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Ten YEARS AGO BREVARD CHILDS ANNOUNCED THE END OF THE BIBLICAL Theology movement; his latest book proposes a post-critical alternative in exegesis. This alternative to historical criticism results not from the paranoid fears of fundamentalism, nor the vagaries of structuralism, nor even from the perspective of one who would read the Bible from the "new criticism" in vogue among students of literature. His proposal, rather, is theological: he would have us read the Old Testament as *Scripture*. By this he means to read the Bible in its final, authoritative form, as the product and legacy of the community of faith which produced and shaped it in such a way that it would be accessible as Word of God to all subsequent generations.

Despite all the other things he contributes in the way of bibliography and history of scholarship (for my views on these aspects of his book see my review in *Currents in Theology and Mission* 7 [1980] 57-63) it is this theological statement and its implications which provide at once the assets and the potential liabilities of this epochal work.

ASSETS

Recent research on the Old Testament canon by Sid Z. Leiman and Albert Sundberg have brought new life to the old question of which books were counted in

and which were counted out. Childs has his own views in this area, too, but he marks a major shift by understanding the canonical process as something far broader. As the various sources were woven together in the Pentateuch or the words of Second Isaiah were integrated into the book we now call Isaiah, the community of faith was attempting to make the Scriptures useable for all future generations. While not every stage along the way is still recoverable and the tradents may even at times have intentionally hidden their traces, Childs enables us to understand the Scriptures as the final product of a centuries-long effort and to see a continuity in that effort between tradents and redactors and scribes until gradually the canonical status of these thirty-nine books was recognized by all. This suggestion takes seriously what we have discovered about how the Bible came to us, and it eliminates the gap between the time when the books were composed and when the canonical decisions were made. Because canon-making was a process connected with the community of faith, the old argument about the priority of Scripture or Tradition is shown to be somewhat beside the point.

One significant way in which this canonical shaping took place is what Childs terms the addition of an eschatological framework. This is a second asset of his work. While he never really provides an adequate definition for eschatology, he apparently means the understanding of Scripture as promissory and moving toward fulfillment. Tentative and partial fulfillments abound, but the thrust of many parts of Scripture puts the reader in the tension between promise and fulfillment, where he or she feels addressed by the promissory word as something not yet cashed in. The eschatology of the Bible is not some thin redactional layer that can easily be peeled off, but it is constitutive of the literature itself. While the stories about the patriarchs in Genesis may once have dealt with the founding of sanctuaries or inter-tribal strife, the dominant force in their shaping was the promissory framework. God's word to the patriarchs about the land, children and blessing is the core of the book of Genesis as we have it. To attempt to document the historicity of the patriarchs or to reconstruct its long tradition history runs the risk of missing the canonical arrows that point to a God who promises.

A third major asset of the book is its manifold attempt to understand the Old Testament holistically. A recent lecture I heard on the theology of the prophet Micah derived all its data from that book's first three chapters and understood the prophet only as one who accused Israel. The canonical Micah, of course, also talks of the final exaltation of Jerusalem, the coming of the messiah, and the incomparability of a God who casts our sins into the depths of the sea. Childs stresses that the canonical shaping intended us to read a book like Micah from this fuller perspective. Similarly, the historical Amos may have been able to formulate his message under the title, "The end has come for Israel," but the book as it winds up with a ringing announcement of the restoration of the fallen booth of David and the gift of unparalleled fertility to the land. This positive ending is not something disconnected, a "Hollywood" ending. Rather it maintains continuity with the historical Amos by showing that the good news only comes to people who have been judged because of their sins, and it comes only by the grace of Israel's God. Israel's future for both the historical and canonical Amos is a future given by Yahweh. Deuteronomy 31-34 are not an appendix to the "real"

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Deuteronomy, and they can be ignored only at the risk of totally misunderstanding the final book in the Pentateuch. Chapter 31, for

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Example, shows that previous chapters of law function as witness against all future generations who rebel; chapter 32 contrasts the unchangeable fidelity of God with the perversity of his faithless people; chapter 33 shifts the focus from Israel's behavior to God's ultimate promise-full purpose; chapter 34 assesses Moses as one who wrought great deeds for Israel through the power of God and whose deeds are now recorded in the law of Moses.

Liabilities

Childs provides many examples of how the canonical shape affects the meaning of the text, but he is somewhat unclear about the method to be used in discovering the canonical meaning. Despite his own excellent credentials as an historical critic, displayed in numerous articles and a major commentary on Exodus (*The Book of Exodus* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974]), he does not specify how—if at all—historical criticism contributes to an understanding of the canonical text. Historical criticism enables us to describe what a given author meant in his original historical context, but the message Childs finds is often more timeless. His procedure has some resemblance to redaction criticism, but it is hardly a one-to-one relationship. His is not the method of a David Clines, who has attempted to understand the Pentateuch as a literary whole by isolating its theme and who begins with the final form of the text and virtually ignores its prehistory. Childs acknowledges the prehistory and finds the meaning-making in the gradual production of the text. I suspect that Childs would also find inadequate attention to the community of faith in the work of Clines. So how are we to interpret from a canonical perspective?

A second liability in the Childs proposal revolves around the question of the source of Scriptures' authority. Is it their canonical form which makes them authoritative, or is it their testimony to the God who promises and judges? Perhaps I am making a dichotomy where a synthesis is called for, or, perhaps, I am arguing for what I understand to be a particularly Lutheran insight into the nature of Scripture. In any case, the point is not unrelated to the fact that many biblical critics who want to proclaim the full message of the Scriptures occasionally find some of the most precious accounts of God's goodness in pre-canonical documents. I do not want to surrender the message of the Deuteronomistic Historian, Second Isaiah, and the Priestly stratum in the Pentateuch to the category of the history of Israel's religion. I find in these and similar documents powerful and

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ding of these documents see *Israel in Exile: A Theological Interpretation* [Philadelphia Fortress, 1979]). While caution is surely called for, there are times when the message of J, P, and Second Isaiah witnesses more clearly and poignantly than the final form of the Pentateuch and Isaiah. If it is the Gospel which gives the Scriptures their authority, it is not all that surprising that pre-canonical documents can be fully authoritative.

Finally, one wonders why the focus is limited to understanding *the Old Testament* as Scripture. Childs has elsewhere discussed Psalm 8 in its total biblical context, both in the Psalter and as reflected in the book of Hebrews, and in his

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Exodus commentary he devoted major sections on each pericope to the Old Testament Context and the New Testament Context. Childs himself is aware of this important issue (see p. 338). But if it is the final, authoritative form that is to be the basis for the Scripture's use, is not that form for us the Christian Bible? To have written this book from such a perspective would have cut down on its ecumenical value for Jewish-Christian dialogue, and it also would have raised a persistent and necessary question: "But what did the Old Testament mean in its original context?" I understand and support Childs' decision to write the book as he did. But once he has retreated to a pre-New Testament context, can he defend against those who want to push back to *other* "pre" forms—like J and P and the rest?

However that may be, we might make bold to ask Childs for a reprise: How about an *Introduction to the Old Testament as Christian Scripture*? That request is only a roundabout way of expressing my deep esteem for the work we have in hand, a book I deeply treasure.