

Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament

edited by
DOUGLAS A. KNIGHT

with contributions by

Walter Harrelson
Helmer Ringgren
Rudolf Smend
Walther Zimmerli
Arvid S. Kapelrud
Roger Lapointe
Douglas A. Knight

Odil Hannes Steck
Peter R. Ackroyd
James L. Crenshaw
Robert B. Laurin
Michael Fishbane
Hartmut Gese

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Introduction:

Tradition and Theology

Douglas A. Knight

Our access to an understanding of tradition is blocked by two hindrances, quite aside from the many severe methodological problems. In the first place, tradition appears to have a mysterious power over its recipients, including us today. Each generation finds tradition already a part of historical reality, of the situation in which the people must confront life. It is impossible to ignore this wide-ranging body of verbal and practical materials; whether it is being accepted or rejected it affects all aspects of life. The power of tradition derives from its very presence: it represents the truths and experiences of previous generations and thus holds an implicitly authoritative advantage over the present situation. For this reason it has the potential to be used either constructively or restrictively. On the one hand, tradition saves each generation from having to start life entirely afresh, with no accumulation of knowledge, experiences, and institutions on which to draw. As we grow up within the tradition and become educated in it, we gain the means for self-realization through critically appropriating and even transcending this heritage. But beyond this meaning-content, tradition conveys also meaning-structures. It promotes solidarity with the past and especially with the present, for through it the clan, the community, and the nation take on a significance far beyond that of simply meeting the needs for physical survival. And even more fundamentally, tradition provides us with the very structures for understanding and communicating. But, on the other hand, tradition also has a potential for restraint, and this accounts for the pejorative sense

in which the term is often used. Simply because it implies experiential truth, it can become a refuge to which later groups and individuals flee, rather than a point of departure for their own struggles with the conditions of life. It can be used as an excuse for institutional rigidity and personal insensitivity. It can squelch rather than promote creative living. Both of these expressions, positive and negative, of the inherent power of tradition have rarely been the object of analytical reflection, and they continue to affect us as we approach the subject of tradition.

The second hindrance to our understanding tradition is the very ambiguity, or better, the multiplicity of the phenomenon. What cannot be considered a matter of tradition? The term is applied as readily to oral and written literature (of all genres) as it is to customs, habits, beliefs, moral standards, cultural attitudes and values, social and religious institutions. It is anything in the heritage from the past that is delivered down to the present and can contribute to the makeup of the new ethos. Actually, the word tradition can even refer to the process of transmission (the *traditio*) as well as to the materials themselves that are being handed down (the *tradtum*). Quite obviously, differentiation in method is needed if one hopes to analyze these diverse types of tradition and to ascertain how each survives and exerts its influence. It may be noted that in the essays in this book the term tradition is usually used in the sense of oral and written literature, although in certain discussions it embraces other aspects as well.

Beginning especially in the middle of the eighteenth century, diverse types of folk traditions were collected in areas of Europe, and within a century, through the efforts of men like Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, such materials gained an ever increasing importance as a subject of scholarly investigation. Significant studies are presently available, for example, on African, Balkan, and Nordic traditions. James Frazer has published a massive collection of folklore from cultures in all parts of the world. Interest has been directed to the traditions in such ancient societies as Greece, Rome, Arabic cultures, Meso-

potamia, as well as Israel. Prompted by such work on the actual traditions and the historical, sociological, and religious roles which they played, modern philosophy and phenomenology have attended to the structures at work and their obvious implications. Notably Hans-Georg Gadamer has underscored the fundamental importance of tradition in establishing our categories of understanding, in shaping our intellect, our predilections, our perspectives, our communication, our presuppositions. According to him, a person is not determined wholly by tradition but retains the freedom to decide whether or not to accept it and to hand it on further. Yet there is a real sense in which the particular historical situation and the whole historical process contribute to each individual's manner of receiving and interpreting the tradition. (A similar point was made earlier by Rudolf Bultmann about the *Vorverständnis*, the pre-understanding which each interpreter brings to a text or tradition, and it is emphasized below in Chapter 3 with respect to our own perspectives and presuppositions guiding us as we seek to reconstruct the history of Israel.) Gadamer emphasizes, though, that tradition is not therefore something to be overcome or neutralized, for it presents humanity—the ancients as well as us—with the opportunity for affirmative understanding and productive advance.

Such considerations and research in other disciplines lend legitimacy and importance to the modern effort to recover the traditions of Israel. Since Hermann Gunkel at the outset of the twentieth century, it has become entirely common to assume that the Old Testament is not the literary creation of authors working at their desks but is the result of a centuries-long, intricate process of development among the people of Israel. The majority of the literature derives from traditions which circulated relatively freely, underwent changes, and gradually became grouped together into a form which acquired literary stability. These traditions, usually at some point related to the oral sphere, do not represent individuals' private productions. They are the life expressions of various groups, for "tradition-

ing” is the function of the community. The process remains in flux through a steady selection and reinterpretation of the heritage from the past; materials are not preserved merely for their own sake but only insofar as they continue to have—or can be modified in order to have—a significance for new generations. Consequently, the fate of these traditions is quite closely tied to ongoing circumstances in the realms of politics, religion, education, judicial courts, social situations, and intellectual life. This in turn underscores the absolute importance of our understanding the narrower and broader situations in which each tradition is anchored—if we hope to comprehend the depth dimension of meaning which the given text contains.

Interestingly, the Hebrew Bible knows no terms equivalent to tradition or transmission in the sense in which we are applying these concepts to it. Yet we should not necessarily expect to find them there, and the validity of this widely held hypothesis about the Israelite tradition process does not depend on it. The ultimate test of an historical hypothesis is its ability to account for the evidence better than any other explanation. The practitioners of the traditio-historical method, which has been refined considerably since the 1930s, have applied it with greater or lesser intensity to most conceivable parts of the Old Testament, including historical, prophetic, lyrical, legal, sapiential texts. While widespread agreement on many specific points has not been attained, there are few that doubt that we are asking basically the right questions. Internal to the literature, below the surface level, there are indications which point to the formation of that literature, and by retracing its development and determining the forces which affected it we can perceive its intense, vital, dynamic relation to life. Why is a text exactly as it is, and not different in some respect? To answer this is no simple enterprise—yet one of absolute importance and seriousness because it drives us back to the stage in which people are not idly composing traditions but are carving out their very existence in situations of stress, of threat, of routine, of faith, of adjudication, of child-rearing, of social control. The

ancient Israelites, not unlike us, had to address their immediate needs, and this was done often by referring to their past and considering their future. The results of this process were as varied as were the situations and the people themselves. This multiplicity, fundamental to the Old Testament, is affirmed, not diminished, by the traditio-historical approach.

All of this has significant implications for theology. How are we to evaluate this process of tradition formation? What theological significance is there in the text's close relation to life, especially at the many points where a kerygmatic intention is not obvious? What does it mean if the theological "message" of the Old Testament was always growing, in flux, adapting to new situations—and not the expression of timeless, absolutistic revelation? Does the involvement of so many people in the formative process affect our understanding of inspiration and revelation? Is it possible to understand the text without knowledge of its prehistory and the situations which produced it? What are the implications if we consider that the tradition was significantly affected by the ancient Near Eastern environment, by the contingencies of history, by social and religious developments, by intellectual streams, by fixed patterns of speech? How could Yahweh, the confessed God of Israel, have been involved in all of this—or despite all of this? Indeed, could not tradition at times have led the people to the abyss rather than to the heights? If we are therefore to be cautioned against an undue idealization of the tradition, what is its actual strength for theology and for anthropology? Might the history of traditions in fact provide us with the key to forming an Old Testament theology or even a biblical theology? Since any given text may conceal a variety of strata, are there any firm rules for how we are to solve the resulting hermeneutical problems? Are we obliged to gain a sensitivity for the whole sweep of the historical formation without arbitrarily preferring one stage or another (whether the original, or the one with the most distinct theological message, or even the final canonical stage)—especially in light of the fact that the meaning at any one such

stage would not necessarily have been amenable or understandable to other persons in the productive process before or after that point? Is there a relation between the process or the traditions unfolding in Israel's history and the post-biblical Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions? What is our own interest in the Israelite traditions—only to repristiniate ancient ideas and ways, or to face our own heritage, to examine common concerns and thereby to strive for self-understanding?

That is an oppressive series of questions. The problems are neither artificial nor insignificant; they emerge directly from the postulated tradition process in Israel. Unfortunately, they lead us into a rather uncharted terrain. Most tradition historians have not been inclined to examine the general historical and theological implications of their work. Gerhard von Rad's pioneering work in this regard contains significant insights at many of these points and has prompted some discussion in the discipline, but several of the questions have as yet received no attention.

The thirteen essays that follow attempt to meet this need for a systematic reflection on the consequences that traditio-historical research has for theology, especially for Old Testament theology. A certain selectivity of topics was necessary; the ones included are essential, while a few other important questions had to be omitted or simply addressed in the context of some related discussion. At the same time, certain matters (e.g., the life relation, revelation, canon, biblical theology) are so basic that they are mentioned in several essays, although we have attempted to keep repetitions at a minimum.

A word about the interrelatedness of the chapters may prove helpful to the reader. The first part does not deal so much with temporal origins as with the material groundings of the tradition. What are some of the primary impulses and materials that stimulate tradition development? These two chapters on life processes, religion, and the wider environment provide an indication as well as of the fundamental role which tradition played in Israel.

Part II focuses on problems essential to the development of

much of the Old Testament literature, and on their theological implications. How are we to understand the relationship between history and tradition in view of the community's centuries-long process of reflecting on their past and searching for meaning in it? The prophets' utterances are replete with references to the pre-prophetic traditions about salvation and to earlier prophetic messages as well; are they simply traditionists inclined to adjust the heritage in only minor ways, or is there a more basic theological conviction that is governing their preaching and their use of prior materials? In light of the central role played by the cult in Israel, what theological significance is there in this close relationship between tradition development and Israel's worship, and how does this affect the nature of the Old Testament as well as the task of the exegete? Stimulated by such problems, the final two chapters in this section address more general and fundamental issues: the implications of oral expression for our notion of tradition and for our understanding of the text, and the unavoidable consequences which the traditio-historical hypothesis has for our understanding of biblical revelation.

Part III confronts questions which to the present have scarcely received systematic attention by tradition historians, although these matters are so basic that they are influencing the traditions at most points in their development. Traditionists, those who are producing and preserving traditions, do not exist in a vacuum, unaffected by their surrounding intellectual life, undisturbed by historical and social changes, unconcerned with ideas and positions that differ from their own. Chapter 8 describes the main streams of theological and ideological positions present in Israel throughout its history, and it deals with the impact of such continuous streams on the development of traditions and texts. In light of such lines of continuity, Chapter 9 examines the effects which historical ruptures, political and social changes, had on the traditions and on theology; how could continuity with the past be reestablished after an unexpected disaster? Yet the prevailing doctrines and notions which do

persist and which are propounded with vigor by many traditionists will not necessarily find acceptance by all the people, and Chapter 10 demonstrates the existence of dissenting opinion in many parts of the Old Testament, especially in the wisdom literature—protest which is not idle talk but which stems from the experienced dilemmas of life.

The final section considers the effect of the tradition process on the development of scripture and on the religious life of the later believing communities, both Christian and Jewish. Was canonization consistent with the lengthy history of tradition growth and transformation, and what are the theological and religious problems of freezing one stage in the developing tradition? Does the Israelite *traditio* help to account for some of the vitality in early Judaism, especially in terms of the midrashic process of interpreting earlier traditions? The last chapter touches on many of the previously mentioned topics and attempts to evaluate their significance for biblical theology. What difference does it make that the text had a prehistory in tradition, and how is the biblical theologian to approach these diverse stages and the developmental process on the whole?

One final word to clarify our intentions: This volume represents a joint effort by a number of scholars to break new ground in this important field. Decades of intense exegetical and historical work by many tradition historians have provided detailed results that demand reflection on a broader scale. All contributors are addressing the same general question about the theological implications of Israel's formation of tradition, and there is a surprising amount of agreement on the answers which are found to this question. Yet the attentive reader will discover numerous points where opinions differ. This is all to the good; the issues are open to numerous approaches, and a monolithic position to which all participants would subscribe—even if this were possible—would suggest that the problems are less complicated than they really are. Our primary purpose, consequently, is to carry the discussion further in the hope of stimulating more engagement with these crucial issues.