

FORM CRITICISM AND THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

A SUMMARY STUDY AND CRITICISM

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Shortly after the World War there arose a new school of Gospel criticism called *Formgeschichte* or Form Criticism. Originating in Germany, where the principal representatives are Rudolph Bultmann, Martin Dibelius and K. L. Schmidt, the system soon found adherents in America and England. Prominent among the English form critics are R. H. Lightfoot and Vincent Taylor. In this country the best known representatives are Donald W. Riddle of Chicago University and F. C. Grant of the Union Theological Seminary, New York. Hardly an issue of English and American Biblical journals appears without a study defending or attacking the new school. Biblical conventions find the topic one of present day importance. Two years ago in the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis one section devoted a session to a panel discussion of Form Criticism and Eschatology.¹ The presidential address in last year's meeting dealt with K. L. Schmidt's book which is basic for *Formgeschichte*.² In view of the widespread adoption or attention which the new method has gained outside the Church, and because so little on this subject has been written by Catholic scholars in English,³ it seems profitable to discuss the matter at some length. Where possible, quotations are given from the Form Critics' writings. A great part of the refutation is taken from non-Catholic sources,—not partial to our view.

THE NAME. Form Criticism, or form history—to translate literally the original German title—is the history of the pre-Gospel tradition by the study of the literary forms. Advocates of the new theory disagree upon a title which will adequately express the content of their method. Some emphasize the historical aspect and prefer a term like "method of cult history" (G. Bertram) or the "history of tradition" (O. Cullmann)⁴. The English title, Form Criticism, brings out the fact that the judgment is made according to the form, but does not make clear that history is the aim of the study. Only the Synoptics are taken into consideration. Form Criticism has as its field the study of materials produced by popular traditions. The first three evangelists, these critics maintain, were authors only in the slightest degree. St. John, on the other hand, in the treatment on his material acts as a true and independent author. The Synoptics are rather compilers and editors.⁵

¹*Journal of Biblical Literature* LIX (March 1940) p. x.

²C. C. McCown. "Gospel Geography. Fiction, Fact and Truth." *ibid* LX (March 1941) pp. 1-25.

³I have seen only F. X. Pierce, S.J., "Form Criticism of the Synoptics." *Ecclesiastical Review* XCIII (1935), p. 85-97.

⁴Cf. F. M. Braun, O.P., "Formgeschichte." *Dictionnaire de la Bible, Suppl.* III (1938), col. 312-313.

⁵Martin Dibelius. *Die Formgeschichte des Evangelium*s. 2nd ed. (Tuebingen. Mohr. 1933), p. 2.

THE PURPOSE: THE GOSPEL BEFORE THE GOSPELS. The new school begins where pre-war non-Catholic writers ended.⁶ In general, rationalistic critics had accepted the two document theory of Mark and Q or the sayings-document. With Streeter some were inclined to raise the number of the documents to four, admitting special sources for Matthew and Luke. But all felt they were faced with the difficulty of bridging the gap of twenty or thirty years which separated their sources from the lifetime of Our Lord. Form Criticism appeared upon the scene and offered to throw light upon this period. It proposed to investigate the stage of oral tradition, to study the Gospel material as it was current in detached pieces before the parts were collected and incorporated in the written documents. To describe their aim the new school employed phrases such as the pre-history or paleontology of the Gospels. They would set forth the oral Gospel which preceded the written Gospels.

PRINCIPLES OF FORM CRITICISM. The principles by which *Formgeschichte* strives to reach its conclusions may be reduced to three. First, the Gospels are not in the strict sense literary productions, i.e., the work of an individual writer producing them for the public, but they are compilations of infra-literary writings (*Kleineliteratur*), similar to folklore, and the small sections are joined together quite artificially.⁷ The scholar, detecting that these units are strung together like beads, simply unties the string and isolates the various sections. Secondly, the material so isolated can be classified in different forms such as paradigms (i.e., examples for preaching), tales, legends and exhortations.⁸ Thirdly, the form gives the clue to the history of the piece. Every form arises from a definite need or life-situation of the community, which manifests the relative date of the unit and sometimes indicates the group from which it sprung. "One factor . . . is highly important. The several types of stories and sayings, or the several 'forms' as they have come to be called, are of different relative periods in the development of the gospel materials. After the primitive Passion materials the paradigms (or apothegms, or pronouncement stories) are the earliest form; the legends are the latest. The other forms come between the limits set by these two. In other words, the criteria of form are likewise criteria of relative date."⁹ "Hardly less significant are the differences in the character of the units of which the gospels are composed. As they were used in the primitive preaching, some in the messages to and for Jews, others in the missions to Gentiles, some were of particular value in the one, others in the very different case. It is possible to determine in many instances, whether a given item of the gospel story is the product of the Jewish or the gentile element in emerging Christianity."¹⁰

⁶Cf. E. A. Mangan, C. SS.R. who in a review of Riddle's book, *The Gospels*, shows how completely the principles of Form Criticism are opposed to Catholic doctrine. *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 2 (April 1940) p. 188f.

⁷M. Dibelius, *Formgeschichte*, p. 2f.

⁸Cf. D. W. Riddle, *The Gospels, Their Origin and Growth*. (Chicago, 1939), p. 38.

⁹*ibid* pp. 38f. ¹⁰*ibid* pp. 39f.

The central importance of the forms for this method has been well expressed by Dibelius. "In the field of popular tradition where many nameless persons act creatively transmitting, modifying or adding to what has been handed down, and where the individual author has no literary aim, the personal individuality of the poet or narrator counts for little; much more important is the form as it has been produced by the practical needs or handed down by use or custom. No master is present to break the form, and the evolution takes place subject to definite immanent laws. Not without reason has one writer spoken of the biology of the saga."¹¹

CONSIDERATION OF THE FIRST PRINCIPLE: THE GOSPELS A COMPILATION OF FOLKLORE. This part may be considered under two headings: the work of the Synoptics as authors, and the nature of the Gospel material.

a) The *Evangelists as authors*. The form critics minimize the work of the Synoptics. The writers of the Synoptics, says Dibelius,¹² were authors only in the most limited degree. They were chiefly collectors or redactors, and their main work was to hand on, regroup and retouch the material they received. The evangelists have merely constructed the setting for the various incidents. K. L. Schmidt published his work on the framework of the life of Jesus¹³ in which he strove to show that the time and place details of the Gospels were unreliable, that the framework for a life of Christ has been completely shattered by scientific research, and that only unrelated units remain, or small sections which the redactors have clumsily sewed together, sometimes juxtaposing contradictory accounts.¹⁴

It is true that the evangelists used material furnished them by others. In his prologue St. Luke tells us that he diligently investigated all from the beginning. Moreover the Gospel writers often disregard chronological order and not infrequently arrange their material topically. Of Matthew the Biblical Commission remarked, "in disponendis factis et dictis, quae enarrat et refert, non semper ordinem chronologicum tenet."¹⁵ Finally the choice or omission of a pericope depended upon the scope the author had in view.¹⁶

The statement, however, that Matthew, Mark and Luke were not true authors goes against the extrinsic and intrinsic evidence. Testimony, the extrinsic evidence, affirms that the Synoptics were authors in the full sense of the word, and Dibelius confesses that this "error" goes back to very ancient times, even to Papias in the second century.¹⁷ The consideration of the style of the Gospels leads to the conviction that each one comes from

¹¹*Formgeschichte*, p. 1. ¹²*ibid*, p. 2.

¹³*Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu*. (1921).

¹⁴C. C. McCown judges that Schmidt is extreme in thinking the Gospels are only fiction. He himself thinks they are a combination of fiction, fact and truth. *Journal of Biblical Literature* (March 1941) pp. 24f.

¹⁵Denzinger 2153. Concerning Mark and Luke the Commission says *apud utrumque Evangelistam defectus ordinis ac discrepantia in successione factorum haud raro deprehenduntur* (*ibid* 2163).

¹⁶Cf. E. Florit. *Il Metodo della Storia delle Forme*. (1935) p. 40.

¹⁷*Formgeschichte*, p. 3.

a single author.¹⁸ Not only scholars in the Church, but many non-Catholics as well, defend the literary unity of St. Mark's Gospel. Yet he shows less independence than Matthew or Luke in the treatment of his material. In connection with the second Gospel C. H. Turner presented the evidence for the unity of style in a series of articles in the *Journal of Theological Studies*.¹⁹ Other authorities who maintain that one author is evident in the second Gospel are Swete, Hawkins, W. Bousset.²⁰ "It is argued," says a recent writer, "that the stories in Mark . . . may have been in circulation in a written form, before Mark used them. It is possible; but there seems to us to be no evidence of it, and the general unity of Marcan style is against the view."²¹

b) *The Gospels are not folklore.* The difference between the Synoptic narratives and those of popular legends or folklore can best be appreciated by reading a part of Mark and setting it beside some of the suggested parallels. Fr. McGinley compares miracle accounts in the Synoptics with some from Rabbinic and Hellenistic sources and expresses surprise that any one can consider them in the same class.²² Fr. Braun has similar comparisons and reaches the same conclusions.²³ Even compared with the Christian apocryphal works, our canonical accounts of the life of Christ are distinguished by their reserve and simplicity. One of the outstanding adversaries of Form Criticism, E. Fascher, remarks that the "laws" of folklore cannot be applied to the Gospels which must be treated as historical documents.²⁴

As evidence that the Gospels resemble infra-literary or folklore productions Bultmann mentions some laws for the growth of popular tales. Let us consider two of them, the growth in definiteness by the addition of names and by the insertion of more definite details.

1) *Names.* An example often quoted triumphantly by these writers is the account of the anointing at Bethany. When Mary poured the precious ointment over the head and feet of Jesus, Mark says (14:4) "some" murmured, Matthew (26:8) "the disciples" and John (12:4) tells us "Judas" complained of the waste. This is a clear example of the tendency of the evolution, Bultmann notes.²⁵ Assuming Mark to be the earliest Gospel, these scholars claim to have found an unquestionable instance of the process by which time adds the identification of previously undetermined persons.

¹⁸Cf. L. J. McGinley, S.J. *Historia Formarum quoad Miracula Sanationis in Synopticis. Verbum Domini* 19 (1939), p. 237. Fr. McGinley will shortly publish his thesis on Form Criticism in THEOLOGICAL STUDIES. It will fill an urgent need.

¹⁹Vols. 26-28 (1924-1926), "Notes Critical and Exegetical on the Second Gospel"; also the Gospel according to Mark. 1931—cited by F. M. Braun, *Où en est le problème de Jésus?* (Paris. Gabalda. 1932), p. 253 n. 2.

²⁰Braun, *ibid* p. 254, n. 1.

²¹Kirsopp and S. Lake. *Introduction to the New Testament* (New York. Harper. 1937), p. 19.

²²*Historia Formarum*, p. 280ff.

²³Le problème, pp. 235-239.

²⁴*Die formgeschichtliche Methode.* (Giessen. 1924), p. 224.

²⁵*Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* 2nd ed. (Goettingen. 1931), p. 72.

On the other hand, if this tendency was at work, we may ask why in other places the facts point in the opposite direction. When information was desired about the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the world, Luke says "they asked Him"—they, evidently being the disciples, for they called Him Master (21:7); Matthew reads "the disciples" (24:3), Mark identifies the questioners as Peter and James and John and Andrew (13:3). In Matthew (21:20) the disciples call attention to the barren figtree which has withered away. In Mark (11:21) it is Peter who does so.²⁶ In fact, to avoid the force of the objection Bultmann gives as his opinion that those sections in which the names of individual disciples are given belong to an early period when the concept of the twelve as the usual comrades of Jesus had not been worked out. He postulates four steps in the evolution: first, an undetermined circle of disciples; next, out of this group this or that one was selected for mention by name; later arose the concept of the Twelve; finally among the Twelve this or that one would be named.²⁷ How easily such a theory can lead to a subjective reading of the sources is quite apparent.

In the miracle narratives we have an interesting situation. Matthew mentions that two blind men were cured near Jericho, but gives no names. Luke has there the cure of an unnamed beggar. Mark alone has the name Bartimaeus (10:46). The young girl whom Our Lord raised to life, Mark (5:22) and Luke (8:41) inform us, was the daughter of Jairus. Matthew omits the proper name. Of these two examples Bultmann remarks that the cure of Bartimaeus betrays itself as a secondary production by the very fact that the name of the blind man is mentioned. It is the only proper name in a miracle story narrated by the Synoptics apart from Mark (5:22) (Jairus).²⁸ In the accounts of Bartimaeus and Jairus, as regards the recording of proper names, Mark has 2, Luke 1, Matthew 0—exactly the inverse ratio to what the form critics would expect according to their folklore laws. The claim that Mark must be late in this matter, because he mentions the names, is begging the question.

2) *Details added.* In popular traditions as "narratives are retold the main facts remain unaltered but details are introduced. For example, the epileptic son in Mark (9:17) becomes the only son in Luke (9:38); the withered hand in Mark (3:1) becomes the right hand in Luke (6:6); the ear of the high priest's servant in Mark (14:47) becomes the right ear in Luke (22:50).²⁹ John (19:39) specifies the amount of myrrh and aloes brought for the burial of Christ as about a hundred pound weight, and here, remarks Bultmann,³⁰ the tendency of tradition is clear.

Other facts in the Gospel show either that this growth of definiteness is

²⁶Cf. Bultmann, *Geschichte*, p. 71.

²⁷*ibid.* p. 370.

²⁸*ibid.* p. 228. Lagrange remarks that Mark names Bartimaeus, while Matthew and Luke do not, probably because he was well known and a Christian (*Evangelie selon Saint Marc*. 5th ed. (Paris. Gabalda. 1929), p. 284.

²⁹E. Basil Redlich. *Form Criticism. Its Value and Limitations.* (London. 1939) p. 74. The citation is a summary of Bultmann's view contained in F. C. Grant. *Form Criticism.* (Chicago. 1935), pp. 32f.

³⁰*Geschichte*, p. 306.

not verified, or that at times a later narrative may be less definite than an earlier one. While Mark and John give the value of the ointment used at Bethany as three hundred denarii (Mark 14:5), Matthew omits the detail, saying only that it could be sold for much (26:9). Luke says Peter and John were sent to make ready the Pasch (22:8), but Matthew has only "the disciples" (26:17) and Mark mentions "two of the disciples" (14:13). Matthew says they were sent to a certain householder. But Mark and Luke describe the sign given them in detail. They shall enter the city, meet a man carrying a pitcher of water, follow him, and when he enters a house they will ask the master where is the supper room. He will show them a large room made ready. Mark alone tells us that in the storm at sea other boats were present (4:36) and that the place Jesus was sleeping was in the prow on a pillow (4:37); that the swine into which the devils entered numbered about 2,000 (5:13); that Zebedee the father of James and John had hired men with him in the boat when Jesus called the two Apostles (1:20); that Simon of Cyrene was the father of Alexander and Rufus (15:21). These are a few instances and do not exhaust the material. In these cases Mark, the earliest Gospel on the critics' claim, has the most developed form with more definite details. The principle of gradual growth in detail does not work out in the Synoptics. The laws of folklore evolution do not fit the Gospels. Definiteness of detail comes from other reasons such as personal recollections of Saint Peter in Mark's Gospel, or from the author's scope.

CONSIDERATION OF SECOND PRINCIPLE: THE MATERIAL CAN BE CLASSIFIED IN VARIOUS FORMS. "Close study of the small paragraphs of stories and sayings shows that they are of several different kinds. It is possible to classify them into a few categories or types."³¹

1) *Catholic doctrine on literary forms.* In order to clarify the issue let us first recall the Catholic teaching concerning forms in Scripture. Forms or *genera litteraria* are any type or style of writing in common use. Such are parables, allegories, apocalypses, etc.

a) *Forms in the Bible.* Are there literary forms in Scripture? The answer must be in the affirmative. The parables of Christ come to mind immediately. The Apocalypse of St. John and the lyric poetry of the Psalms are other examples.

b) *Objectionable forms.* Does Scripture exclude any forms? Of itself any type of writing in common use would be admissible, provided it would not go counter to some aspect of inspiration. Myths or any such forms which contain error or would necessarily lead men into error could not be part of God's inspired word. For in that case God would be the cause of man's being deceived.³²

c) *The form gives the key to the interpretation.* Each form has its own

³¹Riddle, *Gospels*, p. 38.

³²A. Fernandez, S.J., *Institutiones Biblicae I. De S. Scriptura in Universum*. ed. 4a (Romae. 1933), p. 411f.

proper truth. No one will demand the same literal truth from the poet and the historian. The Canticle of Canticles is not historical in the same sense as the Book of Kings. History differs from parable. The historian narrates actual events. Parables set forth happenings, not necessarily actual, by which the author intends to express a higher truth. Therefore if any one judges the opinion more probable, he can safely deny a Samaritan actually cared for a wounded man on the Jericho road or that the Dives and Lazarus of the parable ever existed.³³

The question of literary forms and their interpretation was a burning one among Catholic exegetes at the beginning of the century. Some considered that certain books of Scripture were only apparently historical and were intended to signify something different from the historical meaning of the text. This dispute which was so intense in the years 1904 and 1905 was ended by a decree of the Biblical Commission given in June 1905 which rejected "apparent history" in the Bible.³⁴

2) *The Form Critics' sociological forms.* Far different from the Catholic concept of forms are those proposed by the new school. These writers are concerned with forms, literary, it is true, but at the same time sociological. Bultmann states his case clearly. He completely agrees with Dibelius that the work of *Formgeschichte* does not consist either in an esthetic study or a descriptive and cataloguing process, therefore not in describing individual units of tradition and incorporating them into definite types. The task is rather to throw light on the origin and history of the single units and likewise to clarify the history of the pre-literary tradition. The literature of the community originates from definite needs which express themselves in fixed literary forms. Each form has its origin in a life situation (*Sitz im Leben*) either in the manifestations of cult, in work, in hunt or in war. The literary form is consequently a sociological concept.³⁵ The style in folklore is not one of literary refinement, but a sociological fact.³⁶ Form Criticism has the distinction of introducing sociology into the field of New Testament study.³⁷

A quotation from an American advocate of the new method will show the connection between the first principle of Form Criticism, viz., that the Gospels resemble folklore, and the second, viz., that each paragraph should be grouped under its proper form. "The gospel materials are like folklore in another respect. Who is the "author" of folk tales? It is of the very nature of folklore that it has no author; it is the product of social groups. As stories and sayings (e.g., proverbs) are told and retold, they owe their

³³Christian Pesch, S.J. *De Inspiratione Sacrae Scripturae* (Friburgi Brisgoviae. Herder. 1925), no. 492; Cf. A. Vaccari, S. J. "Moderni Correnti esegetiche," *Civiltà Cattolica*, 82 (1931 III), p. 405.

³⁴Denzinger 1980; Pesch. *Supplementum continens Disputationes Recentiores et Decreta de Inspiratione Sacrae Scripturae.* (Friburgi Brisgovia. Herder. 1926), p. 38; see also p. 33-38.

³⁵Geschichte, p. 4.

³⁶K. L. Schmidt in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart.* II ed. 2. 639.

³⁷O. Cullmann cited by Dibelius, *Formgeschichte*, p. 57 n. 1.

origin, their form, and their preservation to the whole social group which produced them. To be sure, some one person must have articulated them. But they arose from social experience and they represent not some one person who uttered them but the people who were their real producers. Their form was fixed in the processes of their rise and transmission. So it was with the stories and sayings of Jesus."³⁸

Principal Forms. The material of the Gospels is arranged according to different types such as Paradigms, Parables, Sayings, Miracle Tales, Legends (stories about holy persons). Let us take Dibelius' description of the form of Miracle Stories and of Paradigms. According to him the characteristics of Miracle Tales are that "Jesus' deeds are described with all possible detail; the narrative is meant to satisfy natural curiosity, it arouses astonishment and awakens wonder and thus draws attention to Jesus, the worker of miracles."³⁹ On the contrary the Old Stories or Paradigms "are markedly different in type from these, in that they make almost no use of such popular devices, known the world over. These stories are as a rule briefer, more artless, more vigorous; they paint no picture, they say nothing that is unessential. For this kind of story only one thing was necessary: to provide the setting for Jesus' word and saving deed. The circumstances of his activities were described only in so far as these were required for an understanding of his mission . . ."⁴⁰

Applications. Dibelius considers the cure of the paralytic (Mark 2:1-12) a pure paradigm. He also classifies the cure of the blind beggar, Bartimaeus (Mark 1:46-52) as a paradigm, but one of a less pure type. The name Bartimaeus probably does not belong, he claims, to the original narrative. For a pure paradigm does not give details of the healing, but has its emphasis only on the mercy of Jesus and the faith of the blind man.⁴¹

Another paradigm of a less pure type he considers to be the request of the sons of Zebedee for the first places (Mark 10:35-45). Not the sons of Zebedee but unnamed disciples stood in the original narrative, since in a paradigm the entire attention is centered on the words or acts of Jesus and no interest is directed to the person of others. Later the story developed into a legend when the names of the disciples were added.⁴²

"For the most part," the same writer says, the Old Stories or Paradigms "still stand apart as isolated narratives in the text of the Gospels in which they are found. Only the slightest biographical references need to be removed, which now connect the relevant passage with the life of Jesus as a whole. So for example in the Calling of the Tax Gatherer, the feast in Levi's house is omitted" (in Dibelius' reconstruction of the original pericope); "it was obviously added by the evangelist in order to provide a biographical background for the question of Jesus' opponents: 'Does he

³⁸Riddle, *Gospels*, p. 47.

³⁹*The Message of Jesus Christ*. Trans. by F. C. Grant (New York. Scribner's. 1939), p. 135. ⁴⁰*ibid.* p. 136. ⁴¹*Formgeschichte*, p. 50. ⁴²*ibid.* p. 45 n. 1.

then eat with publicans and sinners?' But this question presupposes, not just the meal which was then being eaten, but the fact that he had frequent fellowship—including even fellowship at table—with these despised classes . . . (In the anointing at Bethany) likewise the reference to the burial of Jesus is left out; this has been added to the narrative of the anointing in order to make it a part of the Passion Narrative. As a matter of fact the conclusion is already reached with the words of Jesus concerning the 'good deed.'⁴³

Refutation. 1) *Most of the material is "formless."* These critics, once they have decided from the study of a certain number of pericopes the essential characteristics of a form, proceed to apply the pattern discovered to other sections and cut away anything which does not fit in with this form-concept. These scholars drop out phrases and verses textually certain, because they do not dovetail with the accepted pattern. When they come to apply their principles to the different units of tradition, Bultmann and Dibelius disagree on many important points.⁴⁴ Although some forms are evident in the Synoptics, most of the paragraphs are "formless."⁴⁵ The Gospel material is so complex that all will distrust any rigorous classification which claims to be anything more than a means of facilitating critical study, M. Goguel remarks.⁴⁶

2) *Mixed forms cannot be rigorously classified.* E. Fascher⁴⁷ points out that in his first edition Dibelius enumerated 15 paradigms of which 7 were pure forms and 8 mixed. In the second edition he has 8 pure paradigms and 10 mixed ones. To meet this objection Bultmann says that mixed forms do not contradict the system; that in these small sections, just as in daily life, several motives could be operative and thus produce a mixed form.⁴⁸ To which Goguel replies that on this supposition the mixed forms would not be produced by a contamination of an originally pure form but would be primitive.⁴⁹ Yet often the Form Critics speak as if the pure form was earlier and the other elements a later accretion. No such geometrical patterns are at the beginning of thought for an individual or for a community. Psychologically, mixed forms would seem to be just as early as pure forms.⁵⁰

After reading some *Formgeschichte* discussions of classifications of forms, many will feel as Kirsopp Lake does, "the fact that a terminology originally used for classifying the tales of folk-lore can also be used for stories in Mark does not prove anything except that it can be used."⁵¹

⁴³Message, p. 136f.

⁴⁴Florit, *Il Metodo*, p. 57f; O. Cullmann, "Les récentes études sur la formation évangélique" in *Rev. d'hist. et phil. relig.* V (1925), p. 464.

⁴⁵Redlich, *Form Criticism*, p. 55.

⁴⁶"Une nouvelle école de critique évangélique" in *Rev. de l'hist. des religions* XCIV (1926-II) p. 158. ⁴⁷*Formgeschichtliche Methode*, p. 57. ⁴⁸*Geschichte*, p. 5.

⁴⁹"Une nouvelle, école, p. 235. ⁵⁰Braun. *Le problème*. p. 235. ⁵¹*Introduction*. p. 20.

THIRD PRINCIPLE CONSIDERED: EACH FORM ORIGINATED FROM A DEFINITE LIFE SITUATION. Famous and frequently recurring among these writers is the phrase *Sitz im Leben*. The term refers to the historico-social situation in which such literary forms were produced. Preaching produced one type of story. The ultimate source of all the forms was the early Christian life.⁵² One must inquire about the activities and needs, especially those of cult in the early Christian community. The question arises: what forms were possible and likely in this sociological setting.⁵³

So Dibelius conceives that preaching required simple stories to illustrate some saving word of Christ, and as a result those stories were produced. When in later times people expected to hear of miracles, to satisfy the demand a supply of great miracle stories was produced. "The aim of preaching lay upon the Christian heart, ever since the mission began; whereas the object of outbidding other wonder-workers could only begin to acquire importance after the followers of Jesus had gone out into the world and endeavoured there to assert their claim. These great miracle tales, accordingly, arose later and made use of methods which other groups applied. They owe their fulness of content, not to the tradition, but to convention, not to the recollections of eye-witnesses, but to the habits of story-tellers."⁵⁴

a) *Each form originates in a definite life-situation.* Even Goguel who admits a certain correspondence between types and function insists that this same principle is false if interpreted, as these new critics do, in the sense that a particular type of saying or narrative corresponds to a certain function of the Church's life and to that only. He cannot see on what principle form critics affirm that a section which could be used for preaching could not be useful at the same time for instruction, for controversy or even merely for the satisfaction of imagination and pious curiosity.⁵⁵ The account of the Holy Eucharist could be useful for many needs of the community, in doctrine, in apologetics and in cult.⁵⁶

b) *The creative community.* At the basis of the new school is the doctrine of E. Duerkheim that the community or society is a self-sufficient being endowed with creative power.⁵⁷ When cult needs arise, a cult story is produced by an individual, it is true, but he is only the organ of the community and individuals in this case work according to supraindividual laws.⁵⁸

⁵²Dibelius. *Formgeschichte*. p. 7f.

⁵³*ibid.* p. 8. Cf. Riddle. *Early Christian Life* (Chicago. 1936).

⁵⁴Dibelius. *Message*, p. 168.

⁵⁵M. Goguel quoted by Braun. *Le problème*. p. 232 n. 1.

⁵⁶Braun. *ibid.* p. 232; Bishop of Gloucester. "Formgeschichte." *Church Quarterly Review*. CXIX (1935), p. 281.

⁵⁷Cf. L. de Grandmaison, S.J. *Jésus Christ. Sa Personne, Son Message, Ses Preuves*. I. 5th ed. (Paris. Beauchesne, 1927) pp. 195-200.

⁵⁸Dibelius. *Formgeschichte*, p. 7.

This concept of the community as creative is erroneous. The community and its environment can stimulate individuals so that they exert their abilities in ways they would not otherwise, but the community cannot create.⁵⁹ O. Cullmann, who is sympathetic toward *Formgeschichte*, states that these sociological laws are not certain, nor sufficiently investigated.⁶⁰ The application of the creative community doctrine would mean that the Christian community produced the sublime doctrine of Christ. "If we are to follow Wellhausen and Bultmann we must hold that Jesus gave no systematic teaching but was able none the less, to inspire his followers with the utmost moral and literary discrimination; so much so that when they came to draw up rules for themselves they adopted only the basic contents of the Synoptists. That is, Wellhausen and Bultmann canonize the entire Palestinian Church."⁶¹

Moreover, the preaching of the Gospel from the earliest times was under the direction of certain leaders. Peter stands out from the beginning. The tradition could not grow up except under the control of eye-witnesses. Not only Catholics but critics of liberal tendencies such as M. Goguel have found fault with form critics for their neglect of the influence in the early Church of individuals such as Peter, Paul and John.⁶²

Worst of all the new method does not appreciate the influence of Our Lord Himself upon the first Christians. More than one liberal scholar will agree with E. Fascher when he says that the life-situation might more reasonably be sought in Jesus Christ than in many of the motives which the form critics propose.⁶³ Most of them "forget that the religion which turned the world upside down was one based on belief in a Person who truly lived, and died, and rose again, and who spoke as no man ever spoke before. . . . Bultmann, who explains so much by the Christian community, has not explained how and why the living active community existed."⁶⁴

Time too short. A final difficulty against Form Criticism comes from the brief period which elapsed between the life of Christ and the Gospels. The evolution which the Form Critics postulate would have to take place within 40 or 50 years. Folklore does not develop as rapidly as these critics would require for their theory of the production of the Gospels. For between 50 and 60 St. Paul's letters show clearly that the divinity of Christ, the Incarnation and the doctrinal teachings on the Eucharist, Cruci-

⁵⁹Grandmaison. *Jésus Christ*. I. p. 199; H. Pinard de la Boullaye, S.J. *L'Etude Comparée des Religions*. 3rd ed. I. (Paris. 1929) pp. 471-492 cited by E. Florit, *Il Metodo*. p. 42 n. 1.

⁶⁰"Les récentes études." p. 573.

⁶¹B. S. Easton. *The Gospel before the Gospels* (1928), p. 118. Quoted by Redlich, *Form Criticism*. pp. 58f.

⁶²"Une nouvelle école" p. 125. The Gospel tradition governed by definite persons such as Peter and connected with concrete events, differs from popular tradition (Braun. *Dict. de la Bible. Supp.* III, 315).

⁶³*Formgeschichtliche Methode*. p. 221.

⁶⁴Redlich. *Form Criticism*. p. 76.

fixion and Resurrection were accepted as common, unquestioned beliefs. All this Gospel tradition would have been produced within 20 years. This number of years is too short. Popular legends develop only slowly and gradually.⁶⁵

Conclusion. Benefits. The system is not to be condemned completely for it has brought out certain points often overlooked. One is the recollection of oral tradition. Unfortunately *Formgeschichte* supposes that tradition of its nature deforms the truth transmitted. But, that quality aside, it is good to have scholars recall what the Catholic Church has always insisted upon and what the Reformers forgot, that for 30 years Christians knew not the written Book, but only the living tradition.⁶⁶ The study of some of the forms, particularly the Apothegms or Paradigms, may lead to a better understanding of some particular texts.⁶⁷ Finally these writers have emphasized that Christ's divinity was very early recognized.⁶⁸

Defects. The shortcomings of the method are clear partly from what has been quoted above under the consideration of the different principles. Fr. Braun censures the Form Critics for their poor argumentation. Based upon a limited number of instances, distorted by excessive simplifications and generalizations, their system sins against the elementary laws of induction.⁶⁹ In the handling of the study of individual paragraphs these scholars show unusual arbitrariness. "The problem of inconsistency between parts and wholes of ancient documents is always difficult, for the difference of feeling for what should or should not hang together is one not only of individuals but of times. The demands of critics of the *formgeschichtliche* school on this point are unusually exacting and where they are not satisfied, give occasion for a minute analysis of the processes of composition. Bultmann's book is full of complaints that the situation in the gospels is inappropriate to the conversations."⁷⁰ "It is difficult to resist the impression," this same writer continues, "that in spite of many acute observations in matters of detail, *formgeschichtliche Kritik* in its broad lines marks a return to the methods of the 18th century rationalists.

⁶⁵Braun. *Le problème*. pp. 248f.

⁶⁶O. Cullmann. Cited by Braun. *Dict. de la Bible. Suppl.* III, 315.

⁶⁷Braun. *ibid.* 316.

⁶⁸O. Cullmann. "Les récentes études." p. 475.

⁶⁹*Le problème*. p. 265; W. F. Albright. *From the Stone Age to Christianity*. (Baltimore. Johns Hopkins Press. 1940) p. 293. "... vicious circles are evident throughout their work." He insists that these reconstructions of early Christian life need the control of entirely independent outside facts which are not abundant for the New Testament. *ibid.*

⁷⁰R. P. Casey. "Some Remarks on Formgeschichtliche Methods" in *Quantulacumque* (studies presented to Kirsopp Lake), 1937, p. 114; see also the rest of the article pp. 109-116. He criticizes sharply Easton's exposition of "connective tissue" added by the evangelist in three Markan examples, pp. 111 ff. Easton accepts Form Criticism with reservations. Cf. n. 61.

It is not primarily a literary but a philosophical and historical theory; its literary corollaries derive in the main from a previously determined reconstruction of the facts of early Christian history and psychology.⁷¹

The scepticism of the new method is very marked. Dibelius, considered rather conservative among these writers, says "the early tradition is most closely connected with the faith of these early Christians, but not so closely with their knowledge—or their desire for knowledge."⁷² "I do indeed think," writes Bultmann, "that we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary, and often legendary."⁷³ Is it surprising that some have spoken of his iron scepticism? Goguel asks, on Bultmann's principles how history, least of all, how ancient history could be possible?⁷⁴ An English form critic, R. H. Lightfoot, at the conclusion of his Bampton Lectures on *History and Interpretation in the Gospels* ends with words similar to Bultmann's. "It seems, then, that the form of the earthly no less than of the heavenly Christ is for the most part hidden from us. For all the inestimable value of the gospels, they yield us little more than a whisper of his voice; we trace in them but the outskirts of his ways."⁷⁵

While Form Criticism has not won general acceptance, some of its attitudes are having influence in non-Catholic circles. In this country it is not surprising that Chicago University should contain an advocate for the new method. The sociological school there prevalent has a natural affinity to the fundamental postulate of *Formgeschichte*. For, as Cullmann has said, the acceptance or rejection of the system will depend on whether one admits the concept of a self-sufficing community which evolves according to immanent laws.⁷⁶

Ultimately Form Criticism, which would make the Gospels have their origin in folklore, derives from the theory of sociological determinism.

⁷¹Casey. "Some Remarks." p. 115.

⁷²Message. p. 124.

⁷³*Jesus and the Word*. Trans. by L. P. Smith and E. Huntress (New York. Scribner's. 1934), p. 8. "The book is a remarkable synthesis of radical criticism and Barthian dogmatism." C. C. McCown. *The Search for the Real Jesus*. (New York. Scribner's. 1940), p. 284.

⁷⁴"Une nouvelle école." p. 116. ⁷⁵p. 225. Cited by Redlich. *Form Criticism*, p. 33.

⁷⁶"Les récentes études," p. 472; Florit points out that the basis of the new critics' system is the concept of Hegel that every historical manifestation has its immanent causality and evolution; that Christianity consequently must be explained by natural laws, *Il Metodo*, p. 21.