

d) Martin Noth: *The Traditional-Historical Approach (Traditionsgeschichte)*

The hypotheses of H. Gunkel and of G. von Rad on the existence of traditions prior to the literary stage was developed by the German scholar Martin Noth (1902–1968)¹—a professor at Königsberg and then at Bonn—giving rise to a critical analysis called the traditional–historical approach (“history of the traditions”—*Traditionsgeschichte*). Noth focuses his study, not on the Pentateuch nor on a supposed Hexateuch, but on the Tetrateuch (Gen, Ex, Lev, Num). His first intuition, in fact, is that the current Deuteronomy was originally a large preface to the work that extended from the book of Joshua to 2 Kings (the Deuteronomistic work), composed during the exile. Only later, with the addition of Deut 34 (the story of the death of Moses), did it become the fifth book of the Pentateuch.

At the origin of the Tetrateuch, therefore, would be found, rather than a preliterate text containing the ‘historical creed’—a hypothesis that he does not accept—five major ‘themes’ or ‘greater traditions’, independent from each other, limited in scope and related to particular localities, usually in certain sanctuaries; therefore, it is not bound to the figure of Moses. Noth, in fact, sustains that the only sure data on Moses is the tradition of his burial on the east bank of the Jordan; however, without explaining how and why Moses assumed such a dominant role in the tradition of the Pentateuch. The five traditions would be the following: the promises to the patriarchs, the exodus from Egypt, the crossing of the desert, the revelation of Sinai, and the entrance into Canaan. These traditions, of cultic origin, would have been fixed in their substance prior to their written version. Around them, small isolated traditions gradually coalesced (the cycle of Abraham and Isaac, that of Jacob in Shechem, some episodes of the conquest, the plagues of Egypt with the Passover and many more). Noth also says this about the so-called ‘connecting sections’ such as the story of Joseph (Gen 37–50), which acts as a hinge between the history of the patriarchs and the presence of the Hebrews in Egypt. These themes would be developed, enriched and fused in the course of the oral tradition and then welcomed into the written tradition (J E P), that is, into the classic documents that would have been at the foundation of the current Pentateuch.

Since, according to Noth, all the traditions reflect the existence of a single Israel, there should be recognized the existence of one Israel at the oral stage, that is, in the pre-monarchical epoch, in the period of Judges. This Israel would consist of a confederation of twelve tribes (not derived from the same ancestors) in the land of Canaan who, like the Greek Amphictyonies,² celebrated their

² This was a sacred alliance between the neighboring tribes having in common the worship of a divinity and the defense of its temple. The most famous was the Delphic, which united the twelve peoples and which became a political-militaristic reality.

festivals and recounted their exploits around a single sanctuary, until gradually a common tradition was formed, still in the oral stage, prior then to the preparation of the great documents. This final stage of the tradition would be represented by the letter G (*gemeinsame Grundlage*), a base narrative common to both J and E, which would explain their many points of affinity. As a result, the tradition would be fixed in the documents J, E, and P. In the document P, two layers would be found: one more ancient, the 'priestly code', and one more recent of a legislative type. P would provide to the redactors and compilers of the Pentateuch with the basic texture of their work.

With his hypothesis, Noth drew attention to the need for detecting the stages of oral transmission of the written tradition as well as to the composite character of the classical literary sources. A great number of studies on the traditions, however, have demonstrated the difficulty of this hypothesis. In fact, it leaves some problems unresolved, including the nature of the G source, the similarity between some passages of J and the texts of Deuteronomy or of the Deuteronomistic tradition that do not seem to give credence to the hypothesis of the Tetrateuch, the abstract character that the five great traditions acquire without the central role of Moses, the historical indemonstrability of the hypothesis of the 'amphictyony' of Israel. The problem also remains as to how cult, which can serve as a means to pass on a tradition of storytelling, can also generate it.