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RONALD M. STARENKO

"Were the Reformers Mission-Minded?"

THOMAS COATES

Old Testament Introduction

HOLLAND H. JONES

Brief Studies

Homiletics

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Old Testament Introduction

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INTENT OF THIS READING PROGRAM

In its report, "A Lutheran Stance Toward Contemporary Biblical Studies," the Commission on Theology and Church Relations described what it considered to be "basic and legitimate elements of the so-called historical-critical method." Since the publication of this report there has been, it seems to me, an increased interest on the part of individuals and pastoral conferences to study and apply the techniques of this interpretative method. Invitations to present studies of Biblical pericopes applying this method have multiplied. In such presentations one normally illustrates how Old Testament introductions are used in determining the literary form of a pericope and discovering the historical situation that produced it and to which it was originally addressed. In the discussion that follows such a presentation questions about available, useful O. T. introductions invariably arise, and an interest in the literature of this area of Biblical study is exhibited. This Reading Program intends to introduce you to the latest and most useful works in this area. It makes no claim to completeness, but discusses those standard works which one finds helpful, if not indispensable, as he attempts to employ the historical-critical method in Biblical interpretation. It will attempt to demonstrate how one can discover the information that an introduction offers that is useful in historical interpretation.

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THE NECESSITY FOR INTRODUCTORY RESEARCH

"The need for notes to facilitate the understanding of a work . . . exists from the moment when it is read by a generation no longer directly in touch with it. A reader who belongs to the time and place in which a writing comes into being can, normally at any rate, understand it without prefatory research, without 'introduction.' But one who belongs to a quite different period, or a quite different environment, cannot do so. He must first be supplied with a body of preliminary information, before he is in a position to assess a work which is otherwise . . . foreign to him."¹

Thus Otto Eissfeldt states the principle on which the study of O. T. introduction is based. He continues to illustrate that this principle was in operation when the O. T., or at least certain parts of it, was produced and that it has been exemplified in the varied attempts of the church to understand and interpret the O. T.² And it is this principle which motivates introductory study as it is carried on today. There have been constant changes in this area of Biblical research. Investigation has produced new insights, which have in turn led to new investigation. Nor can one affirm that the latest O. T. introduction has finished the task. It is an ongoing task, but one that intends constantly to supply a

¹ Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 1.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 2—3.

reader or interpreter of the Holy Scriptures with information that will be helpful to him in determining the meaning and message of a Biblical pericope or book. And, in so far as an introduction does this, it is worth one's effort to discover the aids to understanding that it offers.

INTENT OF O. T. INTRODUCTION

"Introduction" in one form or another has been going on throughout the history of Bible reading and study. Introductory research continues because all the information needed to understand every Biblical pericope in its historical setting has not been discovered. This is the intent of such research, however. Eissfeldt states it thus:

"The task of the science of Old Testament introduction is the presentation of the history of the growth of the O. T. from its first beginnings to its definitive conclusion."³

Recent introductions that discuss the various literary types exhibited in the O. T. attempt to describe, from its beginning to its end, the process that produced the O. T. They discuss the smallest units of which the documents are composed and describe the historical situation that produced them. They explain how these small units were gathered into collections and suggest when this occurred. They seek to determine how these collections were employed in the construction of continuous accounts and suggest when these accounts were written. They describe how these accounts were combined in the formation of the Biblical document in its present form and suggest when this happened. These descriptions provide the interpreter with the information he needs to determine with whom

and when these materials originated, when and why they were preserved in written form, and when and how they found their way into the Biblical books. And this information makes it possible for the student, after he has determined the history of those times, to comprehend what these pericopes or books meant in the historical situations that produced and preserved them.

THE HYPOTHETICAL NATURE OF INTRODUCTORY RESEARCH

The broad intent of introductory research, especially when one recalls that it deals with documents produced over two millenia ago, implies that its results will be hypothetical. Not every aspect of the process that produced a Biblical document can be described in that document. It is necessary, on the basis of the form and arrangement of the materials and statements about their preservation, to formulate theories about how they originated and were preserved, if one intends to describe the process that produced and preserved them from beginning to end. Such hypotheses are based on the evidences of origin and preservation included or implied in the content and arrangement of the Biblical materials. In those instances where such evidence rather clearly suggests certain conclusions, one finds that scholars generally agree in their description of the process. In those instances where the materials themselves offer little or no evidence, the descriptions of the process of their origin and preservation tend to diverge, and there is disagreement between one theory and another.

There are several practical applications of this fact. First, one can never be satis-

³ Ibid., p. 6.

fied when he has read the theory of only one person. One needs to be acquainted with the viewpoints expressed by others as they have attempted to explain certain facts about the Biblical material. Second, when one discovers that a majority of those who have attempted to investigate the evidence and describe the process of preservation agree in their description of that process, he can apply that theory in his interpretation of that pericope or book with some degree of confidence. Third, when one discovers a wide divergence in the theories describing the origin and preservation of a given pericope or document, he may realize that it probably is not possible to determine the historical background of that pericope or book with any degree of confidence, and that he will not be able to relate it to the historical situation in which it was produced. This is not meant to imply that introductory research is not beneficial, but to admit that it is not beneficial to the same degree with every pericope or document.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTRODUCTORY RESEARCH AND ITS INFLUENCE ON INTRODUCTION TEXTBOOKS

Since the intent of introductory research is to describe the process that produced a Biblical book or document, one would expect that a textbook in introduction would treat each book or document separately, would begin with a discussion of the literary form of the small units of which it is composed, continue to describe how these small units were combined and how the book grew until it reached its present form. However, in the discussion of individual books or documents, introductions tend to follow the pattern and to discuss

the results arrived at by the literary criticism of the 19th century. They prefix to these discussions a discussion of the literary types and a description of the way in which smaller units of material were collected and combined.⁴ An index of references is provided to enable the reader to discover where the literary form of a pericope is discussed, and one usually can find the information necessary to identify the literary types exhibited in the O. T. There are materials that are not treated, but generally they fall into the category of editorial or explanatory notes which were employed to connect the materials exhibiting older forms. In general one must say that the descriptions of the processes by which these small units were combined are inadequate. However, this is often discussed in more detail in the treatment of the individual books. So, if one uses the indices to determine everything that is said about a pericope in every section of the introduction textbooks, he will usually be able to discover and describe the details of its origin and preservation. Therefore, the fact that introductions begin with the small units and work forward up to a certain point, then take up the book in its present form and work backward to that same point, is not as disturbing to the interpreter as it might seem. But this would suggest that the writers of O. T. introductions might well consider the use of a new pattern for the presentation of their material.

⁴ For examples of this see Eissfeldt, pp. 9—127, 129—53, and Georg Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968, \$7.65), pp. 51—102, "Historical and Legal Books"; pp. 260—79, "Poetic Books"; pp. 311—17, "Wisdom Books"; and pp. 347—62, "Prophetic and Apocalyptic Books."

SUGGESTED PROCEDURE
FOR INTRODUCTORY RESEARCH

The process by which the O. T. grew is described by introductory research as follows: The small units exhibiting a specific literary form were produced individually by the "office" in Israel that employed that form for communicating its ideas (for example, a prophetic oracle or saying was produced by a prophet). These individual units were gathered into collections of material exhibiting the same form (for example, a collection of the sayings of a given prophet). These collections were combined with collections of materials exhibiting different forms (thus a collection of sayings was combined with a collection of stories about the prophet, or a collection of his description of his visions). Thus the tradition of a given prophet was formed (for example, the tradition of Amos). This tradition was combined with similar traditions of other prophets to construct an extensive account of prophetic activity (note as an instance the Book of the Twelve). This indicates that the interpreter should determine when and with whom a pericope originated, when and by whom it was preserved in a literary production, and when it was assigned its present position in the book in which it presently is to be found. This is the information an introduction to the O. T. provides. When one has this information, he can determine the situations in the Near East and Israel at those times and discern the message the originator and/or preservers of the Biblical material intended to convey to their hearers or readers by the thoughts they expressed or the words they recorded.⁵

⁵ For a more complete discussion of this aspect of interpretation, see Otto Kaiser and

SOURCES OF INTRODUCTORY
INFORMATION BIBLIOGRAPHY

Except for information that contributes to one's understanding of the history of introductory research, introductions that do not contain discussions of the literary types to be found in the O. T. are antiquated. There are four O. T. introductions presently available in English that discuss literary forms in some detail.⁶ Of these four I would recommend two as most useful to the Biblical interpreter. The one by Eissfeldt is a translation of the third edition published in German in 1964. The second edition was published in 1955 and the first in 1934. This is the most comprehensive treatment of O. T. introduction available. Its treatment of literary types is comprehensive. Its analysis of the individual books is precise and exhaustive. It offers an adequate bibliography for each book of the O. T. It presents major viewpoints that differ from the theory presented by the author, as well as some information concerning the history of introductory research as it relates to a specific document or book. Fohrer's work is a translation of a work published in German in 1965. It proposes to continue the Sellin introduction tradition, but it is an entirely new presentation. It is the most recent O. T. introduction. It mirrors its author's broad knowledge of re-

Werner Kümmel, *Exegetical Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1967, \$2.45), pp. 40—41.

⁶ Aage Bentzen, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Copenhagen: G. E. C. Gad Publisher, 1957, \$16.00); Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965, \$11.00); Georg Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968, \$9.50); Arthur Weiser, *The Old Testament: Its Formation and Development* (New York: Association Press, 1964, \$5.95).

search in this discipline and assumes that the reader is informed concerning past introductory research. Its treatment of the individual documents or books is fairly exhaustive. It describes the early developments in the growth of the books or documents in more detail than other introductions.

I have found these two texts to be most helpful for serious study in this area of Biblical research. One complements the other, and together they provide the information one needs for historical interpretation. The works by Bentzen and Weiser, though they provide some different insights which are useful, do not offer the detailed treatment of all aspects of the development of the Biblical books presented by Eissfeldt and Fohrer. Moreover, I think the reader will find, when through practice he has acquired some skill in using these texts, that they adequately answer the questions of an introductory nature asked about most O. T. pericopes.

INTRODUCTION SECTIONS IN COMMENTARIES

In commentaries the interpreter usually begins with a discussion of aspects of introduction which, in his opinion, need to be answered before one attempts to interpret the book. In such discussions he customarily states the introductory questions that arise in connection with the book's development, indicates various answers that have been suggested, and states the solutions that he accepts and will apply in his interpretation of the Biblical text. In the body of the commentary he exemplifies how this "introductory" information can be used to determine what ideas the originator or preserver of a Biblical text or

document wanted to convey to his hearers or readers in a particular situation in Israel's history.

Introductions in commentaries are useful particularly in two ways. First, they indicate what questions of an introductory nature need to be answered before one can discover the meaning of the Biblical text for those who produced and preserved it. They help one determine what "introductory" information is essential for a proper understanding of the book or document. They also exemplify how this information can be employed to discover what the text meant to those who produced and preserved it. I suggest that you include the careful reading of these introduction sections in commentaries of a book in your research as you attempt to understand and interpret a Biblical pericope from the book. I am convinced that adequate interpretation of the O. T. will not be achieved without the use of introductory information. I also realize that not every theory suggested by an O. T. scholar in the area of introduction is correct or useful in interpretation. Actually it is only by use that one can discover the usefulness of a particular theory. The introduction sections in commentaries, read in conjunction with the interpretation of the Biblical text offered by the commentator, helps one understand how he used such information and how it informed and affected his interpretation.

In referring you to some commentaries that I think you will find beneficial, I again would suggest that those that have not utilized the results of form and literary criticism are antiquated. And I would say that, in my opinion, many of those that have done so appear to be more interested

in describing the form and literary development of a pericope or book than in describing the message about God that its producer or preserver intended to convey to its recipients. But, if you will recognize that these commentaries, though not perfect, are the best tools available to assist you in the difficult task of O. T. interpretation, you will be able to use them profitably.

The only complete commentary on the O. T. written from this perspective is *The Interpreter's Bible*, vols. 1—6.⁷ One can criticize the format of this publication, but in general he will discover that the introduction sections read in connection with the interpretation sections are most useful. One should also mention that the discussions of the books of the O. T. in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* mainly present introductory materials well worth reading. The most complete commentary series in German written from this perspective is *Das Alte Testament Deutsch*. Some volumes of this series have been translated and appear as the commentaries in The O. T. Library Series.⁸ Several commentary series written from the form-critical perspective in both English and German are in process of publication and some volumes are available.⁹

⁷ George Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Bible*, vols. 1—6 (New York: Abingdon Press, 1952—1957). Complete set, 12 vols.

⁸ V. Hertrich and A. Weiser, eds., *Das Alte Testament Deutsch: Neuer Göttingen Bibelwerk* (Göttingen, 1949—); G. Wright, J. Bright, J. Barr, P. Ackroyd, eds., *The O. T. Library Series* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961—). Von Rad's commentary on Genesis in this series is particularly noteworthy.

⁹ I would mention in English: William F. Albright and Noel Freedman, eds., *The Anchor Bible* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1964—); H. H. Rowley and M. Black,

OTHER BOOKS ON TOPICS OF INTRODUCTION

The tendency in introductory research is toward specialization. Books are being written treating not only the five major subjects treated in the five main parts of the introduction by Eissfeldt (i. e., Description of Forms, Development of Traditions, Analysis of the Books, Formation of the Canon, Witnesses to the Text), but also dealing with specific topics included under these main areas of introduction. A list of such works would probably tend to confuse rather than help, but there are two works on specific emphases of introduction from which I think one can obtain some worthwhile insights, especially in methodology.

In spite of the fact that the study of literary types in the O. T. has been carried on for over half a century and has significantly influenced O. T. interpretation and theology, an introduction to form-critical research that attempted to explain its intent and method was not produced until 1964.¹⁰ This work in its second edition (1967) has been translated and is now available in English. It does not replace the materials in the introduction which define and describe the O. T. literary types, but it does supplement this information. It should be read and used in conjunction with it, and, if so used, will

eds., *The Century Bible*, New Editions (London: Nelson & Sons). I would refer you to the bibliographical sections in Eissfeldt's and Fohrer's introductions (including "Additional Literature and Notes," pp. 722—70 in Eissfeldt).

¹⁰ Klaus Koch, *Was ist Formgeschichte?* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchen Verlag, 1964, 2d ed. 1967, \$5.65); English translation: *The Growth of the Biblical Tradition* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969).

help better understand the introductions and apply the information they provide more intelligently in interpretation. It does not answer all your questions about the intent, method, and results of form-critical research, but it is a successful attempt to supply answers to some of them.

In spite of the fact that literary criticism has provided a generally accepted chronology of the literature of the O. T. and introductions have been written describing the production of the O. T. documents from this perspective, this information has not consistently been used by interpreters. All too often a Biblical document has been treated by commentators in relative isolation from the other Biblical materials produced at approximately the same time. In his recent work *Exile and Restoration*¹¹ Peter Ackroyd has presented an interpre-

¹¹ Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968, \$6.85.

tation of Haggai and Zechariah 1—8 in which he has included not only a careful analysis of the history of this period but also a discussion of the message of the Biblical documents that were produced at about the same time. This study of Hebrew thought in the sixth century exemplifies how beneficial it is to investigate a Biblical document not only from the perspective of history but also from the viewpoint of Israel's literary history.

Though these two works are not introductions to the O. T., and therefore probably do not belong in this study guide, they have clarified introductory information for me and helped me apply it more intelligently in interpretation. And, in my opinion, introduction, though it may be an interesting area of study, is not worth the time it takes unless it is used to understand and interpret the Biblical word.

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