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CANONICAL CRITICISM

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One significant factor distinguishing biblical texts from similar ancient Near Eastern writings is that they were not dug up from the ground by archaeologists, but have been interpreted and handed on from the beginning by communities who define themselves by them. Tradition history has demonstrated that Israelite traditions were transmitted and reinterpreted by successive generations to respond to new situations, and the Bible is the result of layer upon layer of these resignified traditions and stories. At certain historical moments, notably the sixth century B.C.E. and the first century C.E., the process of shaping traditions ceased and the finished text became canonical. However, even when the boundaries were fixed, the form of the text remained fluid for centuries, as text critics have shown. Further, the process of recontextualizing and actualizing traditions that had been informing Israel since at least the tenth century B.C.E. continued unabated in Israel's heirs, Judaism and Christianity. Although we know very little about how canonization occurred, it is clear that the canon represented formalization of an ancient phenomenon: a core of traditions that was continually contemporized for the benefit of the community.

It is this dynamic quality of scripture in interactive formation with the believing communities that canonical criticism addresses. In its narrow sense "canon" refers to lists of authoritative books, found in both Judaism and Christianity from the beginning of the first century C.E., and a concern with what is included in the boundaries of the official text and what is excluded. But the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Septuagint, and the New Testament all bear witness to the diversity of canons in the first century C.E. Even today the major faiths for whom the Bible is of central importance represent five different canons. Canonical criticism does not address the history of these lists or the councils that may have formalized them; those concerns properly belong to the history of canon. Canonical criticism begins instead with the assumption that biblical texts were generated, transmitted,

reworked, and preserved in communities for which they were authoritative and that biblical criticism should include study of how these texts functioned in the believing communities. Source, form, and redaction criticism focus on stages in the development of the biblical text prior to its final form, whereas canonical criticism analyzes the text as it was received in its final form. The emphasis may be on the function of the fixed text in the first communities to receive it, or on the process of adaptation by which the community resignified earlier traditions to function authoritatively in a new situation and thereby produced the final text. In either case, the focus of canonical criticism is on the two-way process by which the tradition functioned to define the communities and communities continued to shape the traditions. Hence the emphasis is on communities, rather than individual authors or sources, and on the final form rather than on earlier stages in its development. Canonical criticism understands the exegetical task to be constructive as well as descriptive.

Historical Background

A brief sketch of three factors giving rise to the canonical approach may help clarify its relation to biblical criticism. First, the attempts to write a biblical theology, ongoing since at least the 1940s, began to unravel in the early 1960s. The task of biblical theologians had been to find the locus of biblical authority in a single, controlling theological construct of the scriptures. Two criteria were essential: The idea must be distinctive to the scriptures (i.e., not found in the literature outside Israel) and the Bible must be so suffused with it implicitly or explicitly that at least a tinge of it could be detected in every book. Like a variety of garments dyed various shades of the same hue, the books of the Bible could be unified by their tincture with a unifying theological concept. For Walther Eichrodt this concept was covenant, for Oscar Cullman the biblical idea of time, for Gerhard von Rad salvation history.[1] But the multiplicity of theories, and the failure of any of them to construct a roof wide enough to cover all of the idiosyncratic residents of the Bible, began to suggest that the search for the unifying idea of scripture was ill-conceived. The recalcitrant books of the Bible were made of different fabrics and would not all take a single dye.

Brevard Childs responded to this situation in his *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (1970), in which he suggested that exegesis should not stop with relating a pericope to its original historical context but should explore the dialectic between individual text and full canonical context. At the same time, he was working on parts of the Old Testament seen by others as intrusions into the text, such as Psalm superscriptions, asking how these "late" additions functioned, and what they could tell scholars about the ways in

which the earliest communities unified their diverse authoritative tradi-tions.[2] The development of the canonical approach moved the quest for the locus of biblical authority from the Bible's content to its shape.

A second factor influencing the development of canonical criticism was growing dissatisfaction with the results of historical-critical scholarship. What had promised to be an objective analysis of the biblical texts in their original settings had proved impossible because it was based on the assump-tion that the scholar could stand outside of history in order to analyze it. A review of critical work over a period of years shows how emphases change because the exegetes' own historical contexts inevitably color their work. It is easy from a distance to see the effect of Darwin's theory on Wellhausen's reconstruction of Israel's religion, of existentialist philosophy on Bultmann's reading of the New Testament, or of anti-Semitism in some Christian Old Testament scholarship. The growing suspicion that value-free, objective his-torical work is impossible has posed one of the most serious challenges to the historical-critical method.

Symptomatic of this problem was the hidden assumption of many biblical critics that authority rested in the earliest version of a biblical tradition. The work of later tradents and redactors was called "accretions," a term suggesting hardened deposits encrusting and distorting the original text, implicitly understood to be of lesser authority than the earliest tradition. The judgment that certain verses were "not genuine" ostensibly referred to their provenance but functionally came to mean "not authoritative." Authority was located in individuals, such as the Yahwist, Isaiah of Jerusalem, or Jeremiah, over against the communities that preserved, interpreted, and shaped the traditions about the individuals. Such a bias toward the earliest over the later and the individ-ual over the community represented the values of Western post-Enlightenment societies read back into early Israel. Ironically, both liberals and fundamentalists based their reading of scripture on the shared assumption that the individual author represents the authoritative voice of the text.

By focusing on the early communities that preserved and shaped the traditions, canonical criticism resisted the unspoken hermeneutical assump-tion of historical criticism that biblical authority resided at the level of the "original author." On the other hand, canonical criticism was also a logical development of historical-critical work, whose history was a movement from smaller (sources) to larger (redaction) units of tradition. Canonical criti-cism can be understood as the next logical step after redaction criticism, moving from the last stage of redaction to the early stages of reception as scripture. James Sanders notes the necessity of canonical criticism by argu-ing that "criticism had skipped over the crucial link, jumping from redaction to conciliar decision."[3] Canonical criticism attends to this rich stage in the formation of the Bible.

Converging with growing disenchantment in the academy was the disil-lusionment in the churches that methods promising to make the Bible accessible had in fact locked it in the past. Further, by fragmenting the text into ever smaller units that could only be read diachronically, some thought that biblical scholars had made the Bible virtually unreadable and unpreachable. In the words of a one-time colleague of both Childs and Sanders, scholars had effectively "decanonized" the Bible.[4] By reading the Bible as scripture, which meant emphasizing the continuity between the reading of canonizing communities and contemporary believing communi-ties, canonical criticism tried to bridge this gap. Sanders refers to canonical criticism as "the beadle who carries the critically studied Bible in procession back to the church lectern from the scholar's study."[5] The origins of canon-ical criticism, then, lie in both the academic and the ecclesiastical communities. Its history is germane to an understanding of its nature, which can be characterized as a hermeneutical approach, grounded in the historical-critical method.

Canonical Context and Canonical Hermeneutics

Canonical criticism has been defined by the work of two scholars, Brevard Childs of Yale University and James Sanders of Claremont Graduate School, whose approaches differ in significant ways.[6] The very term "canonical criticism" embodies the problem and is a good place to begin the discussion. The term was coined by Sanders in 1972 in *Torah and Canon*, in which he raised the question of why the Torah ends with Deuteronomy rather than Joshua. Since the most ancient traditions appear to have been a story of God's promise to the fathers and its fulfillment in the conquest of Canaan, the omission of Joshua—the fulfillment of the promise—is a startling reinterpretation of Israel's foundational story. In its final, canonical shape, the Torah in effect reinterprets Israel's story. Tradition history and form criticism have recovered the lineaments of the original story, climaxing with Israel's entry into Canaan (see, e.g., Ex. 15:1–18; Deut. 26:5–9; 33:1–29); yet the authoritative version preserved in Israel ends with Israel encamped in the enemy territory of Moab, leaderless after the death of Moses. The results of redaction criticism indicate that the final editing of the Torah was accomplished by Priestly editors in sixth-century Babylon. The work of canonical criticism begins with the results of redaction criticism, asking how the *shape* of the Torah resignified the tradi-tions embedded within it. In Sanders's analysis, the canonical shaping of Israel's story into the Torah produced a radical new interpretation of the promise-fulfillment tradition by truncating the original story. For the exiles in Babylon who had lost the land, the Torah offered a new reading of

traditions that must have seemed dead, for it situated the fulfillment of the promise in the future. Further, the Torah moved the focus from the land, which Israel had lost, to the law, which it could never lose.

Sanders used the term "canonical criticism" purposely to underscore the nature of canonical criticism as a critical pursuit, building on tradition history and comparative midrash. Its goal is to recover the hermeneutics of those who interpreted older traditions into what became the authoritative version. Using the metaphor of inflected languages, Sanders refers to the canon as a paradigm by which the believing community can learn to conjugate the verbs of God's activity. Scripture does not offer eternal truths or theological doctrines but a set of stories, along with the various ways in which the believing communities have found life in those stories. The very nature of canon is to be simultaneously stable and adaptable, a fixed set of traditions infinitely adaptable to new contexts by successive communities of believers. Hence, for Sanders, it is not the final form of the text but the process by which the community arrived at that form that is canonically significant. Canonical criticism helps close the gap between what it meant and what it means by retrieving canonical hermeneutics, the underlying theological presuppositions by which ancient communities applied old traditions to new situations.

Brevard Childs, on the other hand, rejects the term "canonical criticism" precisely because it implies that here is another technique that can take its place alongside source, form, and redaction criticism. Canonical criticism for him is "a stance from which the Bible is to be read as sacred Scripture."[7] Childs uses the term "canon" to emphasize "that the process of religious interpretation by a historical faith community left its mark on the literary texts which did not continue to evolve and which became the normative interpretation of those events to which it bore witness."[8] Characterizing scripture as canon also avoids the idea of an authoritative text whose meaning resides in the mind of God, for canonical texts imply an authority resulting from transmission and reception of traditions that have been shaped in the communities of faith.

Unlike redaction criticism, which investigates the editorial processes leading up to the final form of the text, canonical criticism seeks to understand the effect of redaction on the final form of the text and to investigate its theological dimensions. Childs has shown, for example, how the canonical context of Isaiah 1–39 within Isaiah 1–66 shifts the original emphasis of Isaiah's message of doom for Jerusalem to a movement from judgment to salvation.[9] Although the historical context of First Isaiah is important for exegesis, for Childs this context has been subsumed into the larger literary context of the canonical book of Isaiah. While an exegetical understanding of First Isaiah begins with eighth-century Judah, a canonical reading proceeds

from there to analyze how the words of the eighth-century prophet first functioned as scripture when they were preserved on a scroll with the words of the anonymous prophet of sixth-century Babylon. Significant for Childs is the way the original oracles are "loosed from their historical moorings" and thereby made available for successive generations. Reading the oracles of First Isaiah canonically, therefore, means reading them synchronically in the literary and theological context of the whole book of Isaiah. For Childs the focus is not the process of reinterpretation or the hermeneutic leading to the final form of the text, but its *theological shape*. The term "canonical" signifies both the historically final as well as the normative form of the text.

From these two approaches it is possible to distill some basic features characterizing the emerging discipline of canonical criticism. First, while using literary and historical methods, canonical criticism is primarily theological in its nature. Its underlying concern is to find the locus of authority in the biblical texts by analyzing the ways in which the texts were authoritative for the believing communities that received them as scripture. Second, canonical criticism focuses on the dynamics by which the communities of faith and the developing traditions shaped each other. The biblical text is seen as the product of the believing community, but at the same time the community's identity has been shaped by reflection on its religious traditions. The voices of individual authors preserved within the text are of less significance than the "voice" of the text received by the community. Third, canonical criticism assumes that hermeneutics by which the scriptures can be appropriated need not (indeed, should not) be imported from philosophical or theological systems, but are to be found within the scriptures themselves. The discipline of canonical criticism attempts to tease them out, either in the hermeneutics of the communities adapting the tradition (Sanders) or in the shape of the canonical text (Childs). Childs expresses this succinctly when he says "There is no one hermeneutical key for unlocking the biblical message, but the canon provides the arena in which the struggle for understanding takes place."[10]

Fourth, canonical criticism insists that authority resides only in the full canon, which is the context in which every biblical text finally must be read. The voice of a particular tradition is heard canonically against other voices and points of view; no position is absolute. Canonical criticism views scripture not as a treasury of stories but as a lively discussion in which theological ideas are constantly being reformulated in response to new data. Childs notes:

> One of the important aspects within the shaping process of the Old Testament is the manner by which different parts of the canon were increasingly interchanged to produce a new angle of vision on the

tradition. The canonical process involved the shaping of the tradition not only into independent books, but also into larger canonical units, such as the Torah, Prophets and Writings. For example, law was seen from the perspective of wisdom; psalmody and prophecy were interrelated; and Israel's narrative traditions were sapientialized. . . . The canonical process thus built in a dimension of flexibility which encourages constantly fresh ways of actualizing the material.[11]

Reading in a Canonical Context

Genesis 1–2 offers an opportunity to explore how canonical criticism relies on the results of historical criticism yet approaches the text with a different set of questions. Source criticism has demonstrated that Genesis 1–2 is a composite work, comprised of Priestly traditions in Gen. 1:1–2:4a and Yahwistic traditions in Gen. 2:4b–25, while redaction criticism suggests that P has subordinated the J tradition by subsuming it under the framework established by Genesis 1. P's editorial technique here appears to be asyndetic, setting one text alongside another without any link. As a result scholars refer to "the two creation accounts" in Genesis 1–2, and are interested in differentiating the two accounts by their reliance on earlier traditions, theological presuppositions, and their relation to the purposes of J and P.

But the shape of the biblical text before the reader does not suggest that it is offering two contradictory accounts of a single event. The canonical approach tries to make sense of the text as it appears (i.e., the Masoretic text) and to hear in it a single voice, while at the same time affirming that literary-historical analysis has recovered two independent traditions. Since the believing communities transmitted only the text as we have it, scholarly reconstructions of earlier authoritative traditions embedded in the text are pertinent to the prehistory of the text but not to an understanding of its canonical meaning. The canonical text speaks with a single voice, and that is not the voice of the earliest tradent, nor of the redactor, but a new voice that transcends even the intentions of the final redactor.

A canonical approach can legitimately seek the unity of the text in this new voice. Hence Gen. 2:4b, "These are the generations of the heavens and the earth," can be understood not as the end of the P creation account, forming an inclusion with Gen. 1:1, but rather as the introduction to the J account.[12] In this reading, J's account is absorbed into P's and read as an elaboration of it. The creation of heavens and earth in Genesis 1 points to the creation of human beings and their intimate relation to YHWH in the garden. Whatever the striking shift in language and literary style from Genesis 1 to Genesis 2 may suggest about original sources, it now functions to alert the reader to the relationship between the two chapters. Similarly,

by reading Genesis 2 as an elaboration of the creation of the heavens and the earth in Genesis 1, the reader is encouraged to hear the language of Genesis 2 as figurative rather than literal.

In wrestling with the problem of the two names for the deity, the ancient rabbis determined that whenever the text said *Elohim* (God), it referred to the just aspect of the deity, and whenever it said *YHWH* (Lord), it referred to the deity as merciful. They did not posit two sources behind the text of the Torah, but they did hear two opposing tendencies, and drew from them the lesson of the inscrutability of the Holy One, paradoxically both just and merciful. Reading the text as a unity, the rabbis nevertheless heard the echoes of two voices and tried to maintain their distinctive emphases even as they harmonized them. One of the benefits of canonical criticism is its recovery of the history of interpretation as a legitimate aid to exegesis.

A somewhat different way of reading canonically is to highlight the multivalence in the final shape of the text. If Gen. 2:4a is read as an inclusio with Gen. 1:1 and is the end of the Priestly tradition, then a distinctive shift in perspective occurs at 2:4b. As has often been noted, P's term "the heavens and the earth" signifies primary interest in the cosmos and its order, while J's "the earth and the heavens" indicates emphasis on the earth and its inhabitants. The different semantic fields and literary forms employed by the two chapters strengthen the perception that here are two different perspectives. Finally, the different sequence of events and mode of creation in each chapter might well lead a reader to ask why the canonical form of the creation story is so confusing and contradictory. The canonical shape of Genesis 1–2 encourages the reader to attend to the peculiar diction and timbre of each voice in turn. To read Genesis 1–2 canonically is to allow the play of perspectives without insisting on a resolution. Perhaps the "canonical intention" is to remind the believing communities that creation is God's business. One account standing by itself could encourage a literal reading, leading the community to believe that it had the facts of how God created the world. Two conflicting accounts set back to back suggest that all language about the process of creation is figurative.

This understanding of Genesis 1–2 is supported when we broaden the canonical context to include the entire canon of the Hebrew Bible. Most other creation texts are poetic, and often highlight the very aspects notably absent from Genesis 1. The battle between the creator god and the waters/dragon of chaos, so prevalent in the literature of Israel's neighbors, does not occur in Genesis 1. The absence of the traditional battle is particularly noticeable because the text opens with uncreated waters and darkness, and God spends the first two days of creation separating off and containing these forces. The creation of light and of the firmament seems to deal with problems posed by preexistent "stuff" whose presence impedes the created

order. Of course, no battle takes place; God speaks, and the light and the firmament appear to cordon off the darkness and the waters. Yet P's insistence that God was alone at creation and met no opposition is challenged by poetic traditions (Pss. 74:2–17; 89:5–11; Job 38:8–21) and again in the eschatological visions of the prophets (Isa. 51:9–11) and the apocalyptic belief that the ultimate battle will recapitulate God's victory at creation (Isa. 27:1; most vividly apparent in Revelation 12). The canon bears witness to a variety of creation traditions, some describing a bloody battle between YHWH and chaos, others picturing a calmly majestic artist calling the world into being.

Another creation text, Prov. 8:22–31, provides an alternative to the solitary deity of Genesis 1–2. In Proverbs, Wisdom (Hebrew: *ḥokmāh*, Greek: *sophia*) helps YHWH draw up blueprints for the cosmos and delights in the newly created works day by day. She is "the first of YHWH's works," preceding the creation of the world, yet Genesis 1–2 is silent about her. The figure of Wisdom is minor in the canon of the Hebrew Bible, yet becomes indispensable in the development of christological formulations about the preexistence of the Logos and its role in creation (e.g., in John 1:1–3 and Col. 1:15–17).

Genesis 1–2 reflects the ambiguity of the larger canonical treatment of creation, suggesting that no version of creation can be read as absolute. Since scripture is a canon and not a compendium, a faithful reading cannot select the text most conducive to the reader's own predisposition, but must maintain the multiplicity of traditions in all their ambiguity and contradiction. The most significant theological contribution of canonical criticism is the axiom that no voice of the canon should be privileged over others; there is no text by which all other texts must be interpreted. Biblical texts only become the Word of God in their full canonical context.

Canonical Hermeneutics

Reading Genesis 1–2 for its canonical hermeneutics illuminates another significant dimension of the text. The tradition that creation followed a bloody battle between a young deity and the primordial waters of chaos, portrayed as the dragon Tiamat, dominated Babylonian theology. The story of Marduk's victory over Tiamat and his subsequent creation of the world and enthronement as king was read in public celebration at the Babylonian New Year festival. A comparison of this story with Genesis 1 suggests that P incorporated the Babylonian cosmology and some of its storyline into the Israelite creation account, but with a distinctive shift in emphasis. By presenting the waters as a neutral, nameless presence, without history or power, P has transformed the old story into a monotheistic one. But the monotheizing hermeneutic creates the theological problem of theodicy. If there is no Tiamat, who is responsible for the evil we experience in creation?

Genesis 1 maintains a careful, ambivalent stance toward the waters. They have been drained of personality and divine status; nevertheless they remain in their appointed places. On the one hand, they had to be dealt with before God could create the world. On the other hand, they could be contained by the power of the divine word—contained, but not exterminated. The waters remain, albeit in check behind the firmament and under the earth, a potential threat to creation. This ambivalence toward the power of the waters is seen in P's version of the Flood narrative (Gen. 7:11), in which God temporarily allows the primordial waters to reclaim their original power, devastating the whole creation except the occupants of a single boat designed to withstand the waters. P calls attention again to the hostile nature of the waters in the Noachic covenant, when God promises never again to let the waters destroy the earth. Yet they remain, encircling the world from above, on the other side of the firmament, and from below, lapping at the pillars supporting the earth.

Elsewhere in the canon the menacing nature of the waters is graphically evoked. The use of the deep as an image of peril in the Psalms (Pss. 18:1–19; 69:1–3; 130:1) and the description of wicked enemies as "waters" (Isa. 17:12–14; S. of Sol. 8:7) testifies to the link made between the primordial waters and the human experience of evil. The interpretation of the ancient Babylonian story with a monotheistic hermeneutic results in a text in which the potential for evil in a good creation becomes a way of describing the freedom of God. It turns the question of theodicy around to view it from God's perspective, and what we are shown is the impenetrable mystery of the uncreated waters checked by the divine word.[13]

For those in Babylon who had lost their land and for whom God's promise seemed dead, the question of evil was not an academic one. The book of Lamentations and Psalms 74 and 137 eloquently bear witness to the genuine despair that threatened to overcome the exiled Judeans whose theological framework was inadequate to contain their experience. Either God had been defeated by Marduk or he had ruthlessly abandoned his people and promises. Even the theological explanation that eventually dominated, construing the exile as punishment for Judah's sins, was not wholly adequate. In the exile, apparently, the innocent had been swept away with the guilty.

In the context of this experience of cognitive dissonance between the official theology and the experience of the exile, the hermeneutics by which the ancient traditions were resignified in Genesis 1 are significant. Our reading suggests that theirs was a hermeneutic that above all presupposed the freedom of God. Not only is God not bound by any other powers in the universe, he is not even bound by Israel's theology. By placing Genesis 1 at the beginning of the Torah, the canonical shapers provided a lens through which the ensuing stories could be read. God is God, and is not limited by

any human understanding of what a deity ought to do. The unthinkable had happened to Israel, and it threatened Israel's most cherished doctrines about God. In this context of devastation, P fashioned a new way of reading the old stories, teaching the Judeans that their understanding of God had been inadequate; they needed to do a new reading of their entire history.

The Limits of Canonical Readings

Canonical criticism is in the formative stages, and its originators are still the most significant practitioners, but even at this stage misreadings demonstrate that reductive understandings are a serious problem. Some critics mistakenly construe canonical criticism to be akin to the New Criticism in literary analysis, an interest in the literary text without reference to any historical context. This misunderstanding arises from focusing on Childs's emphasis on interpreting the text in its final form and fails to grasp the importance of the believing communities as the context in which the text has been shaped.[14]

A second misunderstanding sees in canonical criticism an attempt to return to precritical reading, casting aside the gains of historical-critical work. This reductive view fails to see the foundations of historical-critical exegesis on which canonical criticism is based, and the tendency of canonical criticism to favor multiple readings of every biblical text. It is ironic that canonical criticism is attacked by some as akin to fundamentalism and by others as leaning toward deconstruction. And there may be cause for concern. Childs's work is extensive and highly nuanced. But in lesser hands canonical criticism could become simply a way of avoiding the arduous process of exegesis and returning to precritical reading of scripture.

An unresolved theological problem resulting from the hegemony of the historical-critical method is the relation of history to the biblical witness. Canonical criticism assumes that scripture resulted from the believing communities' reflection on Israel's religious traditions. Because the act of shaping loosened the traditions from their original moorings, the original historical contexts of passages recoverable by historical-critical methods have been subordinated to the canonical context in which they have been preserved. The actual events that gave rise to the religious traditions in the first place are not only for the most part unrecoverable, but are secondary. It is the witness of the believing community that is canonical, not the historical event itself. Canonical criticism resists dethroning the biblical witness as only one source of historical information among many. Here, canonical criticism has raised a most significant theological issue: What is the relation between historical-critical study of the Bible and its use as religious literature?[15]

On the other hand, canonical criticism as practiced by Childs tends to absolutize the historical moment crystallized in the final form of the text without much regard for the historical factors that may have influenced its formation. The moment of canonization, like earlier moments in the development of the text, was motivated by immediate concerns of the community; it was not directed at unborn generations centuries away. The canonical shapers of Isaiah may have loosed the oracles of First Isaiah from their historical moorings to attach them to the oracles of an anonymous exilic prophet, but they did so in response to a particular historical situation. Any move away from understanding the biblical writings in their historical context, at any stage in their development, opens the risk of absolutizing the words at the expense of the Word.

Another potential danger in canonical criticism is the tendency to read texts as a unity and therefore to prefer harmonization to dissonance and uncertainty. Reading a biblical book canonically is like walking a tightrope, because it means attending to the subordinated voices even while hearing them in the context of the dominant voice. When a canonical-critical reading subordinates earlier sources to later ones, it risks flattening out the text in order to make it more accessible to the reader. Yet it is precisely in the nature of the canon to protect the ancient voices and to create dissonances within the texts. The canon has a peculiar double effect, encouraging the reader to find unity in the texts, yet at the same time checking those attempts by its plurality of voices. Even if earlier traditions are intentionally recontextualized and subsumed in the final form of the text, they still remain part of its fabric. Sometimes the "fabric" of the text works against its final shape; in such cases the tension is a critical part of the authoritative voice of the text, transcending the agenda of any one historical group, including the canonical shapers, but preserving them all.[16] The sum is truly greater than the parts, but it will not tell the truth unless the parts function in it. Because of this peculiar nature of the canon, "the Bible contains its own self-corrective apparatus."[17] Further, "with its affirmation that many have been given glimpses of God's purpose and none has the entire, complete and final answer, the canon calls us to continue to study the text."[18]

Perhaps here is the genuine theological issue of canonical criticism as a hermeneutical approach to the text. Childs says that "the use of the term 'canonical integrity' is not to be identified with literary, historical, or conceptual unity. It refers rather to the effectiveness of the literature to function coherently within a community of faith."[19] Elsewhere he says:

I do not wish to suggest that the canonical shaping provides a full-blown hermeneutic as if there were only one correct interpretation built into every text which a proper canonical reading could always

recover. The canonical shaping provided larger contexts for interpretation, established the semantic level, and left important structural and material keys for understanding. Nevertheless, exegesis also involves the activity of the interpreter who from his modern context must also construe the material. There is an important dimension of "reader competence" which reacts to the coercion exercised by the text itself."[20]

Ideally, canonical shaping provides a guide to interpretation, not the assumption of a single "correct" reading. In practice, however, by finding a hermeneutical key in the final shape of the text, canonical criticism gives the impression of offering at least the parameters of a theologically definitive reading. The frequency of the term "normative" in canonical criticism further encourages the conclusion that the readings of canonical criticism are somehow authoritative ones. The variety of possible readings of Genesis 1–2 proposed above attempts to show that canonical criticism properly leads not to one normative reading but to a variety of canonical possibilities in a text. Perhaps the future of canonical criticism lies in the work of staking out the parameters within which a multiplicity of readings can function for the believing communities.

Notes

1. For a discussion of the relation between biblical theology and canonical criticism see James Barr, *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 130–44; Childs's response to Barr, in *Interpretation* 38 (1984): 66–70; and James Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 155–63.

2. Brevard Childs, "Psalm Titles and Midrashic Exegesis," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 16 (1971): 137–50.

3. Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text*, 165.

4. Gerald Sheppard, cited in Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 79, and Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text*, 158.

5. James Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 20.

6. For an interchange between Childs and Sanders see *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 2 (1980): 113–211.

7. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 82.

8. Childs, *Interpretation* 38 (1984): 68.

9. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 325–33.

10. Brevard Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 15.

11. Ibid., 3.

12. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 148–50.

13. For a fuller exploration of the relation between the motif of the waters and the problem of evil, see John Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

14. John Barton's *Reading the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), in which he presents canonical criticism as essentially a form of literary analysis, is a prime example of such a misunderstanding.

15. See Childs's remarks in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 16 (1980): 58, and *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 5.

16. A careful reader of 1 Samuel 7–31 cannot help seeing that the voice of the "early source," which is pro-Saul, cannot be readily harmonized with the redactor's voice, which is pro-David. Because the early Saul traditions and Saul's demise are so intertwined with David's rise, the canonical shape of the text suggests something of the dark side of God. As Childs repeatedly insists, a canonical reading is not coterminous with the agenda of the last redactors.

17. Sanders, *Canon and Community*, 46.

18. Donn F. Morgan, *Between Text and Community: The "Writings" in Canonical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 147.

19. Childs, *Interpretation* 38 (1984): 55.

20. Ibid., 69.

For Further Reading

Childs, Brevard. *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary.* Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974.

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From: S.L. McKenzie and
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To Each Its Own
Meaning
(Louisville, Westminster,
1999)