words” (187) compiled by Michael Holquist and included in Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination*. This “*lexicon dialogicae*,” however, included “forty major topics, under which were many subtopics” (187), and Robbins asks “how many” such critical terms “should we expect in six essays on biblical canon, apocalyptic, New Testament, and Toni Morrison...?” (188). Robbins recognizes the “different uses and highly varied applications of Bakhtin’s approach to language and literature” (188) in the essays he reviews and critically tracks these uses and applications in each of them. Despite his constructive criticisms, he concludes, as do I, that although for many readers there will be “much more to learn,” the contributions to “this Semeia Studies volume ... are a highly respectable way for biblical interpreters to develop deeper insights into Bakhtin’s exciting and productive hermeneutical system that contribute to even more dynamic ways of interpreting biblical literature” (203).