

**REFLECTION ON GEO WIDENGREN'S
PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD ***

Towards a phenomenological hermeneutic of the Old Testament.

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ABSTRACT

The article demonstrates the value of Geo Widengren's phenomenological method. This method resolves the problem of syncretism lurking in any attempt at a comparative study of religion, and is viewed against the background of the history of philosophy in Scandinavia. Widengren's method is theoretically constituted by a descriptive analysis of religious phenomena in the concreteness of its immediate context with all its particularity and specificity. The relevance

*This presentation is dedicated to my past tutor and my enduring friend, Professor Alfred G. Rooks. I do this with appreciation of his person, his scholarship and his influence on my life and thought. From him I have learnt the importance of using primary source material in research; the benefits of a thorough-going literary-critical approach; the need for critical analysis of historical, philosophical and empirical data; the satisfaction of commitment to an academic task which needs to be well done.

of the method for Old Testament hermeneutics is further illustrated: the justification of the theory in relation to the problematic phenomena is discussed. Widengren's method is analysed as a "hermeneutic of transcendence" contingently situated in the concreteness of human life. It is non-dialectical as opposed to Hegelian Idealism. Human life provides the common ground on which the reader comes to terms with the text of the Old Testament. The method merges the reader and the text into union. Writing a theology of the Old Testament becomes writing a theology of ourselves.

PREAMBLE.

Geo Widengren, born in Sweden in 1907, received his doctorate at Uppsala in 1936. In 1940 he became professor of the history and psychology of religion at the University of Uppsala, a post he held until his retirement about ten years ago. He is known particularly for his contribution to ancient Iranian studies. He is a past president of the International Association for the History of Religions (1960-1970). His major works are numerous, of which the following may be noted:

Hochgottglauben im alten Iran; Iranische Geistewelt von den Anfängen bis zum Islam; Mani and Manichaeism; Die Religionen Irans; Feudalismus im alten Iran; Sakrales Königtum im Alten Testament und im Judentum; Muhammed the Apostle of God; Iran and Islam; The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms of Lamentation as Religious Documents; A series of monographs under the title "King and Saviour"; Religionsens värld (German edition: Religionsphänomenologie).

A. THE SCANDINAVIAN CONTEXT OF GEO WIDENGREN.

Religious studies in Uppsala has a distinctive style of reflection in its approach to historical research. For this reason, Geo Widengren's own scholarly approach must be understood within the context and background of the history of philosophy in Scandinavia, and in Uppsala in particular. There are at least two important aspects of this philosophical understanding which need to be noted.

In the first instance, there is a deliberate rejection of Hegelian Idealism, which has dominated theological and biblical thought in the scene of European research during the past century and more. At the basis of this idealism, reality is to be identified with the Eternal Spirit. Truth is not to be found in individual truths but in the whole. This meant that the so-called scientific study of the history of religions, such as we have inherited from the nineteenth century, had to be a comparative study of religion. Data unearthed within the context of any particular ancient religion, and this would include Israel, were viewed as being subservient to the genus, as representative truths from other religions, as bearing witness to the commonality of a metaphysic of Eternal Spirit.

The version of Hegelian Idealism against which Scandinavian philosophy reacted, during the twentieth century, was that which had been propounded by Christopher Jacob Boström in the nineteenth century.¹ C J Boström (1797-1866), who had been the dominant Swedish philosopher in the nineteenth century, was a Hegelian, a kind of Neo-Platonist who conceived of reality in terms of the spiritual. Reality was spiritual, with determinatives of reality occurring in consciousness. Everything that is, is a determinative mode of self-consciousness, being itself a system of ideas. In Sweden, Boström's Hegelianism had been criticised by Vitalis Norström (1856-1916), for having created a dichotomy between spirit and matter, with a consequence that truth had become

1. Cf Lundenberg, Axel 1972. **Sweden's contribution to philosophy.** La Salle Ill.: Court Publication, 410-423.

representations and not realities in the phenomenological world.²

The second important aspect of philosophical understanding in Scandinavia, which forms part of the background to Geo Widengren, is a general acceptance of the "positivism" to be found influentially in the writings of Axel Hägerström.³ It needs to be remembered that Vienna, Cambridge and Uppsala are the locale where positivistic philosophy originated. This New Uppsala School in philosophy came to the conclusion that metaphysical realities are epistemologically inaccessible. In the light of this, Axel Hägerström also rejected Boström's undifferentiable and indeterminate metaphysics, together with his Absolute Idealism and the religious and theological positions which depended on conventional metaphysical support.

Geo Widengren has this Axel Hägerström and the anti-Boström background to his work, and has to take them into account, in order to develop a thorough-going phenomenological approach to his traditio-historical research. Though indirectly influenced by them, Widengren was more positively influenced by his teachers in **Religionsgeschichte** and Semitic languages, viz Tor Andrae and Hendrik Samuel Nyberg respectively.⁴ Widengren acknowledges his indebtedness to Tor Andrae in his research in Islamic studies and in his explorations in the Psychology of Religion, which represented for him a significant break from the so-called "evolutionism", as a methodological category in the nineteenth century.⁵ For Widengren this had resolved the tension between "religion-as-theology" and "religion-as-humanism", in the formulation of a **Religionswissenschaft**, this being a phenomenological approach to the empirical data.

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2. Norström, Vitalis 1932. **Religion und Gedanke**. Lund: Borelium.
 3. Cf Hägerström, Axel 1964. **Philosophy und Religion**. New York: Humanities. (Axel Hägerström: 1868-1939).
 4. Cf Andrae, Tor 1936. **Mohammed. The man and his faith**. New York: Scribner.
 5. Cf Widengren, Geo 1945. "Evolutionism and the problem of the origin of religion", *Ethos*. X, 2-3.

For Geo Widengren, a phenomenological study of religion must be a method of study devoid of ontological commitments. For this reason, such questions as "the nature of religion", or "humankind's religious experience generally conceived" are matters which are not considered to be of any value at all. For him scientific explanation is to be expressed in terms of William of Ockham: *frustra fit per plura quod potest fieri per pauciora*, i.e. what can be explained in fewer principles, is explained needlessly by more. For this reason, the thought and approach of the Lundensian philosopher-theologian Anders Nygren, in what is known as Motif-Research, is methodologically congruent with the way in which History of Religions at Uppsala approaches "divine-kingship ideology".⁶ This accounts for Geo Widengren's methodological approach in religious studies having such a strong interest in descriptive accounts, so crucial to the phenomenological approach, together with his interest in motifs, modes and themes.

Geo Widengren resists being squeezed into the mould of any typical school, however, and this makes it difficult to classify his work. What most clearly characterises his approach to his source material, is that which can be identified with thorough-going philological studies of primary textual materials, regardless of the area of study.⁷ His interests cover a wide range of research, including his studies of Babylonian and Israelite religions as self-contained entities in themselves; his championing of the sacred kingship theory;⁸ his interest in how religion evolved;⁹ his criticism of the evolutionism of J G Frazer; his interest in the theory of the High God propounded by Wm Schmidt, although rejecting Wm Schmidt's theory of primitive monotheism. Here Geo Widengren is more interested in R Pettazzoni's emphasis on

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6. Cf Nygren, A 1921. *Religiöst Apriori*. Lund: Gleerup, and 1957. *Agape and Eros*. London: SPCK.
 7. Cf Capps, Walter H 1972. *Ways of understanding religion*. New York: Macmillan, 119.
 8. Widengren, G 1952. *Sakrales Königtum im Alten Testament und im Judentum*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
 9. Widengren, G 1946. *Religionens Ursprung*. Stockholm: Diakonistyrelsens Bokförlag.

the special power of the Sky God. Right to the fore in all this, Widengren is a phenomenologist in his approach.¹⁰

B. A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RELIGION AND THE SCANDINAVIAN SCHOOL.

In order to understand the significance of Geo Widengren's phenomenological method in the treatment of his literary source material, it is important to take cognisance of dominant trend in the scientific study of religion, such as has dominated the Western world during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

By 1912, a significant stage in the scientific study of religion had been reached, as is evidenced by a number of publications which appeared in Europe in that year, representing the sociological, ethnological, psychological and historical approaches to religion.¹¹ These epoch-making publications all had the nineteenth century obsession of origins at heart. This was part of the ethos of the time, with the naturalist's quest for the origin of species, the biologist's dream of grasping the origin of life, the

10. Widengren, G 1953. **Religionens våld; Religionsfenomenologiska studier och översikter.** Stockholm: Svenska kyrkans Diakonistyrelses Bokförlag.
11. Durkheim, Emile 1912. **Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse.** (English translation) 1954. **The elementary forms of the religious life.** Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press. Schmidt, Wilhelm 1912. **Ursprung der Gottesidee.** (English translation) 1935. **The origin and growth of religion.** London: Methuen. Raffaele Pettazzoni published his first important monograph in 1912. (English translation) 1956. **The All-knowing God. Researches in early religion and culture.** London: Methuen. Jung, C. G 1912. **Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido.** (English translation) 1949. **Psychology of the unconscious; a study of the transformation and symbolism of the libido.** New York: Dodd, Mead and Co. Freud, Sigmund 1912. **Totem und Tabu.** (English translation) 1950. **Totem and Taboo.** London: Routledge and Paul.

astronomer's endeavour to come to terms with the origin of the universe. This same obsession for the primordial and the original, inevitably became part of the so-called scientific study of religion.¹² It was not possible for biblical studies to remain unaffected by this hive of academic activity, particularly in the light of the mass of new and exciting information which was being unearthed in the Near East. The nineteenth century, with its archaeological activities, unearthing ancient civilizations which had been hidden for centuries, meant that everything in biblical studies had to change.¹³ Whereas previously the Bible had been treated in isolation from other literature, now a knowledge of Israel also required a knowledge of the early Semitic religion of which it formed part. Furthermore, Semitic religion in turn formed part of the human family, thus necessitating a knowledge of the religion of "primitive humanity" in general. This in turn provoked the questions relating to religion itself, including its genesis, its nature, its development, and the ways in which it is to be accounted for.¹⁴

The **Religionsgeschichtliche Schule**, which was composed of an influential group of biblical scholars during the period 1880-1920, represents the culmination of this approach. The advocates of this hermeneutic made extensive use of data drawn from this comparative study of religions for the interpretation of Christianity.¹⁵ To these scholars, religious documents were understood not as isolated expressions of the authors' thought, but as products of a long and complex development of the tribe and community. Hermann Gunkel not only traced developments in Israel, but also sought parallels in Egyptian and Babylonian systems. Similarly, Richard Reitzenstein made an exhaustive study of Hellenism, in order to discover the roots of original Christianity. This

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12. Cf Eliade, Mircea 1975. **The Quest: History and the meaning of religion.** University of Chicago, 44ff.
13. Cf eg. Winternitz, M 1910. **A concise dictionary of Eastern religion: The index of the sacred books of the East.** Oxford: Clarendon.
14. Cf (edd.) Lessa, W A and E Z Vogt, 1958. **Reader in comparative religion: An anthropological approach.** Evanston, Ill.: Row Petersen.
15. Among its members were H Gunkel (1862-1932); W Bousset (1865-1920); W Heitmüller (1869-1925); R Reitzenstein (1861-1931).

evolutionism of development became essentially a comparative study of religion.

In Sweden, during the same period, theological scholars, using the same data available to the **Religionsgeschichtliche Schule**, were possessed with a different concern, viz. that of discovering and clarifying the essential character of separate religions, and of Christianity in particular. For Einar Billing it was the dynamic and dramatic character of God's activity in history and in faith.¹⁶ To Gustav Aulén the fundamental of faith was the picture of God standing behind particular doctrines, giving them unity.¹⁷ To Anders Nygren it was the **grundmotif** of a religion, the Agape-motif being the distinctive element in Christianity.¹⁸ To Nathan Söderblom it was the prophetic character of Christianity, in terms of a mysticism which heightened the sense of distance between human beings and God.¹⁹ The approaches were essentially non-dialectical and non-comparative. The distinctive of a religion was kernel to the discovery of what constituted religion.

What is known as the **Scandinavian School of History of Religions**, sometimes called the **Uppsala School**, arises out of this background, with a compelling interest in the specific and the concrete.²⁰ Broadly speaking, the representatives of this school adopt a scientific religio-historical approach, which is grounded on a philological and thematic treatment of source materials. They make clear distinctions between historical, phenomenological and psychological approaches to the history of religion. They have close affinities with the Myth and Ritual School in their stress on the role of the

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16. Billing, E 1932. **De etiska tankarna i urkristendom.** Stockholm: SKPB.
17. Aulén, G 1943. **Den allmänneliga kristna tron.** Stockholm: SKPB.
18. Nygren, A 1953. **Agape and Eros.** London: SPCK.
19. Söderblom, N 1948. **The nature of revelation.** Philadelphia: Westminster.
20. Although this is not a strictly defined school, it includes such scholars as G Widengren, A V Ström, I Engnell, J Pederson, H Ringgren, S Mowinckel, E Neilsen, G W Ahlström, K Stendahl, G Gerhardsson, S Wikander.

cultus. They are concerned, to a great extent, with the problems of cultural patterns to be found in the ancient Near East. They give considerable attention to the complex problems connected with kingship, cult and tradition within particular ancient contexts. In biblical exegesis, which is considered to be an organic part of Near Eastern study, they have developed the **Tradio-historical Method**. This method, which in Germany is referred to as **Kultgeschichtliche Methode**, has adopted a synthetic approach, aimed at taking a holistic view of the totality of religious traditions and their transmission, with as little reliance on a **priori** theories as possible.

The compelling interest of the Scandinavian School in the specific and the concrete is at the heart of Geo Widengren's phenomenological approach. Instead of being syncretistic, the Uppsala tradition gives sanction to atomistic endeavours, and in so doing seeks to treat each thing in its place. Everything that is investigated has to be described within the concreteness of its immediate context, with all its particularity and specificity. In its devotion to techniques of empirical research, the Uppsala approach is never caught up with metaphysical and epistemological over-commitment. To them the main concern is clarity of thought. For this reason, Widengren always approaches the material in its own specific context. He does not look for coherence which can be applied to everything. Generalizations, such as are the concern of comparative studies, is not his concern. Widengren is not interested in repetitions of the same phenomenon in several historical and cultural contexts. The scientific and the empirical are his concerns, but this is something other than the comparative method of study so characteristic of the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule. The phenomenological takes precedence over the comparative.

C. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SPECIFICITY IN WIDENGREN'S APPROACH.

Here it is important to note that, in a phenomenological approach to any given subject-material, no attempt is made to establish a common ground beneath the cultural forms being investigated. Although there may be some interest in the essence of things, no common natural religion is sought

beneath the forms of religion where they appear in a specific context. The culturally conditioned forms are accepted as the only forms available. The real purpose of research is to raise to the level of conscious, reflective awareness, that which belongs to the particular religious activity.²¹

This phenomenological approach, which has little interest in the generalizations of comparative religion, means that Geo Widengren sees no problem in several religions claiming exclusive rights to religious truth simultaneously. The reason for this is that truth is not a comparative matter. The concern of phenomenological study is not to interpret religions which ascribe validity to each other, for most can fit into a more comprehensive, over-arching meaning-scheme. This means that truth is neither syncretistic nor relativistic.²² The compelling interest of phenomenological research is to penetrate specific objects of historical, textual and philological enquiry. It concentrates on particular phenomena under enquiry, and places it in its proper context of meaning. To this end, Widengren probes, explores, describes, cross-references, with each item explained specifically, minutely and as fully as the data will allow. This is his priority.

An example of Widengren's approach can be illustrated in his interest in sacred kingship. In his study of sacred kingship in the Psalms, his goal was not to demonstrate influence, but to analyse the institution of ideas connected with kingship. He then went on to study kingship in Iran, Mesopotamia and Israel, each as separate religions apart. In other words, kingship was studied in its particularity as that which is its typical portrayal, each religion considered apart.²³ Unlike

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21. Cf Bettis, Joseph E 1969. **Phenomenology of religion.** London: SCM, 3.
22. Cf Bellah, R 1970. "Christianity and symbolic realism", **Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion.** Vol 1X, No 2, 89-115.
23. Cf Widengren, G 1937. **The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms as religious documents.** Stockholm: Bokforlags Aktiebolaget Thule. 1952. **Sakrales Königtum in Alten Testament und im Judentum.** Stuttgart: W Kohlhammer.

the comparative method, Widengren did not start with the notion of religion, and then treat those elements which all religions have in common. His emphasis in his study was on concreteness and specificity.

The Myth and Ritual School, together with such Scandinavian scholars as S Mowinckel and I Engell, have made strong claims to the common elements to be found in the culture and religions of the ancient Near East.²⁴ These schools differ, however, as to the function and purpose implicit within such accepted patterns. S H Hooke, for example, viewed the king, as representative of the god, as being the centre of the cultus, and as such responsible for the crops and prosperity of the cities. Widengren, on the other hand, claimed that the king was responsible for the well-being of the cosmos, a concept which he contends gave rise to the Iranian saviour-ideology and also to Jewish messianism.²⁵ Whereas H Frankfort has reacted against the patternism of the Scandinavian School, pointing out that the differences in the religious patterns are more important than the similarities,²⁶ to Widengren the notion of **patternism** is thematic. By this Widengren means that the themes are to be understood in their own contexts, thus similarities or differences are of no account. Each phenomenon must be treated within its own sphere of meaning.²⁷ He deals with topics which are crucial to the content and configuration of religion. Each is treated in detail, but there is no attempt to show the relationship of the topics, as these affect different contexts.

In his phenomenological approach, Widengren has little to do with philosophical phenomenology inspired by Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Max Scheler or Paul Ricoeur, or the like. Widengren intends that his phenomenological approach be used

24. Cf Hooke, S H 1933. **Myth and ritual**. London: Oxford Press.

25. Cf "King and Saviour" Vol.IV, 1951. **The king and the tree of life in ancient Near East religion**. Uppsala: Lundequistka Bokhandeln.

26. Cf Frankfort, H 1951. **The Problem of Similarity in Ancient Near East Religion**. Oxford: Clarendon.

27. Cf Widengren, Geo 1969. **Religionsphänomenologie**. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

in the tradition of Chantepie de la Saussaye, who used the term in a schematically neutral sense, as referring to the empirical features of religion.²⁸

This specificity of Widengren's phenomenological approach to any given subject-material, resolves the problem of syncretism in religious studies. Whereas the notion of syncretism is difficult to define as a technical term used in modern religious studies, etymologically it is that which characterises the admixture of divergent elements component of any given system. As used in a broad sense by historians of religion, syncretism is understood to be part of the inevitable, in a generic sense, of religions influencing one another in the "growth" of religion. In this assumed historical development, the notion of syncretism represents the higher synthesis within a dialectical process. In that dialectical evolutionism is the adopted schematic in which critical, comparative studies of religion understands how the development in religion has taken place, syncretism is accepted as the "growth" taking place in the encounter of religions and cultures.²⁹ This is clearly a notion of syncretism based on dialectical and idealistic assumptions at the basis of religious studies. Within the non-dialectical and phenomenological approach of Widengren, however, such an understanding of syncretism has little meaning.

Widengren's understanding of syncretism, as this relates to the phenomena found in the context of ancient Near Eastern religion, is noteworthy. It is possible to speak of syncretism in a generic sense, as that which characterizes a group of religions in a definite area and period of time. In this sense Widengren groups the **Oriental Mystery Religions**, including such cults as Mithras, Kybele, Attis, Isis and Sarapis, as

28. Cf de la Saussaye, Chantepie 1925. **Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte**. Tübingen, J C B Mohr. Cf also Widengren, G 1968. "Some remarks on the methods of the phenomenology of religion". **Universitet och Forskningen: Festschrift for Torngny T Segerstedt**. Uppsala: Almqvist och Wiksell, 250-260.

29. Panikkar, R. "Some notes on syncretism and eclecticism related to the growth of human consciousness", (ed.) Birger A Pearson. **Religious syncretism in antiquity**. Montana: The American Academy of Religion, 47-62.

syncretistic religions.³⁰ Such a characterization, however, can only be used in a specific sense, but never as a generality. Widengren treats syncretism as a dynamic process of fusion, union or coalescence which sometimes occurs, when a variety of religious themes interact, or when one or more religious traditions join together. But one may only legitimately speak of a syncretistic process when it can be traced, where its ingredients can be distinguished and sorted, and where the dynamic of the phenomenon can be penetrated, however partially. To treat syncretism as a regular principle for interpretation, does not give one the licence to make extra-territorial inferences.³¹

Widengren points out that the study of the structure of a religious system indicates why certain systems are susceptible to the acceptance of important foreign elements, without a significant change of the structure itself, while other systems are radically disturbed or deformed under such impact. Others again show resistance to the acceptance of elements from other systems. This makes any generalization, in terms of syncretism being a principle to be accepted as a natural element in the development of religions, unacceptable. It is only when a particular context of meaning gives indication of being influenced by another context, or may have originated in another locale, that the scholar is allowed to talk legitimately about borrowing, interaction, contact, influence, continuity and religious syncretism. The specifics are to be described within their specific context of meaning, and not in generalities and abstractions.³² Only in a phenomenological sense will Widengren discuss syncretism. A case in point in this discussion is Manichaeism, where there is unmistakable syncretism. This is established from the fact that it is deliberate, for its founder, Mani, believed that in himself was found the summation of all previous religious wisdom. This is a particular case which can be affirmed phenomenologically. This, however, does not become a basis on which to generalize about syncretism. It is a specific case, but it does

30. Cf Widengren, G 1961. "Synkretische Religionen", (ed.) B. Spuler, **Handbuch der Orientalistik** 8, Leiden: Kōln, 43-82.

31. Ibid. 66ff.

32. Cf Widengren, G 1963. "From atomism to contexts of meaning in philosophy", **Philosophical essays dedicated to Gunner Aspelin**. Lund: Gleerup, 122-136.

not become an example or an analogy on which to speculate in general.³³

In accordance with Widengren's phenomenological approach, there is a deliberate resistance to the generic, unless the data is forced out into the open by the specific. It is only when there is a higher level of generalization assumed by the researcher, that subordinate and dependent levels are required to be identified. On the other hand, without these so-called higher levels of generalization in religion, phenomena can be understood in its own right, without being made party to genus/species classifications, or of having to be transformed into components of some higher form of theoretical unification. According to the phenomenological procedure of Geo Widengren's method, notions of syncretism are subsidiary when viewed phenomenologically, for syncretism is contingent on the schematic of subjective idealism, so prevalent in comparative studies.

D. TOWARDS A PHENOMENOLOGICAL HERMENEUTIC OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

In reflecting upon the methodological approach which characterises Geo Widengren's academic research, I wish to highlight the following hallmarks which appropriately belong to a phenomenological hermeneutic of the Old Testament.

1. **A treatment of the Old Testament material, which is not loaded with ontological commitment, as an a priori demand.**

This means that we allow the empirical data, within the context under investigation, to provide the **grundstof** for our descriptive analysis. The realities we explore must be self-validifying from within the phenomena itself. Whatever ontological questions that are raised, must present themselves

33. Cf Widengren, G 1965. **Mani and Manichaeism**. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

from within the matter and nature of things being investigated.

That which is being "unearthed", should not force us to ask such comparative-idealistic/religio-theological questions as: "Where did this come from?" Rather, the kind of phenomenological questions which will arise out of our discoveries will be of the order: "What is this specific data doing in this particular context?" This may, or may not, evoke certain ontological questions, but such must arise out of the phenomena itself. Only as we go about our probing research with this frame of mind, will we be able to penetrate the specific objects within an historical, textual and philological enquiry. In this way we will come to what approximates the contextuality of the Old Testament, viewed from a "detached within" approach.

The scientific **grundläggning** which makes such a phenomenological approach possible, does not belong to some kind of ultimate truth **beyond** human experience, but is that which constitutes the basis of enquiry into the validity of what is found in human experience itself.³⁴

2. A non-dialectical approach to critical-historical studies and Old Testament theology.

It is not a simple matter, within the climate of our Western thinking, to arrive at an understanding of truth apart from a dialectical process. This is largely due to our mental conditioning, resulting from the radical dialectic with which we formulate theological understanding,³⁵ by restricting the phenomenological world to the realm of reason.³⁶ The

34. Here Geo Widengren is indebted to Anders Nygren's philosophical research, which sought to provide a scientific basis on which theology could function as a self-validifying descriptive discipline. Cf Watson, P S 1963. "The scientific theology of Anders Nygren", *Expository Times*. Vol. LXXIV, No.10, July, 300-304. Nygren, A 1935. *Dogmatikens vetenskapliga grundläggning; met sākils hāsyn till den Kant. Schleiermacherska problems tällningen*. Stockholm: SKDB. Cf esp.61f.

resistance in Swedish theological thought, to Hegelian idealism and its dialectical schematic, provides a more appropriate methodological framework in which to conceive of living faith as rightly belonging to the context of the traditions of cultic history.

Before the rise of modern biblical scholarship, the Old Testament was not considered to have a theology of its own. This was largely due to ecclesiastical practice, in which the Bible was used to substantiate theological assumptions, giving support to the "orthodoxy" of the church. With this understanding of theology, the Old Testament hermeneutic proposed by Otto Eissfeldt, in the twenties, required a separation between theology and historical studies.³⁷ To Eissfeldt the histories of the religion of Israel needed to be an objective study, whereas theology belonged to the confessional theologians in their interest in personal faith. This was understandable when ecclesiastical theology concerned itself with the abstractions of the **noumenal**, within the realm of the metaphysical. Within a conceptualisation of the "transcendent" as a dichotomy of the world of human experience, Eissfeldt was right in his contention that the history of religion was a critical-empirical study, with no interest in revelation, whereas theology had to do with faith and eternal truth, and had nothing to do with history.

The phenomenological method of Geo Widengren, within a Scandinavian context which is non-dialectical and synthetic in its approach, however, allows for theologising to take place within the phenomena. Within this holistic approach, which views the totality of religious traditions and their transmission, it is possible to have a hermeneutic of transcendence which has its **anknüpfungspunkt** within the concreteness of human life.³⁸ This will entail an exegesis of what the **vergegenwärtigung** of Israel's traditions entails.³⁹ This will include an analysis of the "motifs" arising out of the mass of phenomena ingredient to cult and tradition.⁴⁰ This will also allow a study of the corporate faith of the ordinary Israelite, in whom the prophetic interpretation of

what was eventful in life, looked for a response to a "revelation" like his own.⁴¹

3. A phenomenological approach to the Old Testament which provides the threshold of a hermeneutic for life.

Geo Widengren's scientific, religio-historical approach, grounded on a philological and thematic treatment of the source material, is a method which does not argue for an ontological tie between all the component parts of the phenomena under investigation. He adopts a neutral approach, which does not subscribe to any philosophy of phenomenology. Geo Widengren would not recommend that we spend excessive

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35. Cf Jonsson, John N 1970. "The Hegelian dialectic in theology", **Christianity Today**. Vol XIV, No 23, August, 3-5.
36. Cf Nygren, A 1921. **Religiöst apriori, dess filosofiska förutsättningar och teologiska konsekvenser**. Lund: Gleerup, 109.
37. Eissfeldt, Otto 1926. "Israelitisch-jüdische religionsgeschichte und alttestamentliche theologie", **Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche wissenschaft**, n s 3, 1-12.
38. Cf Wolff, H W 1964. **Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament**. München: Chr Kaiser Verlag, 182-205. Rust, E C 1970. **Positive religion in a revolutionary time**. Philadelphia: Westminster, 36. Robinson, H Wheeler, 1946. **Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament**. Oxford: Clarendon, 148-150, 159, 278-9.
39. S Mowinckel argues for this "actualisation" arising out of the mythopoeic thought of the ancient Near East, whereas M Noth argues Israel reacted against the mythical theory.
40. Here "motifs" cannot be reduced to ideas alone. Cf Sarndal, G O S 1955. **A critical exposition of the idea of Agape and Eros in the thought of Anders Nygren**. University of Natal, 101.
41. Porteous, N W. "Old Testament theology". H H Rowley (ed.) **The Old Testament and modern study**. Oxford University Press, 335, 337.

time in the studies of phenomenologies of religion, with their discursive methodological procedures. He is far more interested in the historians of religion who are concerned about treating the phenomena.⁴² What is essential is that we master the work in each context, employing the finest of academic resources available to us, and ourselves becoming proficient in such mastery. His particular emphasis is to treat each religion apart. His findings are never treated as examples for a general construction of religious ideas. Phenomena needs to be investigated and understood within its own proper sphere of meaning. It is a method which seeks to minimise dependence on the theoretical, the idealistic and the general as a priori demands.

In coming to terms with the phenomena relating to Israel's faith and history, it is evident that the role of "prophetic consciousness" represents profound insight concerning Israel's belief in God's dealings in human life. In dealing with our source materials, there is no such category as "bare facts of history". The material is all profoundly and significantly interpreted and interpretative. Israel's perception of God in *cognito*, spelt something different from *deus absconditus*. God's "veiledness" was acknowledged to be part of the phenomena of concrete life and existence, necessitating prophetic interpretation. The unknown was not possible through a "bird's eye-view" of ontological distance. The unknown had to be known through what can be known, and this has to be experienced through the realities of human trauma and dereliction.⁴³ This need for prophetic interpretation carried with it the unanswered "now" of ever-present, eschatological significance.

The phenomena of human life, within the questionings, the anger, the torment of the unresolved, such as one experiences in coming to terms with Job, the Psalter, Jeremiah and Deutero-Isaiah, no longer make us feel stranger to the Old Testament text. Here we are no longer foreigners seeking to discover the particularity of their specific context.

42. Geo Widengren's interest in Gerardus van der Leeuw is a case in point. Cf van der Leeuw, G 1938. *Religion in essence and manifestation. A study in phenomenology*. London: Allen and Unwin.

43. Cf Robinson, H Wheeler 1955. *The cross in the Old Testament*. London: SCM, 54, 112-114, 190-192.

Here we find we are on common ground, within the same particularity. Here we find we are no longer writing a theology of the Old Testament, we are now writing a theology of ourselves. At this point, the phenomenological research has become the threshold of the existential experience. Here we discover, with Martin Heidegger, that language is not a game we play, making the rules as we go along. Language we now find to be the definition of our beings, as that which is true to our humanity. Here the biblical scholar and the systematic theologian have, within concrete human existence, become the same person.⁴⁴

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44. Bultmann, R 1955. **Essays philosophical and theological.** London: SCM. Robinson, J M and J B Cobb (edd.) 1964. **The new hermeneutic.** New York: Harper and Row. Fuchs, Ernst 1964. **Studies of the historical Jesus.** Napierville, Ill.: Allenson. Braaten, Carl E 1966. **History and hermeneutics.** Philadelphia: Westminster.