

# Bible Criticism—Part 2

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(Continued from last month)

## Form Criticism.

Form criticism studies literary forms, such as essays, poems, and myths, since different writings have different forms. Often the form of a piece of literature can tell a great deal about the nature of a literary piece, its writer, and its social context. Technically this is termed its “life setting” (*Sitz im Leben*). The classic liberal position is the documentary or J-E-P-D Pentateuchal source analysis theory established by Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918) and his followers. They actually attempted to mediate between traditionalism and skepticism, dating Old Testament books in a less supernaturalistic manner by applying the “documentary theory.” These documents are identified as the “Jahwist” or Jehovistic (J), dated in the ninth century B.C., the Elohist (E), eighth century, the Deuteronomist (D), from about the time of Josiah (640-609), and the Priestly (P), from perhaps the fifth century B.C. So attractive was the evolutionary concept in literary criticism that the source theory of Pentateuchal origins began to prevail over all opposition. A mediating position of some aspects of the theory was expressed by C. F. A. Dillman (1823-1894), Rudolph Kittel (1853-1929), and others. Opposition to the documentary theory was expressed by Franz Delitzsch (1813-1890), who rejected the hypothesis outright in his commentary on Genesis, William Henry Green (1825-1900), James Orr (1844-1913), A. H. Sayce (1845-1933), Wilhelm Moller, Eduard Naville, Robert Dick Wilson (1856-1930), and others (see Harrison, 239-41; Archer; Pfeiffer). Sometimes form-critical studies are marred by doctrinaire assumptions, including that early forms must be short and later forms longer, but in general, form criticism has been of benefit to biblical interpretation. Form criticism has been most profitably used in the study of the Psalms (Wenham, “History and the Old Testament,” 40).

These techniques were introduced into New Testament study of the Gospels as *Formgeschichte* (“form history”) or *form criticism*. Following in the tradition of Heinrich Paulus and Wilhelm De Wette (1780-1849), among others, scholars at Tubingen built on the foundation of source criticism theory. They advocated the priority of Mark as the earliest Gospel and multiple written sources. William Wrede (1859-1906) and other form critics sought to eliminate the chronological-geographical framework of the Synoptic Gospels and to investigate the twenty-year period of oral traditions between the close of New Testament events and the earliest written accounts of those events. They attempted to classify this material into “forms” of oral tradition and to discover the historical situation (*Sitz im Leben*) within the early church that gave rise to these forms. These units of tradition are usually assumed to reflect more of the life and teaching of the early church than the life and teaching of the historical Jesus. Forms in which the units are cast are clues to their relative historical value.

The fundamental assumption of form criticism is typified by Martin Dibelius (1883-1947) and Bultmann. By creating new words and deeds of Jesus as the situation demanded, the evangelists arranged the units of oral tradition and created artificial contexts to serve their own purposes. In challenging the authorship, date, structure, and style of other New Testament books, destructive critics arrived at similar conclusions. To derive a fragmented New

Testament theology, they rejected Pauline authorship for all Epistles traditionally ascribed to him except Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, and Galatians (Hodges, 339-48).

Thoroughgoing form critics hold two basic assumptions: (1) The early Christian community had little or no genuine biographical interest or integrity, so it created and transformed oral tradition to meet its own needs. (2) The evangelists were compiler-editors of individual, isolated units of tradition that they arranged and rearranged without regard for historical reality (see Thomas and Gundry, *A Harmony of the Gospels* [281-82], who identify Dibelius, Bultmann, Burton S. Easton, R. H. Lightfoot, Vincent Taylor, and D. E. Nineham as preeminent New Testament form critics).

### **Tradition Criticism.**

Tradition criticism is primarily concerned with the history of traditions before they were recorded in writing. The stories the patriarchs, for example, were probably passed down through generations by word of mouth until they were written as a continuous narrative. These oral traditions may have been changed over the long process of transmission. It is of great interest to the biblical scholar to know what changes were made and how the later tradition, now enshrined in a literary source, differs from the earliest oral version.

Tradition criticism is less certain or secure literary criticism because it begins where literary criticism leaves off, with conclusions that are in themselves uncertain. It is difficult to check the hypotheses about development of an oral tradition (Wenham, *ibid.*, 40-41). Even more tenuous is the "liturgical tradition" enunciated by S. Mowinckel and his Scandinavian associates, who argue that literary origins were related to preexilic sanctuary rituals and sociological phenomena. An offshoot of the liturgical approach is the "myth and ritual" school of S. H. Hooke, which argues that a distinctive set of rituals and myths were common to all Near Eastern peoples, including the Hebrews. Both of these approaches use Babylonian festival analogies to support their variations on the classical literary-critical and tradition-critical themes (Harrison, 241).

Form criticism is closely aligned with tradition criticism in New Testament studies. A review of many of the basic assumptions in view of the New Testament text have been made by Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, and I. Howard Marshall, *The Origins of New Testament Christology* and *I Believe in the Historical Jesus*. Also see the discussions in Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* and *Introduction to the New Testament as Canon*, and Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* and *New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*.

### **Redaction Criticism.**

Redaction criticism is more closely associated with the text than is traditional criticism. As a result, it is less open to the charge of subjective speculation. Redaction (editorial) critics can achieve absolute certainty only when all the sources are used that were at the disposal of the redactor (editor), since the task is to determine how a redactor compiled sources, what was omitted, what was added, and what particular bias was involved in the process. At best, the critic has only some of the sources available, such as the books of Kings used by the writers of Chronicles. Elsewhere, in both the Old and the New Testaments, the sources must be reconstructed out of the edited work itself. Then redaction criticism becomes much less certain as a literary device (Wenham, "Gospel Origins," 439).

Redaction critics tend to favor a view that biblical books were written much later and by

different authors than the text relates. Late theological editors attached names out of history to their works for the sake of prestige and credibility. In Old and New Testament studies this view arose from historical criticism, source criticism, and form criticism. As a result, it adopts many of the same presuppositions, including the documentary hypothesis in the Old Testament, and the priority of Mark in the New Testament.

(to be continued)