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The Gains of Form Criticism in Old Testament Studies

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It was a stroke of singularly good fortune for modern Biblical scholarship that the foremost exponent of form-critical studies should have been a scholar with the diversity of gifts and vast erudition of Hermann Gunkel. His was a many-faceted genius: He was able as no other before or after him to combine into a creative synthesis the various disciplines essential to responsible form-critical investigation. Heir to more than a generation of intense historico-critical research classically exemplified in the Wellhausen school, he succeeded in pressing the frontiers of Biblical studies into new regions, without, however, forfeiting the substantial achievements of his predecessors. Already in his early career, he became deeply interested in the interior life of the ancient Hebrew; he sought to penetrate into the mind and heart of the Biblical narrators, to identify himself with their manner of thinking and feeling, and to share in the imaginative world of which they were a part. He was able to portray in extraordinarily vivid fashion, sometimes in homely phrase or colloquial speech in the manner of Luther, the folk attitudes and ways of speaking of ancient Israel. Another concern of Gunkel's early years was to explore the spacious field of the history of religions, and throughout his life he continued to avail himself of the resources of the comparative literatures and cultures of the ancient Near East. In 1895 he published his influential *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit*, a study which stood him in good stead in his pre-occupation with ancient mythology and guarded him from some of the excesses of those who followed him. But among the forces which exerted a more direct influence upon his form-critical approach (*Gattungs-forschung*), the literary and cultural studies of J. G. Herder have a clear pre-eminence. Herder, indeed, paved the way to this approach not only by his many felicitous stylistic and rhetorical observations, but also by his recognition of the forms and patterns in Hebrew literary compositions. To a scholar of Gunkel's æsthetic cast of mind, Herder's literary insights and moving appreciation of the whole Oriental world of thought and feeling came like a rush of fresh wind from the North. *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* and other works opened for him new vistas of understanding. What makes Gunkel's work so significant and compelling, then, is the way in which historical

criticism, psychological insight, knowledge of Near Eastern culture and literature, and literary appreciation are made to serve one another and are brought into creative relationship.

Gunkel was concerned with writing a literary history of the Old Testament. He saw that historical criticism could not provide the proper approach to this undertaking because the biographical data of the Biblical writers are too scant and the datings of individual literary units too insecure. He therefore proposed that the task of the literary historian was first of all to identify the various literary types (*Gattungen*) represented in the Old Testament, then to describe the formal characteristics of each type, to delineate its style, to articulate its modes of composition and rhetoric, and, not least of all, to trace its history back to the pre-literary stage. Gunkel saw that convention and custom determine to a considerable degree the fashioning, structure, and terminology of the various types; thus he was intent upon collecting as many examples of each type as possible, both within the literature of the Old Testament and in the related literatures of the ancient Near East. He perceived that much of the 'literature' of the Old Testament was originally spoken, that its provenance was oral rather than written. He sought therefore to do justice to the speaking manner and style of the 'literary' types.

But intimately related to the identification of the *Gattungen* was the search for the situation in daily communal life in which the *Gattung* had its living context. Songs of triumph were sung at the return of the conquering hero, dirges intoned at the bier of the dead, instructions recited by the priest in the sanctuary, royal hymns chanted in the court, prophetic oracles proclaimed in the market place, judicial encounters engaged in at the city gate, and liturgies rehearsed in the Temple's precincts. After the establishment of the *Gattung*, with a determination of the formal laws governing its composition, and the *Sitz im Leben*, with the discovery of the concrete situation in which the words were spoken, Gunkel adduced parallels from other parts of the Old Testament and the Near Eastern literatures. It is significant in the light of later study to observe how much he was aware of the influences from Canaan as well as of Egypt and Mesopotamia. In the volume on *The Oriental Literatures in the Kultur der Gegenwart*