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BOOK REVIEW

Between Social Stigma and Theological Meaning: A Comparative Analysis of Shame in Hebrew and Akkadian Texts

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Book Reviewed

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In his latest monograph, Jürgen Schulz offers a substantial interdisciplinary study of shame in the ancient Near East. His treatment brings biblical philology and Assyriology into sustained conversation and addresses methodological problems that have persisted in both fields for decades. The analysis centres on the Hebrew lexeme bôš and the Akkadian bâšu.

Shame as a Social and Ethical Construct: A Cognitive-Semantic Reconstruction

In the cultures of ancient Israel and Mesopotamia, shame (בּוֹשׁ, bôš, in Hebrew; bâšu in Akkadian) denoted a social condition rather than a feeling in the modern sense. Schulz rejects the modern Western assumption that shame is primarily an inward, subjective emotion akin to guilt. He instead locates it within the ethical order of ancient society. On his reading, these lexemes function as cognitive markers: when they occur, they evoke a wider social and ethical frame shared across the ancient Near East.

Schulz distinguishes the two concepts as follows.

1. בּוֹשׁ(bôš): The Hebrew Concept and the Loss of Social Honour

In the Hebrew Bible, bôš does not denote an inward sense of shame understood as psychological discomfort or a troubled conscience. It marks a social catastrophe.

- Frustrated expectation. In Hebrew texts, bôš often occurs when an expectation has failed. A person who relies on an ally who does not come to his aid experiences bôš. The point is not embarrassment but public humiliation: the plan has collapsed, and the ally has abandoned the person who depended on him.

- Theological implication. When the Bible declares that those who hope in the Lord "shall not be put to shame" (lōʾ yēbōšû, לא יבשו), it does not promise freedom from psychological discomfort. It promises security. To be shamed before God is to suffer public defeat and be left without protection. The expression lōʾ yēbōšû generally concerns those who place their trust in God. Unlike cultural shame, which is social and external, biblical shame frequently acquires a theological dimension: those who trust God will not find their expectation confounded, because God remains their security.

- Objectivity. Bôš is manifested externally. It describes the status of a person whose hope has failed before the community. Modern anthropological models, many of which Schulz criticises, commonly understand shame as a social mechanism for regulating conduct. Biblical texts can move beyond this binary scheme. The use of lōʾ yēbōšû indicates that, in biblical theology, honour rests not on public opinion, as honour-shame theory often assumes, but on a relationship with God. Studies that confine biblical shame to a sociological framework therefore risk losing its distinctive theological depth.

2. Bâšu: The Akkadian Concept and Political Erasure

Akkadian, the language of the Assyrians and Babylonians, uses bâšu in a more rigid and often overtly political setting.

- Imperial humiliation. In Akkadian texts, particularly Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions, bâšu marks the status of a defeated vassal. It is the shame of one who has violated a treaty with the emperor.

- Loss of identity. To become bâšu in the Akkadian world is to be reduced to nothing before royal power. Whereas Hebrew bôš often has a relational character, arising between allies, Akkadian bâšu more commonly belongs to a hierarchical relation between ruler and subordinate.

- Judicial and legal dimension. In Mesopotamian legal texts, bâšu may designate the condition of a person who has failed to discharge contractual obligations and is consequently subject to legal sanction.

Akkadian also has two homonymous forms associated with bâšu: forms that sound alike but carry quite different meanings. The more common use denotes an ontological condition—being, existing, being present, or being available. It frequently indicates that something is present or taking place at the time of speaking; in a broader discourse context, it describes a state of affairs and is often attested in

passages that record the occurrence or appearance of something. A separate usage, most often associated with the nouns bāštu or būštu, carries the sense of humiliation or being disgraced before an audience. Here the term concerns an individual's social and moral standing, emphasising the loss of dignity, exposure to public view, and the enduring mark this leaves on the person's place in society.

For Schulz, Akkadian bâšu provides a comparative control. It shows that ancient Near Eastern societies possessed a highly developed system of social ethics. Shame requires a public setting: no one becomes bâšu in isolation. There must be a stage—a court, battlefield, or council of elders. Shame also has an economic and political aspect, since it is often connected with failure to meet an obligation. It is exclusionary, removing a person from the circle of those regarded as honourable. In an Akkadian setting, this can amount to non-existence in the eyes of the royal administration or the divine order. Bâšu thus becomes a label for social death. A psychological reading obscures the severity of Mesopotamian imperial politics. Bâšu describes the loss of one's place in the world, not a feeling of sadness.

3. The Comparative Argument

Schulz's comparison supports three principal claims:

1. A shared semantic frame. Both lexemes participate in a cognitive frame of public exposure. Shame presupposes an audience. To be shamed is to be exposed to those who judge one's failure.

2. Semantic differentiation. Akkadian bâšu more often denotes political defeat, whereas Hebrew bôš more frequently concerns a relational betrayal or frustrated reliance. In both cases, the decisive locus of shame is the community's gaze rather than the individual's inner life.

3. Distinction from guilt. Schulz carefully separates these terms from guilt, understood as transgression of a moral norm. They instead express a person's loss of standing within the community. This distinction guards against reading Hebrew bôš through later Christian concepts of sin and repentance, which are more inward and individualised.

Schulz's study directly addresses the disciplinary isolation that has marked much earlier scholarship. The comparative method is necessary for an exact exegesis of ancient texts. Schulz's underlying question is straightforward: how can the meaning of a word be established if it is examined within only one closed linguistic system? Biblical scholars have too often relied exclusively on the Hebrew corpus. Hebrew, however, is not an island but part of a wider Semitic linguistic and cultural world. Akkadian literature, much larger in extent and chronologically central to the ancient Near East, permits a recalibration of familiar interpretations. Royal inscriptions, diplomatic correspondence, and legal agreements provide access to the imperial frame within which shame could be understood. Hebrew texts often reflect a theology of covenant; Akkadian texts disclose the political operation of power. Their comparison enables Schulz to distinguish the culturally particular from the regionally shared.

His central methodological hypothesis concerns the status of shame itself: is it a primordial and universal human emotion, or a sociocultural construct? Treating shame as an emotion experienced identically by all people in every period invites anachronism. Schulz argues that what modern readers call shame, often understood as psychological introspection, was experienced in Mesopotamia as a public loss of status.

Specificity is therefore decisive. Shame is not a universal emotional constant but a broadly shared social mechanism whose content varies by culture.

- In Israel, the frame is filled by covenantal relations between Israel and God.
- In Assyria and Babylonia, it is filled by the hierarchical relation between vassal and emperor.

Shame is culturally specific in its manifestation but general in its function: it regulates social conduct.

The comparison achieves three further results.

1. It demystifies the text. Reading the two corpora together limits the possibility of an overly theological interpretation coloured by modern Western values. Akkadian evidence acts as a corrective to biblical interpretation.

2. It strengthens the argument. Rather than positing a connection, Schulz seeks to demonstrate it through a comparative analysis of the slots within linguistic frames.

3. It establishes a programme for further research. Schulz presents comparative cognitive semantics as a demanding standard for future work. A biblical analysis that ignores Akkadian parallels remains, in his view, fundamentally incomplete.

By incorporating the Mesopotamian tradition, Schulz both broadens the study's horizon and tests the resilience of his method. If frame semantics can account with equal precision for Hebrew bôš and Akkadian bâšu, it becomes a plausible instrument for investigating ancient social consciousness more generally.

The study consequently extends into ancient anthropology, where shame emerges as a precisely delineated social instrument rather than an undefined problem.

Cognitive Precision

For Schulz, translating bôš or bâšu as "shame" in its contemporary sense immediately produces an anachronism.

His preferred reading can be stated succinctly:

- Do not begin with an emotion.
- Begin with a social position.
- When a text uses bôš, it is saying: "This person has been exposed to public humiliation; his social standing has been destroyed, and those around him witness his powerlessness."

This is the signal achievement of Schulz's approach: philology becomes a means of seeing through ancient categories rather than imposing modern ones.

1. Epistemological Transition: From Emotion to Social Reality

Contemporary psychology commonly treats shame as a personal failure. Schulz's analysis shows that ancient texts present it as a public status.

- Shame as an objective fact. To be shamed is to suffer public defeat, lose legal or social protection, or be excluded from the community. The condition is comparable to a loss of legal capacity.
- The absence of privacy. In the ancient setting, the inner world was inseparable from the external gaze. A person existed within the community; when the community ceased to recognise that person's standing, the individual fell into shame.

2. The Structure of Shame: Frames of Experience

Using frame theory, Schulz identifies the constitutive elements, or slots, in each scene of shame:

- Experiencer: the subject who undergoes social degradation.
- Agent: the person or power that imposes shame, whether enemy, deity, or rival.
- Audience: a constitutive element. In antiquity, shame requires an audience. Without a community that perceives the defeat, shame cannot operate as a social sanction.
- Default values: communal expectations, including fidelity to the covenant, success in battle, and respect for the gods. The violation of these values activates shame as a consequence.

3. Shame as an Instrument of Power: An Imperial Ethical Construct

Through comparison with Akkadian evidence, particularly Neo-Assyrian inscriptions, Schulz exposes the political use of shame:

- Imperial ideology. Shame operates as an instrument of domination. When an Assyrian king shames a vassal, he effectively erases the vassal's political agency.

- Theological dimension. Biblical texts reinterpret this political mechanism. Israel's shame frequently follows infidelity to God. Shame thereby becomes an ethical category connecting social status with religious obedience. Israel's humiliation—its defeat by an enemy—signals a broken covenant.

4. Critique of the Binary Stereotype

Schulz's most important contribution to the subject is his dismantling of the division between shame cultures and guilt cultures.

- Reductionism. He shows that this division is anachronistic. Ancient societies were complex and cannot be reduced to the category of external shame.

- Ethical complexity. Shame in these texts is neither primitive nor inferior. It is a sophisticated means of maintaining order, covenantal fidelity, and loyalty in a world where individual security depended on social cohesion.

Why Is Shame a Foundational Construct?

For Schulz, shame in Hebrew and Akkadian texts functions as a mechanism of social cohesion. It defines the boundaries of the community. To lack shame in the relevant moral sense is to stand outside society; to undergo shame is to acknowledge the force of the moral and political order.

This approach does not imply that ancient people possessed a diminished sense of self. Rather, they understood personhood through collective responsibility. Within that social world, shame was among the most powerful means of preserving the community's integrity before its gods and its enemies.

Methodological Framework

Schulz's monograph marks a methodological turning point in the study of the emotional and social worlds of the ancient Near East. He replaces the traditional, often intuitive approach with a rigorous interdisciplinary framework. Its central contribution is the rejection of reductive anthropological paradigms, particularly the model of honour-shame cultures associated with Benedict and Mead, in favour of cognitive semantics and frame semantics. Schulz argues persuasively that previous studies often adopted an "American lens," unconsciously projecting modern Western psychological concepts onto ancient texts.

Drawing on Fillmore's methodology and Dietrich Busse's analytical work, Schulz develops a model of slots, fillers, and default values. This method reconstructs scenarios of shame as objective social realities—public humiliation, defeat, and loss of status—rather than treating them exclusively as subjective emotions.

Contribution to the Field

The book proceeds with an impressive degree of logical consistency:

1. History of research. A critical survey identifies the central lacuna in earlier scholarship.

2. Linguistic analysis. Schulz offers a precise examination of the Hebrew and Akkadian corpora. Neo-Assyrian texts provide an essential comparative setting for understanding imperial ideology and the political dimension of shame.

3. Synthesis. Philological findings are integrated into a broader anthropological account, while cultural essentialism is avoided and the contextual variability of ancient experience remains in view.

1. Comparative Method: Convergence and Divergence of Ethos

Schulz uses comparison to test the validity of the opposition between honour and shame.

- Convergences. He identifies a shared cognitive frame in which shame entails social degradation. In both Hebrew and Akkadian traditions, bôš/bâšu functions as a public marker of lost status. In each

system, shame is inseparable from failure to fulfil a social or political obligation, whether covenant or vassalage.

- Divergences: the role of the deities. Schulz is particularly careful at this point.

- In Mesopotamian mythology, shame often arises from hierarchical determinism. The gods are absolute rulers, and shame constitutes the existential defeat of a person who has lost their favour.

- In the biblical tradition, shame acquires an ethical dimension through the covenantal relationship. Schulz argues that in Israel shame can function as an instrument of divine discipline: it is dynamic because God uses it to restore the people to loyalty. The direction therefore differs. Akkadian shame is principally a condition of defeat; biblical shame is often a summons to repentance.

2. Philological Method: Semantic Precision against Lexicographical Superficiality

The core of the book is a rigorous analysis of Hebrew bôš and Akkadian bâšu. Schulz moves beyond conventional lexicography in two respects:

- Cognitive semantics. Rather than supplying linear definitions, he treats words as cognitive markers that evoke particular semantic fields.

- Differentiation. He distinguishes the terms by genre, above all legal texts and prophetic discourse. In an Akkadian legal setting, the term may mark contractual failure; in Hebrew prophetic books, it can express theological abandonment. The distinction prevents a facile identification of these terms with modern psychological experiences of guilt.

3. Sociocultural Context: Shame as a Legal and Ritual Regulator

Schulz reads ancient texts not as repositories of abstract ideas but as documents rooted in social practice. This is one of the study's strengths: it presents shame as an experienced cultural category.

- Law. Shame often carries legal consequences. In Mesopotamian legal collections, the violation of certain norms leads to public abasement confirmed by law. In this setting, shame operates as a sanction rather than a subjective feeling.

- Ritual. Schulz suggests that many rites of purification or abasement constitute the ritual removal of a condition of bôš. A person publicly shamed must undergo a rite before recovering social status and honour.

- Interpersonal relations. The texts reveal shame as a mechanism of social cohesion. It sustains loyalty between vassals and king, or between the individual and the community. Its preventive force lies in the threat of public humiliation, which helps secure compliance with treaties and moral codes.

Schulz's study combines philological analysis with socio-anthropological reconstruction. By bringing together comparative, philological, and contextual methods, he argues that shame is a fundamental social construct in ancient Near Eastern life. His contribution lies in turning ancient vocabulary into a detailed map of social reality. The book deserves close attention from scholars committed to methodological integrity in the exegesis of ancient texts. Although its subject is antiquity, its conclusions also have implications for current work in social psychology and ethics.

Critical Assessment

Schulz's study exemplifies intellectual discipline. His sharp criticism of scholarly complacency and the superficial citation of modern theory makes the book especially valuable to readers working in biblical exegesis and hermeneutics. His methodological intervention requires readers to examine their assumptions and take responsibility for their treatment of ancient texts.

The book's specialist character will necessarily limit its readership, but its scholarly value is substantial. Schulz demystifies the emotional world of antiquity through a model that is testable, precise, and resistant to the anachronisms found in earlier scholarship.

Methodological Contribution and the Ethics of Argument

1. Scholarly Value: Innovation and Systematisation

Schulz systematises existing knowledge while also reorienting the field. His survey of earlier literature—Pedersen, Stiebert, and the Context Group—is extensive, but the book's principal value lies in this methodological reorientation.

Earlier studies dealt chiefly with ideas about shame. Schulz introduces a cognitive-semantic method that makes it possible to examine the text through slots and frames. Alongside organising the philological evidence, he develops an instrument for interpreting it in a manner open to verification. The gain is epistemological rigour: exegesis is recast from intuitive apprehension as an analytical procedure.

2. Strength of the Argument: Balance within the Comparative Corpus

Biblical studies have often instrumentalised Akkadian texts as background material for the Hebrew canon. Schulz avoids this familiar problem.

- Symmetry of sources. The Hebrew and Akkadian corpora are treated as equal partners in the inquiry. Schulz does not enlist Akkadian texts merely to confirm the meaning of Hebrew bôš. Instead, he analyses both systems as parts of a broader, shared cultural and cognitive space.

- Imperial-covenantal dialectic. Although the Hebrew texts provide the book's principal thread, the Akkadian materials, especially Neo-Assyrian vassal treaties, retain their own analytical integrity. The comparison discloses the imperial character of shame. Its strength lies in Schulz's refusal to let either tradition absorb the other; the tension between them remains productive throughout.

3. Interdisciplinarity and the Critique of Honour-Shame Theory

In 2026, the Context Group's theories of honour-shame culture face sustained postcolonial and methodological scrutiny. Schulz writes as an informed critic of this tradition.

- Distance from essentialism. He explicitly rejects the binary models associated with Malina and Neyrey. Theories of honour-shame culture are treated as historical products of mid-twentieth-century anthropology that now restrict the text more often than they illuminate it.

- Anthropological precision. Schulz draws on anthropological theory, especially the contemporary cognitive models of Busse and Ziem, to clear away accumulated stereotypes. He does not discard anthropology but reformulates its contribution, moving from a static honour-shame system to dynamic cognitive frames.

- Postcolonial awareness. Schulz recognises the danger of an "American gaze" in this scholarship. His interdisciplinary method brings linguistics, ancient history, and cognitive science together while retaining philological precision as the governing criterion.

The limitations of Stiebert's approach clarify what Schulz seeks to overcome.

1. The Problem: A Methodological Pendulum

The field has been caught in a false dichotomy:

- Position A: the static cultural-anthropological model. In the work of Neyrey and Malina, ancient society appears as a fixed honour-shame culture. The model is anachronistic because it imposes a modern Mediterranean stereotype on ancient Israelites, as though they operated like contemporary rural communities in Greece or Sicily.

- Position B: Stiebert's psychological model. In reaction to that static account, Stiebert moves to the opposite pole. Drawing on Thomas Scheff, she treats shame as an intimate, inward emotion. This individualises the ancient person, turning that person into a modern subject who feels shame deep within the psyche.

Both positions miss the mark. One makes the ancient person a statistical instance of a social value; the other turns that person into a modern patient of psychoanalysis. Both neglect the text and its linguistic specificity.

2. Schulz's Solution: The Text as an Objective Reality

Schulz addresses the problem through cognitive semantics. He does not ask what the ancient person felt, as a psychological approach might, or simply what kind of culture that person inhabited, as an anthropological model might. His question is linguistic: how does this word function within the language system of its time?

This position corrects earlier approaches in three ways:

- Abandoning psychologisation. Schulz is not primarily concerned with whether a prophet felt ashamed. For him, bôš is a social designation. A prophetic use of the term reports an objective condition to the community—for example, that an alliance has failed.

- Abandoning anthropological stereotypes. Schulz does not rely on Mediterranean models. He uses the Akkadian corpus as an internal cultural comparator. Shame in the Bible, he argues, operates through the same linguistic mechanism as in Mesopotamian imperial literature: social exclusion and humiliation.

- Treating shame as a frame. Within frame semantics, shame is neither a value in the honour-shame opposition nor an emotion in the psychological sense. It is a social frame activated when an event disrupts the ordinary course of communal life.

How Does Schulz Deconstruct Stiebert's Approach?

On Schulz's account, Stiebert's approach fails at two points:

1. It misconstrues the function of the text. For Stiebert, prophetic texts are evidence of emotions. For Schulz, they are communicative acts that employ lexemes to define the audience's reality.

2. It underestimates social logic. Stiebert's psychologisation obstructs access to the public character of biblical shame. If shame is only an emotion, it remains private. In the Bible, however, shame is a public event and must therefore be analysed as a social sanction rather than an act of introspection.

Schulz counters Stiebert's subjectivism and the reductionism of anthropological models by returning to the text as a linguistic fact. Shame identifies a condition within social space when an alliance or status is compromised. Semantic precision takes the place of an assumed psychological depth.

Conclusion to the Review

Schulz's study differs from general surveys of social values in antiquity. It is a methodologically revisionary monograph that requires scholars to justify each interpretative step. The argument is carefully balanced, and the interdisciplinary method repositions biblical philology as a modern field capable of using advanced cognitive models in its treatment of ancient shame.

Shame in the Worlds of the Hebrew Bible and Akkadian Texts is among the more important recent contributions to biblical studies. Its combination of rigorous philology and cognitive linguistics will make it a point of reference for future work on the semantics of emotion and social norms in the ancient Near East. Schulz's monograph is an ambitious attempt to redefine the semantic field of shame. It rejects the conventional and often anachronistic interpretation of shame as either a subjective emotion or a static anthropological construct, the so-called honour-shame culture, and replaces it with analysis grounded in cognitive semantics and frame theory.

Through detailed comparison of the Hebrew Bible and Akkadian Mesopotamian traditions, Schulz presents shame as an objective social and political sanction. The work exposes methodological problems in earlier biblical scholarship and develops a model in which shame denotes public loss of status and social death rather than an introspective psychological category.

Principal Findings

- Shame as a social frame. In ancient texts, shame is a status activated before an audience, not a feeling located in the heart. It reinforces social cohesion and sustains loyalty to both covenantal and imperial orders.

- The imperial dimension of bâšu. Akkadian texts show how shame could become an instrument of Neo-Assyrian foreign policy, used to humiliate vassals and erase their political identity.

- A critique of psychological reductionism. Schulz rejects readings such as Stiebert's that psychologise prophetic texts. Biblical shame is consistently related to the public breach of covenant with God.

- Cognitive precision. The model of slots and fillers makes scenes of shame analytically explicit and places the discussion on verifiable methodological ground.

Personal Assessment

The study rewards readers who value philological accuracy and methodological economy. Schulz clears away exhausted theoretical models with unusual precision. More importantly, he changes the instruments with which the material is read: the reader moves from passive reception of inherited interpretations to active scrutiny of the assumptions that govern them.

The book presupposes substantial knowledge, particularly of lexicology, methodology, and linguistics. Yet the exposition is balanced, clear, and logically controlled. Each chapter contributes to a cumulative argument whose stages remain visible to the reader.

The work's intellectual force derives from the clarity it brings to a complex problem that has occupied scholars for decades. It sharpens the questions that govern the discussion and provides reasoned answers. The book is an impressive achievement in philological method and a valuable source of guidance for exacting work in ancient-text exegesis.

Critical Appraisal: Methodological Challenges in Reconstructing Ancient Concepts of Shame

Schulz's monograph is an ambitious effort to reposition biblical philology by adopting cognitive semantics and frame theory as primary exegetical tools. Its treatment of Hebrew bôš and Akkadian bâšu provides a methodological corrective to established anthropological paradigms. The argument is disciplined and innovative. Its proposed method, however, also raises serious questions about its own limits.

Methodological Risks: Instrumentalisation and Reductionism

Schulz's central contribution, the model of slots and fillers, may also be his method's principal weakness. He successfully counters the psychological reductionism of earlier scholarship, including Stiebert's work, but risks replacing it with linguistic determinism. Treating ancient lexemes as cognitive markers that activate fixed social scenes can dehumanise the text. When emotionally charged terms are reduced to functional social sanctions, the analysis may lose the excess of meaning that does not fit within a strictly delimited frame.

The representativeness of the comparative corpus also requires scrutiny. Schulz offers a reasoned defence of Akkadian material on the basis of a shared cognitive space. Even so, selecting Akkadian texts as the primary corrective to the biblical corpus remains an interpretative decision. The Akkadian imperial model, in which shame acts chiefly as a political instrument for erasing identity, may become so powerful that the distinctively biblical covenant with God is reduced to a form of vassalage.

The Limits of a "Pure" Cognitive Approach

Schulz practises commendable scholarly caution in attempting to distinguish social status, emotion, and linguistic meaning. Yet those distinctions may owe more to modern academic operationalisation than to ancient consciousness. His analysis is precise, but its consistency becomes harder to sustain in ambivalent poetic or theological passages, where linguistic fact and subjective experience cannot be cleanly separated.

Schulz rightly argues that ancient people did not experience this category through the concepts of modern psychology. Nevertheless, the limited place given to emotional surplus remains open to question. Even if shame was primarily a social sanction, it may still have involved a profound personal state. Such an experience need not have been psychologised in a modern manner to form an integral part of human life.

The Frame as Scaffolding, Not Confinement

These reservations do not invalidate Schulz's monograph. They suggest that its method is best understood as scaffolding. The book's value lies in setting a new threshold for biblical studies and in moving exegesis from intuitive interpretation towards a system of claims that can be tested against evidence.

Three points deserve emphasis:

1. Representativeness. The model should be tested against a wider corpus, including texts not directly connected with imperial or legal structures.

2. Integration. Future studies could extend Schulz's findings by bringing the cognitive approach into conversation with phenomenological perspectives, thereby addressing emotional meanings that are not fully institutionalised.

3. Accessibility. Despite its specialist register, the book is foundational for scholars seeking precision. It nevertheless requires critical extension if the cognitive frame is not to become a closed structure.

The debate exposes a basic dilemma: can the ancient world be understood without imposing some kind of frame?

- Schulz at least acknowledges the cognitive frame as a methodological construct. In this respect, he differs from earlier scholars who presented their modern lenses as objective truth.

- His work does not end the debate but establishes a new point of departure. Its methodological rigour is such that even scholars who reject his conclusions will need to engage the evidence and categories through which those conclusions are argued.

The model is therefore not a prefabricated scheme that necessarily smothers the text. It is scaffolding for a more exact reading of ancient social reality. Used uncritically, however, it can harden into a self-contained system.

Schulz's work is important to current debate, but its pure cognitive method should be employed with critical distance if the theological and anthropological complexity of ancient texts is to be preserved. The claim that the book establishes a new threshold is persuasive; critical discussion must nonetheless move beyond admiration for methodological rigour.

The Reduction of Scholarship to Technical Procedure

The danger inherent in establishing a new methodological threshold is methodological imperialism. If every subsequent objection is required to use the same analytical instruments, Schulz's epistemological frame may determine how a text is interpreted and which humanistic approaches count as legitimate. Phenomenological, existential, and literary-aesthetic readings then risk dismissal as insufficiently scientific or incapable of verification.

- Methodological closure. If scholarly debate is confined to refining slots and sharpening frames, there is less room for questions that resist quantification or systematic classification. A method designed to open the text may become a constraint, limiting truth to what its semantic model can measure.

- The interpreter's subjectivity. Schulz presents his method as objective, yet every cognitive model remains susceptible to the researcher's cultural assumptions. Declaring the method a standard can obscure the fact that the very definition of a frame is partly subjective and shaped by a modern Western scholarly paradigm.

The Challenge of Excess Meaning

The central critical difficulty is the limited capacity of frame semantics to accommodate what biblical scholarship often calls an excess of meaning.

- Poetic and theological irreducibility. Ancient texts, especially prophetic and poetic works, frequently operate through ambiguity, metaphor, and affect. An insistence on logical consistency may cause such features to appear as noise to be filtered out rather than as essential elements of textual meaning.

- The human dimension of ancient experience. If ancient people are reduced to subjects who merely activate social frames—shame as status or punishment—the human drama of biblical figures recedes. The method may then replace one anachronism with another: instead of dismantling modern projections, it risks projecting a rational, cognitively organised modern subject onto people who may have experienced the world in less systematic ways.

Conclusion: Captive to the Method?

If scholars must adopt Schulz's instruments in order to formulate disagreement, free scholarly debate may give way to methodological hegemony. The new threshold could narrow the development of biblical studies by confining it to a cognitive corridor from which departure is treated as a failure of rigour. Progress will depend not on accepting Schulz's tools as universal, but on identifying the points at which they fail under pressure from texts that remain larger than any semantic frame.

Recommendation

Jürgen Schulz's monograph sets a demanding standard for humanistic scholarship. It will be relevant to biblical scholars, Assyriologists, ancient historians, and literary theorists, especially those who have reached the limits of twentieth-century anthropological debates and seek a more exact, cognitively informed method of rereading ancient texts.

For master's and doctoral students in theology, history, and ancient languages, the book is a valuable resource. It serves both as a scholarly reference and as a methodological guide, modelling discipline, precision, and ethical responsibility towards ancient sources. Schulz shows how the complexity of emotionally charged terms can be studied without essentialism or anachronism and with sustained respect for linguistic evidence.

The book warrants close reading by scholars committed to precision in this field. It expands the reader's knowledge while sharpening the habits of research, encouraging scrutiny of inherited models and a more exact account of the ancient world. Schulz's monograph invites reconsideration of the structures that govern interpretation and should remain a significant point of reference for future research.

Skopje, 16 June 2026