

RECENT TRENDS IN APPROACHING THE OLD TESTAMENT

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David Clines poignantly pointed out two major tendencies in current Old Testament studies in his book, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*¹: one is *atomism* and the other is *geneticism*. *Atomistic* approaches do not look at the present text as a whole, but they fragmentize the text into underlying sources, and seek to discern the individual messages of these separate underlying sources. The tendency toward *atomism* in the Pentateuchal field is reflected in such as works like “The Kerygma of the Yahwist”² and “The Elohist Fragments in the Pentateuch,”³ by Walter Wolff, “The Kerygma of the Priestly Writers” by Walter Brueggemann,⁴ *The Yahwist: The Bible’s First Theologian* by Peter F. Ellis.⁵ These *atomistic* works have places of their own according to their own agendas. Therefore, Clines is not necessarily suggesting that we should stop doing these kinds of works, but rather is insisting on doing more than just *atomistic* work. He is calling for a more holistic approach to the text and inquiry about the meaning of the text as it now exists.

The second tendency is toward *geneticism*, by which is meant the study of the origins and development of the extant Biblical text. The two most significant works in Pentateuchal studies in this century, Gerhard von Rad’s *The Problem of the Hexateuch*⁶ and Martin Noth’s *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*,⁷ are both representative of this

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¹David Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, JSOTsup. 10 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978), 7-10.

²H. W. Wolff, “The Kerygma of the Yahwist,” *Int* 20 (1966): 131-58.

³Idem, “The Elohist Fragments in the Pentateuch,” *Int* 26 (1972): 158-73.

⁴Walter Brueggemann, “The Kerygma of the Priestly Writers,” *ZAW* 84 (1972): 397-414.

⁵P. F. Ellis, *The Yahwist: The Bible’s First Theologian* (London: Chapman, 1969).

⁶G. von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, trans. E. Trueman Dicken (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1966).

⁷M. Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, trans. Bernard W. Anderson (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972).

approach. Clines criticized these studies as “for the most part entirely hypothetical” and “a work of art” and lamented further saying, “many Old Testament scholars know of no other way of doing research on the Old Testament except along such lines.”⁸

Clines called for a more holistic or total approach to the Pentateuch which goes beyond diachronic questions about its presumed sources or its genetic development. Not only Clines but also many others have raised their voices against methods whose focus has been diverted *away* from the extant text: for example, Brevard Childs, Alonso Schökel, Walter Wink, and others.⁹

This tendency toward a more holistic approach is reflected in an indirect way by Campbell and O’ Brien in their assessment of recent Pentateuchal studies. Referring to such a holistic approach with the term “synchronic” approach, they say, “Pentateuchal study is in considerable turmoil as a result of the diachronic analyses . . . , on the one hand, and the current advocacy of a synchronic analysis of the text, on the other hand.”¹⁰ In light of this turmoil, that their book was designed to contribute to the former approach is clearly stated by them, “Its aim is to provide teachers and students of the Bible with access to the source hypothesis in a manageable form. It also aims to present the source hypothesis in a form that does justice to the preeminent position it has held, and still holds, in biblical studies.”¹¹ In spite of their claim, it sounds very much like source criticism is not as preeminent as it was before and that their effort is to revive it again. The point being made here is not about source criticism but concerns the surging influence of an effort among biblical scholars to read the biblical text as we now have it.

⁸Clines, *Theme*, 9.

⁹B. S. Childs, “The Canonical Shape of the Prophetic Literature,” *Int* 32 (1978): 46-55; L. Alonso Schökel, “Hermeneutical Problems of a Literary Study of the Bible,” *VTS* 28 (1975): 1-15; W. Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation. Toward a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973); R. Alter, “A Literary Approach to the Bible,” *Commentary* 60 (1975): 70-77; G. W. Coats, *From Canaan to Egypt: Structural and Theological Context for the Joseph Story*, CBQMS 4 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1976), 58ff; M. A. Fishbane, “The Sacred Center: The Symbolic Structure of the Bible,” in *Text and Responses*, Festschrift Nahum N. Glatzer, ed. M. A. Fishbane and P.R. Flohr (Leiden: Brill, 1975): 6-27; cited by Clines, *Theme*, 9-10 and n. 10, 11, 12.

¹⁰A. F. Campbell and M. A. O’ Brien, *Sources of the Pentateuch: Texts, Introductions, Annotations* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 15.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 19.

Nevertheless, we should not dichotomize these two approaches so sharply that one must choose one to the total exclusion of the other. Those who engage in the synchronic approach should, at least, recognize the fact that diachronic approaches have created the need for and provide a rich resource for synchronic approaches. This point is also made by Campbell and O' Brien. By referring to the recent literary approach to the Old Testament, Campbell and O' Brien criticize advocates of the new literary approach, who claim that the phenomena to which source criticism appeals are characteristic features of literary works:

Attention has been drawn to the way repetition and reduplication function as integral parts of Old Testament storytelling to recapitulate key elements of a story at strategic points or to produce a desired literary effect, . . . Because source criticism was rooted in the observation of such repetitions, one outcome of this literary analysis has been to claim that much of the foundation for source criticism was baseless.¹²

A lot of recent literary insight into the composition of the Pentateuch, in fact, owes much to the emphasis on repetitions and reduplications made by source critics. In this sense, many of those who engage in the new literary approach are appropriately seen as post-critical rather than pre-critical.

Another very important aspect of this scholarly debate is pointed out by Campbell and O' Brien when they say, "This radical shift of emphasis may be characterized as a movement from a diachronic (*historical*) reading of the text to a synchronic (*ahistorical*) reading."¹³ This dichotomy between *historical* and *ahistorical* poses a serious problem for conservative evangelical scholarship. Even those who are glad to see historical criticism sink and who welcome the new literary approach are faced with a more challenging phase of the question of *historicity*. It is not enough to depict the nature of the biblical narrative as "*historicized* prose fiction" as Alter does,¹⁴ nor to use Hans Frei's term "history-likeness" as the literal meaning.¹⁵ At the same time we must wrestle to develop an exegetical methodology which would acknowledge the literary characteristics of the Bible while not consequently turning the Bible into literature with all the nuance of

¹²Ibid., 14.

¹³Ibid., 15; italics are the present writer's

¹⁴Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1981), 24.

¹⁵Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 12.

fictionality and imagination.

Another aspect that needs to be considered before making any judgment regarding this issue is that the historicity of the Bible is not intended to be proven in a positivistic way but rather to be assumed by the reader. For example, when we open the Bible, the first sentence starts with this phrase, X@rDaDh tEa w M^yAmDÚvAh tEa MyIhølTa a rD;b tyIvaérV;b. This sentence affirms, at least, two things: one, God exists; second, this God is the creator of the Universe. As an exegete, one can treat this verse based upon one of three different assumptions: first, this sentence is a confessional statement made by a believing community which composed the text; second, this is an ancient literary work and a major source of ancient history that should be studied objectively regardless of any implications that this sentence makes; third, this is a true historical statement that reflects the reality we live in. The point here is that regardless of one's assumptions about this verse, one can draw very successfully the same exegetical conclusions made above. In other words, the subject of the exegetical investigation is not the historical reality of the Bible, but rather its theological message, which places the endeavor of historicity into the realm of one's faith. Therefore, the issue of the historicity of the Bible should be left with each exegete and needs to be answered individually in the final analysis.

Nonetheless some distinction should be made between the Bible's historicity (historical authenticity) and the historicity (state of being historical) that the Bible presents. The former belongs to the realm of one's faith. The latter, however, belongs to the realm of exegetical investigation. When Childs says that the whole point of his canonical approach is to stress the historical nature of the biblical witness, he is not affirming the historicity of the canon but rather he is giving the historicity which the Bible presents its due respect. In many cases the Bible is deprived of its own claims of historicity by critical scholars who try to reconstruct the history of Israel according to their own hypotheses. Therefore a proper exegetical methodology should reflect this concern for the historicity of the Bible and do justice to it.

The writer of this article, thus, suggests that the one of the best ways to approach the Old Testament is to start from the text as we now have it. The object of the exegetical investigation is the final form of the text and it, therefore, seeks a methodology that takes the present shape of the text seriously. One methodology that accounts for the

present shape of the text and that attempts to explain the types and ways the biblical writers fashioned literary units into the complete literary whole can be termed the “compositional approach.”¹⁶ Before going into a description of compositional analysis, similar approaches put forward by others will be discussed.

It was actually James Muilenburg who raised interest in holistic and literary approaches to the study of the Bible when he delivered his presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature in 1968. The title “Form Criticism and Beyond” is self-instructive, in that while appreciating the strengths of form criticism, he urges us to move beyond form criticism. He writes:

What I am interested in, above all, is in understanding the nature of Hebrew literary composition, in exhibiting the structural patterns that are employed for the fashioning of a literary unit, whether in poetry or in prose, and in discerning the many and various devices by which the predications are formulated and ordered into a unified whole.¹⁷

Muilenburg termed his method *rhetorical criticism*. He recognized that the Old Testament had a high literary quality and promoted the study of its style. His work became the touchstone for the literary approach and stimulated many other studies connected with the style of Hebrew poetry¹⁸ and prose.¹⁹

This differs, however, from compositional analysis in that it is concerned with the rhetorical devices, structural features, etc., *within* a particular unit of text or other unit that has the same features, rather than being concerned with the compositional relationship *between* that unit and another. Nonetheless, Muilenburg’s call to move beyond prevailing critical methods, which focused on the precompositional

¹⁶For a detailed description of this approach, see John Sailhamer, “The Canonical Approach to the OT”; idem, “Exegesis of the Old Testament as a Text,” in *A Tribute to Gleason Archer*, eds. Walter C. Kaiser Jr. and Ronald F. Youngblood (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986): 279-96; Rolf Rendtorff, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986); George Fohrer and et al., eds., *Exegese des Alten Testaments: Einführung in die Methodik* (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1983); Eric Bolger, “The Compositional Role of the Eden Narrative in the Pentateuch,” (Ph.D. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1992). The following section is indebted to Bolger’s introduction in his dissertation, 1-46.

¹⁷James Muilenburg, “Form Criticism and Beyond,” in *Beyond Form Criticism: Essays in Old Testament Literary Criticism*, ed. Paul R. House (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 57.

¹⁸For example, see J. Kenneth Kuntz, “Psalm 18: A Rhetorical-Critical Analysis,” in *Beyond Form Criticism*, 70-97.

¹⁹Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), 16-17.

stages of the biblical text, and to the text itself, encouraging text-oriented study, parallels the interest of compositionally oriented interpreters.

Rendtorff is another scholar who has used a compositional-critical approach in his *Einführung*. His introduction is composed of three parts. First he reconstructs the history of Israel based upon the Old Testament as a source. Second he presents the development of the life of Israelite society and institutions in their particular *Sitz im Leben* reflected in the texts. Then in the third part Rendtorff considers the text as the most important, indeed the only, source for the study of the history and life of the people of Israel, and thus moves to the discussion of the books of the Old Testament in their present form. His main concern in this third part is to understand “the structure, composition and purpose of the final form of the individual books”²⁰ In the section called “way to literature,” Rendtorff explains the need to move from traditions into literature:

In looking for the *Sitz im Leben*, which was our starting point in this chapter, we have not considered the Old Testament texts as ‘literature’ but as direct expressions of the life of Israelite society in the period when the texts came into being. This approach has produced a variety of insights into the life of this community. However, examples of the various genres have not come down to us in isolation, but as part of texts or elements woven into wider contexts of Old Testament books and of the Old Testament as a whole . . . This leaves exegetes with the further task of pursuing the course followed by the texts up to their present final form, a course which largely corresponds to the further development of traditional material into traditional *literature*.²¹

As the result of this transition to literature, Rendtorff argues, “Texts are less bound up with particular events and situation.”²² Due to this change, there needs to be a methodological change which can take this literary nature of the text seriously. Rendtorff also argues for a particular viewpoint when literature is understood as a written text:

In all cases it is evident that the editing is not only ‘literary’ but at the same time theological. The editors or authors of the larger works have a clearly recognizable theological purpose. They set their work in a particular theological perspective and give it a form through the entirety of which it makes particular theological statements. This is evidently the decisive purpose of these authors.²³

Therefore in the third part of his book, Rendtorff employs a new

²⁰Rendtorff, ix.

²¹Ibid., 124.

²²Ibid., 125.

²³Ibid., 126.

methodology which can take a text as literature and see the theological viewpoint therein; he then illustrates this compositional-critical approach throughout the rest of his book. It is this third part of Rendtorff's book which contributes the most to the understanding of compositional nature of the text and shares the same interest as the present work

Childs has taken a different approach of his own and termed it a "canonical approach."²⁴ He prefers to call his method an "approach" in order to distinguish it from other critical methodologies such as form criticism and traditio-historical criticism. Childs makes it clear that his canonical approach focuses its attention on the final form of the text itself. Childs sides with von Rad in that Israel's history is viewed from the "perspective of Israel's faith-construal," but he strongly opposes von Rad's approach to a tradition-historical trajectory because it is detached from the canonical form of the text.²⁵ The canonical concern for Childs is not to establish a history behind this Hebrew literature but to study "the features of this peculiar set of religious texts in relation to their usage within the historical community of ancient Israel."²⁶ The major task of a canonical analysis is to understand the peculiar shape and special function of the Hebrew canon within the life of the community which accords it a normative function. Childs' emphasis on this normative status of the canonical text, however, does not exclude the significance of the canonical process which formed the text, rather, according to him, "the final canonical literature reflects a long history of development in which the received tradition was selected, transmitted and shaped by hundreds of decisions."²⁷ For Childs the significance of the final form of the biblical literature reside in the fact that it bears witness to the full history of revelation. He states, "it is only in the final form of the biblical text in which the normative history has reached an end that the full effect of this revelatory history can be perceived."²⁸ For Childs, the peculiar *canonical shape* represents the final, authoritative form of the traditions. Therefore, his focus is on the

²⁴Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970); idem, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); idem, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

²⁵Idem, *Old Testament Theology*, 16.

²⁶Idem, *Introduction*, 73.

²⁷Idem, *Old Testament Theology*, 11.

²⁸Idem, "The Canonical Shape of the Prophetic Literature," *Int* 32 (1978): 48.

shape of the biblical text at the time of the formation of the canon.

The canonical approach shares a common interest with the new literary approach in that both are concerned to do justice to the integrity of the text itself *apart* from any diachronistic reconstruction. However, it differs from a strictly literary approach such as structuralism or rhetorical criticism in that the canonical approach interprets:

the biblical text in relation to a community of faith and practice for whom it served a particular theological role as possessing divine authority. The canonical approach is concerned to understand the nature of the theological shape of the text rather than to recover an original literary or aesthetic unity.²⁹

It is this relationship of the canonical shape of the biblical text to a particular religious community which distinguishes Childs' s approach from other compositional approaches. Compositional critics such as Fohrer and Rendtorff would make much of a particular biblical author' s involvement in combining materials into a composition. The strategy behind such a composition can be determined by examining the author' s purposeful use of materials.³⁰ For Childs, however, the canonical shape of various texts represents their "canonical intentionality," that is, the intention of the religious community that gave the text its final form. And this intentionality is "coextensive with the meaning of the biblical text."³¹ Thus, instead of focusing on a particular author' s compositional strategy, Childs "seeks to analyze how the present shape of a particular text helps the interpreter understand the function of that text in the ancient religious community."³² Nevertheless his attention to the final form of the text as a crucial hermeneutical factor and his emphasis on the overall literary context have much in common with the compositional approach.

John Sailhamer is another scholar who has utilized compositional methodology in the Pentateuch, working from a conservative evangelical viewpoint.³³ The starting point of "compositional analysis," for Sailhamer, is the affirmation of 2 Timothy 3:16 that all *Scripture* is inspired by God. By focusing on Scripture *that is written* as the locus of God' s revelation, he develops an exegetical method that is a direct

²⁹Idem, *Introduction*, 74.

³⁰Bolger, *Eden Narrative*, 9.

³¹Childs, *Introduction*, 79.

³²Bolger, *Eden Narrative*, 9.

³³Sailhamer, "The Canonical Approach"; idem, "Exegesis of the Old Testament as a Text."

function of the meaning of a written text. In other words, the Old Testament as Scripture must be understood as a *text*, and his methodology seeks to understand the meaning of that text. The implication is that the message of the Old Testament can be determined by “how it is written” as much as what it recounts. Therefore, for Sailhamer, both form (how it is written) and content (what it recounts) are important features for understanding the Old Testament, and both are theologically relevant.³⁴ It is, however, a recognition of the importance of form, e.g. the final shape of the Old Testament, which characterizes compositional analysis. The description of the task of compositional analysis is provided by Sailhamer as follows:

The task of a compositional analysis, as described by Georg Fohrer, is to describe the method and techniques employed by an author in producing a final text. What large units of text has the author employed to build the final text? What functions do the individual units within the final text play in light of the completed whole? What are the final touches given to the text by the author that determine how the text will be read and received? What is the religious and theological viewpoint of the final text?³⁵

In the above quotation, “the method and techniques employed by an author in producing a final text” can be called a “compositional strategy.” It is the way an author has combined various units to create a larger whole. The process of combining units reflects the theological viewpoint of the author. Thus, according to Sailhamer, compositional analysis focuses on how a particular unit of text is strategically related to other units which are part of a meaningful complex, and again sees how these units of texts contribute to the whole, that is, the final literary form of the text.

There are several benefits for employing such a compositionally oriented approach to the interpretation of the text:³⁶ 1) it provides a means of taking seriously the final form of the biblical text; 2) it recognizes the fact that the biblical texts in their final shape came to us as written texts. Compositional analysis helps us to understand the viewpoint reflected in that written text. This viewpoint, in the case of biblical texts, is an inspired one; 3) it helps us to understand how various literary units fit into a coherent whole and, at the same time, how the whole affects the understanding of the various parts in the text.

³⁴Idem, “The Canonical Approach,” 307.

³⁵Ibid., 308.

³⁶See Bolger, *Eden Narrative*, 29-31.

Thus, the writer of this article wants to commend the recent trends in approaching the Old Testament as very positive because they focus on the final form of the text and desire approaches that justify it. We should look forward to more works out of these trends to interpret further the text of the Old Testament.

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