

METHODOLOGY FOR CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

Virgil Warren, PhD

For Christians, critical introduction to the Old Testament has the advantage of inspired external evidence to confirm and complement the internal evidence for authorship, date, and character of the earlier literary works. That approach represents logical order, not necessarily chronological order. The Christian method (1) begins with the New Testament verdict of Christ and the apostles insofar as they speak on critical Old Testament issues and (2) examines the data in those books to see whether they fit the verdict. Lastly, the method (3) crosschecks each book with information available from archaeology and ancient Near Eastern literature. The New Testament sets the framework for any view of the character and manner of origin for the Jewish canon. This procedure could begin with the claims in the Old Testament books and measure the contents against the claims. In fact, that is what critics do with any book, but they would not be doing it as Christians. Critics do not have to do it necessarily as Christians, but Christians can take advantage of a factor already in place for clarifying and confirming matters where it can.

Correlation and consistency are two tests of truth. Correlation connects a viewpoint with outside data that may verify or falsify it. Consistency tests whether the elements in that viewpoint fit with each other. In our case, we approach Old Testament criticism with a prior commitment to Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah, not only as Savior but as Lord. Our knowledge of who he is, of what he has done for us, and what he requires of us comes from the Christian canon. To assume commitment to him implies submitting to the New Testament scriptures as his word to us; it submits to the ones he authorized to declare his message, spoken or written. The New Testament serves as the functional equivalent of the apostles Jesus appointed and his disciples submit to. So we study the subject while standing “within the circle.” For consistency’s sake, that allegiance commits us to the attitudes that he and his apostles took on matters of Old Testament introduction. Critical introduction to the New Testament precedes critical introduction to the Old; the two disciplines constitute one system. We cannot take a high view of Christ without taking a high view of the New Testament we depend on for knowing about him, and we cannot take a high view of the New Testament without taking the high view it presents of the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. The pattern observes the use the New Testament makes of the Old, which determines some things about the nature of the Old and its origin.

Highlighting consistency means giving priority to theory rather than phenomena in Pentateuchal criticism, *etc.* Since ideas are clearest in contrast to parallel alternatives, what theory means we see more clearly in contrast to the phenomenological method. Instead of starting with an authoritative verdict or the claim of individual writers, the phenomenological

method begins with raw data to determine “from scratch” the nature of the writings and to reconstruct the process that brought them into their present form.

Because critical introduction is a historical matter, however, that “scientific” approach has limitations, because the available data is often too scanty to generate conclusions. So, assumptions come into play, or the effort cannot determine much. Those assumptions may derive from progressivism, empiricism, Religionsgeschichte, evolution, and so on. Supposedly self-evident first principles fill the same slot that the authority of Jesus, the apostles, and the New Testament occupy. Several possibilities might derive from that phenomenological approach, and critics might choose what seems best because they have no pre-determined place to come out. The phenomenological method dissolves into a theoretical method because a new authority (the critics’ presuppositions) takes over as the foundation for inquiry. The issue has to do with authority. For Christians, that authority comes from the commitment that makes them Christians, and the issues of Old Testament criticism and obedience to Christ stand or fall together.

Theory and phenomena represent deductive and inductive inquiries. In critical introduction, the theoretical, deductive approach is restrictive; it reduces the number of explanations for the literary phenomena in Genesis through Malachi. Within these delimitations, a Christian is free to postulate, and hold as opinion, the understandings that best clarify the origin of God’s word through the prophets of old. For that reason, various views appear among critics who operate in the evangelical framework.

The consistent-theoretical-deductive-restrictive method differs from circular reasoning. Though we initially adopt the New Testament’s attitude toward the Law, we might find in the second and third steps of our work that the phenomena in the Law do not accommodate that viewpoint. We could then reject both the Law and the New Testament insofar as they deal with critical issues, and proceed to work out our own viewpoint. Meantime, we would adjust downward either our view of the New Testament as itself an inspired record of Messianic and apostolic claims or our understanding of the deity of Jesus himself.

Because of their method advocated here, evangelicals expend a great deal of time, energy, and resources in defensive pursuits. Their task includes exposing the weaknesses and fallacies of alternate views, pointing out how to solve supposed contradictions, demonstrating the superiorities of their approach, and so forth. Difficulties destroy the phenomenological method because the conclusions must use the data as evidence, difficulties and all. The evangelical method takes a position that comes from elsewhere, and holds difficulties in abeyance until further light removes them as it has frequently done in the past.