

Form Criticism. Study of biblical tradition which may be presumed to have existed originally in oral form.

Definition and History. The concern of form criticism is to get behind the sources which literary criticism may identify to the preliterate stage of the tradition. It seeks to describe what took place as the tradition was transmitted orally from person to person and from community to community. Its special concern is the modification of the tradition by the life and thought of the believing community. In the case of the OT, form criticism presupposes that the dynamic life of Israel exerted a creative influence on the tradition when it circulated orally, and seeks to recover the earlier forms of the individual units within a larger cycle of tradition. In the NT, form criticism has concerned itself primarily with an investigation of the synoptic Gospels. It has focused upon the individual units of tradition in the Gospels in an effort to distinguish those strata which reflect the concerns of the church from the elements which might be thought to go back to Jesus himself or to some contemporary source in Judaism or Hellenism.

Form criticism was developed as a critical tool in 1901 by Hermann Gunkel. In a commentary on Genesis he broke new ground by attempting to recover the earliest form of the tradition which was given its final literary expression in Genesis. Gunkel accepted the current literary-critical analyses, but was convinced it was possible to recover an earlier stage of the tradition than source criticism had envisioned. He postulated that before there were written documents or structured collections of tradition there was a preliterate oral stage in which the individual stories circulated as independent accounts. The stories must therefore be isolated from the context in which they now stand in Genesis and studied as individual units against the background of similar accounts in the ancient Near East. Gunkel was persuaded that these originally oral stories had been developed and modified over an extended period of time in response to social and cultural changes in the life of Israel.

Gunkel classified the stories in Genesis in terms of their purposes: "ethnological legends" were accounts told to explain the relations of the tribes to each other; "etymological legends" were popular accounts explaining the origin and meaning of the names of races, mountains, wells, sanctuaries, and cities; "ceremonial legends" were devised to explain the sacred customs of Israel; while "geological legends" were told to explain the character of a particular region or locale.

Gunkel attempted to detect how an earlier account had been altered by additions which show more concern for the thought than for the form of the story. He argued that these additions could be recognized by the fact that they disrupted an otherwise harmonious story and by the fact that they were relatively general in character. His analysis tended to eliminate speeches and short narrative notes from the accounts as they stand in Genesis. In his analysis of the individual units Gunkel sought to find reasons for the transformation of an original account and so to describe the inner history of the units of the tradition.

Gunkel was convinced that this method of identifying and classifying smaller units of narrative, didactic, and liturgical tradition behind the literary text was applicable to the study of the synoptic Gospels as well. This insight was developed by one of his pupils, Martin Dibelius, in a study of the primitive Christian tradition concerning John the Baptist (1911). In this early work Dibelius expressed two methodological conclusions concerning the synoptic Gospels and the

tradition embedded in them which became programmatic for form criticism: (1) The Gospel writers are not authors but collectors and preservers of tradition, who have edited their material by adding such items as time and place references, connecting links, and summary reports. (2) Both sayings and narrative material existed in fixed oral forms before they received literary expression by the writers of the Gospels. The second of these insights Dibelius developed in a small brochure, "The Form Criticism of the Gospels" (1919), in which he distinguished five "forms" that he could recognize behind the units of tradition now found in the synoptic Gospels. Three months later his own student, K.L. Schmidt, applied Dibelius' insights to the framework of the synoptic Gospels and sought to demonstrate that the order of the paragraphs even in Mark, the oldest connected narrative source for the ministry of Jesus, was casual and arbitrary.

Traditional birthplace of John the Baptist, who was the subject of Martin Dibelius' study.

In 1921 Rudolf Bultmann published his own independent research into the history of the synoptic tradition. He examined systematically the entire material of each of the synoptic Gospels and sought not only to classify the units by form but to distinguish between the tradition which owes its present form to the early Palestinian church from that which received its form from the later Hellenistic community.

Methodology of Form Criticism. There are three stages in the form criticism of the synoptic Gospels. In the first, the stories and sayings in the Gospels are separated from the framework in which they now appear. K.L. Schmidt had compared a Gospel, with its several units of tradition, to a string of pearls, where each pearl is held in place by the string to which it has been attached artificially. This initial stage of form-critical investigation simply cuts the string so that each of the pearls (the individual units of tradition) may be examined independently.

In the second stage, internal criticism is applied to these units of tradition in order to recover the original form of each. It is presupposed that the units which have been isolated by removing the framework are not yet in their earliest form. A first step toward the recovery of the original form of the tradition is the classification of the material according to its type. Much of the tradition of Jesus' sayings, for example, may be classified as pronouncement stories containing important utterances. Some of these occur in the context of a controversy (e.g., Mk 2:23–28, where the pronouncement occurs in vv 27, 28), while others may be assigned to catechetical instruction (e.g., 12:28–34, where the pronouncement is preserved in vv 32, 33). The words of the Lord sometimes assume the form of a proverb (2:17a), a prophetic statement (9:1), a mission pronouncement (2:17b; 10:45), or a parable (4:30–32). Narrative material about Jesus can be similarly classified (e.g., 1:40–45 is a miracle story).

Once the material has been classified, stylistic considerations established through the study of oral communal "literature" are applied to each unit to determine its original form. It is assumed (1) that each of the several forms possesses a certain stereotyped character; (2) that each unit is complete in itself, stylistically marked off, expressing a single thought or event; (3) that by analysis of the forms it is possible to detect modifications of the tradition; and (4) that since these considerations apply to the popular literature of the day, whether Jewish or Hellenistic, they must apply to the Gospels as well. Working with these assumptions Bultmann, for example, judged

that Mark 2:19 preserved a brief parable told by Jesus, but that verse 20 was an allegorical addition appended to the parable after Jesus' death to interpret the parable and apply it to the worshipping community.

In the third stage, external criticism is applied to the units of tradition to recover the setting in the life of the early church which accounts for their preservation. At this stage the form critic must seek to reconstruct the actual course of early Christian history in order further to classify the material embedded in the Gospels. It is assumed that the gospel tradition served the church in its concern to advance its cause through evangelism, to defend itself through apologetics, and to mature its life through worship and discipline. These several types of concern are reflected in the tradition and account for the modification of the original core of the tradition in some instances, while in others they explain how the tradition actually originated within the developing life of the church, according to Dibelius, Bultmann, and others.

Evaluation of Form Criticism. There are positive features in the form-critical method. (1) The emphasis upon the period of oral transmission prior to the writing of the Gospels balanced earlier approaches which had stressed literary sources almost exclusively. (2) The interest in the role of the community of faith as the guardian and transmitter of the biblical tradition is sound. (3) The Gospels are "occasional writings," in the sense that they were composed for a particular occasion. The emphasis placed by the form critics on the life situation of the believing community is, therefore, proper. (4) Finally, the isolation of particular units of tradition, especially the different groups of pronouncement stories, and the insistence upon the centrality of the passion narrative in the tradition about Jesus, has been helpful for the interpretation of the Gospels.

Negatively, criticism must be directed to each of the three stages of form criticism. There is an element of truth in the estimate of the character of the synoptic Gospels expressed in the first stage. There are fewer precise links to the aspects of the tradition than one might suppose. Nevertheless, this does not imply that there was an indifference to historical sequence or factual truth in the early church. Schmidt's method was to play one Gospel off against another. His method presupposed a rigid literary criticism of the synoptic Gospels and failed to take into account the element of oral tradition which may clarify some of the differences he observed. Form criticism also fails to appreciate the distinct historical, theological, and communal concerns of each of the Evangelists. Moreover, the gospel could not be proclaimed apart from some framework. Since the evangelical message involved a life story, there was a demand for a sequence, at least to some extent. The actual framework discovered by Schmidt conforms to the outline of Peter's preaching in Acts 10:36–41.

A basic weakness in the second stage is that the classification of the material frequently reflects not form, but content. The objectivity claimed by the discipline, consequently, is not evident. Moreover, the appeal to stylistic considerations may be seriously challenged, because the assumptions upon which they are based are not as established as is generally claimed. That they can be applied in a rigid way to materials which have been transmitted orally can be questioned. Such a presupposition precludes diversity which may originate in the authority of the individual responsible for the tradition. In the synoptic Gospels, content is more important than form; it is inappropriate to bring a critical judgment upon the tradition from narrow considerations of form.

One other objection is substantial. The determination of the “laws of style” was based upon a study of material which circulated in an oral state for an extended period of time. It is inappropriate to apply such criteria to traditional units which were written down within a generation or two from the time of their origination.

It is in the third stage of form criticism, the application of external criticism to the units of the tradition to recover their life setting in the experience of the community, that the radical character of the presuppositions of the form critics becomes evident. Dibelius and Bultmann felt that the demands of preaching and worship accounted for most of the modification of the tradition. Bultmann assigned to the (later) Hellenistic community everything that suggests worship, such as interest in the person of Jesus, the birth narratives, most of the accounts of Jesus’ miracles, the resurrection narratives in their present state, the mission pronouncements of Jesus (Mt 11:27; Mk 10:45; Lk 19:10), and the words of institution of the Lord’s Supper. To the Palestinian community Bultmann assigned almost all the rest of the narrative portions and of the teaching, including the distinctly eschatological features of the Gospels and those sayings which indicate that Jesus was conscious of being the Messiah.

The basis of this negative evaluation was Wilhelm Bousset’s reconstruction of early Christian history. Bousset distinguished sharply between Palestinian and Hellenistic Christianity and maintained that the title “Lord” was applied to Jesus first by the Hellenistic Greek-speaking Christians in the course of worship. The early Palestinian Aramaic-speaking Christians referred to Jesus only as the Son of man. This overly sharp distinction between the Palestinian and Hellenistic churches was adopted by Bultmann and others in the determination of the social setting in the life of the church in which the tradition first assumed its distinctive shape.

It is now widely recognized that this reconstruction of the course of early Christian history and development is not accurate. The distinction between Hellenistic and Palestinian Christianity is overdrawn. Palestine was not an island isolated from all Hellenistic influences; Jerusalem itself had Hellenistic synagogues. Moreover, it was primarily Christians from Jerusalem and other Palestinian communities who carried the gospel into Hellenistic regions. Consequently, the disparity between Palestinian and Hellenistic Christianity postulated by Bousset is difficult to maintain.

Moreover, this stage of form criticism tends to separate the gospel tradition from Jesus and those who were the eyewitnesses to what had been said and done unjustifiably. The presence of the apostolic witnesses within the early church exercised a stable influence upon the formation and transmission of the tradition which must be appreciated when seeking to recover the earliest form of the tradition about Jesus’ words and deeds.

WILLIAM L. LANE

See DOCUMENTARY HYPOTHESIS; REDACTION CRITICISM; SOURCE CRITICISM; TRADITION CRITICISM; DEMYTHOLOGIZATION; BIBLICAL CRITICISM, NEW TESTAMENT; BIBLICAL CRITICISM, OLD TESTAMENT.

Bibliography. R. Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*; M. Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*; W.G. Doty, “The Discipline and Literature of NT Form Criticism,” *Anglican Theological Review* 51 (1969), 257–319; K. Koch, *The Growth of the Biblical Tradition*; E.V. McKnight, *What Is Form Criticism?* E.B. Redlich,

Form Criticism: Its Value and Limitations; V. Taylor, *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition* (4th ed.), 1957;
G.M. Tucker, *Form Criticism of the OT*.¹

¹ Lane, W. L. (1988). [Form Criticism](#). In *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible* (Vol. 1, pp. 812–815). Baker Book House.