

WHAT IS FORMGESCHICHTE!

MARTIN RIST

"Formgeschichte" (literally, form history or criticism) is a German term for a method of studying the gospels that is increasingly demanding attention. Indeed, it will soon be difficult to find a serious study of the gospels or of the life and teaching of Jesus without running across many references to this method. Many students, no doubt, have been mystified when they have seen this term; others have quite likely considered it something new and foreign. As a matter of fact, the method is not new, for in one way or another it has been used in the study of various parts of the Bible. Gunkel, for example, without using the word applied the method to narrative portions of the Old Testament, and many New Testament scholars, past and present, have applied it to the gospels without realizing that they were using "Formgeschichte." Nor is the method mysterious or difficult to understand, despite the aura of mystery that accompanies the foreign terminology. Unfortunately, the translation of the term into English as "form history" or "form criticism" does not help — it is almost as meaningless to the uninitiated as the German word itself.

What, then, is "Formgeschichte"? How may the student of the gospels, the preacher, the teacher, the layman, understand this word when applied to the gospels? First of all, in answering these questions it is necessary to outline a theory of gospel origins which is basic to the entire method. To begin with, it is generally agreed that Mark, the earliest of our gospels, was composed around A. D. 70, a generation or so after the crucifixion of Jesus. Further, except among Catholic scholars who are controlled by the dogmatic views of the Papal Biblical Commission, it is agreed that Matthew and Luke, based in part upon Mark, were

written towards the end of the first century at the earliest. The Gospel of John, of course, is even later in date. Consequently, to return to Mark, there was a period of approximately forty years between the death of Jesus and the composition of the Gospel of Mark in which there was no written gospel; for, according to our best knowledge not only is Mark the earliest extant gospel, but it is probably the first one ever to be written.

These preliminary and well-known considerations raise several important questions: Of what did the gospel consist in this period between the death of Jesus and the appearance of Mark? What, to use the phraseology of a recent writer, was the gospel before the written gospels? Further, what were the stages in the development of the gospel tradition from the actual words and deeds of Jesus to the composition of the written gospels?

The answer to these questions — which are really aspects of the same question — is not readily given. However, a ready-made answer, which has been accepted by many throughout the centuries down to the present time, was provided by Papias, a Christian writer who flourished a century or more after the death of Jesus. According to his view, the Gospel of Mark was merely the translation and writing down by Mark, the companion and amanuensis of Peter, of the preaching of the apostle, consisting of a more or less connected narration of his recollections of the ministry of Jesus. Indeed, not a few scholars have jumped to the conclusion that the first written gospel, therefore, was but the writing down of a gospel that already existed in oral form. It has been difficult to relinquish this tradition for it solves our questions so beautifully. If, as Papias states, the Gospel of Mark is essentially Peter's

Gospel, no more and no less, not only does it have the sanction of apostolic authority, which is important from the standpoint of dogma, but it also possesses the authority of an eyewitness and of a participant in the events related, which is important from the standpoint of historical criticism.

Unfortunately, however, this satisfying explanation for the origin of Mark rests upon the late and unsupported statement of Papias. On the other hand there are a number of considerations that point towards quite a different solution for our problem. In the first place, it might be noted that the Gospel of Mark makes no claim whatsoever that it is by Peter, nor that it is by an eyewitness. Not that such a claim if made would of necessity be true. For example, both II Peter and the apocryphal Gospel of Peter assert that they are by the apostle, but few scholars accept the Petrine authorship of either. Moreover — and this is important — the entire absence of any such claim in Mark is inexplicable if it is actually Peter's Gospel or that of any other eyewitness. For it should be observed that most works which are the product of eyewitnesses and participants leave us in no doubt concerning their origin. But the Gospel of Mark, as well as Matthew, is wholly silent at this point, whereas the evangelist of Luke explicitly states that he himself was not an eyewitness. Indeed, in his preface he seems to be telling us that none of the narratives which he is acquainted with (including, of course, Mark, a major source) is by an eyewitness, although he assumes that they eventually go back to those who had witnessed the events related.

If Papias was mistaken, what, then, did the gospel consist of before the written gospels appeared? It is now being suggested that the gospel before the gospels was comprised of a large number of short, detached oral traditions concerning what Jesus had said and done. These, originating in various

ways from various sources, were transmitted by word of mouth from one Christian to another, and by him to still others.

Some evidence for this conclusion may be found in the preface of Luke, which, however, gratuitously assumes that all of the traditions ultimately goes back to eyewitnesses. Further evidence may be found in the statement in John 20:30, to the effect that Jesus did many other signs which were not included in this gospel. This seems to indicate the existence of a body of traditional material. Also, the exaggerated statement in John 21:25 that if all the deeds which Jesus had performed were to be written down the world could not contain the books that would be written, points to a similar conclusion. Furthermore, Papias, among others, testifies to the existence of these oral traditions in his day. In fact, he made it his business to question older Christians concerning what they had received from their elders concerning the words and deeds of Jesus, and he recorded these recollections. It should be said that he preferred these oral traditions, the living and abiding voice, to the written gospels.

More to the point, perhaps, not only were these oral gospel traditions in existence, but examples of them have been preserved for us. Paul, for one, in giving his list of resurrection appearances in I Cor. 15 says that he is merely passing on that which he had received from others, no doubt by word of mouth. Likewise, although he says he had received his account of the institution of the Lord's Supper from the Lord himself, we are probably correct in believing that he had likewise received this from the body of more or less isolated oral traditions. Furthermore, he kept both accounts alive, for he notes that he had passed them both on to the Corinthian Christians.

The familiar passage in Acts, "Remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that he himself said, It is more blessed

to give than to receive," quite likely comes from this same body of detached traditions of sayings or incidents. A striking example of the same phenomenon is found in the story of the woman taken in adultery. It is well-known that this incident with its teaching was not originally a part of the Gospel of John. Not only is it unlike the rest of the Gospel, but it is missing from the best and earliest manuscripts. Furthermore, in some late manuscripts it is to be found in Luke, rather than in John. Here, apparently, was an independent incident in the oral gospel tradition which existed and was transmitted by itself until it at length found lodgement in a written gospel.

Other examples are to be found in the early fathers. Clement of Rome cites sayings of Jesus, with the formula, "remember the words of the Lord Jesus," similar to but different from gospel sayings, (13:1 and 46:7, 8), as does Polycarp in his letter to the Philippians, using a similar formula (2:3). Quite likely the teachings in the Didache which are similar to those in the canonical gospels have a similar origin. These are but a small part of the *agrapha*, the stray, detached, unwritten sayings and deeds of Jesus which would have been lost in the mists of oral traditions had they not been preserved in the writings of the church fathers.

This theory of gospel origins may also account in part for the phenomena of doublets and variations in our gospel tradition. For example, there are two similar but differing accounts of a miraculous feeding of a multitude in Mark. May not these both have existed as detached narrations in the oral traditions available to the evangelist? A similar explanation might be advanced for the two recensions of the question concerning the great commandment, one in Mark, the other in Luke; for the quite different narratives of the supernatural birth of Jesus in Matthew and in Luke (not to mention the accounts in the Ascension of

Isaiah, Ignatius, and Justin Martyr); for the two versions of the temptation scene, one in Mark and the other preserved by both Matthew and Luke; and for the differing and in many places contradictory reports of the resurrection appearances as found in Paul, Matthew, Luke, the late endings affixed to Mark, John, and the Gospel according to the Hebrews. To be sure, other explanations for these phenomena might be advanced, but the reconstruction of the origin and development of the gospel tradition as presented in "Formgeschichte" seems to offer the best solution.

Another and important line of evidence for this theory is to be found in an examination of the structure of the Gospel of Mark. It has been realized for some time that this gospel is loosely put together; that it is composed of small units of narration or teaching, each complete in itself, loosely strung together by transition formulas or connectives, such as "And," "And straightway," "And they came," "And he said," "And he went," "And on the morrow," and the like. If these rather obvious connectives or binders are removed the Gospel of Mark falls apart into a large number of small, component units. As one writer has noted, the Gospel of Mark is like a necklace of pearls; when the string is removed the necklace no longer exists, but is at once broken up into a large number of pearls with no particular relation to each other. If the reader will but turn to the Gospel and take a few minutes in blocking out the connectives he can readily test this for himself.

Accordingly, a basic presupposition of "Formgeschichte" is that prior to our written gospels there was no connected, continuous narration of the life and teachings of Jesus in the oral tradition, no oral gospel as such. On the contrary, the oral tradition consisted of a large number of short, detached units, each a brief account of some deed or of some teaching of Jesus (or both). Many of these units disappeared in the

course of time, a number were eventually preserved in the written gospels, and still others are to be found here and there in the writings of the Fathers. Except for the time element this hypothesis does not differ greatly from the accepted views concerning the origins and composition of the narrative portions of the Pentateuch. The Pentateuch, it is agreed, is composed of several documents. These documents, especially J and E, are in turn based upon a number of independent oral traditions which had been handed down. To be sure, the gospel traditions took shape in a much briefer period of time than those of the Pentateuch, but the process was much the same.

Another partial analogy, which may be helpful, comes to mind. There are today a large number of biographies of Abraham Lincoln. These lives, in large measure, go back to the writings of Lincoln and to other contemporary documentary sources. Written sources such as these are by far the most significant for the writing of a biography; it is most unfortunate that we do not possess comparable sources for our study of the life of Jesus. In addition, as is well-known, there arose a considerable amount of lore and oral tradition concerning Abraham Lincoln, what he did and what he said. This consists of brief anecdotes, each one complete in itself, and detached from the rest. Some of these isolated anecdotes, with or without verification, are to be found in the biographies; indeed, their presence adds color and life to the accounts. Moreover, there is at least one book which is nothing more than a collection of these unconnected tales about Lincoln. Further, the oral tradition is not yet dead — for in the Lincoln country stories about Lincoln are still passed around by word of mouth. Every so often an old one is revived, sometimes in an altered form, or a new one comes to light (or, perhaps, is invented).

The serious biographer of Lincoln,

in taking these oral traditions into account, will realize that they may be classified into three categories in so far as their historical validity is concerned. Some, he will conclude, are authentic as they stand, and have undergone little or no modification in the telling and retelling. Others, he will discover, have an authentic origin, but in the course of oral transmission have been "improved," that is, they have been considerably changed or modified. Still others, he will recognize, do not go back to any act of Lincoln nor to any story by him, that is, they are not authentic, but are the product of conscious or unconscious invention.

This, as has been stated above, is but a partial analogy, but it may be helpful in understanding the origin and growth of the gospel tradition. The immediate followers of Jesus treasured and remembered many of his teachings and deeds and related them to others, who in their turn handed them on to still others. These deeds and teachings were not remembered and passed on in any organized or connected manner; instead, they were related and transmitted as more or less isolated deeds and sayings. Apart from being translated from the Aramaic of Jesus and his disciples into the Greek of the Gentile mission no doubt a number of these units of tradition (pericopes, as they are called) may have been transmitted without any serious modification or change. However, other units, although authentic in origin, no doubt were subjected to considerable alteration or "improvement" in the process of telling and retelling. Further, it is highly probable if not certain that the original tradition actually grew in the course of time, with the addition of unauthentic incidents and teachings through the process of conscious or unconscious invention. Further, and this explains the use of the term "Formgeschichte" or Form History, the sayings and incidents tended to follow certain patterns or forms. Some of these forms have

been classified — such as parables, allegories, miracle stories, myths, legends, paradigms, apothegms, maxims, proverbs, pronouncement sayings, and the like. However, some gospel units are of mixed form, and still others defy classification.

One further step should be noted in the gospel making period. There apparently was a natural tendency for sayings or incidents similar in nature or in form to be grouped together. For example, the parables in Mark 4:1-34 may have been gathered into a collection before Mark was written, and were known to the evangelist as a group, and not as separated, detached parables. Likewise, the conflict stories in Mark 2:1-3:6 and 12:13-37, similar as they are in pattern, may have formed a collection prior to the composition of Mark. It is even possible that these collections may in time have been written down and came to the evangelist in written form. Similarly, it is thought that the passion narrative used in Mark had become more or less fixed in the process of oral transmission and had been written down before it was incorporated in the gospel.

Such, then, was the nature of the gospel material available in oral and possibly in part in written form when our evangelist began to write his connected account of the ministry of Jesus in Rome around A. D. 70. He, no doubt, was acquainted with much more tradition than he included in his gospel. It was his task to make a selection from the store of traditions that had come to his notice, retaining some and rejecting others. Unfortunately, we do not know his criteria for selection or rejection. Also, if we may judge from the known practice of other gospel writers in their use of sources, he did not hesitate to edit and rework his material. It is even possible that he introduced some incidents or sayings on his own responsibility. Finally, it was his task to organize these disconnected units into a concerted, continuous nar-

ration — in other words, to compose a gospel from the scattered material on hand. Since most of the incidents and teachings are not specifically dated or localized with reference to the career of Jesus, it was necessary for him to determine their chronological sequence and geographical locality as best he could. In some cases — notably the baptism and the crucifixion — the chronology and place were readily determined. For others he may have been aided by some lingering tradition. However, for still other detached, undated, unlocalized sayings and incidents he was forced to rely upon his own judgment. Was he correct in placing the question concerning the great commandment in Jerusalem during the passion week, or did it occur outside of Jerusalem some time before the passion week as Luke would have us believe? Did some of the conflict stories take place early in the career of Jesus in Galilee (Mk. 2:1-3:6), and the rest in Jerusalem in the last week (Mk. 12:13-37), or did they all take place in Galilee early in his ministry? Or did they all occur in Jerusalem at the close? Possibly, he had no definite knowledge of their precise time and place, and inserted them where he thought best. That no one possessed any better knowledge is evidenced by the fact that in the main, though with some variation in detail, the writers of Matthew, Luke, and John followed his outline of events.

According to modern standards the first evangelist (and his successors, as well) had many deficiencies as a biographer. In no instance has he documented his work; in no place has he given us the origin of a source; at no time does he evaluate his data; never does he weigh probabilities. He has, on the other hand, apparently accepted the traditions which have been handed down to him without much question. This, we may also say, is true of the other evangelists, even of the author of Luke, despite his statement in his preface concerning careful investigation. Further — his gospel, like the

others, is disappointingly brief and sketchy. Certainly, he knew or could have obtained far more information concerning Jesus than he has given us. Six of the short sixteen chapters are devoted to the last week, which was in keeping with the early Christian emphasis upon the death of Jesus. Of the ten remaining chapters a considerable portion is given over to accounts of exorcisms and other miraculous events. What remains is exceedingly limited in scope. However, we should remember that he was not writing for us; his concern was with the Christian community in Rome in his day and with their needs — and no doubt his gospel met their needs.

Despite his failings as a biographer, we should not neglect to praise the author for giving us the first written and connected narration of the ministry of Jesus. This was a stroke of genius on his part; at the same time it was a daring innovation, for no doubt many Christians of his day, as did Papias and others of a later date, regarded this departure from the oral traditions with misgiving and distrust. With his written gospel he set a pattern which was to be followed by others; it is, perhaps, possible that had it not been for this pioneer work there would have been no written gospel at all.

It is only natural that when this theory of gospel origins and growth is presented several questions should be raised: Granted that the theory is correct, how can we determine the historical authenticity and accuracy of a given passage? Is it wholly authentic as it stands? Does it have an authentic base which has been modified in the course of oral transmission? Or is it wholly unauthentic? These are indeed most important questions, for they have a direct bearing upon our knowledge of the life and teaching of Jesus. Briefly, the relative authenticity of a given passage is to be determined by the application of historical methodology to

it. This is a procedure that has been followed by any number of scholars of the past or present who have studied the gospel in detail. Consequently, it may truly be said that in general the method of "Formgeschichte" is neither new nor mysterious. It is one that has been used and accepted for some time.

However, there are certain emphases in the application of historical methodology which makes "Formgeschichte" distinctive, quite apart from its theory of gospel origins and growth. Thus, as has been stated above, there is an emphasis upon the form or pattern of a given pericope. Certain forms are more primitive, and presumably more authentic, than others; there are those that are Jewish, others that are Hellenistic; according to some, the form which has been designated as a paradigm, a self-contained story with its climax in a striking saying, was one that was developed in the Christian missionary preaching. While form is an important factor it should be noted that the pioneers of "Formgeschichte" paid more attention to form and the laws governing it than other scholars, who have been more concerned with the total historical situation, have done. Furthermore, it is often difficult to differentiate form from content. For example, certain "miracle" stories have been classified as such, it would appear, not because they follow a given miracle pattern, but more because they relate the performance of a miracle.

However, it is a mistake to assume that "Formgeschichte" in any case is mostly concerned with the criticism of form; for even those who have greatly emphasized form have at the same time paid more attention to the "Sitz im Leben," that is, to the life or historical situation. Indeed, the criticism of form is but one aspect of the whole problem of historical investigation. Consequently, the historical situation of a given passage or pericope is brought into question. Does it fit into the probable Jewish situation in Palestine in

Jesus' day? does it conform to his own life situation as nearly as that can be determined? If so, the pericope may be early and primitive, indeed, it may represent an authentic act or teaching of Jesus. On the other hand, does it reflect the doctrines, practices, organization, liturgy, persecution, and problems of one kind or another of the developing Christian church? or does it reflect a Graeco-Roman rather than a Jewish background? If so, there are grounds for believing that the account has undergone alteration and change in the passage of time; it may even be decided that it is an interpolation into the tradition, that it, in fact, is unauthentic.

In order to apply this historical criticism to a given unit in the gospels it is necessary to have as thorough a knowledge of the Judaism, the Hellenism, and the Christianity of the first century as the sources will permit. Great progress has been made in these areas in recent years, and a number of excellent studies are now available to the student of the gospels. Unfortunately, far too many studies of the gospels and of the life and teachings of Jesus have been and are being produced without sufficient attention being paid to the historical background. Likewise, much of the adverse criticism of "Formgeschichte" has failed to take these historical factors into consideration. On the other hand, there have been not a few conclusions reached by "Formgeschichte" which, after more careful study, will be modified or discarded. But after all, it will only be through a long process of trial and error, of careful examination and sifting, that the true facts will be uncovered.

A few brief illustrations of the use of "Formgeschichte" may be in order; at least, they will take the discussion out of the realm of theory into that of application. Let us, for example, consider the parable of the Good Samaritan. First of all, it is common knowledge that the parable is a Semitic and

Jewish form, and not Hellenistic. Further, we know that it was in common use among the Jewish teachers of Jesus' day in Palestine in their discussion with one another and also that it was frequently used in the synagogue homilies, usually to explain or illustrate a passage from scripture. A number of the Jewish parables are similar in content, if not in their application, to those in the gospels. On the other hand, not only was the parable a form that was not in common use in the Gentile world, in addition it was seldom used or appreciated by Gentile Christians. Even when they quoted a parable from the gospels, their practice was to allegorize it, as Augustine, for example, allegorized the parable of the Good Samaritan, finding in it the divine scheme of salvation. Accordingly, the form of our pericope, which is a true parable, is Jewish, not Hellenistic or Christian. Further, it might be noted that unlike other gospel parables it is used to illustrate a verse from Scripture, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," in common with most Jewish parables. Further, when we turn from form to content, we see that this fits the Jewish "Sitz im Leben." Although, like other parables it is a fictional narrative, it presents a situation which might have occurred on the road to Jericho. It also conforms quite readily to the social and religious antipathies of Jew and Samaritan in Jesus' day; in no apparent way does it depart from the probable life situation. Hence, both on the basis of form and life situation there is no reason to question the authenticity of this passage; it appears to be an original teaching of Jesus, illustrating a passage from Scripture, which has been translated into Greek and preserved in a gospel written for Gentile Christians.

However, the so-called parable of the Vineyard and the Husbandman in Mark 12:1-12 shows evidences of modification in the course of transmission. Once a true parable, whose original applica-

tion by Jesus has been lost, it has been turned into an allegory. Accordingly, its present form indicates that it had undergone some alteration from the original. When we turn from form to its content and application, we see that it fits far better into the Christology of the early church than it does into the teaching of Jesus himself. This is also true of its animosity towards the Jews, with their displacement in the divine economy by others (i. e. Christians). Anti-Semitism of this type is characteristic of early Christianity; it can hardly be considered to represent the attitude of Jesus himself. Furthermore, the statement "he will come and destroy the husbandman" may be an allusion to the destruction (or impending destruction) of Jerusalem and the end of the Jewish nation in A. D. 70. Accordingly, while this originally may have been a parable spoken by Jesus, whose original application was lost, the tests of "Formgeschichte" show that in form and content it probably has been radically altered during the period of oral transmission.

Turning to another example, let us consider the allegory of the Vine and the Branches in John 15. This is not a parable; neither has it been derived from a parable. On the contrary, it is a pure allegory in form. While we must not dismiss it solely on these grounds—for it is conceivable that Jesus may have used the allegory at times instead of the parable—nevertheless we know that this form was more Gentile, more Hellenistic, than Jewish; that it was a pattern far more likely to be used by some Christian in the Gentile Mission than by Jesus himself. When we turn to the content of this passage, we see that it too represents the historical situation in the early church rather than that of Jesus. It is, it will be noted, highly Christological in its teaching, with a highly developed mystical relationship between Jesus and his church. The prophecy of persecution may point to a situation of perse-

cution in the early church; certainly the promise of the Comforter reflects a later time when the primitive expectation of the immediate return of Christ had been subjected to modifications. It is difficult, indeed, to see how this passage can be fitted into the lifetime of Jesus himself.

In these three passages just cited we have examples of each of the three possibilities relating to authenticity: the first, the parable of the Good Samaritan, is probably authentic as it stands; the second, the so-called parable of the Vineyard and the Husbandman may well have been authentic in origin, but in the course of oral tradition it has been altered both as to form and content, and the original application of the parable by Jesus has been lost; as for the third, the allegory of the Vine and the Branches, in both form and content it seems to be the product of developing Christianity with little or no claims to authenticity.

An illustration of a different kind is to be found in the incident of the tribute money in Mark 12:13-17. As to form, it has been classified as an apothegm or paradigm, that is to say, as an incident which culminates in a striking teaching. According to some, this particular form was developed by the Christian missionaries to be used as vivid and dramatic illustrations in their sermons. Consequently, if this criterion is correct, it is possible that the original form of the incident has been modified in the process of transmission. As to content, the pericope itself may well have been based upon an authentic incident. The Jews, a conquered people, strongly resented the taxes and tributes exacted by Rome. Furthermore, that they should have raised such a question with a religious teacher is more than likely. As for the teaching by Jesus concerning the payment of this tribute, it is quite Jewish in character, in fact, it corresponds very closely to the Pharisaic attitude towards Rome. However, there is one

element in the narration that appears to be an interpolation; for the exhibition of the denarius, as related in the passage, with the pointed reference to its image and to its inscription is open to serious question. According to ingrained Jewish religious views, both the image and the inscription of this coin were idolatrous, and to display such a coin and to call attention to its idolatrous image and inscription was to be guilty of the great sin of idolatry. It is difficult to believe that Jesus, who in the main was scrupulous in his observance of Jewish religious customs, would have deliberately violated the rules concerning idolatry in such a flagrant and open way. More probably, as has been suggested above, the display of the denarius was added to the incident — in part for its dramatic effect — in the retelling of the narrative by a Gentile Christian who was unaware of its inappropriateness. That this is so is indicated by a version of the incident preserved in a papyrus fragment of an early gospel, now in the possession of the British Museum, in which there is no mention of the coin, to say nothing of its display. It may be that the account in this uncanonical gospel is the more original and authentic than that preserved in Mark.

It is, of course, difficult and in most cases impossible to trace the various stages in the development of the oral tradition with any degree of certainty. However, the way in which the written tradition concerning the baptism of Jesus underwent alterations is illustrative of the process in the oral tradition. It must be admitted that the oral tradition was more fluid and more easily changed than the written, which was more fixed. Accordingly, it is in order to use this development in the written tradition concerning the baptism as an illustration of the way in which the oral traditions were modified.

First of all, we learn in Mark that John's baptism was a baptism of re-

pentence for the remission of sins, and that those who were baptized by him in the River Jordan confessed their sins. The Gospel account then depicts the baptism of Jesus by John, without any indication that it was a different kind of baptism from that of the others. If we accept the story as it stands, Jesus, like the rest, received John's baptism of repentance for the remission of sins without any question, confessing his sins as he was baptized. To be sure, the supernatural events following his baptisms are unique.

Quite naturally, in view of the developing Christian doctrine concerning the sinlessness of Jesus the Marcan account of his baptism was modified in the course of the written tradition. For example, Luke omits any reference to the confession of sins by the baptized, and in order to remove any doubt concerning Jesus he depicts him as praying (not confessing) during the rite.

In Matthew, while the statement concerning the confession of sins is retained, the view that John's baptism was for the remission of sins is omitted. Furthermore, as Jesus approaches to be baptized a significant dialogue is introduced. John attempts to prevent Jesus from becoming baptized, but Jesus replies that he should permit it, "For thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness." By this change the problem of Jesus accepting a baptism for the remission of sins is delicately avoided, if not denied.

In the uncanonical but early Gospel, according to the Hebrews, we are told that Mary and the brothers of Jesus said to him, "John the Baptist is baptizing for the forgiveness of sins; let us go and be baptized by him." Jesus, however, in conformity to Christian doctrine is made to answer by asking, "What sin have I committed that I should be baptized by him? Unless, indeed this very word I have spoken be a sin of ignorance." Here again, as in Matthew, the introduction of a dialogue saves the situation.

In John the problem is avoided by omission, for the most part. There is no indication in this Gospel that John is a preacher of repentance, or that his baptism is a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. Furthermore, the actual baptism of Jesus is left out of the account; the Baptist merely alludes to it in retrospect. Thus the true nature of John's mission and his baptism is obscured, and the difficulties involved in the baptism of Jesus from the standpoint of doctrine are removed.

A sacramental explanation for the baptism of Jesus is given in another source, the letter of Ignatius to the Ephesians, written at the beginning of the second century. Ignatius states that Jesus submitted himself to baptism "in order to purify the water," that is, it would seem, through the baptism of Jesus water was given sacramental efficacy for use in Christian baptism.

Thus we observe how in the written tradition of the baptism of Jesus, a tradition that was relatively more fixed than the oral could possibly be, a number of changes were made in conformity with changes in Christian belief. In consequence, we are justified in assuming that even greater changes and alterations may have been made in this and in other gospel incidents in the course of the more fluid oral transmission. Just what these modifications were is a problem which "Formgeschichte" has attempted to solve.

Let us, for example, enter into some speculation concerning the account of the baptism of Jesus by John prior to its appearance in the Gospel of Mark. That Jesus actually was baptized by John is highly probable. The Christian traditions are almost unanimous in believing that the ministry of Jesus began with this baptism, even though the fact has caused the writers a considerable amount of embarrassment. That John was a preacher of righteousness, as represented in the gospels, is attested by an independent source, the

Jewish writer Josephus. That the remission of sins was effected in a sacramental manner through baptism may be questioned, for Josephus assures us that baptism did not effect the remission of sins, but was merely a sign that the soul was purified beforehand by righteousness. Hence, it is possible that the sacramental nature of Christian baptism (as we find it in Paul and other sources) has been introduced into the baptism of John in the course of the oral transmission.

We may also raise certain questions concerning the events following the baptism, as related in Mark: Was it followed by a theophany? were the heavens rent asunder? did the Holy Spirit descend as a dove? and was a voice from heaven heard saying, "Thou art my beloved son, in thee I am well pleased?" Or were these supernatural phenomena introduced into the account of the baptism in the course of the oral tradition to validate certain important Christian doctrines concerning the prophetic call of Jesus, his inspiration by the Holy Spirit, and his adoption as the Son of God? These questions may and perhaps should be raised — but lacking documentary evidence they cannot be answered unequivocally. For while we can trace quite accurately the growth of the written tradition concerning the baptism of Jesus, as has been shown above, there is much uncertainty in any reconstruction of the various stages in the oral tradition before the time of the written gospels.

It is hoped that this brief survey of "Formgeschichte," followed by a few illustrations, will assist in an understanding of the method, and will remove some of the mystery with which it has been associated. That this method will be applied to the gospels more widely and thoroughly in the future than in the past cannot be doubted. Catholic scholars, even, are taking cognizance of it, although to be sure they do not accept the basic presupposition

concerning the formation of the gospels, the method, or its implications.

The chief implication, it appears, is that we will have to rewrite the life of Jesus, for many of the deeds and teachings which have been generally accepted as authentic are now being brought into serious question. As a result, while we know too little about Jesus of Nazareth as it is, these new studies will restrict the knowledge which we thought we possessed. From this standpoint, so many will say, "Formgeschichte" is negative and destructive. On the other hand, some others will say, for the Christian Church to build itself upon data concerning the life and teaching of Jesus which may be unauthentic, unhistorical, is to be guilty of the sin of obscurantism. A generation and more ago Old Testa-

ment scholars who were applying a method of investigation very similar to "Formgeschichte" to Genesis were likewise accused of being negative and destructive. However, despite these charges they persisted in their quest for the facts. In time their work has come to be generally accepted, and is being considered a positive contribution to the growth of the Christian religion; for if the Church were to hold to the misconceptions in Genesis concerning the origin of the created world and of man it would be engaged in a bitter struggle with science. Consequently, it may be that in time the contributions of "Formgeschichte," in so far as they free the Christian religion from misinformation and misconceptions, will be considered positive and valuable in their nature.

THOUGHTS WHILE THINKING

Aristotle was one of the great thinkers of ancient times. In his "Ethics," he developed the principle called "The Golden Mean." Virtue, according to him, is always the mean between extremes. Bravery is to be found midway on a continuum between cowardice on the one end and rashness on the other. This principle, which may well be renamed The Principle of Limited Applicability, is needed today. It means, briefly, that there are definite and presumably determinable limits beyond which a practice or idea ceases to be useful, efficient or true.

The trend in recent philosophical and ethical thought has been toward integration, unification, mutuality, synthesis and organization. The goal is the organization of every individual into some group, and the organization of subgroups into larger groups until every person has been integrated into an all-inclusive group. This is based upon the assumption that complete and final integration is the highest ideal possible to man. When one has granted the value in such integration, he must recognize that there are quite specific limitations to this concept. In the political fields, we have seen the effects of too much integration in such lands as Italy and Germany. We need integration in political life, but when integration is carried beyond a given point, we have lost some other important values — the values found in individualism, in freedom, and in detachment. Let us have integration, but within limits, lest we lose the values of individual integrity and freedom.