

CHAPTER 9

Form Criticism

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Form criticism, an English rendering of the German term *Formgeschichte*, literally “form history,” is a critical method formulated to identify and analyze units of originally oral discourse that have been incorporated into ancient Israelite and early Christian written texts. New Testament scholars have applied the form-critical method primarily to the synoptic gospels and New Testament letters. The term *Formgeschichte* was introduced to New Testament scholarship through the title of an influential book on the subject published in 1919 by Martin Dibelius (1883–1947), *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums* (“The Form Criticism of the Gospel,” translated into English from the second German edition as *From Tradition to Gospel* in 1934). Form critics typically analyzed the gospel texts in order to identify individual pericopes that may have had an oral origin, classifying them by form and assigning each form to a particular *Sitz im Leben* (“situation in life”) in the early church.

The History of Form Criticism

The development of form criticism as a method for analyzing the oral traditions that were incorporated into Old Testament narratives and poetry was first practiced by Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932), who applied the new form-critical method to the study of Genesis. Before the time of Gunkel, the Pentateuch had been subject to intense source-criticism analysis, from the Roman Catholic scholar Richard Simon (1638–1712) to the culminating work of Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), who popularized the Graf–Wellhausen documentary hypothesis of the Pentateuch. For Gunkel, the earliest documentary sources of the Pentateuch (the “Yahwist” and “Elohist” documents) were not in themselves literary sources so much as collections of originally independent stories that changed during the long process of oral transmission. Gunkel classified the various stories or legends that he identified in Genesis on the basis of their purpose. He distinguished between four types of stories: (1) ethnological legends (fictitious stories explaining relationships between the Israelite tribes); (2) etymological legends (reflections on the origin and meaning of names); (3) ceremonial legends (stories explaining

the origins of religious customs); and (4) geographical legends (legends explaining the origins of a locality, such as the Dead Sea).

The New Testament scholars who began applying form criticism to the synoptic gospels at the beginning of the twentieth century, independently of one another, in a series of monographs published between 1919 and 1921, include Martin Dibelius, Karl Ludwig Schmidt, Rudolf Bultmann, and Martin Albertz. Just as Gunkel accepted the prevailing nineteenth-century German view of source-critical analysis of the Pentateuch, so the early form critics accepted the prevailing German view of the source-critical theory of Synoptic origins, namely the two-source theory propounded by H. J. Holtzmann in 1863 (the two-source theory came to dominate English-speaking scholarship with the publication of B. H. Streeter's *The Four Gospels* in 1924). This theory maintained the priority of Mark as well as the view that both Matthew and Luke made independent literary use of the hypothetical Q document or sayings source. In the liberal quest for the most reliable documentary foundation for a life of Jesus, it was assumed that the earliest gospel, then recognized as Mark, preserved the most reliable portrait of the life and ministry of Jesus. However, William Wrede's monograph on the messianic secret of Mark, published in 1901, convinced the critical community in Germany that though Mark may have had reliable historical material available to him, he had overlaid this material with his own theological understanding of Jesus. Since source criticism was unable to identify any earlier written sources in Mark and Q, form criticism provided a new and exciting critical tool for identifying even earlier oral traditions that had been incorporated into Mark and Q.

Presuppositions of Form Criticism

Short units of oral tradition embedded in the gospels

One of the major assumptions of the early generation of form critics was that sayings of Jesus and narratives about Jesus circulated orally in relatively short isolated units or forms. Some of these oral units became parts of smaller collections, such as the collections of controversy stories in Mark 2:1–3:5 and 11:27–34 and the collection of parables in Mark 4:1–34 (Kuhn 1971; Telford 1992), i.e., what Klaus Berger (1987) designated *Sammelgattungen*. The major exception is the passion narrative, which is the longest pre-Markan block of tradition. Even though earlier practitioners of form criticism have been faulted for an inadequate conception of oral tradition, this is largely an anachronistic criticism, since both Bultmann and Dibelius were familiar with aspects of the state of folklore studies at the beginning of the twentieth century, when folklore studies were in their infancy. Both Dibelius and Bultmann, for example, were familiar with some of the ideas of the Danish folklore scholar Axel Olrik, published in a 1909 article in German entitled “Epische Gesetze der Volksdichtung,” or “Epic Laws of Folk Narrative” (translated into English in 1965). Olrik (1864–1917) was a philologist and medievalist who worked primarily in the field of Scandinavian folklore and who proposed a set of diagnostic principles or “laws” to distinguish segments of originally oral performances preserved in written texts, precisely the task of form criticism as later

practiced by Dibelius and Bultmann. Hermann Gunkel, the founder of Old Testament form criticism, read a copy of Olrik's lecture on the epic laws that he gave in Berlin in 1908. Gunkel corresponded with Olrik on the subject and refers to Olrik's epic laws in *Legends of Genesis* (1964; a translation of "Die Sagen der Genesis," the introduction to his commentary on Genesis, first published in 1901). The epic laws describe many characteristic features of fairy tales (see Olrik 1992: 41–61) such as the following: (1) The *law of three* indicates that narrative has a preference for three characters in the story (Cinderella and her two stepsisters; three blind mice, the three little pigs). (2) The *law of ascent*, by which Olrik means that the last occurrence of an event is decisive (baby bear discovers Goldilocks); (3) The use of actions rather than descriptions to illustrate a character's personality. (4) The *law of two to a scene*, i.e., folk narrative only reluctantly brings more than two characters on stage at one time (exemplified by the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11–32).

The major exception to the oral circulation of the sayings and stories of Jesus in relatively short isolated units is the passion narrative, thought by many to have been a connected narrative that was put together comparatively early, antedating the composition of the Gospel of Mark. One bit of evidence pointing in this direction is found in Paul's introduction to his recital of the Eucharistic words of Jesus in 1 Cor. 11:23: "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread" Here it is evident that Paul knows not only the tradition of the Eucharistic words of Jesus (found with variations in Mark 14:22–5; Matthew 26:26–9; Luke 22:15–20), but that he is also aware of the narrative sequence in which the Eucharistic words were embedded. 1 Corinthians can be dated to 55 or 56 CE, some fifteen years before the composition of Mark.

The artificiality of the framework of Jesus' life in the gospels

One of the corollaries of the view that the Jesus tradition originally circulated in relatively short oral units is that the framework of the life of Jesus in the gospels has no claim to historicity. K. L. Schmidt, who did not himself use the term "form criticism," argued that Mark was made up of short, originally independent episodes or *pericopae* that were linked together editorially by a variety of chronological and geographical bridge passages inserted by the evangelist with the intent of creating a connected narrative. The metaphor of pearls on a string has frequently been used of the discrete units of oral tradition that Mark had strung together on a chronological and geographical string. One of the implications of this view is that little or nothing has been preserved in Mark, Matthew, or Luke of the actual historical sequence of events in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, i.e., the synoptic gospels in their present form are not reliable sources for a biography of Jesus. In Schmidt's words (2002: v):

The oldest Jesus tradition is "Pericope Tradition," that is, a tradition of individual scenes and individual sayings, which for the most part lack definite chronological and topographical identification within the community where they have been transmitted. Much of that which appears chronological and topographical is just the framework into which the individual pictures have been inserted.

Schmidt, Dibelius, and Bultmann all agreed that the primary role of the evangelists was that of collectors of traditions rather than authors (Dibelius 1934: 59):

The composers of the Gospels, at any rate of the Synoptic Gospels, were not "authors" in the literary sense, but collectors; so the question is not what they knew about the facts, but what was known to those who gave the tradition its form. This form did not arise through writers', but through preachers' activities; not, therefore, in accordance with the wishes or efforts of individuals, but with the necessities of preaching, i.e., according to super-individual laws derived from the existence of the early Christian churches.

Oral tradition and the written gospels as folk literature

The founders of form criticism, Karl Ludwig Schmidt, Martin Dibelius, and Rudolf Bultmann, categorized the oral traditions that were incorporated into the written gospels, as well as the gospels themselves, as *folk literature*, or to use the dichotomy made famous by Karl Ludwig Schmidt, *Kleinliteratur* rather than *Hochliteratur* (Schmidt 2002). Since the gospels, as well as the oral traditions of which they were constituted, were "unliterary," the written gospels could not be expected to conform to such ancient literary genres as biography or history. The founders of New Testament form criticism, Rudolf Bultmann and Martin Dibelius, independently developed taxonomies of oral forms preserved in the gospels based on analogous forms attested in both Jewish and Greco-Roman literature, but regarded the literary form of the gospels as without analogy. Bultmann argued that "while we need analogies for understanding the individual components of the Synoptic Tradition we do not need them for the Gospel as a whole" (Bultmann 1963: 373). He continues (1963: 373–4):

The [literary] analogies that are to hand serve only to throw the uniqueness of the Gospel into still stronger relief. It has grown out of the imminent urge to development which lay in the tradition fashioned for various motives, and out of the Christ-myth and the Christ-cult of Hellenistic Christianity. It is thus an original creation of Christianity.

During the last quarter of the twentieth century it became clear to many scholars that the form-critical assumption of a dichotomy between *Kleinliteratur* and *Hochliteratur* was an artificial distinction that owed more to romantic notions of primitivity than to insights into comparative literature. Similarly, the notion that the gospels are *sui generis*, or a unique literary form, while still retained by a number of German New Testament scholars, has been widely rejected in English-speaking scholarship.

Reconstructing the Sitz im Leben

Another assumption of form criticism is that the oral sayings and narratives arose in particular social contexts in the ministry of Jesus and the activities of the early church.

According to Bultmann (1963: 4), "The *Sitz im Leben* is not, however, an individual historical event, but a typical situation or occupation in the life of a community." The

identification of the *Sitze im Leben* ("situations in life") of various units of tradition, however is based on a circular argument, as Bultmann himself admits (Bultmann 1963: 5): "The Forms of the literary tradition must be used to establish the influences operating in the life of the community, and the life of the community must be used to render the forms themselves intelligible."

Gunkel was the first to use the term *Sitz im Leben* ("situation in life") or *Sitz im Volkleben* ("situation in the life of a people"), as the setting within which literary types arose (see Byrskog 2007). By *Sitz im (Volk)leben*, Gunkel meant the roles played by particular groups of specialists, such as priests, wisdom teachers, and singers, who formulated laws, wisdom sayings, and songs. Form criticism further assumes that each individual oral form arose within and was determined by a particular social situation, or *Sitz im Leben*, either a situation in the life of Jesus (if all or part of the tradition can be traced back to Jesus), or else to a situation in the life of the early church. As the early Jesus movement expanded into the Roman world, form critics argued for a diachronic series of cultural and linguistic stages through which the Jesus tradition was transmitted. In order to do this they typically developed a model of the history of early Christianity that they correlated with the transmission and expansion of the oral tradition stemming from Jesus or which was attributed to Jesus in the early church. The first of these cultural-linguistic diachronic stages is the Aramaic-speaking Palestinian church, that is, those who were part of the original circle of disciples and followers of Jesus as well as those who were attracted to their post-Easter message that Jesus was the messiah. The second stage was Greek-speaking Hellenistic Judaism, i.e., Hellenistic Jews who were part of the Jesus movement living in Palestine as well as in Hellenistic Jewish settlements in the eastern theater of the Mediterranean world in cities like Antioch. The third stage was the Greek-speaking world of Hellenistic Gentiles, such as Pauline converts from paganism associated with Christian congregations in such Greco-Roman cities as Galatia, Thessaloniki, and Corinth. Finally, the fourth setting is that of each of the written gospels themselves, which served as final repositories for written forms of originally oral Jesus traditions.

Early Christian creativity and the historical skepticism of form critics

Both Dibelius and Bultmann assumed that early Christians were adept at creating stories of Jesus to fit various situations in the life of the church. Since the early form critics were convinced that oral units of the Jesus tradition were preserved, modified, or created to fit the current needs of the church as reflected in the typically practical *Sitze im Leben* of the community, they assumed that there was little or no historical interest operative in the transmission and preservation of these traditions. A corollary of this is the assumption of many form critics, particularly Rudolf Bultmann, that the oral tradition behind the synoptic gospels, the sayings of Jesus, and narratives about Jesus cannot be trusted to represent what the historical Jesus really said and did. For Bultmann, it was primarily the needs and interests of the early church that shaped its conception of the ministry and message of Jesus, not a desire for reliable evidence of what the historical Jesus did and said. Bultmann expresses this assumption clearly in the opening paragraphs of *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (1963: 1):

Mark is the work of an author who is steeped in the theology of the early Church, and who ordered and arranged the traditional material that he received in the light of the faith of the early Church – that was the result; and the task which follows for historical research is this: to separate the various strata in Mark and to determine which belonged to the original historical tradition and which derived from the work of the author.

For Bultmann, then (in the critical evaluation of Schwartz 2005: 48), “the memory of Jesus, thus, becomes little more than a repercussion of the church’s search for legitimacy.” Schwartz regards Bultmann’s “theory of memory” (his label for form criticism), as characterized by “unmasking,” that is, if the stories and sayings of Jesus can be connected with a function that they performed in the life of the early church, that in itself is enough to reveal that such Jesus traditions cannot have had a historical origin. However in the view of Schwartz, it is obvious that the one need not exclude the other (Schwartz 2005: 48). Bultmann saw the form-critical task as that of identifying fabrications in the Jesus tradition in order to peel them away to reveal the core of historical truth. Yet to do so with any confidence, he must already know the difference between the real and the fabricated Jesus, i.e., Bultmann’s method assumes the very knowledge it seeks to discover (Schwartz 2005: 48). Bultmann’s approach to the synoptic gospels is similar to that of Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945), the founder of the field of social memory. Again according to Schwartz (2005: 49):

Halbwachs advances a pejorative conception of collective memory, one that distrusts and works to undermine established beliefs. He assumes that memory, as opposed to history, is inauthentic, manipulative, shady, something to be overcome rather than accepted in its own right.

Schwartz argues the contrary, maintaining that the task of social memory scholarship is to appraise what we know of the past by considering relevant documents like the gospels as sources of information about early Christian popular beliefs, not to be concerned with their authenticity. For Schwartz (2005: 50),

The Gospels are critical because they put us in touch with the way early Christians conceived Jesus’ place in their world, and because without them our understanding of the social memory of this world would be more shallow.

Identifying Oral Forms in the Gospels

When the first monographs applying form criticism to the gospels were published by Martin Dibelius in 1919 and Rudolf Bultmann in 1921, both scholars had devised different ways of classifying what they regarded as the various types of originally oral forms that had been embedded in the written gospels. Though both scholars introduced modifications into their classification systems with the second editions of their monographs (Dibelius in 1933 and Bultmann in 1931), their classification systems were far from complementary. Dibelius, for example, classified some miracle stories as “paradigms” and others as “tales.” In the years that followed the second editions of these

works scholars have tended to gravitate toward the more detailed system of Bultmann, which we follow in the present discussion (with some input from the conservative English form critic Vincent Taylor). Form criticism assumes that all types of human verbal communication are expressed in well-defined patterns, i.e., forms and genres, and that sentences are given meaning by the generic "package" that contains them. In communication situations, the intuitive recognition of the various genres of oral communication enables hearers to understand the meaning conveyed by the generic packaging of sentences.

Pronouncement stories

For English-speaking scholars, Vincent Taylor's descriptive phrase "pronouncement story" has been preferred as the simplest and most appropriate designation for this form (see Tannehill 1981), though it is not strictly accurate to call this form a "story." Bultmann himself favored the transliterated Greek word *apophthegma* (anglicized as "apophthegm") meaning "a terse saying" (the plural form of which is *apophthegmata*), for what he described as short, pointed sayings that are ideal constructions rather than historical reports (1963: 11–69). Some New Testament scholars have preferred the ancient Greek rhetorical term *chreia*, "a brief sentence or maxim, often illustrating an anecdote" (see Robbins 1988). Bultmann proposed that apophthegms consisted of several subtypes: (1) conflict sayings, (2) scholastic dialogues, and (3) biographical apophthegms. The primary source of parallels for Bultmann is the body of rabbinic dialogues, which means for him that this material was formed in the Palestinian church, though the final sayings of Jesus found in all examples might have originated with the historical Jesus. In the following examples of these three types of apophthegms, the italicized portion calls attention to the focal saying of Jesus that characterizes this basic form.

An example of what Bultmann labels a *conflict saying* is found in Mark 2:23–8 (plucking grain on the Sabbath), which Bultmann considers to be a composition of the church, since it focuses on the behavior of the disciples rather than the behavior of Jesus; the concluding saying of Jesus is italicized (Bultmann 1963:16):

One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. And the Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?" *And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath; so the Son of man is lord even of the Sabbath."*

Luke 12:13–14 is an example of the second subtype of apophthegm, the *scholastic dialogue* (Bultmann 1963: 23):

One of the multitude said to him, "Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me." *But he said to him, "Man, who made me a judge or divider over you?"*

An example of Bultmann's third subtype, the *biographical apophthegm*, is found in Q, Luke 9:57–8, and Matthew 8:19–20, which Bultmann regards as an old proverb that tradition has turned into a saying of Jesus (Bultmann 1963: 28–9):

As they were going along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head."

Dominical sayings

Bultmann distinguished five types of *Herrenworte* or "dominical sayings," all of which could have been independent elements in the tradition, and at least some of which consisted of originally Jewish material taken over by Christian tradition: (1) *logia* (i.e., proverbs or aphorisms), (2) prophetic and apocalyptic sayings, (3) legal sayings or church rules, and (4) *I-sayings* (mission statements of Jesus). These categories of forms are distinguished partly on the basis of the actual form, but largely on the basis of content. This way of classifying the sayings of Jesus is problematic because of the mixed criteria used for distinguishing the five subtypes. The five categories of dominical sayings have not been unanimously adopted by other form critics. Dibelius designated the same Synoptic sayings as *paradigmata*, "paradigms" or *Paränese*, "paraenesis" (Dibelius 1934: 37–69). Vincent Taylor lumped all such material together as "sayings of Jesus," omitting all subcategories (Taylor 1935: 88–100), while Dominic Crossan proposed a simple taxonomy of two types of sayings, parables and aphorisms (Crossan 1986: 22–130).

An example of a *logion* (or wisdom saying of Jesus) is found in Mark 3:24–5:

If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.

An example of a prophetic or apocalyptic saying is found in Luke 7:22–3, a saying in which Bultmann finds such an "immediacy of eschatological consciousness" that he maintains could not have been taken over from Judaism (Bultmann 1963: 126):

And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me."

For a *legal saying* or *church rule*, we can use the divorce saying in Matthew 5:31–2 as an example:

It was also said, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce." But I say to you that every one who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

An example of an *I-saying* (involving mission statements by Jesus) is found in Luke 12:49–50:

I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished.

In this case, Bultmann regards verse 49 as probably an authentic saying of Jesus, but not verse 50, which alludes to his death and so should be understood as a *vaticinium ex eventu* (Bultmann 1963: 153–4).

Similitudes and similar forms

Following earlier scholars like Adolf Jülicher (1857–1938), the author of a famous book on the parables of Jesus (1910), Bultmann distinguished between the similitude and the parable (Bultmann 1963: 174). A similitude uses a typical condition or recurrent event as the basis for comparison, while a parable makes use of a particular situation that is interesting. Mark 4:30–2 is an example of a similitude:

And he said, “with what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

As examples of parables proper we can simply mention such famous examples as the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37) or the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32).

Miracle stories or novellas

Bultmann and Taylor preferred the term “miracle story,” while Dibelius waffled between the designations “paradigm” and “tale.” There are several types of miracle stories, including healing miracles (e.g., Mark 5:21–43, the woman with the issue of blood and Jairus’ daughter) and nature miracles (e.g., Mark 4:37–41, the stilling of the storm). Miracle stories fall into three categories: healing miracles, exorcisms, and nature miracles. Dibelius describes miracle stories in terms of a threefold structure: (1) description of the problem, (2) Jesus’ action in solving the problem, and (3) the reaction of the crowd. These three features are often evident in even very short miracle stories such as Mark 1:30–1:

Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

Bultmann (1963: 221–6) has a much more complex taxonomy consisting of a number of motifs found in miracle stories (developed in greater detail by Theissen 1983: 47–72), including the length of the sickness, the dreadful and dangerous character of the disease, the ineffective treatment of physicians, doubt and contemptuous treatment of

the healer, etc. For Bultmann the tradition was enriched by miracle stories both in the oral and the written stages of the tradition, and some such stories are of Hellenistic origin (Bultmann 1963: 238–9).

The miracle stories of the gospels and Acts have been subject to a formalist analysis by Gerd Theissen (1983), who intends to advance the discussion of classical form criticism. Theissen deals with miracle stories as structured forms (a synchronic approach) as well as in terms of a tradition that undergoes redaction (a diachronic approach). Like Berger (his colleague at Heidelberg) he is not particularly concerned with oral transmission. Theissen (1983: 31), who does not think that miracle stories reproduce historical reality, regards them as symbolic narratives (Theissen 1983: 287): "Primitive Christian miracle stories are symbolic actions in which a new understanding of existence is opened up." In treating the miracle stories as symbolic actions, Theissen (1983: 231–302) explores the problem of *Sitz im Leben*, in terms of social location (town/country; upper-class/lower-class; east/west), function in the history of ancient religion, and existential function. In his synchronic treatment, Theissen finds in the Synoptic parables fields of seven "characters" (demon, sick person, companion, opponents, crowd, disciples, miracle-worker), thirty-three "motifs" in a systematic expansion of the motifs found in Bultmann (e.g., the coming of the miracle-worker, the appearance of the crowd, the appearance of the distressed person, etc.) and six "themes" (exorcism, healing, epiphanies, rescue miracles, gift miracles, rule miracles).

Parables

The parables of Jesus have been defined variously. According to Dodd (1961: 16):

The parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature of common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.

Scott (1989: 8) defines a parable more concisely as a "*mashal* that employs a short narrative fiction to reference a transcendent symbol." Adolf Jülicher devised a threefold system for classifying the parables of Jesus which has proven extremely influential: (1) the similitude (*Gleichnis*), (2) the parable (*Parabel*), both comparisons, and (3) the example story (*Beispielerszählung*), containing an example to be imitated (found only in the Gospel of Luke). Various scholars have counted the number of parables in the gospels differently, primarily because it is often difficult to draw the line between extended figures of speech in the sayings of Jesus and full-blown parables. According to Aune (2003: 330–2), there are six parables in Mark, twenty-two in Matthew, fifteen in Luke without Synoptic parallels, with a total of twenty-eight parables in Luke including those with Synoptic parallels, and seventeen in the *Gospel of Thomas*. Bultmann (1963: 166–205), accepts the distinction between the similitude and the parable made by Jülicher, but argues that parables, for the most part, did not originate in a Hellenistic but in an Aramaic environment (Bultmann 1963: 166). In describing the features of the parable, Bultmann (1963: 187–92) is dependent on Axel Olrik in making the following observations: (1) only the necessary persons appear; (2) there are never more than three

characters, typically two; (3) three characters reflects the "law of three" (e.g., the lender and his two debtors in Luke 7:41–2; the father and his two sons, Matthew 21:28–31); (4) the law of the single perspective; (5) feeling and motives are mentioned only when essential; (6) there is a complete lack of motivation in the description.

Responses to Form Criticism

General observations

Form criticism has typically shown little interest in the historical Jesus, since the units of oral tradition that have been incorporated into the written gospels are thought to have been either created by the early church or reshaped in response to the varied uses to which the Jesus traditions were subjected as they were given stereotypical form in the various *Sitze im Leben* in early Christian communities. With the renewed interest in the historical Jesus by the mid-twentieth century, New Testament scholars developed various criteria of authenticity to reconstruct the *ipsissima vox Jesu* ("the very voice of Jesus") embedded in the sayings and stories found in gospel tradition. Very few scholars, however, have pursued the problem of the means by which authentic Jesus traditions were preserved from the ministry of Jesus to the formation of the canonical gospels. Birger Gerhardsson, following rabbinic analogies, argued that Jesus traditions were memorized and transmitted by a special group within the early church charged with that task. More recently, Richard Bauckham has revived an ancient perspective (that of Papias of Hierapolis in the early second century CE) and argued that the gospels were the products of eyewitness testimony.

Birger Gerhardsson

Birger Gerhardsson (1961, 1977) pounced on what he rightly perceived as a major weakness in the form-critical conception of the oral transmission of the Jesus tradition in early Christianity: it affirmed *that* oral tradition happened, but provided no account of *how* it happened, i.e., form critics neglected to formulate a theory of memory. Gerhardsson's work centered on a collection and analysis of what can be known of oral and written transmission in rabbinic Judaism from tannaitic and amoraic sources (ca. 70–500 CE), which he regarded as an appropriate historical analogy to the origin and transmission of Jesus traditions. One of Gerhardsson's primary purposes was to question the fundamental assumptions and methods of form criticism (Gerhardsson 1961: 9–15).

He applied the rabbinic model to the more fragmentary evidence for the oral transmission of Jesus traditions in first-century Christianity, focusing on evidence in Acts and Paul. Gerhardsson argues that, like the rabbis, the disciples of Jesus and their successors carefully memorized and even took notes on the words and deeds of Jesus, which they then accurately transmitted in relatively unchanged form (Gerhardsson 1961: 335, 328–9). This deposit of tradition was preserved and transmitted by duly constituted authorities, the twelve apostles, originally headquartered in Jerusalem, who constituted a *collegium* with supreme doctrinal authority in the early church (conceptions

influenced by the influx of Pharisees into the church), and were "bearers, not only of the tradition concerning Christ, but also of the correct interpretation of the Scriptures" (Gerhardsson 1961: 221 n.2, 230, 321). The publication of Gerhardsson's dissertation in 1961 was not well received by critical New Testament scholarship, but it has attracted increasing interest and favor in the last two decades. Jacob Neusner, who published a scathing review of Gerhardsson's published dissertation, has since become a strong supporter of Gerhardsson's approach and even wrote the introduction to the 1998 reprint of two of Gerhardsson's books.

Richard Bauckham's book (2006) focused on the memory of eyewitnesses or from those who had close contact with Jesus as an alternative to the form-critical theory of the oral transmission of Jesus traditions. Bauckham centers his discussion primarily on the gospels of Mark and John. Who are the eyewitnesses? In this group Bauckham includes the twelve (an official body of eyewitnesses who had both formulated and promulgated the main corpus of gospel tradition), several female disciples, some of whom experienced healing by Jesus, and various others. Bauckham accepts the ancient tradition that Mark incorporates the eyewitness testimony of Peter (a view recently emphasized by Samuel Byrskog, 2000: 71), who calls Peter "the primary eyewitness of them all"), while John was written by John the Elder, also an eyewitness of the ministry of Jesus. Bauckham uses modern studies of orality, particularly Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (1985).

Erhardt Güttgemanns

In 1970 (in a book translated into English in 1979), Erhardt Güttgemanns raised a number of criticisms of the form-critical method. One of Güttgemanns' primary concerns was the problem of using linguistic forms as a key for illuminating some underlying history, raising serious problems about the sociological assumptions of the appeal of form critics to a reconstructed *Sitz im Leben*. In recent studies on oral performance and writing, the smooth, linear transition between oral and written has proven to be impossible to validate. Bultmann, it must be remembered, saw no real difference or intention between oral and written tradition, since both were the products of *Kleinliteratur* (popular or folk literature); the gospels, in Güttgemanns' view, were wrongly assumed to be the final products of the process of collecting material that originated in oral processes, i.e., anthologies. Güttgemanns uses Gestalt theory to argue, contrary to both form and redaction criticism, that the gospels are greater than the sum of their parts. Güttgemanns points out that the analogy between rabbinic tradition and the Jesus tradition is problematic because the former is connected to a text and the interpretation of the text in a way that the Jesus tradition is not (1979: 213). For Güttgemanns, the gospel form must be treated as an autosemantic *Gestalt*, not as the development of its parts or even as the sum of its parts.

Werner Kelber

In the light of modern studies of orality, particularly the work of Walter Ong, SJ (1982), Werner Kelber (1983) has followed Güttgemanns in making a sharp distinction

between orality and textuality. Before an oral tradition is reduced to writing, he argues, there is no single oral version that can claim primacy or originality. Each oral performance of a tradition differs from all other performances of that tradition, so no single version can properly be regarded as the original version (a view of folktales held by modern folklore scholarship). The form-critical quest to recover the earliest form of a Jesus tradition is therefore a hopeless quest. Kelber regards the written version of oral tradition represented by the Gospel of Mark as a negative development, and also pits the written gospels against the earlier, unwritten forms as the product of a segment of the Christian community which was challenging the authority of the apostles as the guardians of the oral tradition. He sees the textuality of the gospels as creating a more rigid, fixed way of telling the story of Jesus than was permitted by oral tradition. Although traces of orality still appear in the gospels, especially Mark, the value of classic form criticism is greatly diminished for this approach.

Klaus Berger

In his 1987 book on form criticism, Klaus Berger argues that one cannot reconstruct oral forms antecedent to written texts using literary methods (a view similar to Güttgemanns 1979). Like the English practitioners of form criticism (e.g., Vincent Taylor 1935), Berger maintains that issues such as historicity and authenticity are not directly relevant to the form-critical method. Berger emphasizes the linguistic form of a text (i.e., stylistic, syntactical, and structural features) much more than traditional form criticism. "Forms" (*Gattungen*) are groups of texts distinguished by common formal and material features arranged hierarchically. Since forms are conventions reflecting typical situations and functions within early Christianity, the role of exegesis is to distinguish between the conventional form and deviations reflecting the particular communication situation for which the form was used. Berger's discussion of New Testament forms is arranged in three categories, corresponding to the three rhetorical genera in antiquity, symboleutic, epideictic, and dihanic rhetoric. Under symboleutic forms, Berger includes twenty-seven forms including various types of paraenesis, vice and virtue catalogues, woes, domestic codes, and community rules. Under epideictic forms he includes forty forms, including acclamations, doxologies, hymns, reports of visions and auditions, travel reports, encomia, narratives of the suffering and rescue of the righteous, and so on. Finally, under dihanic forms, Berger includes just six forms, including apologetic texts and speeches of indictment and accusation.

The Future of Form Criticism

Even though form criticism has itself undergone a lengthy period of criticism, the method appears to have survived the hazing process remarkably well. Form criticism has been accepted as a basic tool of critical scholarship, despite the fact that some of its premises remain rather shaky. Nevertheless, New Testament scholars, particularly in Germany, as well as many in the United States have found form criticism to be a fruitful

method for achieving diachronic understanding of the gospel tradition. The use of the form-critical method in the study of Old Testament texts, however, though it has undergone some transformations over the years, is still regarded by many Old Testament scholars as a fruitful approach to the text (see Sweeney and Ben-Zvi 2003). However, since the keynote essay by James Muilenburg in 1969, Old Testament scholarship too has tended to value synchronic approaches to the text (e.g., literary criticism) over diachronic approaches to the text such as source criticism and form criticism (see House 1992).

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