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TRADITION-HISTORICAL CRITICISM

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What Is Tradition-Historical Criticism?

To think of tradition-historical criticism of the Bible as a "method" may be misleading. To begin with, the word "method" itself evokes thoughts of a commonly agreed-upon procedure for reading the text that will yield to every reader objective results, that is, "correct" interpretations of the text. On this understanding, the method controls the reading of the text and guarantees the validity of the results obtained, chiefly by eliminating those subjective intuitions and prejudices of the reader that are thought to falsify understanding. Obviously, the ideal here is that of the natural sciences with their goal of producing results that are always and everywhere valid for anyone who follows the same procedure. Yet it is not at all clear that such an ideal is appropriate for humanistic disciplines such as biblical criticism. The successful act of reading is precisely the one that engages a reader, in the way a great work of art does, in an interpretive enterprise that knows no end and is in principle new on each act of reading.¹

In this sense, tradition criticism is no less "methodical" than any other form of biblical criticism. But there is another sense in which the application of the word "method" to tradition criticism can be a source of confusion. The traditional methods of textual criticism, source criticism, and form criticism present a more or less systematic body of specific procedures for analyzing a text according to certain guidelines. But tradition criticism lacks any generally accepted techniques or evaluative criteria of its own. Indeed, it cannot be viewed simply as one method among other methods of biblical criticism. Tradition criticism is at once less and more than other types of criticism. It is less because it is entirely dependent upon their procedures; but it is also more because it represents an approach to the biblical text that formulates investigative goals for synthesizing the manifold conclusions arrived at through "other" methods. Put simply, it formulates

the use of results obtained from the operation of several distinct methodologies, but above all from source- and form-critical studies.²

Although the word "tradition" can be so broad in its meaning as to embrace the entire ongoing life, customs, and practices of a group or community over successive generations, it is used here in a narrower sense to refer specifically to verbal tradition, that is, to words and texts transmitted from one generation to the next orally and/or by means of writing.³ Examples include proverbs, riddles, songs, poems, epics, and various kinds of folk narratives. While theoretically originating with "someone," such traditions are essentially anonymous in character, being developed and shaped over the course of their transmission by the group or groups who have a direct interest in their preservation and for whom they play a vital role. In that sense, whatever their origin, traditions become the common property of a community or a group, alive only as long as they are functional in meeting the evolving needs of the group. Necessarily, then, traditions must change, or develop, over the course of their transmission if they are to continue to be viable. They can enjoy only a relative degree of stability over time.

The degree to which traditions change over the course of their transmission is variable for another reason. One must reckon with such factors as, for example, whether the transmitted material is memorized verbatim (which is the exception) or handed down in a freer form (the normal mode of transmission), and whether written versions exist that can act, in some fashion, as standards for its accurate transmission.⁴ As a living process engaging the interests and concerns of traditionists (those who hand on a tradition), the only rule the transmission of tradition knows is change. Even the wording of a memorized speech (e.g., a prayer or a song) varies over the course of time, as does the degree of fixity that a written tradition can achieve. For that, among other things, depends on the degree and kind of authority a written tradition possesses.

Put simply, then, tradition-historical criticism seeks to reconstruct the history of the transmission of the various individual traditions and tradition complexes that are to be found in the Old Testament. Beginning with a recognition of the historicalness of the Bible and its contents, it views the Old Testament and its various component parts as a body of largely "traditional" literature. This means that unlike the free creation of an individual author (in the modern sense of the word), the Bible is the product of a long process of composition and transmission. Moreover, it is a process that quite often did not begin simply with the writing of those texts that eventually comprised the books of the Bible or even the earlier written sources utilized in them. The process that tradition-historical criticism envisions and, in fact, is most concerned with extends back beyond the written stage of the Bible's formation to embrace stages that can be discerned in the preliterary

history of a textual unit. For many tradition historians it is really this oral stage of a tradition's composition and transmission that is of utmost importance for understanding its particular characteristics.

Tradition-historical criticism, in other words, deals with the entire sweep of history that a tradition passes through, from its earliest beginning as an independent tradition unit to its final elaboration and expression within the Bible. It embraces both the oral phase of a tradition's composition and transmission as well as its "recomposition" in writing and final literary redaction. For the Old Testament this can, of course, mean a history extending over the course of a thousand years. Nevertheless, the goal is to reconstruct within that long history the various stages a particular tradition, or tradition unit, passed through in its growth and development. Indeed, it may even include a tradition's "postliterary" history—that is, how it finally fits within broad intellectual currents that characterized the life of ancient Israel (e.g., the wisdom movement or the Deuteronomic movement).

To achieve such a comprehensive view of a tradition's history, tradition-historical criticism necessarily presupposes and utilizes the results of textual criticism, source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism. This is not difficult, because, for all their differences, each is always directly concerned with the course of the Bible's composition. So textual criticism seeks to recover as far as possible the earliest stages of a text's actual wording on the basis of extant Hebrew manuscripts and ancient versions. For its part, source criticism investigates the literary plan or structure of a text, its themes and language, with a view to determining its integrity (that it stems from a single author) or the degree of its compositeness. If the text turns out to be composite, source criticism attempts to discern the relationship of the compositional elements to each other (older/primary versus younger/secondary) and the nature of those elements (i.e., are they derived from other, perhaps larger written documents, as fragments, or are they redactional supplements to the text, such as introductions, conclusions, or explanatory glosses?).⁵ Such an analysis of the written development of a textual unit might further be complemented by redaction criticism, with its particular emphasis on describing how these various compositional elements eventually came together to produce the text in its present form and what intentions or concerns guided those responsible for it. Nevertheless, the key role in tradition history is played by form criticism.

Form criticism represents the indispensable means of tradition history; it investigates precisely the crucial preliterary history of a text thought to contain ancient tradition, as well as traditional formulas that occur within it. Indeed, it is largely only through form-critical work that the tradition historian is able to identify a textual unit as a piece of tradition as opposed to the free creation of an author. This it characteristically accomplishes by

recognizing that a given unit, whether prose or poetry, is an instance of an originally oral genre (e.g., historical tale, proverb, psalm, prophetic saying), with a characteristic content and the product of a particular kind of recurrent situation or situations (e.g., instruction, worship), which specifically shaped its intentions or goals. While a recognition of the genre to which a unit belongs does not in itself guarantee the antiquity of a particular unit, it goes a long way toward showing the possibility. And historically, form criticism has expended much effort in determining not only the genre to which a text belongs but also the earliest form, or forms, of the unit that might be recognizable over the course of its literary and especially preliterary (oral) transmission. Along with a determination of a unit's original setting-in-life (*Sitz im Leben*), this provides tradition history with the analysis and material necessary to reconstruct the history of a particular tradition or tradition complex. Such reconstruction is the comprehensive goal of tradition history.

Up to this point, we have restricted our discussion of tradition-historical criticism to one of the two facets of verbal tradition, namely, that of the viewpoint of the material handed down (*traditum*). But, as mention of a unit's *Sitz im Leben* suggests, tradition-historical criticism is also concerned with the process (*transmissio*) by which this material is passed down from generation to generation.⁶ Clearly, without an exploration of the forces and influences that exerted themselves on a tradition in the process of its transmission, little headway will be made in reconstructing the individual stages a particular unit of tradition went through. Under this rubric, tradition-historical criticism moves in several different directions,⁷ among which three lines of research are particularly prominent.

First, form criticism's determination of the setting(s)-in-life of a particular tradition provides what is in many cases the only point of departure for ascertaining the group or the community responsible for the development and transmission of a tradition, the so-called traditionists. Quite simply, the more we know about such traditionists and their institutional commitments—the more we know about the social, political, and religious forces that operated through them and on them—the more we can understand the real meaning of a tradition and the vital role it played in the life of ancient Israel. Examples of such groups in ancient Israel are the priests at the local shrines or the Temple in Jerusalem, the bands of disciples of the great prophets, and the so-called "wise."

Second, the geographical area or location with which a tradition is associated is a topic of interest to tradition history. Through the localization of a tradition (e.g., the association of early exodus traditions with the north or messianic traditions with Judah), its interpretation acquires the kind of specificity and concreteness that allows us to appreciate a tradition's historical significance and function within the life of ancient Israel. The

localization of tradition allows one to bring to bear on its interpretation whatever knowledge we possess of the various historical, geographical, economic, and cultural-political forces affecting a locale and its population. Such forces comprise the matrix that nourished the growth of tradition and shaped its ongoing formation.

A third line of research important to tradition-historical criticism is the study of the processes by which the creation and transmission of tradition take place. This means not only an investigation of "authorial" and scribal practices in the ancient Near East and the extent and nature of written communication but especially of the nature and dynamics of oral composition and oral transmission. For the latter, contemporary folklore studies, based on present-day oral cultures, have become absolutely indispensable, since the only access we have to oral tradition in the ancient world is filtered through written materials. Given how little we know about ancient society, a host of questions arises. For example, what kind of stability and longevity can be expected of oral tradition? Who is responsible for a society's oral memory? What techniques are used in the composition and transmission of oral literature? Are different kinds of materials handled in different ways? What are the role and extent of memorization and improvisation in the transmission of tradition? What is the relation between written and oral communication? What precipitates the writing down of an oral tradition and what changes does it undergo in the process? Such questions and many others have been hotly debated within tradition-historical research and will continue to be in the foreseeable future.⁸

As previously noted, there is little consensus today concerning the focus and methods of tradition-historical criticism. Some will argue that it already possesses, or must still develop, methods distinctly its own, or that the scope of tradition-historical criticism must be strictly limited to the preliterate, oral stages of a tradition's transmission.⁹ The particular view presented here, however, is congruent with the history of the discipline's practice, and it would be helpful at this point to consider briefly some of the factors behind its emergence. By looking at the work of a few of its early practitioners, one achieves a better understanding of not only what tradition-historical criticism has been, but also, and as important, what issues and problems will shape its development in the future.

The Emergence of Tradition-Historical Study

The origin of the discipline may be found in an impasse that had been reached as a result of source-critical studies in the Pentateuch, culminating in Julius Wellhausen's classic formulation of the Documentary Hypothesis at the end of the nineteenth century. In Wellhausen's view, the four sources

that comprised the Pentateuch were substantially the product of the creative efforts of their authors, who worked much the same way as modern authors. To be sure, legends about early times were at their disposal, but these were unconnected to one another and were of only very limited value as historical sources. The older they were, the more likely they were to be simply the product of popular fancy.¹⁰ As a result, the original sources behind the present form of the Pentateuch provided the historian with little or no access to the period before they were actually written, certainly not to a period much before the time of David. Consequently, historical knowledge of the patriarchs was impossible, and very little could be known even of the Age of Moses.¹¹

By directly challenging Wellhausen's view of the role of the Pentateuch's "authors," however, Hermann Gunkel was able to show a way behind the written text of the Bible to earlier sources of Israel's history. In Gunkel's view, the writers of the Pentateuch were not so much authors as they were collectors ("redactors") of the traditions of their people, adding little of their own to what they had received. And what they received was merely the latest stage of a long process of these traditions' formation, in which they had been passed down faithfully over many generations by word of mouth. Over time, with each new telling, the originally independent, short "sagas" or legends (which, for example, comprise the narrative cycles of Genesis) changed and developed according to the needs of their hearers. As they did so, however, they continued to bear with them authentic traces of their origins as well as of their subsequent history. In this way, Gunkel believed, a whole history of the religious, ethical, and aesthetic ideas of ancient Israel can be derived from Genesis.¹²

Had Gunkel merely challenged Wellhausen's conception of the Pentateuch's sources as written documents, his influence would probably not have been so great. But Gunkel also developed a method congruent with the nature of the Pentateuch's sources as "traditional" literature. That method was form criticism, and by means of it, Gunkel found a way to explore beyond the limitations of the written text, not only in Genesis but throughout the Bible. Indeed, his goal was to recover by means of form-critical analysis the earliest form of a tradition or a tradition unit. The tradition itself pointed the way, its variants, its inconsistencies, and its blind motifs betraying earlier stages of a long development. In this way, one could hypothetically describe a tradition's entire history on the basis of the tradition itself, its "inner history," as Gunkel called it.¹³ And for this realization, he is justly recognized as the chief pioneer of tradition-historical criticism.¹⁴

While Gunkel himself did not regard the products of oral tradition as appropriate material for specifically historical reconstruction,¹⁵ a number of scholars who followed in his wake took note of his insistence on the

antiquity of oral traditions behind the biblical narratives and on the fidelity of oral transmission. Confident of their ability to separate history from legend, they sought to reconstruct the earliest periods of Israel's history and religion. For example, on the basis of the sagas of Genesis, Albrecht Alt offered a description of the distinctive nature of patriarchal religion before the rise of Yahwism at the time of Moses.¹⁶ In turn, his research had a particularly strong influence on two scholars whose names are more closely associated with tradition-historical criticism than even that of Gunkel himself—Gerhard von Rad and Martin Noth.

Gunkel had focused his form-critical attention on the smallest units of tradition, an emphasis that left largely unaddressed the question of the origin of the Pentateuch's/Hexateuch's larger thematic structures.¹⁷ In texts such as Deut. 26:5–9; Deut. 6:20–24; and Josh. 24:1–18, von Rad found preserved what he considered to be nearly identical old summaries of Israelite belief, or "creeds," originating in Israel's worship at an ancient shrine (Gilgal).¹⁸ As he saw it, these creeds formed the basis of the structure of the present Hexateuch, with whose outline they were essentially identical. Thus, rather than being something that has grown up on its own accidentally, "a casual recollection of historical events," the thematic structure of the Hexateuch itself rests on ancient tradition, a "canonical pattern . . . long since fixed as to its details."¹⁹ Only the Sinai tradition of covenant making (Exodus 19–Numbers 10) was lacking in the old "creeds." However, von Rad concluded that it too derived from old tradition, having originated in a covenant renewal feast at Shechem. It was inserted by the Yahwist into the framework established by the old creeds, and this, along with the prefixing of the primeval history in Genesis 1–11, led to the creation of the present Hexateuch.

Although Noth states explicitly that the task of his history of Pentateuchal traditions is the investigation of its whole growth and formation from beginning to end, the critical period as far as he is concerned is the preliterary, which for him, even more than for von Rad, gave the Pentateuch its essential shape.²⁰ Moreover, Noth goes beyond von Rad in positing behind the earliest written sources of the Pentateuch, J and E, a common base from which both had independently derived and that *already* contained in a unified form what he identifies as the five major themes of the Pentateuch: the exodus, the guidance into the land, the promise to the patriarchs, the guidance in the wilderness, and the revelation at Sinai.²¹ The last is noteworthy, for it was this tradition complex that von Rad had seen as an addition by the Yahwist. Consequently, aside from the primeval history, Noth is able to push the entire thematic structure of the Pentateuch back to the period of the Judges and the worship of the twelve-tribe confederacy.

Since each Pentateuchal theme is composed of its own block of individual traditions with its own history of development, however, still another stage of tradition formation must be imagined. During this stage, the individual themes and their associated traditions developed separately, only gradually growing together around the theme of the exodus from Egypt—the "kernel of the whole subsequent Pentateuchal tradition" and a "primary confession of Israel." With it, Noth believed he had reached "the bedrock of an historical occurrence."²² In fact, for Noth, this attainment of the unique historical events giving rise to the Pentateuch's themes defined the real goal of his tradition-historical studies.²³ And to that end, in the course of detailed analyses of individual traditions that filled out the framework of the Pentateuch, he articulated various principles for separating out earlier traditions from later ones (e.g., the attachment of early traditions to specific places, the priority of cultic traditions over secular traditions, anonymity and typicality), which subsequently became major topics of tradition-historical discussions.²⁴ Though they have been severely criticized, they nonetheless highlight the kind of explicit criteria that will have to be found if tradition-historical criticism is going to succeed in its goal of reconstructing the history of tradition's transmission.

It is impossible here to consider further the lines of research opened up by von Rad and by Noth or by the numerous other scholars, particularly in Scandinavia, who took up the goals of tradition-historical research. They sought to apply its guiding insights to other parts of the Bible, such as the prophetic corpus or the wisdom books, as well as to investigate in a more systematic fashion the process of oral tradition itself.²⁵

Problems and Issues in Tradition-Historical Criticism Today

Today widespread disagreement remains concerning the specific object of tradition-historical research—whether it is restricted only to the phase of oral tradition or is all-inclusive—and concerning its methods of investigation, particularly as these relate to other forms of biblical criticism. Despite the best efforts of many scholars, this situation is likely to continue for some time into the foreseeable future, given the scope of the challenge tradition-historical criticism has posed for itself. Whether through naiveté or simple overconfidence, the magnitude of this challenge has not always been sufficiently recognized. We have only the written texts at our disposal; nevertheless, tradition-historical criticism has set itself the job of studying, if not actually recovering, nothing less than the entire prewritten phase of their composition!

It must be acknowledged that until the last fifteen years or so, much of the enthusiasm for tradition-historical studies came from their promise of

breaking the methodological impasse created by Wellhausen's restriction of historical knowledge to the time in which the Bible's sources were actually written. This can be seen in Noth's tradition-historical work on the Pentateuch, which laid the groundwork for his efforts to reconstruct the history of ancient Israel.²⁶ Despite the rigor of many studies, numerous others failed to distinguish clearly between the history of a tradition and the question of its historicity. What was irreducible in a tradition was taken as historical; what was secondary was taken either as historically untrustworthy or as having an independent historical foundation.²⁷ But can "originality" itself settle the question of the historicity of these traditions? And what of the criteria used to decide primary and secondary elements of tradition? Noth, for example, had argued that the earliest traditions are formulated in small units in a concise style and that cultic traditions are earlier than comparable secular traditions.²⁸ Yet both criteria have been roundly rejected.²⁹

In addition to skepticism regarding various criteria for judging the relative age of traditions, another issue central to penetrating the remote periods of Israel's history is the question of the very stability of tradition. While acknowledging that changes in the form and the content of traditions inevitably occurred in the course of transmission, Gunkel and those who followed him also insisted on the "fidelity" of the transmission process even over long stretches of time. But what exactly constitutes faithful transmission? Surely early studies exaggerated the role of memorization in the process of oral tradition, ignoring its restriction to a limited number of situations and forms; moreover, recent field studies in folklore emphasize that the transmission of oral tradition occurs largely through a process of re-composition, or re-creation, so that a text (even in poetry) never remains unchanged, even on the lips of the same person.³⁰ Thus the "fixity" of tradition over time can no longer be assumed but must be determined on the basis of tradition-historical investigations.

Perhaps more seriously, questions now are raised about our ability to reconstruct preliterary stages of a tradition on the basis of written documents.³¹ After all, how does written Hebrew actually relate to spoken Hebrew? Although most scholars acknowledge differences between oral communication and written communication in general, what constitutes these differences is not always easy to determine. If, for example, one points to repetition as characteristic of spoken versus written communication, what is to be made of the unmistakable repetitive rhetorical style of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomist? May not written language sometimes imitate spoken language? In fact, the issue of the "orality" of written texts is more pressing than it might at first appear, for it calls into question the very ability to discriminate between texts rooted authentically in oral tradition and those that are purely literary inventions.

Perhaps this discussion is sufficient to indicate some of the central issues facing tradition-historical research today. Of course, these concerns necessarily relate to the current practice of source criticism and form criticism. Tradition-historical criticism remains dependent on progress in these methods even as it will continue to reflect their limitations.

An Illustration of the Approach

A brief illustration of the applicability of tradition-historical criticism to a specific biblical text will draw together the various points made here and show concretely both the prospects and the limitations of its approach. The text to be considered is Gen. 32:22–32 (23–33 Heb.).

Anyone who has thoughtfully investigated the story of Jacob's encounter with the mysterious "man" in Genesis 32 can attest to the many obscurities with which it confronts the discerning reader. Yet if we follow the form-critical lead suggested by Gunkel for tracing the history of a tradition,³² these obscurities are clear indications of the antiquity of the story and the long history of its transmission. Along with the presence of possible variant traditions, these indications provide the concrete means by which one may reconstruct the history of the tradition in question.

Such indications within the text of Genesis 32 include apparent vestiges of "primitive" religious conceptions, the narrative's lack of connection to the immediate context, the unevenness of the present form of the story, and its multiple etiologies and conclusions. Also a variant form of the tradition in Genesis 32 occurs in Hos. 12:3b–4a (4b–5a Heb.), where the prophet indicts Israel for following in the footsteps of its eponymous ancestor:

In his manly vigor he [Jacob] wrestled with a "god";
He [Jacob] wrestled a "god" and prevailed.
(The god) wept and besought his favor.³³

On the basis of these two lines of evidence at least four stages in the growth of the tradition may be discerned.

Analysis proceeds by working "back" from the present narrative, beginning with the results obtained from source-critical study. Such study generally affirms the literary integrity of Gen. 32:22–32 and attributes the text to the work of the Yahwist.³⁴ The only exception concerns v. 32, along with its referent in v. 25b ("and Jacob's hip was put out of joint"). Verse 32 contains a strange dietary abstention on the part of Israelites (unknown elsewhere) and is the second of two successive etiologies, neither of which belongs to the essential story. Although older scholarship tended to regard the mere presence of an etiology as a sign of the etiological intention of an

entire narrative, current scholarship recognizes that etiologies are often secondary additions, or redactional elements.³⁵ Consequently, a number of scholars have taken at least v. 32, along with v. 25b, as a postexilic, "midrashic" accretion to the text.³⁶ As the text stands, v. 25b is certainly puzzling in view of the man's cry in v. 26 ("Let me go"), and its loss would only help smooth the flow of the story.

At this last stage of the tradition, Gen. 32:22–32 has become an element in the composite created by the Priestly (P) redaction of earlier Pentateuchal sources. Although P probably introduced no changes into the tradition itself or into its position within the larger Jacob cycle, the new broader literary setting fabricated by P broadened and deepened the theological horizon. Genesis 32:22–32 now represents an episode under the auspices of the eternal covenant God established with Abraham to be the God of his descendants (chapter 17). As such, it falls within the third and penultimate historical age, according to the Priestly scheme of "salvation history."

The third stage of the tradition's development occurred with its inclusion in the Yahwist source. At this stage, a number of significant developments took place in the tradition, as perhaps it was reduced to writing for the first time. To begin with, the Yahwist is most likely responsible for the present "artful" position of Gen. 32:22–32 in the Jacob cycle, with which it has otherwise little in common. In the cycle, Jacob generally makes his way by trickery and cunning; here it seems to be a question of his strength. By inserting this text directly into the middle of the story of Jacob's perilous reunion with Esau (note the lack of an entirely consistent transition from 32:21 to 32:22), the story now forms a perfect counterpart to the theophany at Bethel (28:10–22). Thus Jacob's flight from Esau and his perilous return are both marked by special revelations of divine providence. The two incidents frame Jacob's "exile," otherwise lacking in religious color, and show it to have been under God's protection.

In addition, the Yahwist is probably responsible for the identification of Jacob's mysterious opponent with God. This is accomplished by the concluding etiology of the place name "Penuel" in v. 30, which puns on the meaning of the name ("For I have seen God face to face"). And it is probably indicated by the change of Jacob's name in v. 28, with the explanation given there of the name "Israel." In fact, it is likely that in the story inherited by the Yahwist, v. 29b ("and he blessed him") followed directly upon Jacob's demand in v. 26 (compare Hos. 12:4b–5a above) as the boon won by the hero's victory. In other words, the Yahwist is responsible for introducing the entire motif of the change of Jacob's name to Israel (vv. 27–29a), and with it, the effort to articulate the meaning of "Israel." (In Hos. 12:4a, there is a Hebrew pun on the name Israel, but no expansion of this into a change in the patriarch's name.) This becomes the center of attention,

and to some extent it moves an identification of the text's genre, which continues to puzzle commentators, in the direction of an etiology of the name,³⁷ if not of the existence of Israel.³⁸ For the Yahwist, the struggle of the eponymous hero Jacob typifies Israel's spiritual struggles with God, a struggle that, as he sees it, constitutes Israel's destiny and deepest identity.

Identification of a second stage in the development of the tradition is perhaps warranted by the variant tradition appearing in Hosea. Were the Hosea tradition a true variant to Gen. 32:22–32 from the form-critical point of view rather than simply an allusion to a story, a reconstruction of the earliest form of the tradition could proceed on other than speculative grounds. Nonetheless, the tradition Hosea employs suggests a prior stage in the tradition of Jacob's struggle, less developed than the Genesis tradition. First, at this stage Jacob is not yet the eponymous hero of a united Israel, but only of the Northern Kingdom.³⁹ Second, Jacob's opponent is only identified as an "ēlōhīm," an identification that of itself need only indicate a supernatural, or superhuman, being (compare the usage in 1 Sam. 28:13, where it refers to the ghost of Samuel; see n. 33). Third, although the Hebrew in Hos. 12:5a (4a Eng.) contains a pun on the name "Israel," (*yīšar'ēl*), "he wrestled God/a god"),⁴⁰ the pun is not developed into an etiology for the change of Jacob's name. If this is the case, at this stage of the tradition's transmission, the narrative as a whole would lack any strong etiological thrust, further suggesting an identification of the unit's original genre as that of folktale. Finally, in the tradition the prophet utilizes (albeit negatively, as an example of the eponymous hero's brazen daring) the depiction of Jacob's extraordinary feat of strength is clearly cast in a heroic mode. Jacob successfully wrestled with this superhuman being and won from it some kind of blessing. In this incident, which was clearly a source of popular pride, there is little hint of its later "spiritualization." Most likely the tale circulated as merely one of a number of such folktales about the eponymous hero of the Northern Kingdom, perhaps part of the "stock in trade" of professional storytellers who roamed the countryside entertaining the populace wherever a crowd might be likely to gather.

Although it is merely speculation, one can conjecture a still earlier stage of the tradition's development. Perhaps to this stage belong originally those elements of the story such as the motif of the "magic touch" (v. 25a) or of the demonlike creature whose power is restricted to the night and who seeks to block the hero's passage. Given the ubiquity of such stories in folklore (cf. Ex. 4:24–26), there is no reason to think the story in this original form even concerned the eponymous hero Jacob or had its present localization. Surely the delightful pun on the name "Israel," in evidence at the second stage of the tale's transmission, is in no way essential to the action of the basic story. It probably was introduced later, as part of the

"Israelitizing" of the tale when it became associated with the figure of Jacob. So, too, perhaps came the introduction of the river's name, "Jabbok," which in Hebrew puns on the name Jacob, as well as on the word for "wrestle."

Enough has been said to indicate the lines of the tradition's possible transmission and development, up to and including its final redaction in Genesis. By seeking to uncover the richness of this intriguing text's long and complicated history, tradition-historical criticism reveals something of the riches of biblical narrative, which could take a popular tale about a hero and transform it into a profound statement of the vocation and destiny of Israel. At the same time, we also learn something about the historical development of Israel's religious beliefs and spiritual sojourn, as Israel walks in the footsteps of its ancestor Jacob. Like Jacob, Israel too only discovers along the way that the Mysterious Presence with whom it has had to struggle continually in its history bore the name of its God.

Notes

1. For a penetrating examination of this question, see H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury, 1975).

2. So Gene M. Tucker, *Form Criticism of the Old Testament*, Guides to Biblical Scholarship (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971); John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 10; and K. Jeppesen and B. Otzen, "Status Quaestionis," *The Productions of Time: Tradition History in Old Testament Scholarship*, ed. K. Jeppesen and B. Otzen (Sheffield: Almond, 1984), 129. Klaus Koch, (*The Growth of the Biblical Tradition*, trans. S. M. Cupitt [New York: Scribner's, 1969], 53) regards tradition history as simply a branch of form-critical work. Of course, this is not the self-understanding of many who have been and are proponents of tradition history. See, for example, Douglas A. Knight, *Rediscovering the Traditions of Israel*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 9 (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1975), esp. 193-94.

3. Knight, *Rediscovering the Traditions*, 1.

4. R. C. Culley, "An Approach to the Problem of Oral Tradition," *Vetus Testamentum* 13 (1963): 115-17.

5. Rolf Knierim, "Criticism of Literary Features, Form, Tradition, and Redaction," in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters*, ed. D. A. Knight and G. M. Tucker (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 130-34.

6. For the distinction, cf. Knight, *Rediscovering the Traditions*, 5-20.

7. *Ibid.*, 5-10.

8. For a valuable discussion of the problem in relation to Old Testament studies, see, in addition to Culley ("An Approach to the Problem of Oral Tradition," 113-25) mentioned above, Burke O. Long, "Recent Field Studies in Oral Literature and Their Bearing on OT Criticism," *Vetus Testamentum* 26 (1976): 187-98.

9. For example, O. H. Steck, "Theological Streams of Tradition," *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament*, ed. D. A. Knight (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), esp. 183-85; see also the review of methodological positions in Knierim, "Criticism of Literary Features," 146-48.

10. Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1973), 296, 326. Wellhausen's work was first published in German in 1878, with a second edition in 1883.

11. *Ibid.*, 318-19.

12. Hermann Gunkel, *The Legends of Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 99.

13. *Ibid.*, 100-102.

14. Knight, *Rediscovering the Traditions*, 72.

15. Gunkel, *Legends of Genesis*, 1-12.

16. Albrecht Alt, "The God of the Fathers," *Essays in Old Testament History and Religion* (New York: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1968), 3-100.

17. John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1975), 142.

18. Gerhard von Rad, "The Form-Critical Problem of the Hexateuch," *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (London: SCM, 1984), 1-78.

19. *Ibid.*, 2, 8.

20. Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 1.

21. *Ibid.*, 38-41.

22. *Ibid.*, 49-50.

23. Bernhard W. Anderson, "Introduction: Martin Noth's Tradition-Historical Approach in the Context of Twentieth-Century Biblical Research," *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, xviii-xxi.

24. See Anderson's (*ibid.*, xxiii-xxviii) formulation of these principles.

25. For the contribution of the so-called Scandinavian School to tradition-historical criticism, as well as for examples of other studies, see the excellent survey of Knight, *Rediscovering the Traditions*, 177-92, 217-399.

26. M. Noth, *The History of Israel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958).

27. T. L. Thompson, "The Joseph-Moses Traditions and Pentateuchal Criticism," in *Israelite and Judaean History*, ed. J. H. Hayes and J. M. Miller (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 170-71.

28. Anderson, "Introduction," xxiii-xxiv.

29. R. Polzin, "Martin Noth's *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*," *Bulletin of the American Society of Oriental Research* 221 (1976): 113-20, esp. 115-16.

30. R. C. Culley, "Oral Tradition," 119-50.

31. R. Lapointe, "Tradition and Language: The Import of Oral Expression," in *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament*, 125-42, esp. 131-34.

32. Gunkel, *Legends of Genesis*, 99-100.

33. The scripture translations in this chapter are the author's own. The reconstruction of the Hebrew text for the first colon of v. 4 follows the one proposed by S. L. McKenzie, "The Jacob Tradition in Hosea XII 4-5," *Vetus Testamentum* 36 (1986): 312-14. I depart in taking the subject of the second colon to be Jacob's opponent, which I understand as an unspecified type of supernatural being. Compare the use of the word "god" ('*elohim*') for the shade of Samuel in 1 Sam. 28:13.

34. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 515.

35. See Brevard Childs, "A Study of the Formula 'Until This Day,'" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 82 (1963): 179-92.

36. So Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 520.

37. George W. Coats, *Genesis, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature 1* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 230.
 38. Tucker, *Form Criticism*, 49.
 39. W. D. Whitt, "The Jacob Traditions in Hosea and Their Relation to Genesis," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 103 (1991): 22-24.
 40. McKenzie, "Jacob Tradition," 313-14.

For Further Reading

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 S.R. HAYNES,
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5

REDACTION CRITICISM

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The Method and Its History

Redaction criticism, a translation of the German *Redaktionsgeschichte* (history of redaction), is the technical term for what is arguably the most significant advance in Gospel scholarship in this century. Also known as composition criticism or composition history, redaction criticism is a method of analysis that has been applied primarily to the Synoptic Gospels. It fully acknowledges that the Gospel writers, albeit inheritors of both common and specific traditions, were also creative authors and theologians and not mere transcribers or collectors. New Testament scholar David Barr has forcefully acknowledged the impact of this method of interpretation on biblical scholars: "The excitement many of us felt on our first exposure to redaction criticism is due to the ability of this method to take seriously the differences between the gospels, to explain the differences without explaining them away."¹

The appeal and acceptance of the redaction-critical method has been such that few introductions to the New Testament fail to include a description of it, however cursory, in their surveys of modern biblical criticism. Indeed, their analysis of the Gospels in virtually every case relies upon the perspective of redaction criticism, whether or not they acknowledge this debt. Other fields of New Testament scholarship that attempt to interpret the New Testament writers as theologians or as writers with a specific ideological bent depend upon the basic insight offered by redaction criticism—that each evangelist is a uniquely creative theologian as well as an inheritor of a repertory of traditions. In the United States in particular, this perspective has been true for methods of literary criticism. These literary-critical approaches (see Part 3 of this book), especially the more recent ones, include structuralist and poststructuralist analysis, rhetorical criticism, narrative criticism, reader-response criticism, and to some extent ideological criticism. According to critic Stephen D. Moore, narrative criticism and reader-response criticism