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## TRADITION AND SCRIPTURE IN THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH\*

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IT was on January 2, 1880 that a few scholars met in the study of Professor Philip Schaff and agreed "to form a Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis for the purpose of promoting a thorough study of the Scriptures by the reading and discussion of original papers." In June of that same year the first organizational meeting was held, with eighteen in attendance out of the thirty-five nominated for membership.<sup>1</sup> During the ensuing century of growth and service, much academic water has gone under the bridge and, as they say, many academic bridges have gone under the water. Perceptive members now say that the Society has reached a turning point, when "our fundamental methodologies for interpreting biblical texts" are in question and when even "the historical-critical method, in various forms the dominant *modus operandi* since the Enlightenment, is under fire from many directions."<sup>2</sup> An anniversary should be a time for sober reflection on some of the fundamental issues that have been with us throughout our history, although they may not have surfaced to conscious attention very often owing to professional preoccupation with restricted areas of interest.

The history of biblical studies in this Society must be understood not only in the context of forces at work on the North American scene but also in the perspective of the inheritance from Europe, particularly Germany. In the European context, a major turning point was reached approximately a century before the founding of this Society, when Johann Philipp Gabler delivered his inaugural address at the University

\* The Presidential Address delivered 6 November 1980, at the centennial meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, held at the Loews Anatole, Dallas, Texas.

<sup>1</sup> E. W. Saunders, "A Century of Service to American Biblical Scholarship," *BCSR* 11 (1980) 69-72. By contrast, at the 1980 annual meeting the Executive Secretary reported 4931 members with 1221 in attendance.

<sup>2</sup> P. J. Achtemeier and G. M. Tucker, "Biblical Studies: The State of the Discipline," *BCSR* 11 (1980) 73.

of Altdorf. His address, given in the year 1787, dealt with a methodological question: *De iusto discrimine theologiae biblicae et dogmaticae regundisque recte utriusque finibus* ("A Discourse on the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Boundaries to be Drawn for Each"). He believed that the prevalent confusion of his day, resulting from the ascription of "individual frivolous opinions" to biblical writers, could be overcome if there were methodological clarity regarding the distinction between the two disciplines. "Biblical theology," he said in a memorable statement, "is historical in nature and transmits what the sacred writers thought about the things of God." It must precede and underlie doctrinal theology. "On the other hand," he insisted, "dogmatic theology is didactic in nature and transmits the philosophizing of a particular theologian concerning Godly things in terms of his own mode of thinking, historical situation, denomination and school."<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, Gabler's important inaugural is much better known by name than by content, as Rudolf Smend observes.<sup>4</sup> Gabler did not argue that the two disciplines, biblical theology and doctrinal theology, should be divorced and go their separate ways. Nor did he advocate that the biblical theologian should draw a line of separation between the historical witness of the scriptures and their theological meaning. For him the central issue was the theological meaning of the texts. He only insisted that the primary task of the biblical theologian is to elucidate the theological meaning that is concealed in the concrete and particular texts. Biblical theologians are governed by the historical givenness of the biblical texts and should not intrude into exegesis current concerns or fashions of thought. Doctrinal theologians, on the other hand, must rely on the work of the biblical theologians but they are much freer to engage in theological construction in terms of their own insights, the situation of their time, the philosophical options available, a confessional tradition, and so on.

In retrospect it can be seen that Gabler's program, which he never followed through completely, was a vast oversimplification and that it rested on the presuppositions of the Enlightenment. His distinction based on methodology eventually came to be a separation between two disciplines, as it is to this day. Liberated from doctrinal controls and ecclesiastical management, biblical studies were pursued in the liberal

<sup>3</sup> Translation by K. Froehlich (unpublished manuscript: Speer Library, Princeton Theological Seminary). The text of Gabler's address is found in John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Eldredge, "J. P. Gabler and the Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality," *SJT* 33(1980) 133-58.

<sup>4</sup> R. Smend, "Johann Philipp Gablers Begründung der biblischen Theologie," *EvT* 22 (1962) 345-57. The reference is on p. 345.

atmosphere of *academia*, where historical methodology was refined and the larger theological questions were often ignored in the interests of specialization. This is not the place to explore the fateful implications of the separation between biblical theology and doctrinal theology or to consider complaints about the "tuition" that the university has charged.<sup>5</sup> Suffice it to say that since Gabler's day there has been wide agreement that biblical theology is, in some sense, historical in nature.

During the century covered by the history of this Society it has been assumed by critical scholars that in order to take seriously the historical character of the texts one must explore their prehistory as reflected in the various layers of tradition that emerge under historical analysis. In the past many scholars, under the influence of Julius Wellhausen, have perceived the prior stages from a strictly literary point of view, concentrating on the analysis of literary sources, the separation of accretions, and the redaction of the materials into composite wholes. More recently scholars, under the influence of the pioneer of form criticism, Hermann Gunkel, have sought to trace the history of biblical texts behind the compositional stages into the period of oral transmission and to understand how the evolving traditions sprang up within, and were related to, concrete situations in the life of the people. The end result of these studies, if successfully carried out, would be a history of literature from the earliest stages of oral tradition through various compositional stages to the final form of scripture as we have received it.

In all of this, there has been fairly general agreement (complete agreement among scholars is not an historical possibility!) that the biblical scholar must take into account the whole historical, or perhaps I should say *traditio*-historical, development that led from tradition to scripture. The problem arises when one attempts to become a biblical theologian. Granted that we have to start with the biblical texts that we have received—with scripture—the question is whether it is theologically significant to venture into the prehistory that lies behind the final text. Do such explorations have only the limited value of helping us to understand the genesis and development of the traditions which led toward the final scriptural composition? Or do the precompositional levels have theological meanings of their own which not only need to be heard in their own right in the final text but which, in some cases, may be crucial for interpretation?

If I am not mistaken, this is where a major debate is today. Disagreement is over the question as to whether primary theological emphasis should be placed on the tradition *process* or on the final *result* of the process, scripture.

<sup>5</sup> See the forceful essay by P. S. Minear, "Ecumenical Theology—Profession or Vocation?" *TToday* 32 (1976) 66–73; the "tuition" is discussed on pp. 66–69; see also the ensuing "Symposium on Biblical Criticism," *TToday* 33 (1977) 354–67.

### I. *The Traditio-historical Process*

Consider first the understanding of the relation between tradition and scripture that is advocated by historians of tradition. It was Gerhard von Rad who took with theological seriousness the new kind of *Einleitung* that emerged in the wake of Gunkel's pathbreaking work in form criticism and the history of traditions. It is significant that the first volume of his *Old Testament Theology* appeared with the sub-title, *Die Theologie der geschichtlichen Ueberlieferungen Israels* (1957): *Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*. What von Rad meant by "history" was not altogether clear, but he did sponsor a subtle theological shift from "history" (in the usual sense, e.g., History of Israel) to traditions about history. Indeed, he advocated a new meaning for the word *Heilsgeschichte* (the history or story of God's saving actions), a redefinition that must have disturbed the shades of J. C. K. von Hofmann and his successors. For von Rad the key to *Heilsgeschichte* is *Ueberlieferungsgeschichte*, that is, the history of the transmission of traditions antedating the biblical texts in their final form.

In his bold reliance on a traditio-historical approach von Rad sought to do justice to the narrative mode of expression which, he maintained, characterized Israel's faith from the very first. Since he was basically concerned with theological method, he probably would not have been upset by subsequent objections that his parade examples of the nuclear story ("The Little Historical Credo") come from relatively late stages of tradition. He could have given more attention to early poetic formulations, e.g., the Song of the Sea (Exod 15:1-11). His point was that Israel's faith, at whatever level of tradition, is characteristically narrative in style and therefore, as he said in a memorable line, "event has priority over logos."<sup>6</sup> The way to do Old Testament theology is to follow Israel's manner of *Nacherzählen*, that is, "retelling" the story in ever-new historical situations in which the people found themselves in their movement toward the horizon of God's purpose. When the crust of scripture (say, the Hexateuch) is beaten back into the batter, so to speak, we find this dynamic movement of a people that reappropriated her traditions creatively. The evidence for this is found in the multi-layered levels of the biblical texts, their so-called "depth dimension," which the scholar may expose by historical investigation.

Traditio-historical theologians go even further than von Rad by emphasizing the *process* (a good Hegelian term!) of transmission of traditions—the "traditioning process," as it is sometimes called—and thereby open the door for philosophical conversation. This is evident in

<sup>6</sup> *Old Testament Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 1.116.

the essays of a number of the contributors to the international symposium conducted by Douglas A. Knight, *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament*, for instance the essay by Hartmut Gese on "Tradition and Biblical Theology."<sup>7</sup> Moreover, James Sanders forcefully champions an approach, one that is also influenced by midrashic exegesis, which he denominates "canonical criticism." In various writings, beginning with his *Torah and Canon* (1972), he maintains that the Bible reflects "an existential process" in which people, at various times and in divers circles, found life-giving value in inherited traditions as they coped with the needs of their historical situation. The growth and development of the literature, according to his view which allows for sociological method, disclose a community on the move, searching for an understanding of its identity and the identity of God and finding in the received traditions both stability and adaptability.<sup>8</sup>

A similar view is advocated by Paul Hanson in his programmatic essay, *Dynamic Transcendence*. He also endeavors to "penetrate behind a surface reading" of biblical texts in order to perceive "the lively process which gave rise to the biblical community's confessions." If we shift our emphasis from "history" to tradition history, and notice the complex character of the appropriation of tradition in any given historical situation, it is possible, he maintains, to understand "the acts of God" in a more satisfactory way. The "lively process" reflected in scripture is one that developed through the years as the community perceived that the new things God did were in keeping with "the creative and redemptive patterns of the past." The fact that "the entire heritage must be related to contemporary experience in a dialectical process of criticism and renewal" not only helps us to understand biblical texts theologically but to find our place in the same unfolding process today.<sup>9</sup>

The traditio-historical approach provides a very attractive view of the biblical community of faith as a people on the way, a "pilgrim people" that was not allowed to settle down in any fixed formulations of the heritage but was constantly summoned into a new understanding of its place in the unfolding drama of the Bible. However, the question arises—and this question has inescapable theological force—as to what

<sup>7</sup> D. A. Knight, (ed.), *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977). See my review essay in *RelSRev* 6 (1980) 104–10.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, his essay in the *Festschrift* for G. E. Wright, *Magnalia Dei* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), "Adaptable for Life: The Nature and Function of the Canon," 531–60; also "Biblical Criticism and the Bible as Canon," *USQR* 32 (1977) 157–65.

<sup>9</sup> *Dynamic Transcendence: The Correlation of Confessional Heritage and Contemporary Experience in a Biblical Model of Divine Activity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978); see his chart of an "event" on p. 34; also his essay, "The Theological Significance of Contradiction within the Book of the Covenant," in *Canon and Authority* (ed. G. W. Coats and B. O. Long; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 110–31.

happens in the transition from tradition to scripture. That transition, it should be noted, did not occur only at the end of the whole process, at the stage of canonical scripture, but was evident at various stages along the way when words that may have been spoken orally in concrete situations became fixed in writing and thus entered the public domain, where they transcended the living situation in which they once functioned. Isaiah's deposit of his spoken words in writing to be treasured among his disciples (Isa 8:16) or Jeremiah's dictation of his oracles to Baruch (Jeremiah 36) provide two glimpses of the transition which took place at various points and in various ways in the history of traditions.

It is to the credit of traditio-historical theologians that they face squarely the problem of the relation between the spoken and the written word, between oral tradition and literature. As an example, take the illuminating essay by Roger Lapointe on "Tradition and Language: The Import of Oral Expression."<sup>10</sup> Like others who belong to this school of interpretation, he too admits the difficulty of penetrating the traditioning process, for our only access to this prehistory is through the final scriptural formulations, and therefore we are led into a realm of uncertainty and hypothetical reconstruction. Can biblical theology, if it intends to be historical in nature, flourish in this shadowy realm? The thing that intrigues me about this essay is that the author, conscious of the Achilles' Heel of traditio-historical investigation, explores the question at the level of linguistics: the relation between the spoken and the written word. Primacy, Lapointe argues, belongs to "orality." A living language is one in which the mode of communication is from subject to subject and in which linguistic meaning is given and perceived in a human situation. It follows, then, that written language is relatively inferior: "Written language seems to be a simple transcription of oral language and is as such secondary and relatively accidental."<sup>11</sup> A fateful step was taken when the spoken word, inseparably related to a human situation (*Sitz im Leben*), became the written word and was thereby severed from the concrete situation in which it functioned meaningfully. This transition, says Lapointe in a vivid figure of speech which an OT theologian can hardly ignore, was "a passage probably as important as the passage through the Sea of Reeds."<sup>12</sup> Albert B. Lord, in his reassessment of Homeric literature, also drew attention to the sharp discontinuity introduced when a tradition that was formulated orally was reduced to writing.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> In Knight, *Tradition and Theology*, 125-42.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>13</sup> A. B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1964) 124-38. See also D. A. Knight, *Rediscovering the Traditions of Israel* (Missoula: Scholars, 1975) 390-91.

Once the matter is stated this way, it is understandable that scholars have sought to go beyond the sacred page and to penetrate the orality of language. The form critical method offered a way to reach into the prehistory of the text, when words were spoken orally and in relation to a concrete human situation, a *Sitz im Leben*. In the spirit of romanticism, Gunkel and his followers (including von Rad) even insisted that the truly creative period of tradition was the oral period, when the word functioned in situations typical of folk life, such as birth, victory in war, cultic celebration, mourning at death, and so on. Yet what happens to human speech when it undergoes the transition from the oral to the written word? (I tremble before this question when I consider the relation between what I say in lectures and what my students take down in notes!) Lapointe described the shift from the oral to the written word as a “passage” as crucial as the passage through the Sea of Reeds—a passage that marked the transition from the old to the new, from a band of slaves to a people with identity. Fixation in writing is a momentous event, for the written product is not necessarily identical with the oral word that it replaces. Indeed, there *is* a profound difference; but one should guard against the romantic notion that the oral word is superior. There are poets who would maintain that the written word, carefully chiseled and nuanced, is the best vehicle for communicating the transcendent meaning of human life. This is true, for instance, of the poem of the Nobel Prize winning poet, Vicente Aleixandre, on “The Old Man Moses” who, from a distance, catches a glimpse of the future that others will inherit.<sup>14</sup> Poetry of this kind is so freighted with verbal power, especially in the original Spanish, that it requires faithful transmission and transcription.

It is striking that so much of the literature of the OT is in poetic form: early traditions like the Song of the Sea, much of the prophetic corpus, the wisdom poetry of Job, etc. The story teller is much freer to expand and improvise than is the poet. To be sure, the “Singer of Tales” (to refer to the title of Albert Lord’s book) is bound by the story line, uses fixed formulaic expressions, and speaks in rhetorical cadences; yet each telling of the story is the singing of “a new song” with its audience response. But a poem is not so susceptible to change, owing to its form, its rhythm (if not meter), its unique collocation of words, and its metaphor. It may be marred in transmission, but it requires transmission in its fixed literary form. From a very early period of Israel these two types of tradition undoubtedly coexisted: story material subject to paraenetic elaboration and fixed poetic texts

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in *The New York Times* (Oct. 7, 1977) from “Roots and Wings,” an anthology of Spanish poetry, ed. H. St. Martin.

(either memorized or written). By the time we reach the poems of so-called Second Isaiah (Isaiah 40–55), we are dealing with the finest poetic art of Israel.

It is significant that James Muilenburg, who from the very beginning of his scholarly career devoted his attention to the poetry of Second Isaiah and whose last work was an unpublished commentary on the first part of the book of Jeremiah (chaps. 1–20) which contains poetry of great power, delivered his presidential address to this society on the subject “Form Criticism and Beyond.” Contrary to recent interpretation of the address, my esteemed teacher did not advocate moving “beyond form criticism” into a purely literary or rhetorical study of biblical texts. He concluded his address by saying: “We affirm the necessity of form criticism (and that demands appropriate exploration of the prehistory of the text); but we also lay claim to the legitimacy of what we have called rhetorical criticism (and that requires attention to the text itself: its own integrity, its dramatic structure, and its stylistic features).”<sup>15</sup> In his judgment, it was not a sharp either/or. There are many parts of scripture, both narrative and poetic, which may be illumined by form criticism. For traditions when written down still bear the *stigmata* of the spoken word in its concrete situations. As Lapointe observes, scripture is stamped with the impression of “referents and situations without which it would make no real sense.”<sup>16</sup> And these *stigmata* may be theologically significant in the interpretation of what comes to us in final form as scripture.

## II. *The Final Scriptural Formulation*

We turn now to a second approach which has been claiming attention more and more in recent years. According to this view, it is the final scriptural formulation, not the traditio-historical process leading to it, which provides the basis for biblical theology.

Karl Barth was a leading advocate of this view. He recognized that excursions into the prehistory of the text have a limited value and interest. But these ventures should be bracketed when one interprets biblical literature theologically for the community of faith. Barth’s scriptural approach is set forth in an excursus on “the history of the spies whom Moses sent to investigate the promised land” related in Numbers 13–14.<sup>17</sup> He recognizes that it is possible to make certain

<sup>15</sup> J. Muilenburg, “Form Criticism and Beyond,” *JBL* 88 (1969) 1–18. See my essay, “The New Frontier of Rhetorical Criticism,” in *Rhetorical Criticism: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1974) ix–xviii.

<sup>16</sup> Knight, *Tradition and Theology*, 140.

<sup>17</sup> K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, 478–83. See further R. Smend, “Nachkritische Schriftauslegung,” in *PARRHESIA: Karl Barth zum achtzigsten Geburtstag* (Zurich: EVZ, 1966) 215–37.

distinctions hypothetically, that is, “distinctions between that which can be historically proved, that which has the character of saga, and that which has been consciously fashioned, or invented, in a later synthetic view.” But these distinctions take us away from the received text. To be sure, we have here a “history,” but “the term ‘history’ is to be understood in its older and naive significance in which (irrespective of the distinctions just mentioned) it denoted a story which is received and handed down in a definite kerygmatic sense.” He goes on to say: “To do justice to this sense, we must either not have asked at all concerning these distinctions, or have ceased to do so. In other words, we must still, or again, read these histories in their unity and totality. It is only then that they can say what they are trying to say.”

It would probably be a misreading of Barth to suppose that his emphasis on the final text of the biblical narrative demands ignoring the prehistory of the text. He admits that the story contains “a ‘historical’ element in the stricter sense,” that is, the persons, cities, localities, ventures reported. He admits too that the story contains elements of saga, e.g., the depiction of the two men carrying the branch of grapes or the giants who inhabited the land. And further, he says something that sounds like traditio-historical “actualization” (*Vergegenwärtigung*): the story of Israel’s transition from the wilderness to the promised land was a story that came alive “at a later period—perhaps at the time of the Exile when it was confronted by a dangerous return to its own land.” Hence the story displays “the element which has its origin in the synthetic or composite view (fusing past and present almost into one) which is so distinctive a feature of historical writings in Old and New Testament alike.” Nevertheless, when all these critical distinctions have been made, he observes, “they can be pushed again into the background and the whole can be read (with this tested and critical naivete) as the totality it professes to be.” This is what Rudolf Smend, in an essay in tribute to Barth on “post-critical exegesis,” calls “the second naivete.”<sup>18</sup>

Barth’s interpreters know that he was not a literalist. He took seriously the humanity of scripture and emphasized its rich diversity. His view, however, clearly stands in opposition to the traditio-historical approach as a theological enterprise. Although we may gain some profit from understanding the ongoing history that is reflected in the multi-layered biblical texts, this is not the basis for biblical theology. The question of the origin, or dynamic, of the tradition process is not theologically significant, nor is it theologically necessary to know historical and sociological realities present at various stages. Furthermore, the historicist attempt to deal with historical events or historical

<sup>18</sup> Essay in *PARRHESIA*, 236.

referents is theologically irrelevant. In fact, this “historicist sense,” as Barth puts it in another context, is “a ridiculous and middle-class habit of the modern Western mind which is extremely phantastic in its chronic lack of imaginative phantasy.”<sup>19</sup> The theological interpreter is concerned with the final form of the tradition: scripture as read within the community of faith. It takes religious imagination and the power of the Holy Spirit to enter into and appreciate the “genuine history” to which the Bible bears witness—a history in which “the ‘historical’ and ‘non-historical’ accompany each other and belong together” and which, in the last analysis, is “non-historical” in the sense that it transcends our creaturely historical distinctions and is seen in its immediacy to God.

This is not the place to go further into the enigma of what Barth means by “history,” especially history that is non-historical. There are, however, other movements in both philosophy and literature which, in their own way, emphasize the final text of a writing. Roland M. Frye, an advocate of the New Literary Criticism, has been insisting for some time that biblical scholars should take a leaf from the notebook of secular literary critics who have learned the folly of excursions into the prehistory of a text. In the study of Shakespeare, he points out, the “disintegrators” who tried to explore the precompositional stages (“strata belonging to different dates”) have not led closer to “the authorial originals” but have actually “substituted intricate new understandings which, however subjectively satisfying for a time, have eventually been recognized as learned illusions.”<sup>20</sup> And Hans Frei, in his important book on *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*—a work which James Barr cites favorably as evidence that biblical theology should shift from “history” to “story”—maintains that the biblical narrative which moves from creation to consummation is not “historical” but “history-like.”<sup>21</sup> He compares the Bible to a realistic novel in which the identity of the characters and the intention of the novel are given in the story itself. It makes no sense theologically to look behind the scenes, so to speak, and inquire into a historicity or intentionality outside of the linguistic world of the narrative—in the mind of the author or in the social setting of the time of composition. “The story is the meaning.” Attempts to go beyond the story in search of “historical referents” or precompositional stages violate the meaning that is given narratively.

At first glance it seems that Brevard Childs, in his monumental *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, says something similar in

<sup>19</sup> *Church Dogmatics* III/1, 81.

<sup>20</sup> R. M. Frye, “Literary Criticism and Gospel Criticism,” *TToday* 36 (1979) 207–19.

<sup>21</sup> H. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University, 1974); see J. Barr, “Story and History in Biblical Theology,” *JR* 56 (1976) 1–17.

his insistence that the final shape of the text is the basis for theological understanding. In his chapter on the book of Exodus he observes that historical-critical study has shown us the tremendous difficulties that beset a “quest for the historical Moses.” “Yet it remains an unexplored challenge,” he goes on to say, “whether or not one can speak meaningfully of a ‘canonical Moses,’ by which one would mean a theological profile of Moses which would do justice to his place within the divine economy.”<sup>22</sup> I believe, however, that Childs does not intend “to sever the cord of any historical referential reading of the Bible”; he only insists that the attempt to found theology on “a critical, reconstructed historical sequence” is difficult, if not impossible.<sup>23</sup>

More intriguing is the question of how much Childs is influenced by Karl Barth, under whom he studied systematic theology and, like Rudolf Smend, experienced the lure of “post-critical interpretation.”<sup>24</sup> I suspect that in Childs’s case “the second naivete” (to my knowledge he does not use this language) is different. When it comes to the study of the genesis of the tradition, he stands firmly in the critical school of scholarship. Indeed, he maintains that the various modes of criticism (source, form, tradition, rhetorical, redaction) can help to bring the features of the final text into sharper focus than before. Nevertheless, he maintains that historical criticism in its various modes fails to deal adequately with the theological meaning of *scripture*, that is, the final canonical shape of the various books of the canon. At the final stage of canonicity when the traditions were shaped by usage in the community of faith, scripture reached a transhistorical level—beyond the concrete actualities of the historical times of, say, the Exodus, or Hosea, or so-called Second Isaiah. At this scriptural level, the historical critical method, which seeks to lead us into the prehistory of the text, is no longer applicable and the biblical theologian should move into “post-critical” interpretation. For it is through the canonical contours of the scriptures in their rich diversity that the community of faith hears the word of God.<sup>25</sup>

### III. *Tradition and Scripture*

Here, then, are two radically different approaches to the task of biblical theology. In the case of the traditio-historical approach, the emphasis falls on the theological significance of the movement from

<sup>22</sup> *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 178.

<sup>23</sup> Letter dated April 27, 1980.

<sup>24</sup> See R. Smend, “Questions about the Importance of the Canon in an Old Testament Introduction,” *JOT* 16 (1980) 45.

<sup>25</sup> See my review of Childs’s *Introduction* (*TToday* 37 [1980] 100–108) for further discussion of this “transhistorical” dimension.

tradition to canonical scripture; indeed, one view is that the end-result, canonical scripture, should be regarded as “only an incident, and no more than that.”<sup>26</sup> In this perspective, the community of faith is regarded as a people on the way, a people who are constantly being shaped by, and giving shape to, the traditions as they respond to the challenge of new historical situations. On the other hand, in the case of the scriptural approach, the emphasis falls on the end-result of the tradition process, that is, the final literary or canonical shape of the traditions. In this perspective, especially if the canon is taken seriously, the community of faith is defined by the authoritative function of traditions fixed in writing and, at the final canonical stage, in particular books. These opposing approaches, both of which attempt to deal with the historical nature of biblical theology in response to Gabler’s appeal, seem to present us with an either/or. At the end of the first hundred years of the Society, we find ourselves in a situation of creative ferment, the outcome of which may be seen in another hundred years by those who inherit our future.

Nevertheless, even at this time, when we can only see through a glass darkly, there are common methodological interests and common theological concerns. It is noteworthy that traditio-historical theologians are also interested in what is called “the second naivete.” In an essay written in preparation for this centennial celebration, and which deals specifically with the task of teaching the Bible in universities and seminaries, we read these words (the immediate context relates to teaching in a “confessional” setting):

Students in the “first naivete” must be pressed toward criticism, and that has been one of the large historic tasks of most seminaries. Students in a critical mood must be pressed to a post-critical “second naivete” which is chastened and knowing.<sup>27</sup>

If students are to be pressed from one naivete to another (the language is not the most felicitous!), then this assumes that their teachers too, even when they use a traditio-historical approach, are concerned with the final form of scripture. Indeed, we should all remind ourselves that our primary task is to interpret the text that we have received, not to substitute some imaginary text created by scholarly ingenuity. The question is whether investigations into the prehistory of the text bring us finally back to the text from which we started, with a literary and theological appreciation that is “chastened and knowing.”

<sup>26</sup> The words are those of the late S. Sandmel, “On Canon” (*CBQ* 28 [1966] 207), quoted and discussed by R. B. Laurin, “Tradition and Canon,” in *Tradition and Theology*, ed. D. A. Knight, 261–74.

<sup>27</sup> W. Brueggemann and D. A. Knight, “Why Study the Bible?” *BCSR* 11 (1980) 78–79.

For my own part, I welcome the various critical methods that are designed to interpret the text synchronically, not just diachronically, and especially the redaction criticism that helps us to move from analysis to synthesis.<sup>28</sup> Surely a clear verdict of one hundred years of history is that much scholarly work in the past has been too atomistic, too analytical, and not concerned enough with the unity and totality of scriptural units or canonical books. Nevertheless, it is precisely because we deal with the text given to us, as a unity and totality, that we use our historical methodology, with its strengths and weaknesses, in order to understand. True, the final text deserves a place of theological privilege. In regard to Israel's scriptures, that is the text that functioned in the early Christian community and which has been read in the community of faith, both synagogue and church, throughout the centuries to the present. Yet why should the final form of the process of tradition be absolutized? After all, as Rudolf Smend suggests, we may be able to perceive something that those who gave us the text in its final form never saw; and surely we should "use our eyes as best we can."<sup>29</sup>

Granting pride of position to the text in its final form, there are several matters that deserve attention. First, the final text is inseparably related to the history of the community ("Israel" in the case of the Hebrew Bible; the church in the case of the New Testament). The analogy between biblical narrative and the realistic novel breaks down at this crucial point. The prehistory of the novel or the circumstances of the composition of Mozart's music may be ignored as having no bearing on the work itself. But in the case of biblical literature, with some notable exceptions (e.g., Job), we are dealing with works, often composed anonymously, in the history of a people over a period of many generations. In short, the text pulses with the life of a people, and therefore invites historical and sociological inquiry.

A theologian may raise the objection that explorations into the prehistory of the text lead us away from the givenness of the text into the realm of uncertainty and hypothesis. This objection loses much of its force if we seek for illumination of the text, rather than the stubborn, last-ditch defense of hypotheses regarding the prehistory of the text. Hypotheses are necessary, of course, but they are tentative and subject to critical testing; yet this should not lead us into complete skepticism about the precompositional history of traditions and even the earliest period of Israel. Surely the text dealing with the testing of Abraham (Gen 22:1-19) has been illumined by explorations into its prehistory, even though these explorations have to be carried out

<sup>28</sup> See my essay, "From Analysis to Synthesis: The Interpretation of Genesis 1-11," *JBL* 97 (1978) 23-29.

<sup>29</sup> R. Smend, "Questions about the Importance of the Canon," 48.

cautiously and in full recognition of the new meaning that the story gained when incorporated into the epic narrative governed by the history of the promise. Von Rad has helped us to understand that the community was engaged in a significant theological activity in the various stages of the movement that led from oral tradition to scripture. The prehistory of the text was not just an evolution toward its final, scriptural form but the history of a community whose faith was finding expression in forms which became vehicles for expressing its theological understanding. It is important, therefore, to engage in ear training, by whatever methods available, so that we may hear the various theological voices that constitute the choir of the final text. These choral voices may not always be in harmony; in fact, there may be dissonance (contradiction), but all of them should be heard if we are to listen to the witness of the text.<sup>30</sup>

Secondly, the biblical theologian must face the question as to whether the dominant "voice" that speaks in the final form of a text deserves, at least in every case, to be heard as loudly as other voices whose witness has been preserved in the history of traditions. There was a time when scholarship was engrossed with the pursuit of the "earliest"; now the pendulum may swing to the "latest." Even tradition-historical theologians may accord a higher or fuller meaning to the later stages of the process of tradition. Hartmut Gese observes: "This continuing history of tradition can show how, for example, additions to a text—beyond simply replenishing it as may be necessary—can result in an actualization of the text which opens it up to a totally new theological perception."<sup>31</sup> He rightly objects to past scholarly obsession with the origins or primary stages of tradition, as though the stripping off of accretions to a text left us with a residue that is genuine. In the biblical period, he continues, the supplementing of a text had the effect of preserving the old but lifting it up to "a new plateau," "a new ontological level." For example, "through apocalyptic additions a complex of prophetic texts can acquire an altogether new character, representing old truth on a new ontological level." In a particular instance this may be so. Yet it is also possible that the later stages in the history of tradition could blur, obscure, or reverse the theological perception of an earlier stage, in which case one wonders whether the movement which opens up "a totally new theological perception" is a gain or a loss.

<sup>30</sup> See Paul D. Hanson, "The Theological Significance of Contradiction within the Book of the Covenant," *Canon and Authority* (ed. G. W. Coats and B. O. Long; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 110–31.

<sup>31</sup> "Tradition and Biblical Theology," in *Tradition and Theology*, ed. D. A. Knight, 312–13.

Take, for instance, the book of Isaiah. The time has come to go beyond past critical analysis of the book into component parts and to recover some understanding of the integrity of the whole. Isaiah is the end result of a process of tradition, extending from the preaching of the eighth century prophet through his disciples such as so-called Second Isaiah and into the proto-apocalyptic and apocalyptic stages. It may well be that this book provides a good illustration of Gese's thesis that "through apocalyptic additions a complex of prophetic texts can acquire an altogether new character." Be that as it may, it is not certain that the final "apocalyptized" form of the Isaianic tradition is hermeneutically normative. The community of faith which accepts "Isaiah" as scripture may need to turn from this "new plateau" to an earlier, pre-apocalyptic stage if it is to hear "the word of God." The "canonical Isaiah" is no substitute for the "historical" Second Isaiah or the "historical" Isaiah of Jerusalem!

Or consider the case of *'adam* in Gen 1:26–28 (also 5:1b–2; 9:6). The creation story has been accommodated to the genealogical scheme that structures the book of Genesis in its final form: five times the formula "these are the generations of" occurs as a superscription in the primeval history (2:4a; 5:1; 6:9 [cf. 5:32]; 10:1; 11:10) and five times in the ancestral history (11:27; 25:12; 25:19; 36:1; 37:2).<sup>32</sup> The result is that in the final composition *'adam* has a prevailing masculine meaning, as in the genealogy in Genesis 5 where "he" is the first member in a series traced through the first-born son. Yet the final composition also retains the more inclusive meaning of *'adam* given in the once separately existing creation story. Surely it is appropriate for the community which reads the primeval history as scripture to tune in on the prior tradition which sets forth a corporate understanding of *'adam*, including "male and female" equally,<sup>33</sup> rather than following the masculine interpretation of the compository stage as was done in the NT (cf. 1 Cor 11:7: "man is the image and glory of God but woman the glory of man").

Or take as a final illustration the parable of the unjust steward found in the Gospel of Luke (16:1–13). It is not clear where the original parable ended, for it has gathered various accretions as the community struggled with its meaning. Are we to conclude that these interpretive accretions have the effect of lifting the traditions to "a new plateau," "a new ontological level"? Or is it the case that these supplements have had the effect of blunting the sharp edge of the story? If the latter is a hermeneutical possibility, then the final text has

<sup>32</sup> See further F. M. Cross, "The Priestly Work," in *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1973) 301–5.

<sup>33</sup> See the beautiful and incisive exposition by P. Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), chap. 1.

only a relative claim to authority, especially in the community of faith which reads scripture in the expectation of hearing the word of God.

In the end we return to the note struck almost two centuries ago by Gabler, the reverberations of which are still heard today: "Biblical theology is historical in nature." It is precisely the historical character of the biblical texts which is still the issue, and inescapably related to this is the problem of faith and history or, in the terms of Emil Fackenheim, God's presence and activity in the historical realm.<sup>34</sup> Historical methodology has built-in limitations which make it inadequate for dealing with the biblical witness to transcendence or to divine activity in the historical sphere; but it is a necessary tool for those in the community of faith who take the historical character of the biblical texts seriously.

In this connection, Brevard Childs has put before us a hermeneutical challenge that deserves the most serious consideration. The challenge comes to its sharpest expression in his treatment of Second Isaiah. Reacting against the analysis of the Isaianic corpus into various writings (First Isaiah, Second Isaiah, Third Isaiah, and later accretions), he insists that we should read the book theologically, as the totality that it is scripturally. The theological meaning of the whole is not dependent on scholarly reconstruction of the prehistory of the text or even the relating of passages to historical events or situations in the Assyrian, Babylonian, or Persian periods. "The final form of the literature," he writes, "provided a completely new and non-historical framework for the prophetic message which severed the message from its original historical moorings and rendered it accessible to all future generations."<sup>35</sup> The movement from tradition to scripture, in this view, "relativizes" historical particularity and minimizes historical referents, with the result that those who were not involved in the original, particular historical situations can now respond to the religious truth. There is much to be said for this. Clearly words that were once spoken or written in concrete situations, say the poetic consolation of Isaiah, chap. 40, or an epistle of Paul, have the power to speak to future generations, who may know nothing or little of the original, particular circumstances. Childs's critics rightly point out, however, that this transhistorical quality is not just a characteristic of the end-result of the process of tradition but inheres in previous stages along the way, including the earliest epic and poetic materials.<sup>36</sup> Attributed to Hegel is the wry observation that the past loses its meaning with the passage of

<sup>34</sup> E. Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972).

<sup>35</sup> *Introduction*, 337.

<sup>36</sup> See, e.g., the reviews by J. Barr and R. Smend in *JSOT* 16 (1980).

time.<sup>37</sup> But this is not so in the case of biblical materials which, expressed in the forms of narrative or poetry, had the power to transcend a particular historical situation and to speak to future generations.

Nevertheless, this transhistorical quality of the biblical materials did not eclipse the anchorage of the texts in real life with its concrete particularity and historical referents. When tradition underwent the “Reed Sea passage” from the spoken to the written word, the literature—as we have seen—retained the *stigmata* of oral speech evoked by concrete situations. And the same thing is true with tradition which moved in various literary stages toward final scriptural formulation. It is not just that Second Isaiah’s prophecy contains “scattered vestiges” of the particular historical situation of a people in Babylonian exile,<sup>38</sup> but that the message of the prophet, and hence the meaning for future generations, is essentially related to that historical situation into which the prophet spoke Yahweh’s word of consolation and hope. To separate the prophecy from its historical moorings not only leaves us with language that would make no sense, or would make whatever sense the reader cares to bring to the text, but blunts the cutting edge of the word that the prophet spoke in the name of God.

In conclusion, the relation between tradition and scripture in the community of faith deserves further theological clarification, especially in the case of those who strive for that “second naivete” which is “chastened and knowing.” As one who is going on toward that goal (and for one who stands in the Methodist tradition that must be the scholarly equivalent of “going on to perfection”!), I submit to you that it is not tradition alone, as though the final canonical text were only an incident in an ongoing process of tradition. Nor is it scripture alone, if that means that the prehistory of the final text discloses only a tradition-historical development. Rather, it is tradition *and* scripture: tradition which still makes its theological witness in scripture, and scripture which theologically incorporates and crystallizes biblical tradition.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Quoted by Fackenheim, *God's Presence*, 11.

<sup>38</sup> Childs, *Introduction*, 325.

<sup>39</sup> I should like to thank members of the society called “The Biblical Theologians” who discussed this essay in a preliminary stage and made helpful contributions.