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Correlating Methods In The Interpretation Of The Old Testament¹

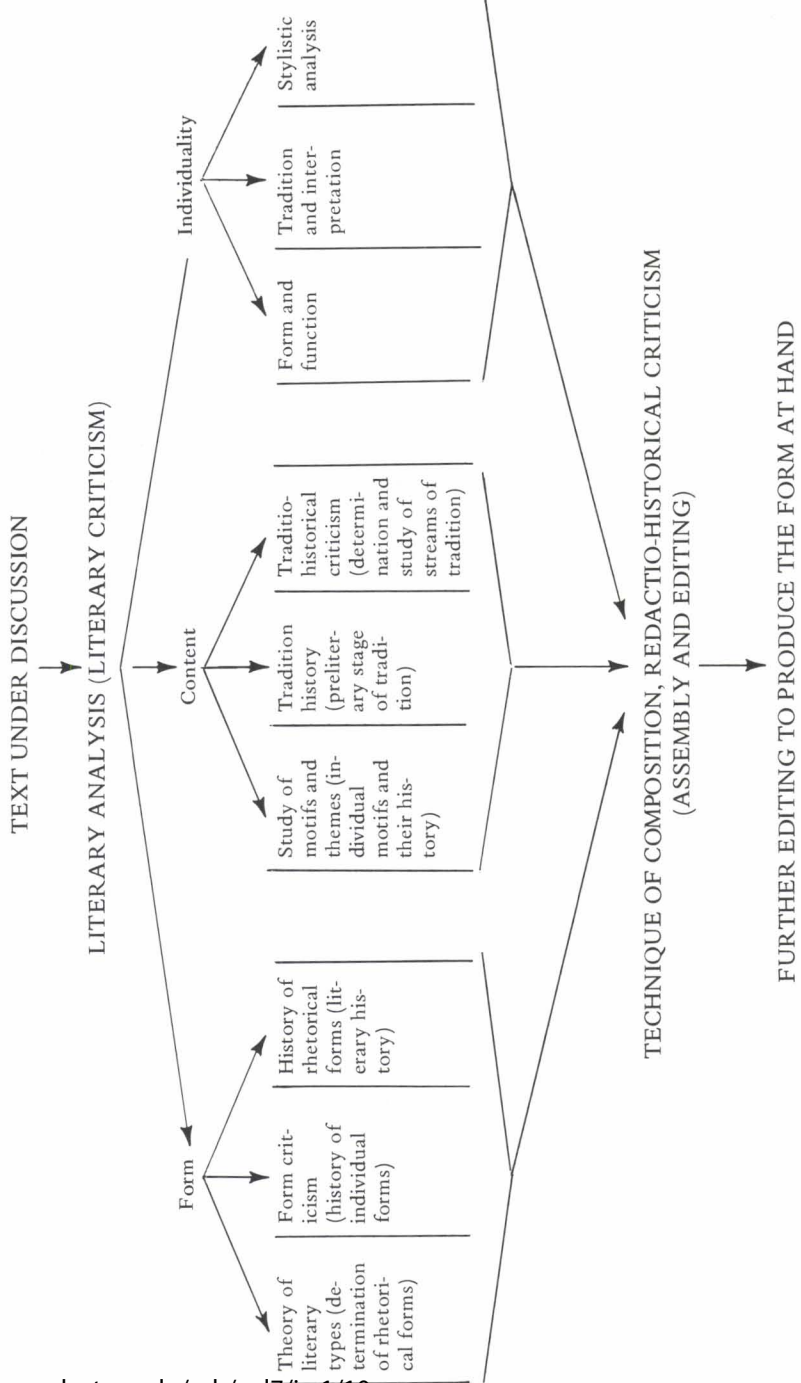
Kent Harold Richards

An accurate interpretation of any Old Testament (hereafter OT) passage demands that the interpreter utilize a multiplicity of historical, literary, and form critical methods. Hardly anyone would deny this as a central presupposition for exegesis. Despite this fact, the critical introductions to the OT,² and articles of a methodological nature, have often failed at two points. First, rarely is there a suggestion about *how* the multifarious methods are to be correlated in the actual interpretation of a text. The standard format of an introduction is to describe the methods in the order of their historical development. In fact, one can almost date an introduction by what method falls at the end of the methodological discussion. Secondly, the *purpose* of the discussion usually rests far in the background, if it is even present. All too frequently the description of the methods is discussed as an end in itself. These failures are self-evident to any observant student of the OT. The correlation and purpose of the methods need to be viewed together, for they are inseparable in the interpreter's hermeneutical process. However, for the purpose of analysis, they can be taken singularly, leaving the total discussion for a later time.³

As a point of departure in discussing the problem of correlation, I would like to turn to one of the more recent introductions to the OT by Georg Fohrer.⁴ In addition to the long standing task of an introduction⁵, Fohrer indicates "a special task in the present situation." It is,

... to coordinate and integrate the divergent methods and tendencies... Our purpose is to prevent the independent or mutually hostile development of the various schools and constitute the science of introduction as an organic whole.⁶

This special task would seem to be an answer to the failure of correlation. Fohrer provides a chart which is to function as the explanation of this correlation.

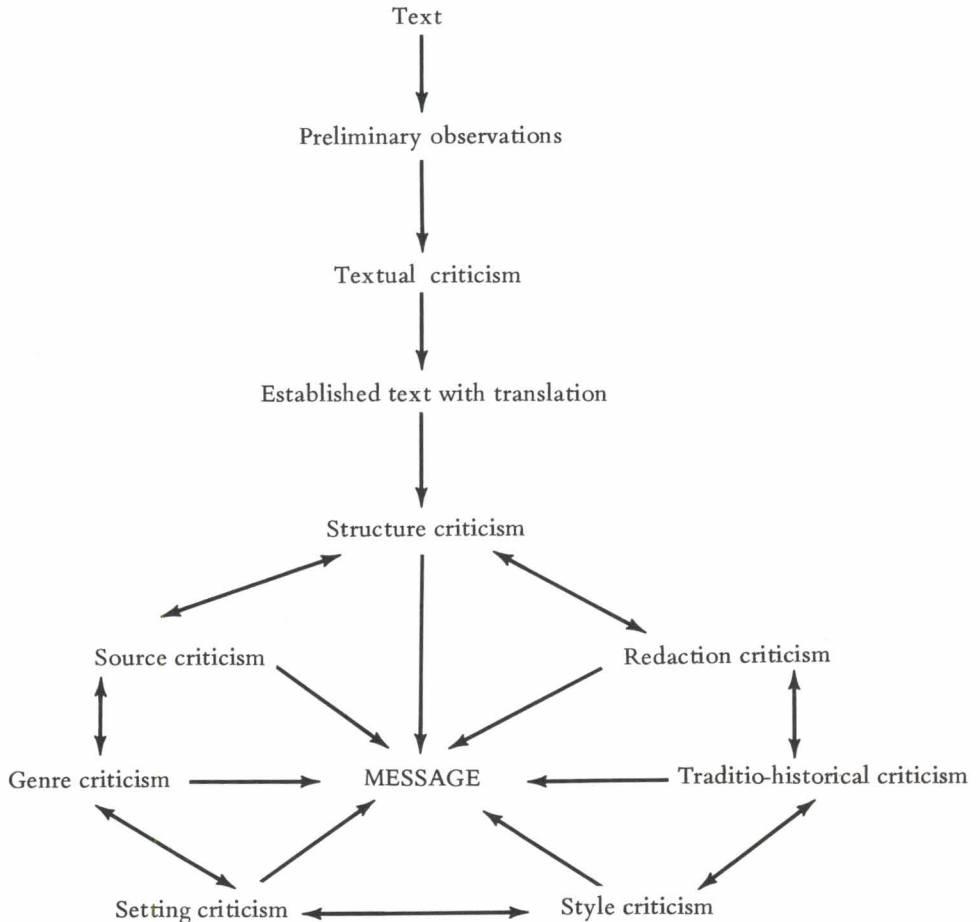


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Certainly, the chart should serve as a recommendation to future writers of introductions, not in its particular form, but as an essential feature of any introduction's format. A variety of questions arise from an examination of the chart. 1) Textual criticism is not mentioned.⁸ Does this mean it does not function in the correlation of methods and the analysis of a text? 2) Can one begin his analysis with literary criticism? The problem can be underscored if one turns to the Hexateuch. Does the analysis of a Genesis text begin with source critical issues? What kind of consensus can be reached with the existing confusion of identifying sources? If one starts here, does the foundation of his exegesis rest on the text or on the science of source criticism, a secondary element to the existing text? 3) On what grounds can one subdivide the methods between form,⁹ content, and individuality? The debate over the separation of form and content has a long history in form critical circles. Can one really separate them? How is individuality discovered, if not through form and content? Why are form and function discussed under individuality and not form? Form, content, and individuality are important issues, but probably not controlling ones for the correlation. 4) Is it possible to make such sharp distinctions between pre-literary stages (under content and tradition history) and literary history (under form and history of rhetorical forms)?¹⁰ 5) Why the separation between assembly and editing and further editing? Is the technique of composition qualitatively different from editing, or merely quantitatively different? 6) Is the chart directional or purposive? Can the interpreter use the chart in his exegesis of a specific text? Stated otherwise, does the chart correlate the methods in order to be instructive to the interpreter? These are only a few of the questions that arise from Fohrer's chart. They seem to signal at least three major concerns:

1. How can the interpreter focus on the text as the foundation of his exegesis?
2. Can the correlation take place through a secondary, static means, i.e. form, content, individuality?
3. Should not the correlation be bound closely to the purpose (the other problem raised at the beginning of the paper)?

In order to suggest some answers to these questions, I would like to propose another chart. It is suggested primarily for the purpose of discussion and not as a *fait accompli*. A correlation can only ultimately arise from the actual practice of interpretation.



Some remarks about several of the methods and the overall procedure will be helpful in understanding the applicability of the correlation. Of course, each of the steps in the chart presuppose an entire set of questions. Only a few of the questions can be indicated in some of the less well known methods.¹¹

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The foundational work up to the establishing of the text with a preliminary translation should include such considerations as,¹²

1. Reading the text in its context.
2. Knowing some of the problems raised in the history of research on that context.
3. Listing the problems between Hebrew and translated text.
4. Marking the problems of understanding.

This does not even mention the multitude of questions raised by textual criticism. It should not be viewed as an appendage to the task of interpretation, but as a vital part of the task. The realization of conscious alterations and unconscious errors can be essential in interpreting a text.

Structure criticism¹³ is a key step in applying the proposed correlation. It is the step through which all other questioning should proceed. It is the attempt to display the text in outline form. The long history of tradition, through which most OT texts have gone, obscures the structure, making it necessary for the interpreter to employ some careful questioning. Today, when we receive a letter, we immediately realize it is a letter by its structure or outline. Unfortunately, this is not the case with most biblical texts. The interpreter should establish the structure of the latest form of the text, i.e., as it exists on the printed page. Some of the questions which need to be raised are the following:

1. Where is the beginning of a unit?
2. Where does the unit end?
3. Are there various sections within the unit?
4. What relationship do the sub-units have to the whole? Vice versa?
5. What can you determine about the relationship between this present unit and its context?
6. Does the structure of the unit signal anything about its pre-history?

The units and sub-units can be determined grammatically, thematically, relationally, etc. While structure criticism is the first step, it can be returned to after some additional insights have been gained from other methods.

The outlining of a passage is something one can find in most commentaries, but which has seldom been carried out with much precision.¹⁴ A careful consideration of structure has arisen most prominently with third and fourth generation form critics and the New Stylists.

The usual direction to proceed, once one gains the structure, is toward source, genre, setting and style criticism. Here I must mention the deficiency of any chart in graphically portraying the direction of questioning. Normally one would proceed in a spiral, from structure criticism through these four “isms,” to traditio-historical criticism, then redaction criticism, and finally towards the message. In reality what happens, instead of a spiral, is a circling procedure from structure criticism through the others, again and again, until one has encircled the message. This way each of the “isms” acts as a corrective on the others. However, since the circle must be started at some point, one most assuredly

has a point of origination with structure criticism.

Some remarks about genre, setting, and style criticism would be helpful. The questions of genre and setting have long been a part of the form critical methodology. I have indicated these as separate “isms,” since they do raise different kinds of questions. Form criticism has not been mentioned as a separate category, since the term evokes so many connotations. However, the range of questions raised by the method are included in the chart. The identification of the genre helps immensely in getting to the message of the text. In our contemporary life, we would not think of substituting the genre of a love letter for a business letter when writing to a company. The OT writers would have had these same sensitivities in formulating their writings. The variety and richness of genres in the OT, and for that matter in the Ancient Near East, is immediately transparent.

As one writer says,

Indeed, the book contains a most remarkable assortment of literature: narratives, some crude, some highly sophisticated, prophetic sayings, proverbs, cultic songs, long letters, apocalyptic visions. The use of words, the style and construction follow correspondingly varied principles, and all these must be considered before a text can be accurately interpreted.¹⁵

Setting criticism is the attempt to raise the sociological questions. Every text, be it oral or written, comes from a specific grouping, a particular area of life, and this is reflected in the text. This is not to say that a specific genre remains static in distinct settings. Clearly, a genre of literature discovered at one point in history may reflect one setting, while at a later time it may appear in another setting. So the question arises about the setting of a specific text. Was it in the courts, the temple, at the gate, on the streets, in the family? Does the text’s setting indicate a confrontation of individuals, or a solitary moment? What is the relationship of the text to some event? Questions such as these help the interpreter understand the sociological backdrop for the text, and consequently to demonstrate how it can function for us today.

Style criticism, as indicated by Fohrer, studies “sound patterns, verse structure, use of images, and composition.”¹⁶ A variety of questions arise in this “ism” and have been vigorously carried out by what is frequently called the New Stylistics or New Criticism.¹⁷

I use the term *traditio-historical criticism* to include the items of *Überlieferungsgeschichte* (Fohrer refers to as tradition history) and *Traditionsgeschichte* (Fohrer refers to as *traditio-historical criticism*). What I mean in this case is the history of oral and written traditions, both the development of structures and the means of their transmission. This history impinges directly upon source, genre, setting, and style criticism. I think it is also necessary to indicate that this “ism” must be concerned with related Ancient Near Eastern traditions. In order to better understand an OT text in its Ancient Near Eastern backdrop, I would raise the following questions.

1. Are there similarly structured Ancient Near Eastern texts?
2. Does the genre classification exist outside the OT?

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3. Does the same setting in the Ancient Near East make use of this same genre?
4. If similarities are found in the Ancient Near Eastern literature, what is the chronological relationship of the two?
5. Is the similarity more than a motif?
6. How might the purpose of the story have changed from non-Israelite usage to Israelite usage?

Redaction criticism has not frequently been employed in OT circles,¹⁸ but primarily in gospels research. In some sense, it is very closely related to what I have called traditio-historical criticism and of course form criticism. As Norman Perrin notes, "Form criticism and redaction criticism in particular are very closely related to one another."¹⁹ It does deal more explicitly with the theological motivation of a writer or redactor than does traditio-historical criticism.

In summary to these methodological considerations, I can refer back to the three major concerns raised. First, any correlation must explicitly attempt to use the text as its starting point. As primitive as that sounds, it would seem that it has been overlooked by a good number of OT scholars. I believe that in placing structure criticism at the beginning of one's interpretation, he is forced to focus on the text, as no other procedure would urge him to do. Secondly, the methods must be correlated in a dynamic and flexible manner. The only controlling element must be the text, in all its continuity and discontinuity. The form, content, and individuality must be developed in terms of each method. Thirdly, all of these methods have as their primary purpose the freeing of the text to speak forth its message. Only through a careful correlation of the critical methods can the interpreter hope to present the *messages* of the OT for our time.

¹ This is part of a paper read at The Middle West branch of the American Oriental Society and the Mid-Western Section of the Society of Biblical Literature at Indiana University, November 3 – 4, 1969.

² Below is a fairly complete list of introductions to the OT. None of the introductions include a comprehensive list and I would like to collect such a list. Any suggestion for such a list would be appreciated.

G. C. Aalders, *Oud-Testamentische Kanoniek*, 1952.

G. W. Anderson, *A Critical Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1959; 2nd ed., 1968.

W. W. Graf Baudissin, *Einleitung in die Bücher des Alten Testaments*, 1901.

A. Bentzen, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1948-49; 5th ed., 1959.

A. Bertholdt, *Historischkritische Einleitung in sämtliche kanonische und apokryphische Schriften des Alten und Neues Testament*, 1812-19.

J. A. Bewer, *The Literature of the Old Testament in its Historical Development*, 1922; 3rd ed. (re. by E. G. H. Kraeling), 1962.

Bratsiotis, *Εἰσαγωγή εἰς τὴν Παλαιὰν Διαθήκην*, 1937.

-----, *Ἐπίτομος Εἰσαγωγή εἰς τὴν Παλαιὰν Διαθήκην*, 1955.

K. Budde, *Geschichte der althebraischen Literatur, Apokryphen und Pseudepigraphen von A. Bertholet*, 1906; 2nd ed., 1909.

- Cassel, *Geschichte der jüdischen Literatur*, 1872-73.
- J. Coppens, *Introduction a l'etude historique de l'Ancien Testament*, I, 1938; 3rd ed., 1942; II, 1950; III, 1944; 2nd ed., 1950.
- Cornely, *Historica et critica introductio in utriusque Testamenti libros sacros*, 1885-87; 2nd ed., 1894-97, 1925.
- C. H. Cornill, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, 1891; 7th ed., 1913 (English: *Introduction to the Canonical Books of the Old Testament*, 1907).
- Davidson, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1862-63.
- S. R. Driver, *Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*, 1891; 9th ed., 1913, reprinted 1961.
- J. G. Eichhorn, *Einleitung ins Alte Testament*, 1780-83; 4th ed., 1823-24.
- O. Eissfeldt, *Einleitung in das Alte Testsmnt*, 1934; 3rd ed., 1964 (English: *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, 1965).
- I. Engnell, *Gamla Testamentet: en traditionshistorisk inledning*, I, 1945.
- Fell, *Lehrbuch der allgemeinen Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, 1906.
- Flanders, Crapps and Anthony, *People of the Covenant: An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1963.
- Fohrer, *Introduction to The OT*, Trans. David E. Green, 1968.
- Fürst, *Geschichte der biblischen Literatur und des jüdisch-hellenistischen Schrifttums*, 1867-70.
- Gautier, *Introduction a l'Ancien Testament*, 1906; 3rd ed., 1939.
- Geiger, *Urschrift und Übersetzungen der Bibel*, 1857; 2nd ed., 1928.
- Goettsberger, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, 1928.
- Gottwald, *A Light to the Nations An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1959.
- Gray, *A Critical Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1913, 1919.
- H. Gunkel, *Die israelitische Literatur* ("Kultur der Gegenwart," ed. P. Hinneberg, Teil I, Abt. VII), 1906, pp. 51-102; 2nd ed., 1925, pp. 53-112. (English: "What remains of the Old Testament?," trans. A. K. Dallas in *Fundamental Problems in Hebrew Literary History*, New York: Momillan Co., 1928, pp. 57-68.
- R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1969.
- J. Hempel, *Die althebräische Literatur und ihr hellenistisch-jüdisches Nachleben* ("Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaften", ed. O. Walzel), 1930-34.
- H. Höpft, *Introductio in sacros utriusque Testamenti libros compendium*, 1921-22; II: *Introductio specialis in Vetus Testamentum*, 6th ed., 1963 (cur. S. Bovo).
- A. Hudal, *Kurze Einleitung in die Heiligen Bücher des Alten Testaments*, 1920; 6th ed., 1948 (neubearbeitet von F. Sauer).
- Y. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*. Trans. and abridged by Moshe Greenberg, 1960.
- Kaulen, *Einleitung im die Heilige Schrift des Alte und Neues Testament*, 1876-81; 5th ed., 1911-13.
- A. Kuenen, *Historisch-kritisch Onderzoek naar het ontstaan en de verzameling van de boeken des Ouden verbonds*, 1861-65; 2nd ed., 1885-93.
- C. Kuhl, *Die Entstehung des Alten Testaments*, 1953; 2nd ed., 1960 (ed. G. Fohrer) (English: *The Old Testament, Its Origins and Composition*, 1961).
- A. Lods, *Histoire de la litterature hebraique et juive depuis les origines jusqu'a la ruine de l'etat juif (135 apres J.-C.)*, 1950.
- Margolis, *The Hebrew Scriptures in the Making*, 1922; 2nd ed., 1948.
- Mariani, *Introductio in Libros Sacros Veteris Testamenti*, 1958.
- J. Meinhold, *Einführung in das Alte Testament*, 1919; 3rd ed., 1932.
- Möller, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, 1934.
- , *Grundriss für alttestamentliche Einleitung*, 1958.
- G. F. Moore, *Literature of the Old Testament*, 1913; 2nd ed., 1948 (rev. by L. H. Brockington).
- Napier, *B. D. Song of the Vineyard*, 1962.
- Nikel, *Grundriss der Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, 1924.
- Nöldeke, *Die alttestamentliche Literatur*, 1868.
- , *Untersuchungen zur Kritik des Alte Testament*, 1869.
- W. O. E. Oesterley and T. H. Robinson, *Introduction to the Books of the Old Testament*, 1934; 3rd ed., 1958.

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- R. H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1941, reprinted 1957.
 -----, *The Books of the Old Testament*, 1957.
- Reuss, *Die Geschichte der heiligen Schriften des Alte Testament*, 1881; 2nd ed., 1890.
- A. Robert and A. Feuillet, *Introduction a la Bible*. Tome I: Introduction generale, Ancien Testament par P. Auvray et al., 2nd ed., 1959.
- Robert et Tricot, *Initiation Biblique*, 1939; 3rd ed., 1954. (English: *Guide to the Bible: An Introduction to the Study of Holy Scripture*, trans. Arbez and McGuire, 1952; 3rd ed., 1960).
- H. H. Rowley, *The Growth of the Old Testament*, 1950.
- S. Sandmel, *The Hebrew Scriptures. An Introduction to Their Literature and Religious Ideas*, 1963.
- Scholz, *Einleitung in die Heiligen Schriften des Alte und Neues Testament*, 1845-48.
- Segal, *מבוא המקרא*, 1946-50; 4th ed., 1954-56.
- E. Sellin, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, 1910 (English: *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1923).
- E. Sellin and L. Rost, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, 9th ed., 1959.
- W. R. Smith, *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church*, 1881; 2nd ed., 1892.
- C. Steuernagel, *Lehrbuch der Einleitung in das Alte Testament. Mit einem Anhang über die Apokryphen und Pseudepigraphen*, 1912.
- A. J. Tos, *Approaches to the Bible: The Old Testament*, 1963.
- T. C. Vriezen, *Cud-isrealietische Geschriften*, 1948.
 -----, *De Literatuur van Oud-Israel*, 1961.
- A. Weiser, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, 1939; 5th ed., 1963 (English: *The Old Testament: Its Formation and Development*, 1961).
- J. Wellhausen, *Die Composition des Hexateuchs und der historischen Bücher des Alten Testaments*, 1876-77; 3rd ed., 1899; 4th ed., 1963.
- C. Westermann, *Handbook to the Old Testament*, trans. Robert Boyd, 1967. Originally published in 1962.
- G. Wildeboer, *De letterkunde des Ouden Verbonds*, 1893; 3rd ed., 1903.
- E. J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1949 (1954).

³ One of the most widely known discussions on the problem of the purpose of historical-and literary-critical methods is found in Krister Stendahl's article on "biblical theology" in the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. He discusses the history of the problem of a text's meaning under the categories – "What it meant and what it means." (italics mine) Here one is at the center of the problem of the purpose of the methods. While I could not agree totally with Stendahl's analysis, he does seem to be going in the correct direction when he discusses the necessity of biblical theology's "descriptive task." The mere recognition of the two problems of correlation and purpose point in this direction. Stendahl states that:

The distinction between the descriptive function as the core of all biblical theology on the one hand, and the hermeneutics and up-to-date translation on the other, *must be upheld* if there is to be any chance for the original to act creatively on the minds of theologians and believers of our time. (italics mine) (I, 423)

This emphasis on the distinction of the descriptive task and the hermeneutical task seems to be too strong. I would not wish to identify the two, but to point to the impossibility of their separation. This would need to be worked out at another time.

⁴ Cf. footnote 2 for Fohrer. I would have liked to take the most recent OT introduction (1969) by R. K. Harrison, but the criticism would have been too extensive. Harrison's introduction exhibits too much of an anti-critical view, and is governed by dogmatic considerations.

⁵ The generally accepted task of an OT introduction since Eichhorn is stated by Fohrer, "to examine and describe the growth of the Old Testament from its earliest beginnings to its conclusions." (p. 24)

⁶ Fohrer, 32.

⁷ p. 31.

- ⁸ While textual criticism is not mentioned in the chart, it is discussed in the final part of the book pp. 480 – 515.
- ⁹ The use of the word “form” in English is complicated by the fact that German has both the word *Form* and *Gattung*. These have been confused in English translations. I try to avoid the English word “form” and use “genre” for *Gattung* and “structure” for *Form*.
- ¹⁰ *Aage Bentzen’s* introduction and his work in various areas of OT research are helpful in discussing this question.
- ¹¹ I have a 10 page list of questions which can be used as a guide in each of the methods. I am trying to develop and refine this list at the present.
- ¹² Specialists need to keep in mind that more frequently than not the student or layman who wishes to become engaged in OT interpretation does not know Hebrew. For this reason, in the preliminary work of translation I have these people compare several translations, in addition to using the commentaries, in an attempt to get a translation. The other thing is to encourage more people to learn Hebrew!
- ¹³ The Old Testament Form Critical Project, of which I am a member, has been using the term structure analysis. Since it is a method which has its own set of questions, I am moving in the direction of standardizing the terms. Norman Perrin, among others, has suggested this standardization in his work *What is Redaction Criticism?* (1969) p. 11, note 1.
- ¹⁴ The *Interpreter’s Bible* is one of the most notorious examples. The outlining, with few exceptions, is a mere appendage which has no weight in the analysis of texts.
- ¹⁵ Klaus Koch, *The Growth of the Biblical Tradition*, Trans., S.M. Cupitt, 1969, p. 6.
- ¹⁶ Fohrer, 30.
- ¹⁷ Two of the most prominent figures that move in this direction are L. Alonso Schökel and James Muilenburg. Addison Wright, in discussing Ecclesiastes (“The Riddle of the Sphinx,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (1968), 313 – 334:), brings in some of this method’s questions. Cf. James Muilenburg, “Form Criticism and Beyond” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (1969), 1 – 18.
- ¹⁸ Gene Tucker, in a forthcoming book on form criticism, will be indicating its function in OT research.
- ¹⁹ Perrin, 1.