Tradition criticism is the step-child of form and redaction criticism, developed as a method for determining authentic Jesus material in the gospels and studying the history behind a text or idea in that material. “Tradition criticism” stems from the technical German term *Traditions-geschichte*, which might better be translated “tradition history” or “the history of the transmission of the traditions.” Form criticism deals with the identification and development of an individual gospel tradition; tradition criticism studies the use of that tradition in the *Tendenz* of the gospel itself; and redaction criticism studies how each evangelist modified the tradition sources in producing their own compositions.

The precursors to the discipline were D. F. Strauss, who stated that the stories about Jesus were created by the community along the lines of Greco-Roman myths; and W. Wrede, who argued that it was the needs of the community that were read into the developing traditions. The basic theory, however, was developed by the form critics, in particular K. L. Schmidt, M. Dibelius, and R. Bultmann in Germany in the 1920’s and by V. Taylor and R. H. Lightfoot in Britain in the 1930’s and 40’s. By utilizing models developed via the study of ancient folk literature, they posited an oral period of thirty to forty years after the death of Jesus and creation of the community, during which the stories and sayings of Jesus floated as independent units through the preaching and teaching of the church. As oral traditions they followed certain laws of

---

1 David R. Catchpole, “Tradition History,” in *New Testament Interpretation*, ed. I. H. Marshall (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 165, who speaks of “an ongoing process of development in the form and/or meaning of concepts or words or sayings or blocks of material.”


transmission derived from ancient folk literature (see next section) so that the details of the stories and sayings were continually altered, with new details or whole units added on the basis of the kerygmatic needs of the church. In studying the forms of these traditions, critics developed four tasks: analyzing the forms of the stories and sayings, reconstructing the original Sitz im Leben (situation in the life of the church) that accounted for the various details; working backward from the final form to elucidate the original, authentic nucleus of the tradition; and determining the history of the transmission of the tradition. The latter three constitute the discipline of tradition criticism.

1. The Tasks of Tradition Criticism

1.1. Sitz im Leben Analysis

The “life-setting” of gospel pericopae functions at two levels. First, at the macro-level critics have theorized that miracle stories developed in apologetic settings, primarily in Greco-Roman settings vis-à-vis Divine man expectations, while pronouncement stories and parables developed in preaching contexts and sentences of holy law stemmed from church discipline situations. They believe that in many cases the nucleus may have come from the historical Jesus. However, as the stories and sayings floated from house church to house church and were preached in the weekly meeting as well as used in catechetical instruction and proclaimed in the church’s mission to the world, they were expanded to meet the new situations. Moreover, Christian prophets would create new sayings to meet new circumstances, believing them to be inspired by the exalted Christ.

At the micro-level there is also the life-setting of the individual pericope or added details. There the critic asks whether a detail or saying goes back to the historical Jesus or was added by the later church. For form critics this is determined by the form itself, seen in terms of four tendencies or laws of transmission: (1) a tendency for stories/sayings to expand as new material was added (Matt 16:13–23; Mark 8:27–33); (2) a tendency to clarify or qualify the original details (Mark 14:13; Luke 22:8); (3) a tendency to reduce Semitisms from the original (Matt 10:37; Luke 14:26); (4) a tendency to create new sayings to meet new needs in the community (Matt 10:18; Luke 9:62). Critics will take

4 The first three are from Scot McKnight, Interpreting the Synoptic Gospels (Grand