Three questions may be asked of any literary document:

What does it mean?
What is its aim or goal?
How is it meant to be used?

The first question is the one most commonly addressed by biblical scholars in handling the historiographical or narrative works of the Old Testament. Especially with the help of redaction criticism, it is possible to examine the meaning of the historical books not only at the level of words and sentences, but at the macrosemantic level at which whole books—even the whole ‘Deuteronomistic History’, supposing that there is one—convey theological significance. The idea, for example, that there is a ‘kerygma’ of the Deuteronomistic History belongs to the quest for its meaning. The significance of whole sections of the work, and their articulation in relation to each other, can be analysed, and an overall ‘drift’ identified. Notoriously, Martin Noth thought this drift negative and pessimistic, whereas Gerhard von Rad and Hans Walter Wolff believed it to be much more positive. The question of the tailpiece on the release of Jehoiachin from prison (2 Kgs 25.27–30) is crucial here. Does it serve merely as a

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footnote, continuing the story for a few more years but basically confirming that Israel remained in exile, or does it hold the promise of a fresh beginning? Commentators will no doubt continue to differ about this, but what they are differing about is the overall meaning of the work; what kind of Gestalt it should have in our literary imagination.

The second question, about the purpose of Old Testament documents, is asked rather less frequently. To use jargon, it may be said to be a question about the narrative’s perlocutionary force. What does the work achieve? Martin Noth had an answer to this question as it relates to the Deuteronomistic History. Its purpose was theodicy, the explanation of the disaster that had befallen Israel in terms of the justice of God. The work was meant to convince its readers that the disaster of exile was a fully justified punishment by the God of Israel of his own people because of their constant backsliding and apostasy. Much the same may be said of some prophetic books. In Amos, for example, the aim of the compiler is to explain why the people have experienced bad fortune and to attribute this not to bad luck or human causes but to the avenging anger of God. We might say that von Rad and Wolff also had an answer to the question about the purpose of the deuteronomistic work. It was written, they thought, to raise the spirits of those in exile, to assure them that God still had promises which he would fulfil in due time, and so to rejuvenate their life as exiles with the promise of better days to come. But they did not disagree with Noth that there was also a purpose in relation to theodicy. Only when the people could be brought to see why they had suffered could there be hope of improvement in the future, so that the promises might find a response from a newly responsive community.

The third question might be called a form-critical one. In what context, in what social situation, were various Old Testament documents meant to be encountered or used? This question is perhaps most discussed in relation to the Psalms where, since Gunkel⁴ and Mowinckel,⁵ it has been normal to concentrate on the supposed use

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