

Tradition and Framework: Composition of the Gospels and Acts

Stages of Transmission

Stage One: Life setting of Jesus

Stage Two: Period of oral tradition and early written sources

Stage Three: Work of the Evangelists (authors of the Gospels)

Many scholars think the author of Luke refers to the three stages listed above in the opening sentences of his Gospel:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were *eyewitnesses* [stage one] and *ministers of the word* have delivered them to us [stage two], it seemed good to *me* also [stage three], having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus. (Luke 1:1–3 ESV, italics added)

Basic Assumptions of New Testament Scholarship

- The Gospel tradition was transmitted through stages like those described above.
- Changes in the tradition may have occurred throughout this process of transmission.

- All that we have is the written texts of the completed Gospels and Acts, which are the cumulative products of this process.

Goal of Source Criticism and Form Criticism

The goal of source criticism and form criticism has been to understand the second stage in the transmission of the Gospel tradition so that we might also better understand the first and third stages.

Source criticism seeks to establish which portions of the Gospels and Acts derive from early written sources and, if possible, to reconstruct these early sources. Source critics classify material according to various strands of tradition (Q, M, L, etc.) and evaluate the material in each strand according to its likely origin.

Form criticism seeks to understand how traditions were preserved and handed down orally in the early church. Form critics distinguish between independent units of tradition and attempt to identify the *Sitz im Leben* (setting in life) in which these units of tradition were preserved (catechesis, liturgy, etc.).

Both source criticism and form criticism distinguish between tradition and framework. Material that is thought to derive from the period of oral tradition or from early written sources (i.e., material from stage two) is ascribed to tradition. Material that has been added by the evangelists themselves is described as framework.

Goals of Historical Jesus Studies and Redaction Criticism

Source criticism and form criticism provide the basis for two other fields of research: historical Jesus studies and redaction criticism.

Historical Jesus Studies seeks to reconstruct as accurately as possible the actual words and deeds of Jesus and his earliest followers. Historical Jesus scholars try to determine which material in the Gospels and Acts meets generally accepted criteria for historical reliability. Historical Jesus scholars focus on stage one of the Gospel transmission and are most interested in the material that source critics and form critics classify as tradition.

Redaction criticism seeks to understand the distinctive theology and concerns of the Gospel authors. Redaction critics are primarily interested in the way the authors of these books edited traditional materials and worked them into their final compositions. Redaction critics focus on stage three of the Gospel transmission and are most interested in the material that source critics and form critics classify as framework.