

CHAPTER IX

Form Criticism

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Form criticism of the New Testament has two aims—to classify the various New Testament books according to their literary genre (German *Gattungsgeschichte*), and to analyse the smaller units of traditional material according to the “form” or “shape” they have assumed during the oral, preliterate period. The German word *Formgeschichte* (“form-history”) is often used in a broader sense with reference to attempts to trace the development of units of tradition during the oral period and thus to make historical value-judgments on the material. But this is, strictly speaking, the function of “tradition criticism”, which is treated elsewhere in this volume. My contribution will be confined to the more purely analytical aspect of form criticism, and to units of tradition in the Gospels.¹

I. Some Axioms of Form Criticism

Form-critical methods were first applied systematically to the Gospels by three German scholars—K. L. Schmidt, M. Dibelius and R. Bultmann.² In order to understand how the method works, we must now list some of the axioms from which form criticism proceeds.

(1) The Synoptic Gospels are “popular” or “folk” literature rather than literary works in the classical sense. And the evangelists, according to Dibelius, “are only to the smallest extent authors. They are principally collectors, vehicles of tradition, editors.”³ Although both these claims are regarded by more recent scholars as over-statements, they are important because they emphasize that the evangelists were not historians employing modern methods of research, but receivers and transmitters of traditions cherished by Christian communities.

(2) Between the time of Jesus’ ministry and the writing of the Gospels there was a period when the sayings of Jesus and stories about him were communicated orally among Christians. Even though “Q” may have existed as a document as early as A.D. 50, the church continued to set great store by oral tradition until well into the second century. Thus Papias stated: “I supposed that things out of books did not profit me so much as the utterances of a voice which lives and abides” (Eusebius, *H.E.* III.39.4).

(3) During this oral period the traditions about Jesus circulated as in-

¹ On tradition criticism see Ch. X by D. R. Catchpole. On the study of literary genres (*Gattungsgeschichte*) and of units of tradition in the Epistles and Revelation, see R. P. Martin (Ch. XIII).

² Schmidt’s book, *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu* (“The Framework of the Story of Jesus”, Berlin 1919), has never been translated into English. Dibelius’s book, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums*, also appeared in 1919, but the English translation, *From Tradition to Gospel* (London 1934; reprinted 1971), is based on the much enlarged second German edition (Tübingen 1933). Bultmann’s *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (Oxford 1963) is a translation of the third German edition (1958) of *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (originally published Göttingen 1921).

³ *From Tradition to Gospel*, pp. 3-6.

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dependent units. It can hardly have been otherwise, since the acts and sayings of Jesus would be recounted by preachers and teachers *as occasion demanded*. We cannot imagine the apostles giving a series of lectures in the temple precincts on the life of Jesus. Rather they would use some particular story or word of Jesus to bring home some point in the course of their preaching. This is why when we look, for example, at Mk. 2:1-3:6 we find a collection of short paragraphs (known as *pericopae*), each complete in itself and with no essential connection with what precedes or follows.

However, there are exceptions to this general rule. All three early form critics agreed that some joining up of pericopae had taken place before Mark compiled his Gospel. But this was normally on a topical basis, for example the "controversy stories" in Mk. 2:1-3:6, and the "miracle stories" in Mk. 4:35-5:43. Only very rarely is there reason to believe that such groupings of traditions preserved memory of the *chronological* order of events—the most famous example of this being the insertion of the story of the woman with the haemorrhage into the story about Jairus' daughter (Mk. 4:21-43), which is probably due to recollection that "this is how it actually happened."⁴

The major exception to the rule about independent pericopae is the Passion Narrative, where the paragraphs are joined together in a continuous story.⁵ From early times the Passion Story may have been recounted as a whole, both in worship and in apologetic to outsiders. For such a connected account was necessary in order to answer the question, "How could Jesus have been brought to the cross by people who were blessed by his signs and wonders?"⁶

(4) During the oral stage these "units of tradition" assumed particular forms according to the function which they performed in the Christian community. Form critics recognize certain forms or categories in the gospel tradition—such as "pronouncement-stories" and "miracle-stories" (see below)—and insist that these distinctive forms are no creation of accident or free invention, but are determined by the setting in which they arose and the purpose for which they were used. The technical term for this setting is *Sitz im Leben* ("life-situation"). Just as information about the qualities of a particular toothpaste will be told in a distinctive manner by an advertisement, but in a quite different manner by a scientific report, so stories about Jesus acquired different forms or shapes according to their *Sitz im Leben*. Thus form critics claim the ability to deduce the *Sitz im Leben* of a gospel pericope from its form. If we find several pericopae with the same form, we may assume that they all had the same *Sitz im Leben*, i.e., they all performed the same function in the church's life, whether it be worship or apologetic or catechesis or some other function.⁷

It is important to understand that for form critics "*Sitz im Leben*" is primarily a "*sociological*" term, denoting a whole "area" or function of the community's life (e.g., worship, or missionary preaching). Only in a secondary sense is it applied (as often by Bultmann) to the

⁴ But Bultmann believes that the insertion is made simply to provide the time lapse necessary between the statement that Jairus' daughter is "at the point of death" (v. 23) and "your daughter is dead" (v. 35) (*History of the Synoptic Tradition*, p. 214).

⁵ Bultmann only partly agrees (*op. cit.*, p. 275).

⁶ Schmidt, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

⁷ For typical statements, see Dibelius, *op. cit.*, pp. 13f; Bultmann, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

particular historical situation which gave rise to a particular story or saying. Thus, for example,

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Bultmann might say that the *pericope* about paying taxes to Caesar (Mk. 12:13-17) had its *Sitz im Leben* (in the general, "sociological" sense) in the apologetic of the Palestinian church, while its *Sitz im Leben* (in the specific sense) was the problem about whether Christians had obligations to Caesar as well as to God.⁸ A further refinement of this "specific" sense is the distinction made between the life-situation of the early church where a piece of tradition was created or transmitted (*Sitz im Leben der alten Kirche*) and the historical situation in the life of Jesus where the piece of tradition originated (*Sitz im Leben Jesu*).⁹

II. The Various Forms¹⁰

A form critic's main purpose, then, is to classify the gospel pericopae according to their forms, and to assign them to their respective *Sitze im Leben*. Apart from the Passion Narrative, Dibelius found five main categories. I shall now list them, noting some variations suggested by other scholars.

1. PARADIGMS

These are brief episodes which culminate in an authoritative saying of Jesus, or sometimes in a statement about the reaction of onlookers. A typical "pure paradigm" is Mk. 3:31-35:

And his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting about him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, asking for you." And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking around on those who sat about him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother."

Dibelius also cites as "pure paradigms" Mk. 2:1-12, 18-22, 23-28; 3:1-5, 20-30; 10:13-16; 12:13-17; 14:3-9. He also speaks of "less pure paradigms"—pericopae including extraneous features, such as names of characters in the story, which are not found in the pure paradigms. These include Mk. 1:23-27; 2:13-17; 6:1-6; Lk. 9:51-56; 14:1-6.

Dibelius believed that paradigms attained this shape in order to serve as examples or illustrations in the preaching of the early missionaries. Hence their name (Greek *paradeigma* = "example"). His list of five characteristic features of the paradigms shows how ideal they would be for this purpose: (1) independence from the literary context; (2) brevity and

⁸ See Bultmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 26, 48.

⁹ But H. Schürmann has denied the appropriateness of applying the term to a particular historical situation and has insisted on the sociological meaning ("Die vorösterlichen Anfänge der Logientradition", in *Der historische Jesus und der kerygmatische Christus: Beiträge zum Christusverständnis in Forschung und Verkündigung*, ed. H. Ristow and K. Matthiae (Berlin 1962), p. 351).

¹⁰ There is no space to discuss these in detail. Apart from the books of Dibelius and Bultmann, see the summary of their classification of forms in E. V. McKnight, *What is Form Criticism?* (Philadelphia 1969), pp. 20-33, as well as the discussions in V. Taylor, *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition* (London 1933), and E. B. Redlich, *Form Criticism: its Value and Limitations* (London 1939).

simplicity—we are told nothing of biographical interest about the participants, who act merely as foils for the saying of Jesus; (3) religious rather than artistic colouring; (4) the word of Jesus is made to stand out clearly as the climax of the narrative (as in a “punch-line” joke); (5) the pericope ends with a thought useful for preaching—either a word or act of Jesus or the reaction of the onlookers.¹¹

Dibelius’ location of the *Sitz im Leben* of the paradigms in early Christian preaching has been criticized by Bultmann as too narrow. He prefers

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the term “*apophthegm*” for pericopae of this type, and subdivides them into *controversy-dialogues* (e.g. Mk. 3:1-6), scholastic dialogues (e.g. Mk. 12:28-34), which arose from the needs of polemic and apologetic, and biographical apophthegms (e.g. Lk. 9:57-62), which purport to contain information about Jesus and were used as “edifying paradigms for sermons”.¹² V. Taylor has criticized the terminology of both Dibelius and Bultmann, and claims—with some justification—that his term “*pronouncement-story*” is simpler and puts the emphasis in the right place.¹³

2. TALES (NOVELLEN)

These are stories of Jesus’ miracles which, unlike paradigms, include details betraying “a certain pleasure in the narrative itself”,¹⁴ and which Dibelius therefore attributed to a special class of story-tellers and teachers (for whose existence there is no New Testament evidence, unless these stories are themselves evidence). The stories may be subdivided into exorcisms (e.g. Mk. 5:1-20; 9:14-29), other healing miracles (e.g. Mk. 1:40-45; 5:21-43) and nature miracles (e.g. Mk. 4:35-41; 6:35-44, 45-52). All the stories follow the same basic pattern: (1) a description of the disease or situation to be remedied; (2) a statement of the cure or solution achieved by Jesus; (3) a statement of the results of the miracle—either the effects on the person healed or the reaction of the onlookers. This is a natural pattern for any story of this kind, shared by Jewish and pagan miracle-stories, as well as by TV adverts for vitamin pills and medicated shampoos.

In these tales, says Dibelius, there is “a lack of devotional motives and the gradual retreat of any words of Jesus of general value”, and “didactic applications altogether fail.”¹⁵ Thus, in contrast to the paradigms, they were not formed for the purpose of illustrating sermons. Rather, their *Sitz im Leben* was their use by the story-tellers “to prove the miracle-worker was an epiphany of God, and this was done by the Tale as such apart from inclusion in a sermon.” They were used especially in a Hellenistic setting to demonstrate Jesus’ superiority over rival gods and miracle-workers.¹⁶

¹¹ Dibelius, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-26, 37-69. For some illustrations of how these stories may have been used by the early preachers, see G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Preaching the Gospel from the Gospels* (London 1965²), pp. 11f.

¹² Bultmann, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 30.

¹⁴ Dibelius, *op. cit.*, p. 70. There are some pericopae including accounts of healings which nevertheless are classified as paradigms because the centre of interest is not the healing itself but the pronouncement of Jesus which follows from it (e.g. Mk. 1:23-27; 2:1-12; 3:1-6).

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 79.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 95f.

Bultmann, who calls these narratives "miracle-stories", does not endorse Dibelius' belief in a special class of story-tellers, but agrees with him that these stories were formed for propaganda and apologetic purposes.¹⁷

3. LEGENDS

Dibelius took over this term from its application in later Christian centuries to "legends of the saints". It does not necessarily imply that what is recorded is unhistorical—though that may often be the case, in the opinion of Dibelius, and particularly of Bultmann, who treats these pericopae under the heading "historical stories and legends". What is important is the purpose of these narratives. They are "religious narratives of a saintly man in whose works and fate interest is taken". And they arose in the church to satisfy a twofold desire: the wish to know something of the virtues and lot of

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the holy men and women in the story of Jesus, and the wish which gradually arose to know Jesus himself in this way.¹⁸

Thus there are legends about Jesus (e.g. Lk. 2:41-49; 4:29f), Peter (e.g. Mt. 14:28-33; 16:13-23), Judas (Mt. 27:3-8) and other characters. In narratives like this the characters are not simply foils for some word of Jesus, as in paradigms—they become real people and are presented as examples to follow.

4. MYTHS

Myths are narratives which depict "a many-sided interaction between mythological but not human persons"—the supernatural is seen breaking in upon the human scene.¹⁹ Only three narratives are listed in this category: the baptismal miracle (Mk. 1:9-11 and parallels), the temptations (Mt. 4:1-11 and parallel), the transfiguration (Mk. 9:2-8 and parallels). Bultmann does not use the term "myth" to denote a category, but includes these three narratives among the "historical stories and legends".

5. EXHORTATIONS

Exhortations (*Paränesen*) is Dibelius' term for the teaching material in the Gospels. Their *Sitz im Leben* is catechesis. Formally, the sayings of Jesus may be divided into maxims, metaphors, parabolic narratives, prophetic challenges, short commandments, and extended commandments including some kind of motive clause (e.g. Mt. 5:29f, 44-48; 6:2-4).

Bultmann's treatment of the sayings of Jesus is more extensive. He divides them according to content into three groups: (1) *logia* or wisdom sayings; (2) prophetic and apocalyptic sayings; (3) laws and community regulations. *Formal* characteristics cut right across these categories, provoking B. S. Easton to ask: "What *formal* difference is there between the

¹⁷ Bultmann, *op. cit.*, p. 368.

¹⁸ Dibelius, *op. cit.*, pp. 104, 115.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 271.

'logion'—Whosoever exalteth himself shall be humbled—the 'apocalyptic word'—Whosoever shall be ashamed of me, the Son of Man shall be ashamed of him—and the 'church rule'—Whosoever putteth away his wife and marrieth another committeth adultery?"²⁰ On grounds of form rather than content, Bultmann was able to isolate only two main types: "I-sayings" in which Jesus speaks of himself, his works and his destiny (e.g. Mt. 5:17; Mk. 10:45); and "Parables". His analysis of the parabolic material is particularly illuminating.²¹

III. *Some Limitations of Form Criticism*

We must now mention some limitations of form criticism as it has hitherto been practised, and some questions which it has not yet answered satisfactorily.

(1) How many of the forms or categories commonly referred to by form critics have in fact been satisfactorily established? We can agree that the

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"paradigms" and "tales" are distinctive types (though the names "pronouncement-story" and "miracle-story" are more meaningful in English), and that parables are a particular form within the sayings tradition. But what of the rest? Dibelius' "myths" are classified by their content, not by their style or form. On grounds of form alone, the temptation story in Mt. 4:1-11 would more naturally be described as a controversy dialogue (it is not very different from Mk. 10:2-9; 11:27-33 or 12:18-27), and is in fact so described by M. Albertz.²² Similarly the "legends", though they may have certain typical features in common, can hardly be said to have a common form or shape. "What common form can be perceived in the stories of the Confession of Peter, the Entry into Jerusalem, the Transfiguration, and Jesus in the Temple at the age of twelve?" asks Redlich.²³ He therefore calls such pericopae "form-less stories", and Taylor for similar reasons speaks simply of "stories about Jesus". Most of the discourse material, too, refuses to be categorized according to form. Bultmann's categories, for instance, "'do little more than describe stylistic features; they do not denote popular forms into which an individual or a community unconsciously throws sayings."²⁴

Admittedly, too sharp a distinction must not be drawn between form and content—they do influence each other. Thus it is legitimate to speak of miracle-stories as a distinctive form—even though "miracle" is a designation of content—because all miracle-stories are told in the same basic form. But to describe "legends" or "myths" as forms, when no common shape is discernible in the various examples adduced, is not form criticism. Thus R.H. Lightfoot, who did much to introduce form-critical methods into Britain, admits that we may have to be content with the form critics' success in distinguishing and classifying two types of story, paradigms and miracle-stories—and no others."²⁵

²⁰ *The Gospel Before the Gospels* (New York 1928), p. 74.

²¹ For details see Bultmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 166-179, 188-192.

²² *Die synoptischen Streitgespräche* (Berlin 1921), pp. 41-48.

²³ *Op. cit.*, p. 180.

²⁴ Taylor. *op. cit.*, p. 31.

²⁵ *History and Interpretation in the Gospels* (London 1935), p. 43.

Furthermore, even these two types are not as distinct as is sometimes suggested. Compare, for example, Mk. 3:1-6 (the man with the withered hand—a "purr, paradigm" according to Dibelius), Mk. 10:46-52 (Bartimaeus—a "less pure paradigm") and Mk. 5:25-34 (the woman with the haemorrhage—a "tale"). Is there really as much difference between them as Dibelius' classification would suggest? Since Mk. 3:1-6 so obviously contains a "didactic motive" (which according to Dibelius a "tale" does not have), Dibelius classes it as a paradigm, saying that the healing is only incidental.²⁶ Yet the pericope concludes not with the saying about the Sabbath, but with the miracle and its effect on the Pharisees. "The plain fact", comments A. Richardson, "is that we have here a miracle-story which is something more than what the form critics have decided that a miracle-story ought to be."²⁷ To take another example, Mk. 1:29-31 is a perfect little healing-story following the pattern of description of the illness, the cure and the results. Yet it betrays none of the "delight in the narrative itself" which Dibelius regards as a feature of his "tales". Is it because it does not fit his theory that he nowhere discusses it in *From Tradition to Gospel*?

In fact there are many pericopae in the Gospels which do not fit neatly

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into categories, but are of "mixed type". Bultmann makes a virtue out of this problem, claiming that "it is no objection to the form-critical approach, but rather a demonstration of its fruitfulness, to find that one piece of the tradition is seldom to be classified unambiguously in a single category." It is difficult to see how this can be reconciled with his statement about the *Sitz im Leben* earlier on the same page: "The proper understanding of form-criticism rests upon the judgment that the literature in which the life of a given community... has taken shape, springs out of quite definite conditions and wants of life from which grows up a quite definite style and quite specific forms and categories."²⁸ When dealing with a living tradition, we must certainly resist excessive systematization; but the more we resist systematization, the more we undermine form criticism itself.²⁹

This question about how far it is possible to establish fixed and clear-cut "forms" does have exegetical implications. Thus, for example, many scholars assert that Mk. 2:19b-20 is an addition by the early church to the pronouncement-story about fasting in vv. 18-19a. Part of their argument for this is that vv. 18-19a so clearly form a perfect paradigm or controversy dialogue that the extra sayings of Jesus can hardly have stood there originally.³⁰ But what if the definition of a paradigm, from which this conclusion is drawn, is too rigid and doctrinaire? Similarly with parables, it is too readily assumed that Jesus could not have included allegorical traits in his teaching, and that a parable must have been designed originally to have only one point, so that a second point must be an addition by the church.³¹

²⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 55.

²⁷ *The Miracle-Stories of the Gospels* (London 1941), p. 77.

²⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 4.

²⁹ Cf. P. Benoit, "Reflections on 'Formgeschichtliche Methode'", in *Jesus and the Gospel*, Vol. I (London 1973), pp. 24f.

³⁰ See, e.g. D. E. Nineham, *The Gospel of St Mark* (Harmondsworth 1963), pp. 103f.

³¹ For a criticism of these assumptions see J. A. Baird, *Audience Criticism and the Historical Jesus* (Philadelphia 1969), pp. 167f. For recent criticisms of this doctrinaire denial that Jesus intended an allegorical interpretation of the Parable of the Sower, see B. Gerhardsson, "The Parable of the Sower and its Interpretation", *NTS* 14 (1967-68), pp. 165-193; C. F. D. Moule, "Mark 4:1-20 yet once more", in *Neotestamentica et Semitica, Studies in*

(2) The assumption that there was an "oral period" before any of the gospel material came to be written down has been questioned by H. Schürmann. He suggests that during Jesus' ministry his disciples may have written notes on main aspects of his teaching.³²

(3) How did the traditions about Jesus arise and how did they develop? These are questions which form criticism has not taken seriously enough. Dibelius and Bultmann wrote confidently about the "laws of tradition", giving the impression that these were well-proven laws of the development of oral tradition which could be scientifically applied both to biblical narratives and to extra-biblical material. Their main contention was that traditions develop from the simple to the more complex—hence, in general, legends were regarded as later creations than paradigms. But in fact no one has thoroughly examined these "laws of tradition", and there is no agreement on this matter among the experts on "folk tradition".³³ E. P. Sanders has shown that in the manuscript tradition and the apocryphal gospels there are developments both from the simple to the more complex, and from the complex to the simpler.³⁴ The situation is not straightforward.

Moreover, H. Riesenfeld and B. Gerhardsson have contended that the transmission of traditions by the early Christians must be understood on the analogy of transmission of traditions by the Jewish rabbis. Since the rabbis' concern was to transmit accurately the traditions as they received them, we should assume that the Christian churches were similarly concerned for accurate transmission, rather than being the "creative communities" which

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form critics often imagine them to have been.³⁵ Although this thesis has been widely criticized, its insistence that the transmission of Christian traditions should be understood in the light of the way Jewish traditions were transmitted in the first century deserves serious attention.³⁶

This question of how the traditions about Jesus developed has bearing on the problem of "doublets" in the Gospels, among which we may note the following:

The parable of the talents/pounds	(Mt. 25:14-30; Lk. 19:12-28)
The miraculous draught of fishes	(Lk. 5:1-11; Jn. 21:4-14)
The anointing of Jesus	(Mk. 14:3-9 = Mt. 26:6-13; Lk. 7:36-50; Jn. 12:1-8)
The feeding of the 5000/4000	(Mk. 6:30-44; 8:1-10)

Honour of Principal Matthew Black, ed. E. E. Ellis and M. Wilcox (Edinburgh 1969), pp. 95-113; J. Drury, "The Sower, the Vineyard, and the Place of Allegory in the Interpretation of Mark's Parables", *JTS* 24 (1973), pp. 367-379.

³² *Op. cit.*, pp. 342-370.

³³ See Baird, *op. cit.*, and literature cited there. Also E. Güttgemanns, *Offene Fragen zur Formgeschichte des Evangeliums* (Munich 1971²).

³⁴ E. P. Sanders, *The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition* (Cambridge 1969).

³⁵ H. Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition and its Beginnings* (London 1957); B. Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Lund and Copenhagen 1961).

³⁶ A valuable critique is that by W. D. Davies, "Reflections on a Scandinavian Approach to the Gospel Tradition", in *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge 1964), pp. 464-480. Gerhardsson replied to his critics in *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity* (Lund and Copenhagen 1964).

The healing of the centurion's
servant/nobleman's son

(Mt. 8:5-13 = Lk. 7:1-10; Jn. 4:36-54)

The usual form-critical approach to such doublets is that divergent traditions have developed from one original story. But since form criticism itself involves the assumption that different stories of the same type have come to be told in a similar way to each other, is it not also possible that two originally different stories have assimilated features from each other in the course of transmission? The answer to this question may not be the same in each case, but it is a question which ought to be considered.

A similar question could be asked about parables with more than one "moral" attached to them (e.g. Lk. 16:1-9; or the different applications of the parable of the lost sheep in Mt. 18:10-14 and Lk. 15:3-7). Must we assume that this is always the result of development in the church, rather than of development in *Jesus' mind*?³⁷ Is it not likely that Jesus would use similar stories on separate occasions to drive home different points, just as Paul does with his athletic metaphor or his imagery from slavery?

(4) The concern to draw parallels with extra-biblical material can sometimes distort rather than help exegesis. This is the fault of many form critics' approach to the miracle-stories. Noting formal parallels with stories of Hellenistic "divine men" and miracle-workers, they have underplayed the didactic purpose of the miracle-stories and regarded them as quite distinct from the proclamation of Jesus as bringer of the kingdom of God.³⁸ This is ironical when we observe that Bultmann, for example, regards as genuine sayings of Jesus Mt. 11:4-6 and 12:28, where Jesus clearly relates his miracles to his message of the kingdom.³⁹ It is quite misleading to suggest that the miracle-stories have "no didactic motive". In Acts 3:1ff, often in John's Gospel, and in the paradigms involving a miracle, we see miracles used as springboards for teaching. And Richardson has shown how suitable many of the miracle-stories are, not just to exalt Jesus as a wonder-worker, but to point to various aspects of the Christian message.⁴⁰

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IV. Some Insights of Form Criticism

We have seen that form criticism has limitations, and that there are some questions it has left unanswered. But there are also real gains for our understanding of the New Testament, including the following.

(1) Form criticism has helped us, however tentatively, to penetrate into the "tunnel period" between A.D. 30 and 50, before any of our New Testament documents were written down. For instance, it has given us clues about methods of preaching and teaching among the early Christians, and about their debates with Jewish opponents.

³⁷ See Baird, *op. cit.*, pp. 166-168.

³⁸ See, e.g., Dibelius, *op. cit.*, p. 80; Bultmann, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

³⁹ Bultmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 128, 162.

⁴⁰ *Op. cit.*, *passim*. See further L. J. McGinley, *Form Criticism of the Synoptic Healing Narratives* (Woodstock, Maryland 1944); W. Nicol, *The Semeia in the Fourth Gospel* (Leiden 1972).

(2) The search for the *Sitz im Leben* of a tradition is an aid to exegesis. Once we can discover how and why a particular story was used in the early church, we shall have a surer way of knowing how we should use it to speak to our own situation. It is true that suggested *Sitze im Leben* are often only tentative, and frequently scholars disagree about the life-situation of a particular pericope.⁴¹ So we must beware of claiming too much. It is true that the quest for a *Sitz im Leben* involves a circular argument—"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."⁴² But the method is not thereby invalidated, since all advances in historical precision involve a certain circularity of method. Also, the evidence of the Acts and Epistles provides some external check on any postulated life-situation. Despite these difficulties, therefore, form criticism has drawn valuable attention to the question of the *Sitz im Leben*. "In this way the gospels can be to us..., within limits which need to be carefully guarded, a mirror of the hopes and aspirations, the problems and the difficulties, of the early church."⁴³

(3) Linked with this is the emphasis that the early Christians preserved stories and sayings of Jesus not because of mere antiquarian interest, but because they were *useful* for worship, preaching, teaching or some other situation. And this helps us to understand why the Gospels ought not to be regarded as biographies of Jesus. Independent pericopae, transmitted because of their practical value to the church, tell us less about Jesus' inner development than about what he meant to the church.⁴⁴ This may well mean that we can expect to deduce from the Gospels only the barest of chronological outlines of Jesus' life.⁴⁵

(4) An understanding of the form of a pericope is often of major importance for its accurate exegesis. Attention has already been drawn to the exegetical value of understanding the parable form—and the dangers of applying this too rigidly.⁴⁶ Another example of form-analysis guiding exegesis is K. Koch's study of the beatitudes in Mt. 5:3-12. He shows that these "blessings" follow the pattern of "apocalyptic blessings" in the Old Testament and Jewish literature, rather than the quite different type of blessings found in Old Testament wisdom-sayings. On *formal* grounds, therefore, it can be established that these beatitudes are not speaking of general worldly

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⁴¹ For a good example of this see S. Neill, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861-1961* (London 1964), pp. 247f.

⁴² Bultmann, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁴³ R. H. Lightfoot, *The Gospel Message of St Mark* (London 1950), p. 102.

⁴⁴ This can of course be asserted without denying (as many form critics do deny) that the early Christians were interested in the historical Jesus and able to transmit accurately information about his earthly life. See G. N. Stanton, *Jesus of Nazareth in New Testament Preaching* (Cambridge 1974).

⁴⁵ For an attempt to establish the reliability of the Marcan outline see C. H. Dodd, "The Framework of the Gospel Narrative", in *New Testament Studies* (Manchester 1953), pp. 1-11; and D. E. Nineham's criticisms in "The Order of Events in St Mark's Gospel—an Examination of Dr Dodd's Hypothesis", in *Studies in the Gospels, Essays in Memory of R. H. Lightfoot* (Oxford 1955), pp. 223-239. G. E. Ladd has a balanced discussion in *The New Testament and Criticism* (London 1970), pp. 165-168.

⁴⁶ See notes 21 and 31.

well-being, but should be related to Jesus' eschatological teaching - and the content confirms this impression.⁴⁷

(5) Form criticism draws attention to the presence of the "gospel in a nutshell" in each pericope. "It was probably to the light thrown by the historical traditions on these great themes [of life and death, judgment and salvation, etc.], even more than to their historical interest, that the traditions themselves owed their preservation; and if form criticism can show once more the vital connexion in this respect between the gospels and the Gospel, it will have proved its value."⁴⁸ This insight can be overdone—plainly, the message contained in one pericope is of limited meaningfulness to the hearer unless he can relate it to an overall impression of Jesus which he has derived from other pericopae. But it points the interpreter of the Gospels in the right direction: to the authoritative and saving message contained in the gospel tradition.

V. What Now?

Form criticism is not merely something to be studied as an aspect of modern theology. Since an appreciation of form is necessary for the understanding of any literature, form criticism will remain a basic tool for exegesis of the Gospels. And so the work goes on, as scholars seek to build on the insights of their predecessors and to correct the weaknesses of earlier studies. More recent trends have included attempts to discern behind the Fourth Gospel some of the same basic forms as have been found in the Synoptics;⁴⁹ and to throw light on Gospel pericopae by comparing them with Jewish forms known to us from rabbinic literature.⁵⁰ If all this makes the study of the Gospels more complicated, it can also make such study more fruitful.

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<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

⁴⁷ Koch, *The Growth of the Biblical Tradition* (E.T. London 1969), pp. 6-8; cf. pp. 17f, 28f.

⁴⁸ Lightfoot, *The Gospel Message of St Mark*, p. 105.

⁴⁹ See, e.g., B.-Lindars, *Behind the Fourth Gospel* (London 1971).

⁵⁰ See D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London 1956), pp. 55-201; and B. Gerhardsson, *The Testing of God's Son (Matt. 4:1-11 and par)* (Lund 1966).

Form criticism is a method of biblical study that seeks to categorize units of Scripture according to their literary pattern or genre and then attempt to trace this pattern to its point of oral communication. It has often been used in attempts to categorize the supposed sources within the Torah or Books of Moses (Genesis through Deuteronomy) and classify them by sources according to the JEDP Theory.