

Robert Vannoy, OT History, Lecture 2

Form Criticism – Gerhard von Rad

Review

We were talking about Gerhard von Rad. I've been trying to summarize Wellhausen's source critical approach to the Old Testament and what that means for Gunkel's form critical approach, and developing the form critical method, and then the third individual we began to look at was Gerhard von Rad. Now, I've been trying to summarize the rather complex theory that von Rad developed by use of three propositions. I've given you the first two of them in the last class hour, I want to give you the third one this afternoon. But let's briefly go through the first two to reorient ourselves.

1. "Statements of Belief" Stand Behind the Hexateuch as a Whole—Credo Deut 26:5ff
2. The Hexateuch is an Aggregation of Diverse Materials which have Been Changed to the Present Form Under the Guidance of the Credo
3. The Hexateuch as a Whole, must be Understood as a *Gattung*/sitz im leben.

First, von Rad says what he terms, "statements of belief" stand behind the Hexateuch as a whole. He claims that the principle elements of the *heils geschichte* or salvation history were summarized in the Credo in Deuteronomy 26:5 and following. Second, the Hexateuch is an aggregation of diverse materials, which have been changed to the present form under the guidance of the Credo. I utilized some of the quotations from some of his writings to illustrate those two points. Third, the Hexateuch as a whole, in terms of Gunkel's research, must be understood as a *gattung*. He examined them form critically. In this way, the *sitz im leben* of the early stages represented by the statement of belief can be recognized. You can see, from that statement that von Rad is moving in a tradition begun by Hermann Gunkel in his terminology of *gattung* or literary types and *sitz im leben*, which isolates situation types that produce each particular literary type or genre. von Rad wants to submit the Hexateuch as a whole, that entire body of material,

to form critical examination, and consider the whole of it as a *gattung*, and determine what the *sitz im leben* of it is at its early stages.

A. Elaborate on that Third Point

Now, let me elaborate on that third point by reading from his *Problem of the Hexateuch* pages 2 and 3. He says “the intricate elaboration of the one basic idea into this tremendous edifice”--he’s talking about this material from creation to conquest--the Hexateuch, Genesis to Joshua. “The intricate elaboration of the one basic idea into this tremendous edifice is no first essay nor something that has grown to its own accord to the proportions to its classic maturity. Rather, it is something pressed to the ultimate limits of what is possible and what is readable. It must certainly have passed through earlier stages of development. In other words, the Hexateuch may and indeed must, be understood as representing of a *gattung* of which we may expect to be able to recognize in the early stages the *sitz im leben*, the situation or circumstances of composition, and the subsequent development, until it reached the greatly extended form which now lies before us.”

b. Those Statements of Belief in Passages Such as the Credo in Deuteronomy 26:5-9

Now, let me make a few comments about the entire structure and approach that von Rad utilizes. He follows, as I said, in the line of Hermann Gunkel, with a form of critical methodology. But he deviates from Gunkel in this way. Remember when we talked about Gunkel in form criticism, isolating story units, and then tried to label them—their literary type or *gattung* with the various types of labels. With von Rad, he directs his form critical examination out of the individual story units to the entire structure of the Hexateuch. Instead of individual stories he looks at the entire structure of the Hexateuch. That is what he calls these statements of belief that stand behind the Hexateuch, the statement of belief that pulls together the aggregation of material, all the story units.

Now he finds those statements of belief in passages such as the Credo in Deuteronomy 26:5-9. We might look at that in a minute because I think you will see the point he’s trying to make. Deuteronomy 26 gives the regulations for bringing an offering

of the first fruits. When Israel comes into the land, they bring their harvest of crops and they are to give the first fruits to the LORD. In Deuteronomy 26, verse 4 you read that “The priest shall take the basket from your hands and set it down in front of the altar of the LORD your God. Then you shall declare before the LORD your God.” The following things are listed in verses 5 down through verse 9, it is sort of a brief summary of the movement of history through the Hexateuch. Here is the confession that he is to make. “My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there, and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labor. Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the first fruits of the soil that you, O LORD, have given me.”

So, you get a brief resume, you might say, of the mighty acts of God, bringing his people to the land from Abraham to the conquest period. That resume summarizes the movement of history through the entire period. What he says is those statements of belief stand behind the Hexateuch as a whole. Behind this *heils geschichte* or salvation history there are diverse materials that have been shaped into present form under the guidance of this Credo, as you find in Deuteronomy 26. What he wants to do, is understand then, the structure of the Hexateuch as a whole—its literary type, its circumstance, and what he finds in a cultic setting and the confessional setting. The Credo sort of brings it all together in the end.

c. Relation to JEDP and the Hexateuch's Final Form

Student Question: Have they now discarded JEDP and any of the documents?

No, not at all. Now, there are a number of these kinds of resumes of Israel's history that you find in the Old Testament besides Deuteronomy 26. Joshua 24:2-13 is another one that is often appealed to. Joshua 24:2-13; I'm not going to take time to read

that, but you can look through it, they're very similar.

I guess you could say he's working on JEDP but he's working on it on a different level. If you were going to start out, you would follow methodologically the sequence that you find historically in the development of these methods. In other words, you'd start out with Wellhausen's sources of the Pentateuchal mapped out into various JEDP documents. Then you would work with Gunkel's form critical method on top of that, you might say, and divide the documents down into little story units, to try and penetrate the documents to find out how the document material came into existence from the roots of oral tradition. But then, given the legitimacy of all that, someone like von Rad would come along and say, "Alright, that's all good, and we can work that way with it, but let's look at the final form. Here's what we have before us—Genesis to Joshua. Now, let's work with that final form. What is it that structures that final form?" He would say there is this sort of skeletal outline that you'd find in certain confessional statements that has structured the movement of things, from Abraham, to Egypt, to Sinai, and then to the conquest. He would say that the thing that gave rise to that overall structure was this confessional-cultic sort of recitation of these things. Now, I don't know if I can say much more than that, but he does not reject the JEDP, he assumes it.

The final redactor becomes much more important to von Rad. The redactor, we're going to go further with this, when we look at redaction criticism. The redactors were sort of lost in the emphasis of Wellhausen's JEDP sources. The redactor comes to be more important later and takes a much more prominent place compiling the sources together.

d. Historie & Heilsgeschichte

Let me say a few more things about von Rad. von Rad distinguishes between two sorts of history of Israel. The one, he terms *historie*—and that has reference to scientific historiography. In other words, that deals with history in the sense of what really happened. And when he speaks of history in that sense, he uses the word, *historie*. But in von Rad's view, you find little, if anything, of *historie* in the Old Testament material. He says that the sections of the Old Testament do not give us *historie*, but they give us

heilsgeschichte—salvation history. *Heilsgeschichte* according to von Rad, is “confessional history.” It’s not actually a history of what happened, but an expression of the way in which Israel thought about its own relationship with God. *Heilsgeschichte* is a history formed and transformed by Israel’s faith, according to von Rad it is something she believed, and gave shape to, not necessarily something that actually happened. So that you’re back into this dichotomy we talked about in the last class hour. With von Rad, the history of Israel as viewed by modern historians, and the confessional history of Israel as formed by Israel’s faith, the view which we find in the Old Testament, are two very different things.

Then you get an interesting twist. What von Rad is interested in is this. He cares little to nothing about *historie*, that is, what actually happened. What he’s interested in is *heilsgeschichte*, the history that was the construction of Israel’s faith. Let me read from his *Old Testament Theology* again briefly. This is his *Old Testament Theology* volume one, page 106. He says “Both at this point and in the sequel, we are of course thinking when we think of the course of history, of those which the faith of Israel regarded as such. That is, the call of the forefathers, the deliverance from the land of Egypt, the bestowal of the land of Canaan, etc., and not of the results of modern and critical historical scholarship to which Israel’s faith was unrelated. This raises a difficult historical problem. In the last 150 years critical historical scholarship has compiled an impressively complete picture of the history of people of Israel. As this process was shaped, the old picture of Israel’s history which the church had derived and accepted from the Old Testament was destroyed bit by bit. Upon this process, there’s no going back, nor has it yet indeed come to an end. Critical historical scholarship regards it as impossible that the whole of Israel was present at Sinai. Or that Israel crossed the Red Sea and achieved the conquest and settled as a group or mass. It holds the leadership of Moses drawn in the traditions of the book of Exodus to be as ‘unhistorical’ as the Deuteronomist and the book of Judges which describes the judges.” All this stuff really didn’t happen in the way it’s described in the materials of the Old Testament.

But he says, “On the other hand, that it is the most recent research on the

Hexateuch that has preceded to deal with the extremely complicated origin of the Old Testament's picture of Yahweh's saving history with Israel. Scholars are even beginning to allow"—and here, this is an amazing statement I think—but he says, "scholars are beginning to allow a scientific standing of its own, to the picture of our history which Israel herself drew." That's this *heilsgeschichte* he's trying to get a scientific standing for that. It's not history in the real sense of the word and the sense of what actually happened, but he says, "scholars are beginning to allow scientific standing on its own to the picture of her history which Israel herself drew, and to take it as something interesting *per se*, in its own right, which in the way it has been sketched, has to be taken into account as the central subject in our theological evaluation."

e. Saving History that was Drawn up by Faith and is accordingly Confessional in Character

Further down that page, that's page 107 now, he says "thus the Hexateuch shows us a picture of the saving history that was drawn up by faith, and is accordingly confessional in character." That's the essence of his thesis: "The history drawn up by faith, is confessional in character." The same holds true for the Deuteronomistic history which pictures the later history of Israel down to the exile—Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings—it's the same thing. Then he makes this comment. "These two pictures of Israel's history lie before us. That of modern critical scholarship"—that's the real *historie*—"and that which the faith of Israel constructed"—*heilsgeschichte* "the two lie before us and for the present we must reconcile ourselves to both of them." He says it would be stupid to dispute the right of one or the other to exist. One is rational and objective, *historie*. It constructs a critical picture of the history as it really was in Israel--*historie*. Of course, for him that means pictures of Moses' conquest wasn't the whole of Egypt.

He says, "the other activity is confessionally and personally involved."--*Heilsgeschichte*. He says, "historical investigation searches for purposes for a critically assured minimum. But the kerygmatic picture tends for a theological maximum. The fact that these two views of Israel's history are so divergent is one of the most serious burdens

that is imposed today upon biblical scholarship.” He says it’s a problem. He calls it “a burden.” The fact that these two burdens in Israel actually exist—but he says you can’t deny the right of either one. Then he says, “it would not do to simply explain the picture of the one as historical and the other as unhistorical.” But what he’s getting at here is he’s trying to get a legitimacy for how *heilsgeschichte* is historical itself, even though it talks about things that didn’t happen.

f. How Heilsgeschichte was Built Up

That’s pages 106-108, from volume one of his *Old Testament Theology*. Here again you get an idea of how he works out this theory summarizing these three points. “What a number of old, detached, tribal or local traditions. Previously quite restricted in currency were in the Hexateuch or the Deuteronomistic history. But now, they’re all related to Israel.” In other words, you get individual story units taken out of an original context that maybe had nothing to do with Israel, and they are put into connection with one of these blocks of materials in the larger configuration in which they move. He says that’s the aggregation of diverse material pulled together by the Credo. He says, “what a number of old, detached, tribal tales previously quite restricted in currency were incorporated in the Hexateuch or Deuteronomistic history, but now they’re all related to Israel. In the process, the old disassociated traditions have been given a reference and interpretation which in most cases was foreign to their original meaning. The prerequisite, which was by no means self-evident, for the incorporation of the traditions into the history was that all of them, even the most obscure and paltry ones of the small clan were concerned with Israel, and therefore belonged to Israel. Israel was ready to see herself embodied in the traditional component parts and to include, absorb and record the experience themselves, there recorded in the great picture of the history of Israel. Here, at last, we come upon one unifying principle at which Israel’s theological thinking strove in reverence to which it ordered its material and thought. This was Israel, the people of God, which always acts as a unit, and which God always deals with as a unit.” I’ll stop with this. We could go on for a long time, but this again is at the heart of his thesis. He says,

“it is important to bear in mind from the outset, that this Israel of which the Old Testament’s presentation of history has so much to say, is the object of faith, and the object of a history constructed by faith.”

g. Vannoy’s Response

Now, let me make a few comments. As I’ve said, von Rad claims that the *heilsgeschichte* or salvation history was formed by the construct of Israel’s faith. Now, when you reflect on that, I think that what you must say is that actually the opposite is the case. He’s turned everything upside down. Put it backwards. Israel’s faith was nurtured and grew in the context of the unfolding of redemptive history. This is the way the Bible presents things to us. Israel’s faith grew and was nurtured in the context of the unfolding of redemptive history. What we’re talking about is a relationship between faith and history.

h. Exodus 14 Example

Let’s look at Exodus 14 as an illustration of this. Exodus 14 is when Israel left Egypt, is out in the wilderness, comes up to the Red Sea, and Egypt is out in pursuit. Israel is fearful, and they don’t know what to do. “Now the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,” verse one, “Tell the sons of Israel to turn back and camp before Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea; you shall camp in front of Baal-zephon, opposite it, by the sea. For Pharaoh will say of the sons of Israel, ‘They are wandering aimlessly in the land; the wilderness has shut them in.’ Thus, I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will chase after them; and I will be honored through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD.” I won’t read through the chapter, but the chapter tells that the LORD provided passage through the Red Sea for the Israelites, then destroyed the Egyptians when they pursued. At the end of that chapter, we read in verse 29, “the Israelites went through the Red Sea, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. That day, the LORD saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians. And Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the sea shore.” Now you notice verse 31. “When the Israelites

saw the great power the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.” So what you see is divine intervention both by word and act, which elicits the response of Israel’s faith. They respond to what God gave them in history. When he delivers them, they respond—their faith is a response to that. So I think we can say, there are many assumptions that you could make. That divine revelation, by word and act, by word and by intervention in history, precedes and constitutes the basis for Israel’s faith. Divine revelation by word, by act, precedes and constitutes the basis for faith. In other words, faith does not create the events of biblical history, but the historical events elicit a response of Israel’s faith, that’s the order. von Rad’s response has turned it upside down. von Rad says this history is the product of Israel’s faith. I am saying what the Scripture supports very clearly, is that faith is a response to divine revelation, where it was an act on Israel’s behalf in history.

In something like von Rad’s work—now, that’s where you get the tricky thing. What he’s interested in is the *heilsgeschichte*--salvation history, and what he’s interested in is the theological teaching of it, so when he expounds this, if we can strip away all the theory underneath it, what he says many times is not very different from what you or I would say. He does have some insights into the theological significance to these events as he discusses many of them. But you see, the problem is this *heilsgeschichte*, salvation history, has no relationship to what actually happened. So, then you ask the question what is the foundation for the basis of faith? This becomes an existential identification with the ideas presented. But it’s not actually something rooted in something that actually happened in history.

I think you’re getting there what he leaves unresolved—he says these two views of history are a burden. I think the biggest burden placed on the student of the Old Testament today is that if the two of these things exist we have to reconcile ourselves to the fact that they exist in that way. I think he would downplay very much that this *heilsgeschichte* is something that is deceptive, something that’s fraudulent, or anything of that sort. I think he’d say that this is an expression of Israel’s faith, it’s something positive. This is the way they saw themselves—they take a tradition from one element of

the population, one tribe, and they'd apply that one experience to all of Israel. It then becomes something to all of Israel and they'd express it as something rooted in their faith and incorporating that into this whole structure. He would feel that is something legitimate, not something that is fraudulent. We have a problem with that, because we're concerned with what happened, and it certainly distorts what happened because it's a mis-representation of what happened.

i. Heilsgeschichte and Biblical Faith

I think in your bibliography I have an entry by Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, third edition. 1982, page 100. On page 100, Gerhard Hasel quotes a German scholar named Frans Hesse, in which Hesse says: "Our faith lives from that which happened in Old Testament times. Our faith needs to rest on that which has actually happened, not on that which has only confessed to have happened." That's a good statement; our faith rests on what had to have happened, not on what has confessed to have happened.

Now, it's interesting that Frans Hesse makes that statement, which is a very good statement, but I think Hesse is more of an advocate for the older kind of documentary source criticism, not back to what really happened because when he gets back there, there is very little of what really happened left. But I think he does understand the principles very clearly. I think it's very important to understand that. Any separation between *historie* and *heilsgeschichte*--salvation history--is destructive to biblical faith. You have to work with the unified concept of truth in the Old Testament. Only when faith is founded on facts of real history, can it have any legitimacy or significance. Now, that is a fundamental principle behind everything. I think you need to reflect on that, and maintain that, because there are all kinds of attacks on that idea today, and it can very quickly erode away the basis of our faith if you're not careful.

2. Concessionary Evangelicalism

Let's go on to 2., "Concessionary Evangelicalism." These views that we've been

discussing Wellhausen, Gunkel, von Rad and all the material that has been produced along the lines of their methodologies—those views have not gone unchallenged. As I mentioned previously in the last class hour during the time of Wellhausen, William Henry Green refuted the theories of Wellhausen. The same was true of Gunkel and von Rad. But in spite of that, you will find today that those who are committed to biblical inerrancy when we come to the Old Testament, are comparatively few. I think you even see in the past 10-15 years, a trend developing in Evangelical circles towards a more concessionary position with respect to some of these methodologies. I think there has been an unnecessary concession in a number of instances to attacks on the historical reliability of Scripture and the concessions in areas of methodology with which we approach the historical materials of the Old Testament.

Now, when you come to some Evangelical scholars who seem to have conceded on some of these points, you find that the central idea that has been promoted, which I have no argument with, is that the basic message of the Bible is to point to Christ. I would certainly agree with that. Christ is the focal point of Scripture. But then what is then asserted in connection with that, is the basic purpose and message is not affected. When we revise our method of biblical interpretation to the extent that we reject inerrancy with respect to historical details. In other words, the thesis is you can hold on to the central message of Scripture, the message of redemption in Christ, even though large sections of the Old Testament need to be reinterpreted, even though these texts represent themselves as being historical. They would maintain that those texts need to be reinterpreted in a way that would demonstrate they're not really intended to be read historically, and that the events they describe didn't really happen.

Let me illustrate this, rather than just talk theoretically. The book I want to use is on reading and interpreting the Bible. *Do You Understand What You Read?* is the title by H. M. Kuitert. Kuitert is a theology professor at the Free University in Amsterdam. A number of his books have been translated into English. He was a student of G. C. Berkouwer, and then joined the theological faculty at the Free University. He wrote this little book. *Is the Bible Historically Reliable?* Kuitert would claim to be an

evangelical—representing himself as such.

On page 14—he says, “If the Bible claims to be God’s word, would not we at least assume that everything in it at least happened as the Bible describes it?” Obviously the answer is, no. “To insist that everything happened precisely as the Bible describes it, is to read the Bible badly indeed, or at least superficially. If one does take it all as a literal record he has to tamper with the text. Naturally, much of what did happen literally is what the Bible tells, but some things are reported that simply did not happen the way they are told.” Now, he’s very clear in the way he says it. He then gives a number of illustrations of the things he feels are contradictions within the Old Testament.

a. Examples of Problems and Solutions in OT History

1. Burial of Uzziah

I don’t want to discuss all of them, because we could take a lot of time on that. They’re all easily answered. You could take this New International Version Study Bible and look at the notes and get the answer to each one of these. But he says, “Take a few of these examples from the Old Testament. The writer of 1 & 2 Chronicles tells us the stories of Israel’s kings, but does not tell the stories the exactly as the writer of 1 & 2 Kings tells it. Anyone who has ever read through Israel’s history has met some of these differences. For instance, according to 2 Kings 15:7, King Uzziah was buried with his fathers, but 2 Chronicles 26:23 tells us that Uzziah because of his leprosy was not laid to rest with his fathers, but rather in a burial place alongside theirs. There are a couple possible solutions here. One, 2 Chronicles 26:23 actually says, “Uzziah rested with his fathers and was buried near them in a field for burial that belonged to the kings, for people said, ‘He had leprosy.’” It’s possible that 2 Kings 15 gave a general reference and is referring to the same thing as 2 Chronicles 26. A second possibility comes from a Second Temple Aramaic inscription that said Uzziah’s bones were moved in a secondary burial allowing for two possible references to his burial in separate places.

2. Cities Traded Between Solomon and Hiram

In 1 Kings 9:11 we are told King Solomon gave away twenty Israelite cities to King Hiram. But in 2 Chronicles 8:2, we find instead that Hiram gave these cities to Solomon.” When you compare those two texts, you can see they are not talking about the same thing. It seems there’s a sequence involved. At one point in history, Solomon gave the cities to Hiram, and later Hiram gave them back or vice versa, Hiram gave them to Solomon and Solomon gave them back. But he sees that as a contradiction.

3. Who Killed Goliath?

Then there’s the question of who really killed Goliath, 2 Samuel 21:19 we read Elhanan slew the giant, but the writer of 1 Chronicles tells us there was a man Elhanan involved with the fight and that, he killed Goliath’s brother. David was the real giant slayer as we know from 1 Samuel 17. Some have suggested that Elhanan was another designation for David which was his throne name. Or it is possible that Goliath came to stand for a type of person who was of gigantic size. So there’s a resolution to that problem, but there’s a problem there. It’s a textual problem if you look at the references involved.

4. Kuitert’s Improper Conclusion

But Kuitert, from illustrations like this says, “These illustrations ask us to form a simple question: which writer tells things as they actually happened, the writer of Kings, or the writer of Chronicles? Or do neither of them? In any case, if we are concerned about historical precision, we cannot find it in both writers. Things could not have happened precisely as Kings has it and precisely as Chronicles says it. To say that the Bible is God’s word cannot mean that all writers record things as they happen.”

So what he does it set up contradictions in 1 Kings and Chronicles. It’s very similar to the New Testament in the synoptic gospels—I’m sure you’re familiar with that. There are problems of harmonizing statements in the synoptic gospels. There are problems of harmonizing with Kings and Chronicles and Samuel, where you have

parallels. I don't think these problems are irresolvable. There are adequate answers to these things. Here he tries to build a theory off that. I simply don't think it's well founded.

I see our time is gone. I want to go further with this, and give you a good idea of how he treats some of these things and some analysis of it. Then we'll come back and pick up that C. that I skipped over.

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