

ports and major inland entrepôts where merchants from many lands resided. Army camps, especially along the frontiers and near large urban centers, also fostered the spread of new cults. Frequently these newly imported beliefs appealed to local inhabitants. Often, too, peoples in newly annexed territories practiced religions which attracted Roman devotees.

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TRADITION HISTORY. In modern biblical studies, it is widely recognized that the literature of the Bible, or at least large portions of it, came gradually into existence through a process in which oral or written materials were passed down from one generation to another, acquiring their final form with the assistance and contributions of

many individuals and groups along the way. Tradition generally preceded text, and this tradition—just as the later canonized text itself—has a history. As a method, tradition history is one of the steps in exegesis, attempting to recover the meaning that the tradition had at each stage in its growth.

- A. The Phenomenon of Tradition
- B. Development of the Study of Tradition History
- C. Relation to Other Exegetical and Historical Methods
- D. Application to Types of Biblical Literature
 - 1. Narrative
 - 2. Law
 - 3. Prophecy
 - 4. Lyrical Poetry
 - 5. Wisdom
 - 6. Tradition in the New Testament
 - 7. Early Jewish Tradition
- E. Implications and Significance

A. The Phenomenon of Tradition

Carrying the heritage from the past into the present, tradition is ubiquitous in the human community, both in primitive and modern times alike. It is, in fact, so widespread and so all-embracing a phenomenon that studying it can become an enterprise without boundaries. In biblical studies, however, tradition history has a somewhat restricted meaning in that it refers only to verbal traditions, that is, oral or written materials articulating in words that which is transmitted, such as stories, proverbs, laws, sayings, poetry, and teachings on the one hand and motifs, notions, themes, and ideas on the other. Excluded is another whole range of ways in which the word "tradition" is commonly used—for practices or beliefs such as customs, habits, rules, mores, rituals, ethos, or even social and religious institutions. These are not the direct subject matter of tradition history, even though they can and usually do affect the verbal traditions that are being handed down. Tradition history focuses, instead, on the specific literary or verbal developments that led up to the biblical literature in its present form.

Another important distinction is evident in two Latin words used in the study of tradition history. Latin *traditio* refers to the process of transmission, whereas *traditum* designates the materials themselves that are being transmitted from one person, group, or generation to another (see especially sec. C below). The process is extremely variable. In some instances it can be carried out statically through very careful, even reverential transmission, avoiding the introduction of any changes in the wording of the tradition; in other cases persons in the line of transmission can be responsible—whether deliberately or accidentally—for alterations, expansions, omissions, and new combinations of the traditions.

Of special importance in this latter respect are the category of interpretation or actualization (known also by the German word *Vergegenwärtigung*) and the effort by any given generation to contemporize its received traditions by reinterpreting them "existentially" in light of, or applying them to, its own context and time (Groves 1987). The products of the past are thereby not left as an antiquarian's artifacts but are brought to new life as articulations of a

new reality. Thus, the stories about Abraham, the laws of Moses, the prophecies of Isaiah, or the sayings of Jesus are not simply residues of the ancient past but are actually reinterpreted—and consequently changed in themselves—in order to apply to the conditions and urgencies of later people, and these shifts become a part of the traditions as they continue to be handed on to the next generation. A tradition that originally had only local significance could be nationalized, just as material that began as non-Israelite and polytheistic could be adapted to Israel's monotheistic faith. This collective creative process has meant, therefore, that probably the vast majority of the biblical literature contains multiple levels of meaning; that is, that it has an extended tradition history reflecting the gradual contributions of new individuals, groups, and generations as they reinterpreted the old heritage for themselves.

Tradition history is normally associated with the oral period in which stories and sayings were composed, retold or recited, and preserved for long periods of time (Nielsen 1954; Culley 1976). While traditions could be remembered and passed on reliably in this form, a distinct degree of flexibility is to be expected for the oral stage, and different versions of a single story or saying are not unlikely. For a culture in which literacy was generally restricted to the few who needed to be able to write for governmental, commercial, educational, and religious purposes (cf. Demsky 1988), "oral literature" among the wider populace was commonplace. At some point—and this juncture varied for the different traditions—the oral materials were committed to writing, often after they had matured to a high level of artistry and had been combined with other similar traditions, and their transmission thereafter could occur through this new medium. It is not accurate to say, however, that the traditioning process—that is, the gradual, incremental growth of the traditions—transpired only through oral means. In written transmission, a given literary piece could also undergo change or growth as it was being handed down from one generation to the next.

Tradition history embraces the whole period of development, from the first formulation of a tradition on to the point where it became relatively stabilized. This latest phase would have been the stage of canonization, but most texts became essentially fixed and no longer fluid prior to that. In a sense, it is a difference between tradition *before* and tradition *after* Scripture (Barr 1966: 28–29; for more discussion of the canonization process and its relation to tradition, see also Sanders 1972): growth and change occurred before a literary piece was rendered constant and was accepted as authoritative Scripture, whereas thereafter the text continued to be handed down but then as a document not to be altered internally but only copied and interpreted exegetically.

B. Development of the Study of Tradition History

Research on the history of biblical traditions did not begin in earnest until the 20th century, in fact only with the 1930s (for a full history of research, see Knight 1975). Prior to that it had indeed been recognized that the biblical literature came into being gradually and that tradition and transmission played a significant role. Seventeenth-century scholars such as Thomas Hobbes, Benedict de Spinoza, Isaak de la Peyrère, and especially Richard Simon thought

it likely that portions of the Bible do not exist now in the form in which they were first written, but that they attained this form only after having been handed down to later writers. But there was little effort made to recover the details of the traditioning process, and focus fell instead on the literary stage of conflating and editing written documents. Source criticism was the dominant exegetical method through the end of the 19th century, with Julius Wellhausen's work as its showcase achievement.

The new era was introduced by Hermann Gunkel, first in his 1895 effort (partially translated in Gunkel 1984) to trace the lines of mythical materials on creation from early Babylonia to the Hebrew Bible and ultimately to the book of Revelation. But it was his development of form criticism—initially in his 1901 commentary on Genesis (see the English translation of his introduction in Gunkel 1964) and later in his studies of other narratives, prophetic literature, and the psalms—that laid the groundwork for subsequent traditio-historical studies. In identifying the wide variety of genres used by the ancient Israelites to express themselves, Gunkel drew attention to the process by which a group or an individual could receive traditional material and rework it in creative ways. In a revolutionary shift of method and perspective, he emphasized the oral stage of composition and transmission. Furthermore, with his concept of the life setting (*Sitz im Leben*) of genres, he opened the door for new inquiry into the real-life contexts in which the people engaged their own needs, problems, and crises through an innovative interpretation of their received traditions. Additionally, Gunkel was one of an influential group of Hebrew Bible and NT scholars who sought to understand the history of religion in the ANE, and this—as in his 1895 study of the creation myths—contributed to a new effort to trace the way in which religious materials, often of foreign descent, could be appropriated and revised as the *traditum* of later communities.

The initiators of traditio-historical research in its modern sense were Gerhard von Rad and Martin Noth, and for both of them the Pentateuch (Hexateuch for von Rad) served as the staging ground, as has been the case for the rise of several other of the exegetical methods. Von Rad's 1938 monographs (translated by 1966, *PHOE*) began with the assumption that the Hexateuch, a remarkable complex of diverse kinds of material, is the final stage in a long process of development and that it must be possible to recover some of the earlier stages and circumstances of its composition. His key to accomplishing this lay in what he identified as the creeds of Israel's faith, best evident in Deut 26:5b-9; 6:20-24; and Josh 24:2b-13, which articulated the rudiments of the sacred history and thus formed the structure for organizing the Hexateuchal materials into a linear whole. This literature was not authored in the modern sense; rather, it emerged out of earlier collections, crafted especially by the Yahwist, of originally independent traditions. See YAHWIST ("J") SOURCE.

Noth, in 1948 (translated in 1972, *HPT*), expanded on von Rad's work by shifting the emphasis to the *pre*-Yahwistic stage of tradition growth and by demonstrating the importance of critical analysis of all details of this growth process. Both of these scholars, in subsequent publications, also indicated the implications that traditio-historical study

of the biblical literature could have in other areas: Noth for historiography, and von Rad for theology.

A distinctive approach to the study of tradition history emerged among Scandinavian scholars, above all among those who taught or studied in Uppsala (Knight 1975: 217-399; Jeppesen and Otzen 1984). Key representatives of this method were Sigmund Mowinckel, H. S. Nyberg, Ian Engnell, and G. Widengren, and later also Helmer Ringgren, Arvid Kapelrud, Eduard Nielsen, Gösta Ahlström, and Birger Gerhardtsson, to name a few. Under the leadership of Engnell especially (see Engnell 1969), tradition history became elevated as the most important of the exegetical and historical methods, and the legitimacy of other methods reflecting a modern "bookish" approach was disputed.

This circle of scholars became known for several distinctive positions. They attributed paramount importance to oral means for the composition and reliable transmission of the materials; these traditions were tied to specific places and groups wherever possible; emphasis fell on the "living," dynamic process in which the biblical literature came into being; committing oral traditions to writing was often seen as an incidental stage which had little effect on them; and ANE religious ideas were perceived as dominant influences on the content of these traditions. This line of scholarship has lost some of its characteristic edge since the 1960s, but its sense of the vitality of the tradition process remains a lasting contribution.

Traditio-historical study of both the Hebrew Bible and the NT is now established as a standard component in the analysis of the literature; in fact, Hebrew Bible scholarship is said to be "primarily traditio-historical in orientation" (Morgan and Barton 1988: 101). There is virtually no biblical section which has not been examined from this perspective, except for literary materials which did not go through a developmental, cumulative process but were composed at the outset in their final form. And even in those cases there are normally motifs, ideas, themes, and more which the author incorporated from the heritage of the past. Commentaries of biblical books now integrate tradition history as a routine part of the exegesis.

C. Relation to Other Exegetical and Historical Methods

The traditio-historical method represents one of the steps in modern biblical exegesis. Generally it follows directly on TEXTUAL CRITICISM, SOURCE CRITICISM, and FORM CRITICISM, making full use of their results concerning the unified or composite character of the text in question, the historical background and nature of any sources, the text's genre and life setting, and the like. The tradition historian first attempts to recover traces of the prehistory of the text (the analysis or criticism stage of the inquiry) and then hypothesizes about the probable course through which it passed in its development (the synthesis stage). To accomplish this task is somewhat analogous to an archaeological excavation, in which progressively earlier and earlier strata are discovered as one cuts deeper into the mound.

These prior levels of meaning are often identifiable as interpretations or comments attached to or integrated into the text, such as some of the motive clauses that follow on

the various laws. Embellishments and stylizations which heighten the plot or message, especially in stories (the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18 is a good example), also can indicate the handiwork of later traditionalists, as can etiological elements. One watches, moreover, for evidence of localization—where the tradition might have been at home—and tradents—the groups that would have handed it on and reinterpreted it, such as certain cultic personnel, social sets, or political interests. The text's present literary context may well not be original, for so often the narratives, sayings, prophetic utterances, and laws arose independently and only with time became joined together with similar materials. Fusing such traditions into a larger complex or collection is itself a new level of interpretation in comparison with the meaning each bore as an entity circulating separately; this, in fact, is the stage of development which Rendtorff (1977) identifies as the often-neglected, but crucial phase in the growth of the Pentateuch.

The exegete synthesizes all of these findings into a description of the growth of the tradition from its origin to its final form. This constitutes, admittedly, a hypothetical picture that may be more or less probable. Some interpreters, in fact, dispute the extent to which an oral prehistory can even be posited on the basis of the literary text and then used as a historical source (e.g., Van Seters 1975; see, nonetheless, Vansina 1965; 1985). Yet the question is in principle legitimate: How did a specific text come into existence, and what was the import of any of its earlier forms and elements—to the extent that these can be plausibly identified? If the present text affords a glimpse of this, then it is part of the text's meaning and deserves to be studied. These findings also become part of the total cluster of information on which the historian and sociologist (see, e.g., Gottwald 1979) can draw in order to reconstruct the events and social structures of a given period.

D. Application to Types of Biblical Literature

Various kinds of literature comprise the *traditum*, the materials which were passed from one person or generation to the next, becoming developed and actualized in the process. The tradition history varies according to literary type as well as historical period. The examples below are taken primarily from the Hebrew Bible, to which this method has been applied most extensively.

1. **Narrative.** Stories enjoy great popular interest, especially in non- or semi-literate societies where they serve as the primary repositories of shared cultural memory. Multiple functions can be posited: entertainment for young and old alike; instruction, especially of moral and religious customs; historical remembrance; ritualistic celebrations; interpretation of contemporary realities (e.g., etiologies, eponymous stories); articulation of group identity and character. All of these purposes and more caused narratives to originate and circulate in early Israelite, Jewish, and Christian communities, just as was the case for the legends and myths of ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome. It is not unlikely that certain persons, especially gifted as raconteurs, were repeatedly called upon to tell familiar stories about the past. As they recited these favorite anecdotes before an audience, they could

quite naturally introduce embellishments, stylistic refinements, and new interpretations.

Stories of the great ancestors, of the Exodus and wilderness wanderings, of the Conquest and the judges, of prophets like Samuel, Elijah, and Jeremiah, of leaders like Saul, David, and later kings—all held fascination for the common people. They generally arose as shorter, independent accounts—e.g., the numerous narratives about Abraham or about David—and gradually became gathered into cycles or collections centered on a specific character or period—such as the traditions about Abraham now recorded in Genesis 12–25, or the stories of David's rise to power in 1 Samuel 16—2 Samuel 5. Their tradition history thus spans this entire growth process and seeks to clarify the meaning and significance of each story at all of its successive stages.

2. **Law.** Large portions of the Pentateuch comprise laws now grouped in collections called the Covenant Code, the HOLINESS CODE, the Deuteronomic Code, and the scattered smaller sections often associated with the Priestly Code. See LAW. These, however, are not codes in the sense of a body of laws promulgated by a legislature or ruler with law-making prerogatives. Israelite law is better understood as customary law, which emerged among the people as the needs of their actual situations required it. Laws about a goring ox, about boundary stones, about treatment of slaves were responses to problems requiring some type of consensual resolution. As situations changed or more complexity was experienced, a given law could accrue qualifications or elaborations. Thus, capital punishment was first ordained for causing another's death, but to this was subsequently added a stipulation about how to handle a case of possibly unintentional murder (Exod 21:12–14); or the law of adultery was ramified in light of a wide range of possible liaisons and circumstances (Deut 22:22–29). The people continually worked out the terms for their coexistence in all areas of life, including cultic practice.

The Pentateuchal laws represent the later collection of such regulations, yet they betray portions of the long development that led up to this point. In addition, throughout the rest of the Hebrew Bible it is possible to trace an inner-biblical legal exegesis, an effort to apply and interpret Pentateuchal laws to new situations, especially in the face of gaps and obscurities in Israel's legal *traditum* (Fishbane 1985).

3. **Prophecy.** Prophecy in Israel was above all of the spoken word. Typically, the prophet stepped forward to speak critically or comfortingly to the general populace, the king, other leaders, the people in the marketplace, or the cult (exceptions were ecstatic and cultic prophecy). These utterances tended to be short; their power resided in the terse, poignant articulation which could be readily grasped and remembered. In some cases there may have been disciples or followers (Isa 8:16 has often been interpreted in this manner) who committed them to memory and who even added their own interpretations to them as the need arose. Collecting these into written form would generally have come at a later stage, as the incident described in Jeremiah 36 depicts (note especially 36:32, which states that after the first dictation the second included even more utterances). Some of the prophetic materials may well have appeared first in written form;

many scholars think that Isaiah 40–55 was drafted as a treatise, although portions may initially have been delivered orally. The tradition history of prophetic materials, at any rate, identifies any evidence of orality and public presentation, traces the course from independent, smaller units to the larger collections of sayings, and notes the influence of themes and motifs, religious and social institutions, and prophetic predecessors. See PROPHECY.

4. Lyrical Poetry. The poetry of Psalms, Song of Songs, Lamentations, and the numerous individual songs inserted elsewhere throughout the Hebrew Bible displays yet another type of tradition history. Like other biblical literature, these poetic pieces were rooted in the life of the people, for in their songs the Israelites gave expression to their joy, their sufferings, their beliefs, and their hope. Yet more so than other literary forms, these were closely tied to ritualistic settings, contexts in which individuals and groups would find it especially appropriate to celebrate or lament. At all points in their history the Israelites married, buried their dead, worked, warred, languished in illness, rejoiced over recovery or success. Traditional songs, largely anonymous in authorship, arose and persisted throughout the centuries for the people to use, much as have our modern hymns. Some, such as the songs in Exodus 15, Judges 5, Genesis 49, and Deuteronomy 33, have been shown through orthographic and linguistic analysis to be especially ancient (Cross and Freedman 1975). A tradition-historical analysis seeks to determine the course of development, the possible ritualistic settings, and the traditional materials incorporated in each such poem.

5. Wisdom. Some of Israelite wisdom springs from the popular sphere: the ever-present proverbs, sayings, riddles, and advice from parent to child and friend to friend. Another source was the royal court, where judicious decisions and prudent actions were highly esteemed. Beyond these was the intellectual tradition among the sages, the learned who taught the young, responded to persons facing vexing dilemmas, and reflected on persistent issues in human life, such as tragedy, injustice, self-control, personal relationships, and the nature and destiny of life in this world. The Wisdom Literature in the books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes and scattered throughout the rest of the Hebrew Bible is the result of a long process, stretching back to and drawing upon its ANE heritage, of trying to come to terms with the natural need for knowledge, understanding, and meaning in life.

6. Tradition in the New Testament. Although the time spans for growth and transmission vary significantly between the Hebrew Bible and the NT—often centuries for portions of the former in contrast to only decades for the latter—the study of tradition history has played a role also in NT studies, albeit less so than have form criticism and redaction criticism. Most notable are the Gospels, which are based on sources of sayings attributed to Jesus as well as stories about his ministry and impact (see the classic study by Bultmann 1963). The early churches preserved these in memory and in written form, actualizing and reinterpreting them as the believers faced new social and historical realities. The Gospels themselves represent such a reworking of the traditions. It was, however, no natural shift from oral to written, and the oral *traditio* was notably more flexible and fluid than was the literary. As Werner

Kelber (1983) has suggested, a crisis of credit perhaps developed in the church as a result of the Roman-Jewish War, and the Gospel of Mark was written—on the basis of earlier sources and traditions—to establish a new basis for permanence and trust. The Johannine community also developed and kept alive its own perspective on the basepoints of Christianity.

For the letters by Paul, which reflect subtleties in the relationship between oral and written language (Funk 1966: 224–74), tradition history is of importance especially in analyzing the appropriation and interpretation of traditional materials, such as a hymn (e.g., Phil 2:5–11) or a credal confession (e.g., 1 Cor 15:3–5). The phenomenon of quoting is evident at an even broader level, for the NT—from Jesus through Paul to the book of Revelation—repeatedly cites its scriptural heritage—the Hebrew Bible—and interprets it in light of the new faith.

7. Early Jewish Tradition. Within the postbiblical Jewish community there was an especially pronounced interest in keeping alive the traditions of the past by remembering and building upon them. Jewish and Christian apocalyptic movements did this in one manner. Sects such as the Qumran community pursued assiduously their own interpretation of Scripture and, in the process, preserved for us some of the most ancient copies of biblical texts.

Of special significance, however, is the stream of tradition known as the “Oral Torah,” which held authority alongside Scripture, the “Written Torah.” The laws of the Pentateuch were continually studied and interpreted in an effort to clarify their minute points, especially for the purpose of deriving rules and instructions that would fit the new circumstances of the day. These emerged as *halakah*, a body of rules, norms, and legal decisions on specific points. Alongside that was the *aggadah*, a wide range of narratives, homilies, anecdotes, and aphorisms that could aid the understanding of the biblical heritage. The rabbis preserved the Oral Torah in memory through a sophisticated mnemonic system and eventually recorded and edited it into the Mishnah by ca. 200 C.E. (Neusner 1987; Weingreen 1976). From that point on to the closing of the Babylonian Talmud (ca. 600 C.E.), the traditioning process continued as new generations of sages engaged scriptural and mishnaic basepoints in light of their new circumstances.

This process occurred more in the context of sustained study and debates among rabbis than had been the case in ancient Israel’s traditioning, which often involved the wide reaches of the population. However, the principle of gradual growth of tradition through new interpretation and actualization of the past heritage is present in both. Notably, several scholars are currently seeking to apply the biblical exegetical methods of form criticism, redaction criticism, and tradition history to the complexities of this vast literature (see various discussions in Safrai 1987; also Saldarini 1986).

E. Implications and Significance

Tradition history, even with the hypothetical nature of its proposals, has assumed a widely accepted role in biblical exegesis. Its importance lies in the effort to uncover the creative process which issued in the biblical literature—to the extent that this process was collective and gradual. It

acknowledges that numerous persons and groups, and not simply solitary authors, contributed to the growth of the tradition. While materials were at points transmitted from one generation to another in a manner that would minimize changes in the *traditum*, in many other instances the tradition was "existentially" applied to the new historical situation, resulting in novel layers of meaning which were incorporated quite naturally into the growing text.

Tradition history carries with it considerable theological implications (see articles in Knight 1977; also Morgan and Barton 1988: 93–132). For the text is thus viewed not so much as a repository of static truths revealed in a unilateral manner without human involvement, but rather as a dynamic collection of material that points to the ongoing human struggle for survival and meaning in real-life situations. Gerhard von Rad's two-volume inquiry into the theology of the Hebrew Bible (*ROTT*) takes this process of the actualization of tradition as its starting point. Similarly, the results of traditio-historical study become part of the evidence to be scrutinized by the historian of ancient Israel, as demonstrated by Martin Noth in his much-debated history (*NHI*). Yet, at a more basic level and even despite the uncertainties on many individual points, one can agree with Noth's assertion (*HPT*, xxxv, 3–4, 147) that the significance of the study of tradition history rests perhaps not so much in its answers as in the very questions it raises.

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TRADITION OF THE ELDERS [Gk *paradosis ton presbyteron*]. The precise phrase "tradition of the elders" occurs only in Matt 15:2 and Mark 7:3, 5, in connection with Pharisees, scribes, and other Jews and their custom of ritual hand-washing. It is probably a technical term that refers to customs observed and considered binding by Pharisees and some other Jews, although not written in the Pentateuch. Although the Pharisees themselves have left no writings, several ancient sources associate the Pharisees with the term "tradition" or "tradition of the fathers" (Josephus, *Ant* 13.10.6 §297; 13.16.2 §408; Matt 15:3–9; Mark 7:8–13; Gal 1:14). Other sources mention unwritten traditions which have been handed down for generations (Philo, *Spec* 4.28.149–50; Ben Sira 1:1). Josephus reports that observance of these traditions evoked controversy with the Sadducees. The Qumran texts contain attacks on "the seekers after smooth things" (*dwrsy hlqwt*), who are identified by most scholars as the Pharisees, for following their own traditions and not God's law (IQH 4: 7,11).

Detractors of the "tradition of the elders" stressed its human origin and contrasted it with God's law (Matt 15:3–9; Mark 7:8–13; cf. Col 2:22; Titus 1:14). Its champions undoubtedly saw it as divinely revealed, complementary to the written Law, possibly analogous to the way later rabbinic Jews regarded the oral Law (*m. 'Abot*. 1:1).

The three NT references to the "tradition of the elders" suggest that ritual hand-washing before eating, originally prescribed only for priests eating consecrated food in the temple, gained wider practice. Though there are no other 1st-century references to the custom, 3d-century evidence shows that some Jews ate ordinary food in a state of ritual purity (*t. Dem.* 2:2).

Later Jewish literature yields no example of the phrase "tradition of the elders," although "tradition" (*mswt*) is common, as is the related verb "receive" (*qbl*). The expression "elders" may have been used by the Pharisees them-