

A Book Worth Discussing: Brevard S. Childs. *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture.*

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Make no mistake: this is one of the most important books in theology published in the 1970s. The scholarship is often dazzling — extensive, up-to-date bibliographies, a balanced presentation of the major issues in biblical studies, and a breadth of vision that takes American scholarship seriously. In the introductions of Eissfeldt, Fohrer, and Kaiser, Old Testament scholarship seems often to be a German game.

But what marks this introduction as classic is its central theme, presented with passion and erudition, challenging all students of the Bible regardless of their labels as conservative, liberal, or whatever. This introduction seeks to describe the form and function of the Hebrew Bible *in its role as sacred scripture for Israel*. The crucial issue, according to Childs, is how one understands the nature of the Old Testament in relation to its authority for the community which shaped it and preserved it. The relationship between the growing biblical writings and Israel was dialectical: the word gave the community its form and content, but the community affected the word by the way it selected, collected, and ordered it. For Childs, then, the canonical issue is far more crucial than the final dogmatic decisions which decided which book was in, which one out. "The heart of the canonical process lay in transmitting and ordering

the authoritative tradition in a form which was compatible to function as scripture for a generation which had not participated in the original events of revelation." (p. 60) The community helped the tradition function for coming generations, and it is this resultant shape which is — or should be — the object of biblical interpretation.

Childs is by no means suggesting a return to pre-critical times. While the current regnant theology in the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod also insists that the exegete interpret the canonical text, the LCMS assumes that the canonical text is identical with the text penned by Moses (for the Pentateuch) or by Isaiah (for chapters 40-55), a position that most scholars today, including Childs, would find intellectually in-defensible and untrue. While certain conservative/fundamentalist scholars may seek an unexpected ally in Childs, they are bound to be disappointed in the final analysis.

The people most seriously challenged by Childs will be precisely those historical critics who have used the tools of their discipline to seek the kerygma or message of the Old Testament. Confessional seminary professors have long regaled their students with a view of the Yahwist (J) as a profound statement of the promise tradition to and for 10th century Israel, or they have argued that

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Second Isaiah enunciated a wondrous gospel to Israel in exile in the 6th century B.C. In principle, Childs does not deny the correctness of this historical research although he offers some wise caution about the frequent subjectivity of its results. His central objection to it is that this approach magnifies the hermeneutical gap or problem — what the Yahwist or Second Isaiah said was a message to people 2,500-3,000 years ago: how do you get from "what it meant" to "what it might mean"? Childs argues that through the dialectic, canonical process, important hermeneutical activity took place which made that original document valid for and appropriable by coming generations. To neglect these hermeneutical guidelines would be the height of folly.

Childs, of course, is not the only one today interested in the final form of the text. In addition to the non-historical approach of fundamentalism, there is the "newer criticism" associated with English studies, structural analysis, and rhetorical criticism. All of these disciplines recognize that a work like the Pentateuch has a meaning as a whole, and that *this* meaning is its primary meaning, rather than that meaning or message extracted from a reconstructed, pre-final phase. But Childs' canonical approach differs from the latter three methodologies by interpreting the biblical text in relation to a community of faith and practice for whom it served a particular theological role as possessing divine authority. Time and again he returns to the peculiar relationship between text and people of God which is constitutive of canon. The final shape of the text often reflects a judgment on or even a transformation of earlier forms of the text; this final text, in his opinion, is the one which continues to exercise an

authority on the community of faith. Through the canonical process the traditions from the past were transmitted in such a way that their authoritative claims were laid upon all successive generations of Israel. Historical criticism is demoted by Childs from its role as the primary way to read the Bible. Rather, the interpreter is challenged to look closely at the biblical text in its received form and then critically to discern its function for a community of faith.

When it comes to specifics, the sparks start to fly already with textual criticism. In 1974 I wrote (and Childs quotes me): "Textual criticism is the discipline that tries to recover the original copy (autograph) of a piece of literature by comparing its available copies, all of which inevitably contain mistakes." Is that the goal of a textual critic of the Old Testament as sacred Scripture? "No," says Childs. For such a person the goal is to seek to recover the stabilized canonical text through the vehicle of the Masoretic traditions. That means the text critic seeks to establish a Hebrew text which is closest to the *original text of the first century A. D.*

At about that time the canonical process was at an end and a text form was selected once and for all. Childs by no means denies the great multiplicity of text types before the first century, but he uses them, not to reconstruct a more original or better text, but only to understand the canonical text. At the end of 1 Sam. 1:24, for example, the Hebrew text reads: "And she [Hannah] brought him [Samuel] to the house of Yahweh at Shiloh, and *the lad became a lad.*" Usually text critics — and Childs agrees — hold that the italicized words are a corruption of a more original reading preserved in the Septuagint and in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls. But the

refers to "former things" and "new things." "Former things" in the original, sixth century context, meant the first Exodus, the destruction of Jerusalem, or the early activities of Cyrus, all of which were the former things accomplished by the word of Yahweh. But when Second Isaiah became part of the Isaiah book, former things can only refer, according to Childs, to the prophecies of First Isaiah — this prophetic word has been confirmed. The canonical shape testifies to the continuity of God's plan for Israel.

Who is the servant in Isa 40-55? The last two hundred years of biblical scholarship have produced a bewildering attempt to discover who was originally meant in the sixth century, and this search remains without a clear answer. How would a canonical critic approach this problem? The canon-producing process made no attempt to identify the servant with any figure in *First* Isaiah, such as the messiah. Rather, the canonical tradition identified the servant as Israel even though some of the descriptions of the servant have led to the many alternate surmises referred to above. The canonical process, therefore, has pre-served the traditions of the servant in a form which reflects a great variety of tensions (corporate reality vs. individual; promised new Israel of the future vs. a suffering and atoning figure of the past). Since this diversity could not be resolved in terms of Israel's past experience, the canonical text implies that the past would have to receive its meaning from the future. In this case I think Childs tries to make a virtue out of the unclarity of the text. Granted the servant texts have gained profound — and different — meanings from the subsequent experience of Jews and Christians, but is it not legitimate to try to pin down what

the text's original intention was?

If it is the canonical text that is to be interpreted, what tasks remain for historical criticism in studying Isaiah? The main contribution is the discovery of the complex history of the book. Thus the critic detects the community's activity in selecting, collecting and ordering, and seeing this, is forced to come to grips with the theological issues of canon, the community of faith, and the role of the spirit in shaping and handing-on the tradition. Criticism also shows that the book is not ordered chronologically, that Isaiah's call is not to be psychologized, and that Isa. 40-55 is not to be interpreted rationalistically as a series of supernatural predictions. Note that Childs does not think historical criticism uncovers *the* meaning or message of the text.

Some years ago Childs wrote a book chronicling the end of "biblical theology," particularly that kind of theology that focused on the mighty acts of God in history. His canonical study on Isaiah demonstrates to him once again that the Old Testament is not a message about divine acts in history as such, but about the power of the word of God. The divine word of God confirms itself in bringing to completion its promise (read: what critics call Second Isaiah confirms the word of First Isaiah and of his God). History receives its meaning from the divine word; the divine word does not receive its meaning from the mighty acts of God.

Critics have often polemicized against regarding the Bible as timeless truth. Rather, they hold that the writers addressed specific situations with specific messages; their message must be understood from the time in which they spoke. "Not so," says Childs. Via the canonical process Isa 40-55 was severed from its

original historical moorings in the exile, given a completely new and non-historical framework, and thus rendered accessible to all future generations. Second Isaiah becomes a general eschatological hope addressed to future Israel. It is in this canonical shape that the New Testament employed Isa. 40-55. While this approach to "Second Isaiah" was one the earlier Christians shared with their Jewish colleagues, they -- and we — differ from the Jews on the *nature of the promise* and the *identity of Israel*. To breach this theological gap will require some other means than historical criticism, which often acts as if agreement on the meaning "back then" would be a great ecumenical boon.

Space permits only one more brief sample of a canonical understanding. Childs does not basically contest the fact the Deuteronomy is related *in some way* to the 7th century reform of Josiah — though there are many complications on this issue today. But the canonical importance of Deuteronomy lies in its providing the hermeneutical key for understanding the law of the Pentateuch in its role as the sacred scripture of Israel. Moses explains in Deuteronomy the divine will to a new generation which had not itself experienced the formative events of its religious history. How is past tradition to be made alive for Israel? Deuteronomy makes clear that God's covenant is never tied to past history, but through an act of commitment Israel of every age partakes of the selfsame event of Sinai. Deuteronomy teaches that the law demands a response of commitment, and its summary of the law in terms of loving God with heart, soul, and mind is a check against all forms of legalism. The law points to the living will of God whose eternal purpose for the life of his people offers the only grounds for hope

and salvation. Deuteronomy's "original" role as a late pre-exilic reform document, calling Israel to radical repentance and the putting away of other gods lest it suffer the curses of the covenant, is *not* its canonical meaning.

In summing up, what are the strengths of this book and what are its weaknesses? Childs brilliantly summarizes the basic critical issues today though he usually refers the reader to men like Fohrer to pick up information on the "nuts and bolts" of introduction. Reading his discussion of scholarly debates helps one see where the stream of scholarship is flowing, without getting bogged down in all sorts of trivia and side-channels. Most importantly, he demonstrates how the canonical contexts transform individual texts greatly. His views on the over-all meaning of the Pentateuch or of the book of Isaiah are clearly great advances, and they can be matched for each of the books in the Old Testament. With Childs one is wrestling with a major figure in biblical interpretation.

Still I have several serious misgivings about the central thesis he proposes. 1) Is it not possible that the power, spiritual insight, or interpretation of God or the human situation was better, clearer, or whatever, in, say, the Yahwist or in Second Isaiah, than in the modifications which the text experienced in the canon-making process? Is there not a sense in which the blurring of the historical particularity is a great loss, a loss which historical criticism gives us the possibility of remedying?

2) What really is the on-going role of historical criticism? Childs himself is an excellent practitioner of it — witness his book on *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis*, or his commentary on *Exodus*, which contain much historical criticism in addition

to his canonical-critical comments. Is historical criticism merely to show *that* the original texts have been collected, selected, and ordered, thus proving the large role of the canon-making process? Is there not a more direct theological task left for historical criticism?

3) What is it that gives the Scriptures their authority? Does their authority reside in their canonical character? Or is it not the word of gospel /promise they contain that gives the Scriptures their authority? The latter formulation is one Seminex has stood for at great expense, and to my mind, this insight, forged in the heat of an altogether different sort of argument, applies to the present question as well. Is it the framework given to Second Isaiah that makes him accessible to Israel of every age, or is it that we read there of a God of promise, faithful to a particular people, and realize that this faithful God of promise addresses us in our particularity, analogously, and as the same promiser? Does not this promiser show up most of all on the cross and there give us the hermeneutical glasses to go back and see the text of Second Isaiah anew. I suspect my criticism of Childs is unabashedly Lutheran, and I can't help but wonder if his approach is not greatly shaped by his own Calvinistic orientation. One suspects that his brilliantly argued and passionately stated thesis will not be universally accepted. But this failure will be no criticism of his intellec-

tual achievement. It merely means that there are many people for whom canon, however defined, is not the source of authority.

4) Finally, one must ask whether Childs' canonical approach really closes the hermeneutical gap as much as he thinks. Do we still not have the yawning chasm between then and now, between there and here, between a message addressed to God's Old Testament people and a message read by us Christians *through* the all-transforming message of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus? That is, is there still not an enormous gap between the canonical Isaiah and the Christian of the twentieth century?

Again, make no mistake about it: this is a very important book. My criticisms reflect the depth of his challenge to me, my exegetical method, and my theology; my enthusiasm reflects the depth of the book's knowledge and synthesis. Not least important is that Childs holds a chair at Yale and has used that secular university position to reopen the question of how the Bible speaks to the community of faith. So there is no mere dead scientism in the Ivy League, nor a cynicism that smirks "For God, for country, and for Yale." In Brevard Childs we have a man who reads the Scriptures *Christo et ecclesiae* — for Christ and for the church! What a refreshing way to get called back to the drawing boards.