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Is the Literary Approach to the Bible a New Paradigm?

The literary approach to the Hebrew bible can and should take its own stature seriously by reflecting every now and then upon its own underpinnings. It takes the stand that the bible *is* literature and does not want to waste its energy on the option of "the bible *as* literature". The latter option regards literariness as just one aspect of the bible among many, like the religio-historical, the historical, the moral or the theological aspects, and implies that the reader is free either to pay attention to the literary properties of the text or to pass over them in an attempt to come to grips with "the real contents". Up-to-date text research, however, no longer believes that we are justified in imposing a dichotomy of form and content upon the texts and that we are able to discard the literary quality like a piece of clothing. More and more close analyses are becoming available nowadays that show us how units of almost any genre in the bible are shaped as artifacts and that the ancient authors used their literary skill at any given level of composition. From this we may infer that the prose writers and the poets of hymns and laments, wisdom and love poetry considered the well-polished and very carefully designed literary text as the most powerful form of language and as the most effective way of communicating what they wanted to convey to their audience.

Almost any text in the bible, even most of the legislative portions, is a literary creation through and through. As a product of the imagination it tacitly requires from its readers to respond with an imaginative approach that first of all tries to discover the same wave length. This is not just a superficial metaphor. A text is somewhere in the middle of a communicative polarity, coming as it does from a sender and looking for the right kind of receiver. What are the principles prerequisite for becoming a competent listener? Do we learn them from the historical-critical method, and is this paradigm of scholarship suited to dealing with the texts of the Bible? Does it need a serious reappraisal or even renewal? As a human enterprise it can be expected not to be infallible. Is it time, perhaps, to recognise the need for, and to formulate the epistemological conditions of, a new scholarly paradigm?

In the sections below I intend, firstly, to discuss the main principles and epistemological presuppositions of the historical-critical method, and secondly, I will be studying three quite different texts. They function in my argument as examples that show, on the negative side, how a historical-critical bias can wreak havoc on the texts and, on the positive side, how stylistic and structural signals offered by the text itself can lead the sensitive reader to a response and an interpretation which are appropriate.

I
Interpreting the bible: remarks on epistemology

The historical-critical method has its qualities and insights on the one hand and its limitations on the other. In this section I want to concentrate on the latter, not with the intention to attack or blame individual scholars, but with the aim of writing a modest contribution to an improved hermeneutics. I will focus on the interpretation of the texts of the bible because I consider this to

be central practice. It is the heart of the matter on the grounds that the description or overview we seek to have of the history, the literature and the religion of ancient Israel is totally dependent upon the scope and quality of our handling of the texts. I will not be discussing branches of research like archeology, codicology or paleography which operate in their own right, but acquire the status of auxiliary disciplines as soon as they are called upon to aid our understanding the texts.

The historical-critical method has taught us all to respect and not to underestimate the otherness of ancient culture and its products. It requires our being objective in our scholarship, in the sense of our not being so naive as to impose our expectations or needs or system of beliefs on the bible and to exploit this canonic corpus as a mine that readily offers the material to confirm our prejudices and biased opinions. Insights like these are achievements worthy of future permanence. Historical criticism speaks emphatically about the three or four ways in which the bible is a remote body of texts. This canon came about long ago, its voices are from the Middle East, its artifacts are witness to an oriental culture and this culture expressed itself in very foreign, Semitic languages and differing social and religious values.

Having established the great distance between text and reader, the historical-critical method stops short. And this chasm is covered by and partly identical with another one that has an epistemological nature: the one between the subject and the object of knowledge. The historical-critical paradigm is a dialectical answer to and polemics against an era of fundamentalism that felt justified in denying any gap between the believer and his Holy Writ and had no problem in putting the bible to immediate use. The so-called "higher criticism" that starts to grow in the 18th century and holds a monopoly in the scholarly world during the 19th until far into the present era is marked by rationalism and the Cartesian split between subject and object.

There is, however, another side to the accurate notions of distance and objectivity. The assertion that the bible text is remote is only half of the truth. The reader who is impressed by it runs the risk of being intimidated and of losing full contact with the text; he can hardly trust that there are still possibilities of understanding the text, he is prone to despair and inclined to find the text more obscure than is necessary. The demand for objectivity is a half-truth, too. Its other side is a matter of epistemology. It is the simple fact that the text is there already and close by, right from the start. The text starts speaking as soon as someone starts to listen. The text becomes a work in the fullest sense and its meanings can unfold themselves only when the reader accepts his responsibility and assigns meanings to it. The text makes sense as soon as (and to the degree that) a competent reader makes sense of it. The productive and telling ambiguity of the English expression "making sense of" is a wonderful illustration of what intersubjectivity is about. Whether the bible story or poem stems from the tenth or the third century B.C.E. does not matter any more in principle: the process of making sense happens here and now, it is fully dialogical in nature and it is an event in the field of intersubjectivity -- a field with the shape of an ellipse the two foci of which are the text and the reader. The apparent object of knowledge (the text) and the apparent subject (the reader) meet and sometimes collide in an enigmatic, intimate and mysterious encounter of import and values.

The bible text is immediate in still another sense. At the very moment we open up a chapter a fundamental and positive value judgement is being made, and it reads: this text is important, or intriguing, or authoritative, etc.; it is a monument of ancient communities of believers, or even: this is Holy Writ. A judgement like this is usually implied by or precedes the act of reading. With regard to the individual reader the bible is pre-existent just like language (in the Saussurian sense, *la langue*) is with regard to its users. One of the epistemological consequences is that no reader is conceivable who is blank or indifferent or otherwise neutral to the impact or importance of the

bible. This kind of immediacy has a dangerous side, too, and the serious interpreter should be aware of it. The only way not to let this become a pitfall is to practise self-reflection. We live in an era of *Ideologiekritik* and should be aware of the hidden and overt signs of ideology in the text, in ourselves and in the society and authorities that influence us.

Historical-critical scholarship has received insufficient literary training, or no training at all, with fatal consequences. The story-tellers, the law-makers, and the poets of Tanakh have worked at all text levels, and shaped them, in a conscious, well-trained and sophisticated way. The text model that I have developed in my Samuel studies distinguishes six levels of texture and six levels of (structure, or rather) composition.[1] On all these levels the text can be shown to be a genuine artifact. This testifies to and presupposes a thorough literary training on the side of the writers or editors; so the least we can do to make for a competent response as interpreters is to analyse and describe their work on all levels, and to understand it better and reinterpret it on the basis of integrating the data and the links between these synchronic layers. We emulate the literary training of the authors by discovering and re-enacting the figures, the structures and the conventions present in the work of art. After having completed this course of discoveries, we have laid the basis for a responsible handling of the big questions: about the values and the truth of the text.

A lack of literary training leads many scholars in an early phase of textual study to fall back on tacit, negative value judgments that are made beforehand (like: the text does not fit, it is not logical, it exhibits tensions, seams, or duplications, and the like) and in this way determine and jeopardise the continuation of their study. From this moment on the historical-critical scholar steps out of the dialogue with the text and limits himself to genetic interrogation - a treatment no text was ever attuned to.

Historical-critical research is used to dealing with texts without having developed the methodological foundations of a textual model and without mastering insights from text grammar or communication theory. One of the consequences is atomism, such as exaggerated and one-sided attention to word research, or practising razor-sharp analysis which obeys a logic foreign to the text and is in fact a form of hypercriticism. Monographies and articles often deal with small units of text that are insufficiently studied in the context they are part of. For an example of this kind of atomism, see example C in section II below.

Another consequence of this lack of theoretical awareness is that the historical-critical scholar usually pays excessive attention to a quest that is doomed to fail: the reconstruction of the genesis and tradition of the texts. He labours under the tacit assumption (that hangs in the air like an insinuation, I often feel) that a text cannot be understood unless we have a good or full knowledge of its origins, its *Sitz im Leben*, its author's mind and the like. This kind of research entails a very odd relation to the text: in order to establish its sense or function the scholar decides not to listen to the given text in its own right, but to use it as a source from which he hopes to elicit clues about how it arose and the process of its being handed down the ages. In this way he is actually looking for hypothetical archi-texts, in the light of which the sole extant text should be interpreted. The text has been reduced to a means of source-criticism. It cannot speak for itself any more, for there is no one able and willing to let it speak for itself.

The first problem involved in this approach is that the text itself never refers to its origins. It talks of birth and death, creation and patriarchs, deceit and covenant, temple and pilgrims, war and poverty, but never of its own coming about. Secondly, it is true for almost all the texts that there is simply not one scrap of evidence in existence of older or earlier stages in its development. That means that the historical-critical scholar looking for more ancient forms is engaged in a stubborn and fruitless work of never-ending speculation. The most he can achieve is another hypothesis on origins. After two centuries of diachronic research the competition between source-critical

hypotheses has reached the heights of self-defeating absurdity where one sophisticated picture of hands and strands cancels out the other.

The few texts in the Hebrew bible that do have forerunners have a special contribution to make. I am thinking of the books of Chronicles as the prime example, as they have used materials from Samuel and Kings. Of course a thorough comparison is needed, and it is certainly intriguing to see how different the portrait of David is that the author of Chron., a late composition, offers us. But the point is that his portrait makes sense on the basis of a synchronic reading. If we want to understand this late portrait, we have to take it seriously in its own right and to find out what conventions and decisions moved the author to depict this new David. The coherence and the sense of this late portrait can be understood and described only by means of intrinsic study. The wholeness and unity of Chronicles do not depend upon the existence or the make-up of the antecedent text. What a comparative study can do, on both sides, is to highlight the systematic nature of the differences between the old and the new portrait of David. If a late author borrows something from a more ancient text, he does so for his own reasons, or rather for the reasons implied by his design or composition. As soon as he borrows he selects; the nature of his selection is synchronic and is determined by intrinsic or synchronic considerations, not diachronic ones.

The historical-critical method has failed to formulate some of the questions most basic to the texts, let alone to answer them. It has not taken the trouble to supply a proper definition of what a classical verse (or full poetic line) is. It has not paid serious attention to the basic question of whether a simple dichotomy of prose and poetry is correct, and if not, why not. Its adherents do not know how to listen to the structural signals in the texts. They have never considered investigating the text levels beyond the sentence or the verse systematically. When it comes to understanding the narratives, many scholars do not realise how fundamental the difference is between narrator's text and characters' text. And so they get confused about the importance of the omniscient narrator and his ideology, as distinct from the voices of his puppets, the characters he manipulates all the time.

One of the most dramatic examples of the lack of basic narratological insight is the source-critical dissection of I Sam.8-12, the famous Act about the inauguration of the monarchy. The narrator himself hardly intervenes to give comments or other glimpses of his authorial stance, but offers us a highly complex debate between three, four, five voices. They talk about the pros and cons of a human kingship, and finally Samuel and his God get their way.[2] There is no need at all to reify the main difference in a diachronic reconstruction that pretends it can recognise a pro- and an anti-monarchic strand.[3] A mistake that is often made in respect to the stories about Samuel is the blind assumption that the opinions and viewpoints of this prophet exactly cover those of God, and that the author's viewpoint must coincide with God's. At the same time one then has to ignore the obvious data in chapters 3, 9 and 16 that show us a very fallible or ignorant Samuel.

Another example that shows how incompatible and essentially unequal the voice of the author and a character's voice are can be found in I Sam.31 and II Sam.1. These chapters contain two contradictory statements on the way king Saul died on the battlefield. As I have shown the two narratives are very subtly intertwined.[4] A mature literary analysis is able to prove that the Amalekite lied when he reported to David that his *coup de grâce* had finished Saul. I have pointed out how this supports the authority of the narrator's report in ch.31 all the more. In this way a stylistic analysis of seemingly competing stories opens the way to the historical truth that Saul did kill himself. The diachronic attempt to "solve" the contradiction by posing different traditions just creates a mess and blocks the way to the question of how Saul died, because it has no means of deciding which tradition is true.

The typical historical-critical scholar gets cold feet when it comes to self-reflection, does not like to admit that as a reader he is the one who is assigning meanings all the time during the process of reading and interpreting, and that he can be held responsible for his results. He does not dare to trust in an immediate contact with the text and denies the epistemological truth that the sense of a text is a dynamic process and comes about in a dialogue, held here and now, of two speaking subjects. He believes in objectivity in a pre-phenomenological way. He does not like to reflect upon, let alone to give an account of, the implicit epistemology of his profession. His hermeneutics suggest that the text refers directly to the extratextual and/or historical reality, which is a pre-Saussurian naivety with regard to the nature of the linguistic sign and ignores the artificiality of literary texts. Theorists like Jury Lotman or Paul Ricoeur may have argued that the literary text has a double and elusive kind of referentiality -- he has not read them. He is after realia, and in his heart he is sometimes annoyed that the texts behave so refractorily and opaquely to his quest of establishing real history and "hard facts".

The implicit or tacit hermeneutics of the historical-critical method considers the text to be a document, and in this way immediately and heavily shifts the centre of gravity of the text to somewhere else. A document is an entity pointing to something else, of a material or historical nature mostly. The historical-critical scholar is under the illusion that the text is a window that offers us an undistorted look at ancient reality such as that of the religion and history of old Israel. However, as René Wellek once remarked, a literary artifact is a monument, not a document. It is there in its own right and deserves to have its full say. We have to take its "message for its own sake"; such is the literary function of its language, as Roman Jakobson said in the famous speech in which he presented his communication model. It is not "transparent on facts", as Frank Kermode shows, writing on the gospel of Mark in his book *Genesis of Secrecy*.

The text is reduced to a means as soon as one wants to practise source-oriented research, and then the big danger is that one starts to put the wrong questions to the text. In discourse-oriented analyis the text is revived and recognised as the goal of text study. It is governed by rules and conventions that belong to the discipline of poetics and have their functions and effects in a communicative field where sender, message and receiver meet. The literary object is an object *sui generis* and deserves to be studied by means of a discipline that is independent instead of remaining an *ancilla theologiae aut historiae.*

The historical-critical method has its meaningful place in the succession of scholarly and scientific paradigms. It was the historically necessary and justifiedly critical answer to the simplistic and dogmatic uses of the bible text that characterised fundamentalist hermeneutics. In the Middle Ages and much later the believer read the text and believed it "to be true" *prima facie*, in the restricted sense of: "it really happened so". What the orthodoxy of those times didn't realise is that it was obeying some kind of pagan thinking. Its tacit and hidden, and in this way all the more influential, criterion in the face of the holy texts is the yardstick of historical reliability. It simply took the position: "because Holy Writ says so, it was so." Then came the rationalists, and the hermeneutics of historical criticism. On the face of it they said something radically different: "because event X or phenomenon Y cannot have happened in reality, the text is "not true" (and consequently its status as divine revelation is hardly tenable any more)." Actually, however, the fundamentalist believer and the rationalist critic have much more in common than they are aware of. However different their respective value scales are, they have one tenet in common that is crucial. It is the presupposition that the historicity of the events and persons which the texts refer to is the decisive factor. Both parties let historical reality decide, and they subsume the production of meaning, matters of referentiality and revelation under the iron yardstick "whether things really did happen." Historicity is the common idol that is allowed to take a top position in the hierarchy

of their value system. The truth of the biblical narratives, oracles and poems is made fully dependent upon an extrinsic criterion.

At the end of this section let me answer the question that is posed by the title of this article. Narrative art and poetry, making up the bulk of the texts of the Hebrew bible, should be studied and answered by a mature poetics. This is an independent discipline that pursues intrinsic studies of the texts and respects their nature as an object *sui generis*. Yes, an up-to-date *Literaturwissenschaft* is a new paradigm whose underpinnings are an intersubjective hermeneutics.

II
Against atomism; three examples

A. Levels and structures in biblical poetry.

A distinct and not too small group of poems that are part of the Psalter proves that the ancient poets were clearly aware of the units that served them as the major and minor building blocks of their compositions. I am referring to the series of alphabetic acrostics that can be found. Their construction shows that the colon, the verse (i.e. the full poetic line),[5] the strophe and the stanza are well-defined units that form an uninterrupted succession of four levels. Ps. 111 and 112 do have full bicolic lines (i.e. verses, as the Massoretes also have recognised, in view of their accentuation signs), but mark the start of each colon with a new letter of the alphabet. We can easily infer from this that the colon was an existent unit. One level higher up, Pss.25, 34, and 145 show that the verse is the next textual and compositional unit; each full poetic line starts with a letter from the alphabet. So far so good; but the existence of the higher levels is still under debate. Here Pss. 9-10 and 37 come to our assistance and show that the strophe is an official and well-marked unit. The same applies to most chapters in the book of Lamentations, where we find strophes of three (chs.1-3) and two verses (ch.4); this is even reflected in the typography assigned to these poems in the new Stuttgart edition of the bible (the BHS). And finally we have the king-size poem of Ps.119 that distributes the 22 letters from the alphabet over stanzas that are all equal. Each stanza has eight verses that probably allow for a strictly binary analysis so that eight verses can be divided in two sets of four (sub-stanzas) and four sets of two (i.e. strophes).

These parameters provide us with a provisional model for studying other poems. One of the most difficult is the long poem of Ps.68. Forty years ago it was discussed by William Foxwell Albright.[6] The only thing he thought he could do with this refractory text was to propose that it represents an enumeration of some thirty incipits. This means that Albright was not able to interpret the poem, but had to step back into a diachronic diagnosis and a total fragmentation of the text. It is not my intention to attack an individual scholar here, but to interpret his proposal as a highly relevant operation in the frameworks of its time and method, the historical-critical one. It is a revealing proposition, notwithstanding the fact that other authors soon judged it to be extreme. What we have here is that a famous scholar, who can be called the dean of Old Testament studies in the United States for two generations, fully admitted that he was unable to make sense of the poem as a whole and as an artifact. And I consider this to be significant testimony to the impotence, or at least clumsiness, of the historical-critical school when it is confronted with the complexity of a sophisticated and extensive work of art.

Psalm 68 is a challenge for the literary approach that wants to prove that it can be a new and fruitful paradigm. Is this poem really as opaque as its reputation has it? I will start my succinct exploration at the end of the psalm. Assuming that the vv.35-36 are the last strophe, I study vv.33-34 as being the penultimate strophe. It is a call to praise God who rides the skies. We can find the same word pair *shiru / zamm^eru*, imperatives in the plural, exactly in verse 5, where the righteous are called upon to sing to God. God is there again (v.5) as a rider, this time as *rokeb ba^'arabot*. Thirty years ago, under the influence of so many Ugaritic parallels, some of us thought that this phrase meant "rider of the clouds", but after some debate recent authors returned to the older rendering of God as "the rider over the desert plains."

The verses 5-7 form the second strophe of the composition and form an *inclusio* with the penultimate strophe. This leads us to the structural hypothesis that the whole poem could be marked as a rounded-off whole with carefully drawn boundaries. Moreover, we observe that verse 34 is beautifully shaped as a double series abcde. In his commentary on Psalms (Anchor Bible,

vol.II, p.132 and 151) Dahood already recognised this and translated the words as follows: "Behold the Rider of his heavens, the primeval heavens; Hark, he sends forth his voice, his mighty voice!" For the professional it is not difficult to imagine what an earlier generation was tempted to do when they read the double sh^eme in v.34a. They wished either to delete one sh^eme as totally superfluous or to change it, as the apparatus of the BHK, the older standard edition from Stuttgart, shows. However, as soon as we rely on some literary sensitivity, we notice that the B colon has another doubling of a word, $qol\ b^eqolo$, in exactly the same location after the verb form. The words that especially lend colour or power to the two predicative units are the final words $qedem$ and $'oz$, characterising the power of this deity. The particle la may mean about the same as the deictic $hinne$ that opens the B colon. And so we discover a structure of five elements that makes a perfect parallellism of this pair of cola and gives the full verse a hermetic shape.

Now that the poet has shown his formal skill, it is highly improbable that the rest of the composition is just the shambles that led Albright to his diachronic proposal. A serious structural analysis is able to demonstrate that the text is well-formed in other parts and that the poet has command of his profession at the levels beyond the single verse too. The thirty-six verses (i.e. full poetic lines) combine mostly in pairs and fill out sixteen strophes. The strophes all come in pairs so that there are eight stanzas: 2-7/8-11/12-15/16-19/20-24/25-28/29-32/33-36. At the next level there are three sections. In the central one (vv.12-24) God is the great liberator who wins the war on behalf of his chosen people and his abode, the Zion: vv.12-24. This middle part is flanked by section I = vv.2-11, that offers a theophany and hymnic verses that honour the deity, and section III = vv.29-36 which shows a procession and another hymnic address to God.

The text of Ps.68 appears to be a precise hierarchy. It not only allows, but demands, a careful structural analysis that makes a coherent interpretation possible and opens the way to a positive value judgment: this song of victory and thanksgiving is state of the art of poetry, in which all things fall into place as soon as we have learned and applied a full analysis of all the prosodic levels, from the colon and the verse, via the strophe and the stanza, up to the sections and the poem as a well-integrated whole. A full account of the contours and structures can be found in *Oudtestamentische Studiën*.[7]

I conclude this paragraph on poetry with a stylistic finesse and a strophe. God comes from Sinai as a warrior to save his people (vv.8-9, = strophe 3). In the first and the last section of the poem he is the rider of the steppe and the heavens; in terms of space, the two vivid images are complementary, and in this way contribute to the circular contours of the whole composition. In the central section, in vv.18 and 19, the deity gains victory, and in the middlemost stanza of the section (and of the poem as a whole) we encounter the root rkb once more. This time it is the thousands and myriads of chariots with the celestial armies that do the work of battle, *rekeb 'elohim ribbotayim w^e'alfe shin'an*. The periphery of *rokeb // rokeb* has got its exact central point.

The verses 7-8 form the third strophe and are rendered in the New English Bible:
O God, when thou didst go forth before thy people,
 marching across the wilderness,
earth trembled, the very heavens quaked
before God the lord of Sinai, before God the God of Israel.

A syntactic analysis of the strophe sees two complements that start anaphorally with b^e + infinitive Qal, two predicative clauses referring to the convulsions of the cosmos, and two more complements pointing to God. Many standard translations have the same or a similar division into parts as the NEB.[8] The strophe is a quotation of one strophe from a famous and ancient poem,

the Song of Deborah in Judges 5.[9] At the same time it is an adaptation: the core of the older strophe consists of four short predicative cola on cosmic events, two of which are deleted here.

It is easy to understand why scholars thought they recognised a simple case of *parallelismus membrorum* in the units that read "the earth trembled // the heavens dripped." And around this predicative nucleus they quickly noticed the balance in both of the pairs of complements. But then they stopped paying attention, and a minor catastrophe took place. Their translations show a single, huge period that has a strange discrepancy between the second and the third person, used for God. The compound sentence begins by addressing God directly, but seems to forget this in v.8 and then talks about God in the third person. The first objection one could make is that in this way the predicative core is overloaded with no less than four complements that all refer to God. Isn't that much too much? But the second objection is of a syntactic-semantic nature and is decisive. To make myself fully clear, I will create a sentence that makes the same pointless shift from second to third person. Imagine that I am speaking to my host,[10] and say this: "in your institute, dear Niek, I deliver a paper with Prof. van Uchelen in my audience." The friction between addressee and referential third person is intolerable. Would the Hebrew poet really have created a monster like this? I refuse to make this my point of departure when analysing the strophe.

There is an alternative that respects the seeming break in the syntax. We should not read three bicola, but two tricola; like this:

'lhym bs'tk lpny 'mk / bs'dk bysymwn / 'rs r'sh
'p smym ntpw / mpny 'lhym zh syny / mpny 'lhym 'lhy ysr'l

Now we have two sentences each of which has to carry two complements, and the overloading of the predicative sentence nucleus is gone. The first sentence that coincides with the first verse speaks *to* God. The second syntactic unit (or sentence) also takes up a full poetic line and speaks *of* God. But in this way, you might protest, the merismus of heaven and earth is cut in two! That is true, but their relation is still there. The relation is changed from a horizontal *parallelismus* (the primary form of *parallelismus*) into a vertical or rather diagonal one, and that is not rare. This new parallelism remains just as effective in the new ordering of the six cola as in the usual division of the half-verses, but now it is placed dynamically on a diagonal line. There is no automatism of three neat bicola, but a beautiful syntactic mirroring of two tricola. Syntax and prosody now combine in offering a dynamic chiasmus: two complements and predicative core plus predicative core and two complements. The semantic friction of the second versus the third person of God is completely abolished.[11]

B. Time as the key to the structure of a narrative cycle.
The most elementary material of the narrative is time. Time is omnipresent; whether we look into narration or discourse time (*Erzählzeit*) or into narrative or story time (*erzählte Zeit*), each and every clause of any story tells or at least implies movement on both of these levels. This even holds good where the narrator halts the action and offers comments or information. Such retardation is just as much a manipulation of time as the normal reporting of progression in the plot is.

Seriously considering the handling of time -- its flow, the leaps forward or backward, the stills -- is an elementary phase of homework, when it comes to analysing or interpreting a narrative. The historical-critical school, however, feels justified in not bothering most of the time. It does not know what are the primary questions to be put to a prose text. The cycle of Abraham stories in the book of Genesis offers us a prime example of this kind of neglect. This section, Gen.12-25 (or rather, 11:25-25:18), has a highly conspicuous and coherent series of explicit time references. There are thirteen of them, and most of them give the age number of the hero himself.[12] Now if

we consult the three great commentaries on Genesis that appeared in Germany in this century, none of them has noticed this series, let alone studied or understood its structural importance. Neither Gunkel, nor von Rad and Westermann have done anything at all with these figures, and even Benno Jacob (a Jewish commentator, who certainly cannot be counted amongst the historical-critical school and did work hard on a lot of Genesis numbers) failed to use them:

		verse in Gen.:
a)	Terach was 205 years old, when he died in Haran	11:32
b)	*Abram was 75 years old when he departed from Haran.*	12:4
c)	Sarai (…) took (…), *after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan.*	16:3
d)	*Abram was 86 when Hagar bore him Ishmael*	16:16
e)	*When Abram was 99, the Lord appeared unto him.*	17:1
f)	*He (Abraham) laughed and said to himself:*	
	"Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old,	
	"or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?"	17:17
g)	*Abraham was 99 years old when he circumcised himself*	17:24
h)	Ishmael was 13 years old when he was circumcised.	17:25
i)	*Abraham was 100 years old, when his son Isaac was born.*	21:5
j)	Sarah lived 127 years, (…) and she died.	23:1–2
k)	*This is the number of years that Abraham lived: 175 years*	25:7
l)	This is the lifetime of Ishmael: 137 years	25:17

Several patterns make this series a remarkable subsystem of the composition. One of them consists of the fact that most of the lines quoted can be combined in pairs that rotate around an axis; see e.g. the items e-g, d-i, c-j. The combination b-k indicates that the amount of story time that is covered by the [discourse time of the] entire cycle is exactly 100 years. This is all the more interesting because another instance of this round number indicates the age of the father when he finally gets his long-awaited son Isaac, in ch.21, and the reader was being prepared for it ever since ch.17.

The most striking phenomenon of the series of age indications is the middle or axis, Gen.17:17. It is unique because it has two lines and two age figures. It is marked as special by several stylistic devices: it is direct speech delivered by the hero, it shows *parallelismus membrorum* and can easily be scanned as a full poetic couplet, and the two numbers apply an inversion that is a subversion.[13] Normally, when numbers are used by a poet, he starts with the lower one and ends with the higher number.[14] Here the order of the ages that preclude any fertility is inverted, and this can be interpreted as a signal of how things (to the mind of the speaker) are turned upside down by the deity who had promised offspring such a long time ago. His annunciation, in Gen.17, of the belated birth can only meet disbelief and covert despair on the side of an Abraham whose patience is exhausted.

The patriarch utters his disbelief in the chapter devoted to the covenant of circumcision, and in ch.18 his wife shares it. He is a hero of disbelief, many chapters before he is able to manifest himself as the hero of belief (in Gen.22, in view of the Akedah) that made him "the father of those who believe" and earned him the admiration of the rabbis who produced the Midrashim. As a tired, despairing, almost cynical couple who do not know any more how to trust the promise of the Lord, Abraham and Sarah are much more accessible to the reader and his sympathy than in Gen.22 where Abraham seems to be a superman. The reader can easily identify him/herself with hero and heroine in chs.17-18.

The subsystem of age references is a special application of the explicit time references that offer most narratives their temporal co-ordinates. In Gen.12-25 they are supported by several other manipulations of time, mainly two huge hiatuses in story time that mark the boundaries between chs.16 and 17 and between 21 and 22, and three time thresholds (as I call them) that presuppose one another and are located in 15:1, 22:2 and 22:20. Together with the age numbers these five data help us find the underlying time schedule of the entire Abraham cycle and offer the

key to its structure. A full analysis can be found in vol.25 of *Oudtestamentische Studiën*.[15] It shows how crucial Abraham's hundredth year was and that this short period of (narrative) time has received a great amount of discourse time: the chapters 17-21 are reserved for it. Ch.17 is the principled overture of this central panel. Two annunciations, one of individual birth and one of collective death and destruction, come with it and are elaborated upon in ch.18. The events that represent the fulfilment of the divine words happen in chiastic order in chs.19-21.

The central Act has remarkable boundaries that are temporal hiatuses. There is an exact gap of 13 years that separates and connects the final verse of Gen.16 and the opening one of 17. The gap between chapters 21 and 22 is called *yamim rabbim* in 21:34. In this final verse Abraham has become doubly blessed, as the father of Isaac and the powerful man whom the Philistines want to have as their political ally. And so "he lived many years" in their land. Ch.22 follows immediately with the temporal clause *wayhi 'achar hadd^ebarim ha'elleh*. This initial clause is the chiastic counterpart of the other time threshold, Gen.15:1a, that reads *'achar hadd^ebarim ha'elleh hayah*, and introduces a story promising a son and in which Abram expresses his concern about the matter.

C. Ascending to higher text levels: the dialectic of wholeness.
Here I want to study two crucial passages from the prose texts in II Samuel that is a part of the Deuteronomistic History. In my portrait of the established King David I ascertained that the two capital crimes committed by David in ch.11, adultery with Bathsheba and the heinous liquidation of her husband and his officer, Uriah, on the Ammonite front, were answered in ch.12 by two distinct oracles of doom. The traditional division into verses is wrong in 12:10. We see that the oracle on death ends in v.10a with the announcement of the sword as punishment. We also see that v.10b forms a parallelism with 9a through the correspondence of the initial "why" and "because" and the repetition of the value judgment *bazitah*, "you have despised Me/ the word of the Lord." The parallelism is a phenomenon on the level of paragraphs or sequences and marks the initial boundaries of two oracles. In v.10b the accusation is offered which belongs to the oracle against adultery, in v.11a the messenger formula follows that serves as a pivot, and in 11b the verdict begins that avenges the sexual crime with a sexual invasion. The end of both oracles has another parallelism; it is *mibbeteka*. David will be punished on the level of his "house", i.e. his dynasty.

The word *bayit* is known to advise a whole network of punning in II Sam.7. This chapter of prime ideological impact is in historical-critical circles known under the misnomer "Nathan's oracle." A terrible mistake, as the prophet is neither the sender nor the addressee of the oracle; I will not be digging deeper into this at this juncture, however. What is told us in ch.7? David sits in a palace, a *bayit*, of cedar wood, and considers the fact that the Ark dwells in a mere tent. He then conceives a plan to build the temple (once more: *bayit*). God does not want a temple, however, and counters by promising the king a lasting dynasty - again a *bayit*. The pun sounds like this, in the shortest formula: you are not to build a house for Me, but I will give you an enduring house.

Now let us see what two representatives of the historical-critical method have done with this Samuel material; firstly, Kyle McCarter, who wrote his Anchor Bible commentary on Samuel in two volumes, and secondly two articles written by Matitiahu Tsevat in the sixties. Like others, they attack the authenticity of the final part of the divine promise, from v.13 on, when God mentions David's son and successor and says: "he will build a house (*bayit*, a temple) for My name."

McCarter goes about this sentence as follows.[16] "Within the oracle proper (vv.5-16) these two incongruous ideas - the refusal of a temple (vv.5b-7) and the promise of a dynasty (vv.11b-16) -

are joined together in a precarious unity by v.13a, "He [the scion of the dynasty] will build a house for my name .." This half-verse, then, is the linchpin of the passage. When it is removed the oracle falls apart: (...). Thus the likelihood that v.13a is editorial is very high."

It is true that vv.5b-7 is the passage where God refuses a temple, and that the next part is the promise of a dynasty. But at the same time McCarter commits four fundamental errors in four sentences. He reduces literature to ideas, he subjects the Hebrew text to a conceptual analysis that is to justify a negative value judgment, he ignores the composition of the long speech along the syntagmatic axis and his observation of the function of v.13 leads him to a negative genetic conclusion.

It is very risky to identify themes or motifs from a literary text, or any artifact, with ideas. Usually good literature is full of interesting ideas, but that does not mean that the author has to behave like a tidy thinker or philosopher. Poetic license keeps narrator and poet free from the obligation of including ideas, or dealing with concepts in a way that satisfies philosophical or logical norms. Literature is neither subject to nor a handmaiden of conceptualising, and in reality many writers deal freely, creatively, or wildly with ideas. The label "incongruous ideas" is an improper and premature judgement on a non-literary plane. At the same time McCarter creates the false problem of "a precarious unity." But again, the unity required by him lies on the conceptual plane, which does not affect the narrator.

Moreover, there is an effective unity resting on the proper, that is, the literary plane. It is forged by the extensive and punning exploitation of *bayit*. What the historical-critical scholar overlooks is the fact that this play on words was already prepared six chapters ago. In II Sam.2 the narrator gave David's supporters the name *bet Yehudah*, which is a unique combination. In chs.2-4 he repeatedly used the phrases *bet sha'ul* versus *bet dawid*, in a symmetrical opposition that accompanies the civil war and gets gradually broken as "the house of Saul" becomes weaker and weaker and "the house of David" grows stronger - this is a quote. When David conquers Jerusalem in ch.5, the word is prominent once more, and at the same time ambiguous. The blind and the lame may not enter the *bayit*, and the best craftsmen from Phoenicia arrive to build a magnificent palace for king David, a *bayit* as the object of their *banah*.

So the word "house" has become a key word in the development leading to the culmination of chs.6-7. There it reaches a climax in the pun of temple/no and dynasty/yes. This coupling has been already achieved at the end of 7:11, so that McCarter gives too much weight to v.13a when he calls that line a linchpin. By the way, he handles this object in an amazing way. "When it is removed the oracle falls apart" - of course, what else can one expect when one takes away an essential part from an organism? McCarter is himself responsible for the kind of scrap-heap he made here.

His fourth error is astonishing. In his own way, by the conceptual analysis criticised, McCarter shows that v.13a has an important function. An open mind would conclude that the clause is indispensable and suits its context well. But McCarter does the opposite and says in other words: throw that line out, because it is likely to stem from editorial work.

The historical-critical method is often atomistic with words, and often repeats this atomism on the level of literary units (stories and the like). This is fatal here, too. One may not interpret chapter 7 and pass a judgment on it without reckoning with and thinking through the connection with chapter 12. Chapter 7 has its place in a grand design; it is a station on a long trajectory. The prophet Nathan's appearance in the text should be studied in conjunction with the two other occasions when he comes to the foreground. I am referring to ch.12 and I Kings 1, where he has a major role and his interventions are crucial. The interpreter who neglects this is precipitating towards the edge of a ravine.

This does not stop Tsevat (in HUCA 1963 and Biblica 1965) from going one step further. He too is plagued by conceptualising. His argument is as follows. The promise of a lasting dynasty, the promise God gives the king by word of his prophet, entails concluding a covenant. "Covenant means contractuality and conditionality."[17] Loyalty to the covenant on the side of the people of Israel is a necessary condition, from the Sinai covenant to the prophets much later, and this has nothing to do "with the blank check of unlimited validity made out to the house of David, as we find it in II Sam.7:13b-16. This is the salient point. For if the existence of the confederacy, which is the body, is conditional, kingship, which is an organ, cannot be unconditional. There are, then, in this chapter two mutually exclusive concepts of the Davidic kingship and dynasty, and we are forced to the conclusion that the short passage that contains one of them, vss.13b-16, is a gloss."

This kind of thinking is razor-sharp, and the train of thought is compelling, if taken by itself. But the text does not ask for our autonomous smartness, but for our open-minded listening, and whether we are willing to attune ourselves to its wave-length. By the standard of the text itself Tsevat's argument is just an example of fatal hyper-criticism. He has limited himself to one chapter. In a footnote he says that the actual word $b^e rit$ does not occur in the text, "but the matter is clear." This note makes his discourse self-defeating. The word is not there and that should be taken seriously. The learned author did not really honour the fact that this chapter, however weighty it is in terms of ideology, is no more than one building block in a much bigger whole (that has an under-estimated degree of unity). Concretely speaking, he has overlooked the fact that the unconditional nature of the promise in ch.7, perceived within the boundaries of the complete narrative, lasts only a short while and soon receives a dialectical response, in ch.12.

The unconditional promise by God is the thesis; it is undermined in ch.11 through the double crime committed by the man who was to maintain and protect the law. The thesis is then crippled permanently by the oracles of doom in ch.12 and their consequences; I mean the sword at this point. They are the antithesis, and they are twofold. Well then, the oracle of salvation in ch.7 is formally and emphatically articulated into two. Looking at the colometric typography of this text,[19] we observe v.5ab with its first and second degree direct speech and the exact repetition of this in 8ab, so that the two halves of the oracle - the negative part against building a temple and the positive one in favour of the dynasty - together form a third degree embedded character's text. The key word *bayit* proceeds too, after ch.7, and participates in the negativity of the announcements of punishment in ch.12; see the repeated *mibbeteka* v.10a and at the end of v.11. One level higher up: after the thesis of the oracle of promise with its two halves and the antithesis of the double oracle of doom we finally have I Kings 1 that is a synthesis, to a certain degree. Nathan convincingly plunges himself into faction politics so that Solomon becomes the successor on the throne. This is one of the first manifestations of the lasting quality of the Davidic line as promised by God. At the same time, however, this succession is accompanied by several acts of bloodshed. The demise of the handsome Adonijah is an instance of the judgment announcing that the sword will never depart from David's house.

NOTES

1) Vol.II of my *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel* (abbreviated henceforth to NAPS) discusses the hierarchy of the text by means of a model of 12 levels, and calls it a semiotic staircase. The texture has six layers (sounds, syllables, words, phrases, clauses, and sentences), the structure (or rather composition) has another six layers: sequences/speeches, story parts, stories, Acts, sections, book.

2) Lyle Eslinger, "Viewpoints and Point of View in 1 Samuel 8-12", in: *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (1983), pp.61-76. Cf. his book *Kingship of God in Crisis. A Close Reading of 1 Samuel 1-12*, Sheffield 1985 (BLS 10).

3) A full interpretation showing how a synchronic reading is necessary, rich, and sufficient will appear soon, in volume IV of NAPS.

4) NAPS II ch.XV § 3. See also my article "A Lie Born of Truth, Too Weak to Contain it. A structural reading of 2 Sam. i 10-16", in: *Oudtestamentische Studiën* 23, Leiden 1984, pp.39-55.
For a more reflective, hermeneutical consideration of the combination I Sam.31 versus II 1 see also my article "Structural Reading on the Fracture between Synchrony and Diachrony", in: *Jaarbericht Ex Oriente Lux* 30 (1987-88), pp.123-136.

5) For a discussion of the acrostic psalms see also Wilfred G.E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry, A Guide to its Techniques*, JSOT Supplement #26, Sheffield, 1984, pp.192ff. It is regrettable that this useful and rich inventory does not recognise the level of the verse; calling this unit a couplet or a strophe, it skips the verse, calls the strophe a stanza and has no name for the stanza.

6) W.F. Albright, "A Catalogue of Early Hebrew Lyric Poems - Ps.68", in: *Hebrew Union College Annual* 23 (1950-51) pp.1-39.

7) J.P. Fokkelman, "The Structure of Psalm lxviii", in: OTS 26 (1990) pp.72-83.

8) In English I consulted the NEB, the King James Bible, and the second edition (1985) of Tanakh, translated for the Jewish Publication Society of America. In Dutch one can find the bicolic solution in the so-called Statenvertaling, the Leidsche Vertaling, the NBG version, and the Willibrord-vertaling (of the Katholieke Bijbel Stichting). Cf. the commentaries, e.g. H.-J. Kraus, *Psalmen I-II*, BKAT XV, etc.

9) A full structural analysis of Judges 5 will appear shortly in the USA, in the *Festschrift* for Jacob Milgrom. It has the same goal as my article on Ps.68: to show that a long, ancient and difficult poem is a very carefully structured composition that has much more to say on the basis of a full prosodic analysis.

10) The first version of this article was delivered orally at the Juda Palache Instituut in Amsterdam, where Prof. Niek van Uchelen was the host of a one-day symposium.

11) Why did scholars overlook the syntactic-semantic problem of the second versus the third person? Perhaps this can be explained with an eye to the antecedent text from Judg.5. There we had so many predicative clauses in the middle of the strophe that it was quite natural to put a period in the middle or close to it, so that two sentences came about. Now four predicates are reduced to two, and the seeming separation of heaven and earth along a diagonal line was a little bit too much for a mindset that had received no genuinely literary training.

12) Terah, Sarah, and Ishmael (his father, wife, and first son, respectively) each get one age designation too; I print these in Roman type, the others in italics.

13) I am grateful to Robert Alter (Berkeley) who pointed out to me, when I visited California to give some guest-lectures, how the convention is creatively overturned here.

14) Well-known examples: 7 and 77 in Lamech's song of revenge in Gen.4, thousands versus tens of thousands in the women's song of victory when they meet victoriuos Saul and David (I Sam.18); and several times in Prov.30:15-31.

15) J.P. Fokkelman, "Time and the Structure of the Abraham Cycle", in OTS 25 (1989) pp.96-109.

16) P. Kyle McCarter Jr., *II Samuel*, New York 1984, p.222.

17) According to Tsevat in *Hebrew Union College Annual* 34 p.73. The next quotation I give is from the same page. The two articles I am discussing are "The Steadfast House: What Was David Promised in II Sam.7:11b-16?" in: HUCA 34 (1963) pp.71-82, and "the House of David in Nathan's Prophecy", in: *Biblica* 46 (1965) pp.353- 356.

18) I offer the colometric typography of II Sam.7 at the back of NAPS vol.III (= *Throne and City*), Assen 1990. There each clause gets its own line, so that e.g. v.5b refers to the second clause of verse 5, etc.