THE "COMPARATIVE METHOD" IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION—PRINCIPLES AND PROBLEMS

by

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Modern Old Testament studies, from the inception of the historico-literary or literarhistorische approach, constitute an illuminating example of interdisciplinary contacts and of the transfer of methods applied in one field of research to another. Thus, the principles underlying the analysis to which the ancient Hebrew literature has been subjected by modern scholarship, especially since the beginning of the nineteenth century—the days of de Wette, Ewald, Kuenen, Graf and Wellhausen, to mention only a few outstanding names—in essence were those formulated by students of classical Greek literature, which were then adopted and adapted by biblical scholars to meet the requirements posed by the particular character of the writings of the Old, and, for that matter, the New Testament. A further illustration of the fructification of biblical studies by other disciplines is the overall complex of "oral tradition" and the "traditio-historical" method, which has freely emulated analytical and interpretative techniques and procedures developed by students of ancient Scandinavian lore and of the epic literature of Eastern European peoples. Similarly, Werkinterpretation or "close reading" and the like schools which crystallized in general literary criticism influenced and still

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1 I wish to thank my assistant, Mr. David Satran, for his help in the preparation of this article.


influence heavily the contemporary study of Old Testament literature qua literature with concomitant repercussions on other areas of biblical research. The restating of these well-known facts may be likened to carrying coals to Newcastle, since the dependence of biblical scholarship on other humanistic disciplines and even on the natural sciences with respect to fundamental outlooks as well as tools of the trade is generally admitted and recognized. The perusal of any "History of Modern Biblical Study" or "Introduction to Biblical Literature" will prove the point. However, two considerations induce me to preface my paper with these cursory remarks of a very general nature. Firstly, the fact that a fully detailed, up-to-date analysis of this interdependence still remains a desideratum. And secondly, to remind us that the "comparative method", on which I wish to focus attention, did not emerge independently within the restricted frame of our discipline, but rather was devised and developed in other areas of historical and phenomenological research which gave comparative biblical studies their impetus. Again, this fact will be readily acknowledged by all, and likewise the legitimacy of applying to the biblical literature techniques worked out in quite disparate fields of scholarly endeavour.

Alas, there seems to be a decisive difference between these other disciplines and our own. Sociologists, anthropologists, ethnographers and historians bestow constant attention on the evaluation and re-examination of the conceptual modes by which they guide their comparative investigations; it would appear that in the realm of the Old Testament, however, comparative studies concerning the ancient Hebrew society, its literature and world of ideas, deal preponderantly with particular cases of parallels found or assumed to be present in other cultural complexes. Scholars seem to be less concerned about scrutinizing their methods in the light of the experience gathered from their "field work" and seldom apply themselves to such basic questions as whether the comparative method intrinsically operates under the "assumption of uniformity", as one school advocates, or if the aim should be "a comparison of contrasts rather than a comparison of similarities", as another school would have it.5