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## Form Criticism of the Gospels and Acts

### ***Presuppositions of Form Criticism***

- There was a period of oral transmission prior to the writing of the Gospels and Acts.
- During this period, small units of material that could be easily remembered circulated independently.
- These small units exhibit characteristics that allow them to be classified as particular types of material. The defining characteristics may be related to structure (a typical outline), language (similar wording), or content (a common theme).
- These units served different needs for the early Christian communities and were remembered or developed in ways appropriate to the settings in life (*Sitz im Leben*) that they were intended to serve (see below).
- These small oral units were collected, organized, and edited when they were incorporated into our four Gospels and the book of Acts.

### ***What Form Critics Do***

Form critics try to identify where small units of oral tradition have been incorporated into the written documents of the Gospels and Acts. They look for material in which structural patterns or other rhetorical features typical of oral transmission are evident. They also

look for material that, at least in part, appears to address a setting in life (*Sitz im Leben*) other than what might be presupposed for the document as a whole.

### *Form-Critical Classifications*

Form critics classify units of tradition according to typical form-critical categories. (Note that all of these categories are descriptive and not fixed. They may also overlap.)

**Sayings:** memorable quotations that may have been preserved apart from any particular context

*Wisdom sayings* provide insight into how life really works:

“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”

(Luke 12:34).

“If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand” (Mark 3:24).

*Prophetic sayings* proclaim the activity or judgment of God:

“The kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe”

(Mark 1:15).

*Eschatological sayings* reflect the view that the future is of primary importance:

“The Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done” (Matt. 16:27).

*Legal sayings* interpret God’s will:

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matt. 7:12).

“*I*” *sayings* are autobiographical:

“I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (Mark 2:17).

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”  
(John 10:10)

**Pronouncement Stories:** short narratives of incidents that provide context for memorable quotations (these sometimes are called “apophthegms” or “paradigms”)

*Correction* stories preserve a saying that corrects a mistaken point of view:

forgive seventy-seven times (Matt. 18:21–22)

whoever is not against us (Mark 9:38–40)

*Commendation* stories preserve a saying that blesses someone or endorses a particular idea or type of behavior:

the confession of Peter (Matt. 16:13–20)

the generous widow (Mark 12:41–44)

*Controversy* stories preserve a saying that explains, resolves, or defines a conflict:

Jesus’s disciples don’t fast (Mark 2:18–22)

paying taxes to Caesar (Mark 12:13–17)

*Biographical* stories recall significant moments in a person's life:

cleansing of the temple (Mark 11:15–17)

*Didactic* stories recall occasions in which a person's teaching was particularly relevant:

the true family of Jesus (Mark 3:31–35)

**Parables:** longer sayings that function as extended figures of speech (similes, metaphors, allegories, etc.)

the parable of the sower in Mark 4:3–8

**Speeches:** extensive reports of discourse that purport to represent what individuals said on particular occasions. Speeches differ from mere “collections of sayings” in that they are more unified thematically and usually evince particular rhetorical strategies.

*Evangelistic* speeches may use deliberative rhetoric to urge the audience to decision or action

the speech of Paul in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16–41)

*Defense* speeches may use judicial rhetoric to refute charges and claim innocence

the speech of Paul in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3–21)

**Commissioning Stories:** narrative accounts of persons or groups receiving calls to participate in the divine plan

Jesus's call of Levi in Mark 2:14

**Miracle Stories:** narrative accounts of people displaying extraordinary power

exorcisms (e.g., Mark 5:1–20)

healing miracles (e.g., Mark 5:25–34)

resuscitations (e.g., Mark 5:21–24, 35–43)

nature miracles (e.g., Mark 4:35–41)

feeding miracles (e.g., Mark 8:1–10)

**Hymns:** words to canticles or songs that may be distinguished by particular metrical patterns or by poetic devices such as alliteration, parallelism, and chiasm

the “Magnificat” in Luke 1:46–55

**Genealogies:** narrative lists that trace the line of descent for persons or groups

genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1:1–17

**Legends:** narrative accounts of persons earning renown or glory

Jesus's entry into Jerusalem (Mark 11:1–10)

**Myths:** narrative accounts of people interacting with supernatural beings

Jesus's temptation (Matt. 4:1–11) and transfiguration (Mark 9:2–8)

### Sitz im Leben: *The Original Setting in Life*

Form critics try to identify the probable *Sitz im Leben* (setting in life) each unit of tradition might have served prior to its incorporation into a larger written document. Among other questions, form critics ask, “Why was this material remembered? What purpose did it serve for those who preserved it?”

Common suggestions for *Sitz im Leben* include:

preaching

catechetics

polemics

discipline

worship

entertainment

### *Reconstruction*

Form critics sometimes try to reconstruct what the units of tradition may have looked like prior to their incorporation into the documents. They distinguish between “tradition” (the material prior to incorporation) and “framework” (the material added to the unit when it was incorporated). Once a pericope is identified as deriving from oral tradition, editorial additions (framework) sometimes can be identified by recognizing parts of the pericope that are atypical for

material of this type (e.g., a unit classified as an “exorcism story” that exhibits features atypical for exorcism stories). Likewise, editorial additions may also be recognized when portions of a pericope serve a *Sitz im Leben* different from that which would be supposed for the stage of oral transmission.

### ***Why Form Critics Do This***

Scholars who are interested in the historical period of Jesus and his earliest followers believe that the reconstructed units of oral tradition are more likely to be representative of this period than is the edited material in the Gospels and Acts.

Scholars who are interested in the history of the early church believe that the reconstructed units of oral tradition offer direct testimony to the concerns of the church during the period before the Gospels and Acts were written.

Scholars who are interested in the concerns of the evangelists believe that the reconstructed units of oral tradition represent sources that these writers used when they composed the Gospels and Acts, and that distinctive interests of the evangelists can be discerned through analysis of their editing of these sources.

### ***Bibliography of Classic Texts***

The three classic studies:

Bultmann, Rudolf. *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*. Translated by John Marsh. 3rd ed. 1921. Reprint, New York: Harper & Row, 1963.

Dibelius, Martin. *From Tradition to Gospel*. Translated by Bertram Lee Woolf. 2nd ed. 1919. Reprint, New York: Scribner, 1965.

Taylor, Vincent. *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition*. 2nd ed. London: MacMillan, 1935.

A helpful modern handbook that includes more extensive bibliography:

Bailey, James L., and Lyle D. VanderBroek. *Literary Forms in the New Testament: A Handbook*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992.