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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the biblical discipline of Canon Criticism. It will seek to define the discipline, describe its history, discuss its presuppositions, and its methodologies. Attention will also be given to the practical application of the discipline in biblical studies.

The primary sources for an understanding of this recent methodology are the works of Brevard Childs and James Sanders. That their efforts to make this discipline known have somewhat paid off, can be seen in the numbers of new books treating the topic of canon one way or the other.

It is hoped that the reader will get a feel for this discipline, do some additional reading from some of the many books published in this area, and put on the glasses of canon criticism to take a new, fresh look at the biblical text.

CHAPTER ONE DEFINITION AND PARAMETERS OF THE METHOD

Canon Criticism: Definition

Canon criticism can be defined, within the context of this paper, as "a method of study that has as its primary focus the interpretation of the New Testament within its canonical context."¹ Within the context of biblical studies, canon criticism includes both Testaments. In fact, the development of the methodology of canon criticism began with the Old Testament and broadened to include the New Testament as an obvious necessity.

Canon criticism is a recent arrival on the scene in the explicit form it now takes. The nineteen-sixties established dissatisfactions with the more traditional methodologies of biblical exegesis and resulted in the initiation of the methodology now known as canon criticism. Brevard Childs, Professor of Old Testament at the Divinity School, Yale University led the way in its development. James Sanders, Professor of Intertestamental and Biblical Studies at the School of Theology at Claremont and Professor of Religion at Claremont Graduate School, actually coined the term "canonical criticism" in 1972.

There is not agreement as to the title by which to identify this new methodology of biblical studies. The term "canonical criticism," as coined by James Sanders, is commonly employed by some for this purpose.² However, Brevard S. Childs resists this terminology with the follow-

¹Mikeal C. Parsons, "Canonical Criticism," in New Testament Criticism & Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 256.

²James A. Sanders, Torah and Canon (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), ix. Sanders (ix) introduced the term in the following remark: "The following is an essay in the origin and function of canon; it is, in effect, an invitation to formulate a sub-discipline of Bible study I think should be called canonical criticism." A further discussion of the role of James Sanders in the development and promotion of canonical criticism is found in this paper, Chapter Two: "History of the Method."

ing reason:

I am unhappy with this term because it implies that the canonical approach is considered another historical critical technique that can take its place beside source criticism, form criticism, rhetorical criticism, and similar methods. I do not envision the approach to canon in this light. Rather, the issue at stake in relation to the canon turns on establishing a stance from which the Bible can be read as sacred scripture.³

Other terms, "like 'canon criticism'⁴ or 'canonical approach'⁵ or 'canonical process approach' have been suggested as alternatives."⁶

Sanders defends his original title "canonical criticism" against those who would prefer another terminology. He suggests that two reasons stand behind the avoidance of the term. The first arises from those who fear that canonical criticism "can be misunderstood to say that criti-

³Brevard S. Childs, Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 82. Sanders, in Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism, Guides to Biblical Scholarship, Old Testament Series (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 18, agrees with Childs that "our common concern with canon cannot be reduced to another technique. It is indeed a stance from which to read the Bible. And that is the reason I say canonical criticism rather than canon criticism, because it, more than any mode yet developed for proper exegesis, includes a clear posture with regard to the Bible."

⁴See Albert C. Outler, "'Gospel Studies' in Transition," in The Relationship among the Gospels: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue, Trinity University Monograph Series in Religion, vol. 5, ed. William O. Walker, Jr., (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1978), 24,n.18. Outler states, "To me, 'canon criticism' seems a better analogue to 'form criticism,' 'redaction criticism,' 'genre criticism,' etc." However, Outler notes in his article, "The 'Logic' of Canon-making and the Tasks of Canon-criticism," in Texts and Testaments: Critical Essays on the Bible and Early Church Fathers, ed. W. Eugene March (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1980), 272,n.1 that "Nothing substantive that I know of turns on this option."

⁵This term is used by Sidney Greidanus among others. See his work, The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 73-79. This is the term of choice for Bernard Childs and is used consistently by him in his book, The New Testament As Canon: An Introduction (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

⁶Parsons, 255-56.

cism is canonical."⁷ Sanders pays scant attention to this objection. The major reason scholarship rejects the term is "because some scholars feel that the matter of biblical authority falls properly outside the province of historical study."⁸ The term "canonical criticism" remains commonly employed to describe the methodology.

The complexity of defining the methodology of canon criticism arises first, as discussed below, with the concept of canon itself. There is certainly no agreement how to define canon. James Sanders finds the concept of Torah as essential to the meaning of canon. In an exploration of the life of Israel, Sanders identifies two meanings for canon: "authority and invariability."⁹ Sanders observes:

A canon begins to *take shape* first and foremost because a question of identity or authority has arisen, and a canon begins to *become unchangeable* or invariable somewhat later, after the question of identity has for the most part been settled.¹⁰

Thus, for Sanders, "Canonical criticism starts by defining the hermeneutics of that generation which gave the canon its basic shape."¹¹

⁷Sanders, Canon and Community, 21.

⁸Sanders, Canon and Community, 21.

⁹Sanders, Torah and Canon, 91.

¹⁰Sanders, Torah and Canon, 91. To understand how the ideas of authority and invariability work in the New Testament, Sanders (91-92) shares the following example: "For instance, the New Testament *began* to take shape as a canon when the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple took place in A.D. 70 and the very nature and identity of the followers of Christ as a Jewish sect was seriously called into question; the New Testament canon *began* to become unchangeable and invariable when the question of identity, over against Marcionite challenges, had for the most part been settled."

¹¹Sanders, Torah and Canon, 120. Sanders (118) summarizes the thesis of this book as follows: "The thesis suggested here is that a historical review of the meaning of Torah, its content and its shape, its antecedents and its gestalt, provides a valid starting point for debating the meaning and authority of canon for the whole Bible, whatever its extent."

The problem of defining canon criticism (or canonical criticism) is made more complex with the observation that this methodology is not the *first* to deal with the canon issue. Questions addressed to the canon did not await the arrival of canon criticism. According to Sanders the literary critical study of the canon viewed canon as the "study of how the larger literary units, the several books, were received by the community at large as authoritative in a certain order of sequence."¹² The attention, however, was not on the product or process of canon with its integral relationship to the believing communities, but on the search for the texts behind or beneath the process.

Canon Criticism: Parameters

Definition of Canon

Note that this section turns away from defining canon criticism, as such, to the word *canon* itself. Since the word canon has a "kaleidoscopic variety of senses,"¹³ it is not so simple to define. The English word *canon* comes from

the Greek $\kappa\alpha\lambda\omega\upsilon\varsigma$ (related to $\kappa\alpha\mu\alpha$ or $\kappa\alpha\omega\eta$, *a reed . . .*) [and] denotes primarily *a straight rod*, and from this comes numerous derivative uses of the term, in many of which the idea of *straightness* is manifest. Since a rod was employed to keep other things straight, or as a test of straightness, $\kappa\alpha\omega\eta$ frequently refers to *a level or plumbline*. . . . It is from this literal sense of a *level* or a *ruler* that all metaphorical senses are derived.¹⁴

As far as its use in canon criticism is concerned, two derived meanings are significant. $\kappa\alpha\omega\eta$ came to be used with the meaning of *rule* or *norm*.¹⁵ It also was used to identify "a list,

¹²Sanders, Canon and Community, 1. More will be said in regard to the development of this literary understanding of canon under the discussion of "Canon Criticism: Parameters," below, page ____.

¹³To borrow an expression from Bruce M. Metzger, The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 289.

¹⁴Metzger, 289.

¹⁵" $\pi\alpha\tau\alpha\ \omicron\upsilon\mu\iota\ \omicron\ \epsilon\iota\ \delta\omega\kappa\alpha\ \gamma\epsilon\upsilon\sigma\iota\ \epsilon\iota\ \omicron\ \epsilon\pi\iota\tau\omicron\ \kappa\alpha\mu\alpha\ \tau\eta\ \pi\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\omega\ \epsilon\pi\iota\tau\epsilon\tau\omicron\ \rho\alpha\pi$

index, or table--terms that carry the suggestion of something fixed and established, by which one can orient oneself."¹⁶

The debated issue today is "whether the meaning 'rule' (that is, 'standard' or 'norm') or the meaning 'list' was uppermost in the minds of those who first applied the word to the Scriptures."¹⁷ Eventually, "the canon of Scripture became equivalent to the contents of the writings included in such a list."¹⁸

Historical Development of Canon

At some point, the historical questions must be raised concerning the development of the canon. While it is not the purpose of this paper to explore this development fully, especially as it relates to the Old Testament, some comments are necessary related to the historical development of the New Testament canon. What gave rise to the New Testament canon? Or put another way, what were the criteria by which canonicity was determined?¹⁹

tai." Clemens Alexandrinus, *Stromata* IV. Cap. XV. 98.3. Quoted from *Clemens Alexandrinus: Stromata Buch I-VI, Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller: Der Ersten Jahrhunderte*, Vol. 2, eds. Otto Stählin and Ludwig Früchtel (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1985), 292.

¹⁶Metzger, 290-91. Metzger gives textual examples of both these uses from the New Testament, the patristic writers, and early church history.

¹⁷Ibid., 293. Childs, *The New Testament Canon*, 25, remarks concerning the controversy, "Although this etymological discussion remains significant, its resolution is not crucial to my argument. . . . The process of the formation of authoritative religious writings long preceded the particular designation of the collection as canon in the fourth century."

¹⁸Ibid. Metzger (292) notes that "the expression 'canon of the New Testament' (*kanwn th" kainh" diaqhkh*") occurs for the first time in the *Apocriticus* (iv. 10) of Macarius Magnes, an apologia written about A.D. 400."

¹⁹F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 255 states: "The earliest Christians did not trouble themselves about criteria of canonicity; they would not have readily understood the expression. They accepted the Old Testament scriptures as they had received

External Influences

The designation "external influences" can only be tentative since it is not possible to know in every instance when an influence would be considered as from without, rather than from within. There are usually listed at least four major influences from without on canon development. Metzger discusses these influences as Gnosticism, Marcion, Montanism, and Persecutions.²⁰ Gnosticism

The impact of Gnosticism on early Christianity may have played some part in forcing the church to be selective of the writings they held authoritative. As Metzger observes

in defending itself against Gnosticism, a most important problem for the Church was to determine what really constituted a true gospel and a genuine apostolic writing. . . . The indirect consequence of this was a devaluation of oral tradition.²¹

Marcion

The influence of Marcion on the New Testament canon is still a debated question. According to Zahn,

Marc's [Marcion's] Bibel bestand aus zwei Büchern mäßigen Umfangs, einem Evangelienbuch und einer Sammlung von 10 Briefen des Paulus. Ersterem gab er den Titel euangeliion ohne jeglichen Zusatz. . . . Auf die Frage, wer ihr Evangelium geschrieben habe, antwortet der Eine Zunächst: 'Christus'.²²

Certainly, Marcion felt he had the gospel in the books he accepted as authoritative and that these

them: the authority of those scriptures was sufficiently ratified by the teaching and example of the Lord and his apostles. The teaching and example of the Lord and his apostles, whether conveyed by word of mouth or in writing, had axiomatic authority for them."

²⁰Metzger, 75-108.

²¹Metzger, 78.

²²Theodor Zahn, Geschichte des Neutestamentlichen Kanons, Vol. 1 (Erlangen: Verlag von Andreas Deichert, 1888), 619.

books upheld Christ. Marcion rejected the Old Testament books as authoritative to the Christian. But already the authority of the Scripture can be seen in Marcion's awareness of its power in the church. Zahn makes the following observation of this understanding:

Mrc.'s [Marcion's] Kampf mit der Kirche war von Anfang an ein Kampf mit den hl. [heiligen] Schriften der Kirche und der herkömmlichen Auslegung derselben gewesen. Eine neue Kirchenbildung in seinem Sinne war gar nicht möglich ohne Herstellung einer neuen Bibel.²³

Hans Freiherr von Campenhausen has the following to say about the role of Marcion in spurring the Church to produce a canon:

. . . die Vorstellung eines normativen christlichen Kanons, einer neuen Schriften-sammlung oder Schrift, noch nirgends begegnet, so soll nunmehr dargelegt werden, warum sie mit einem Schlage bei Markion und nur bei ihm und bei ihm sofort in voller Konsequenz gegenwärtig ist. Die Art, wie die Kirche auf dieses neue Ereignis reagiert und dann ihrerseits ein Neues Testament schafft, schließt den Ring des Beweises. Auf allen Wegen gelangt man zu demselben Resultat: Idee und Wirklichkeit einer christlichen Bibel sind von Markion geschaffen worden, und die Kirche, die sein Werk verwarf, ist ihm hierin nicht vorangegangen, sondern -- formal gesehen -- seinem Vorbild nachgefolgt.²⁴

The role of Marcion in leading toward the development and closing of the canon is still debated among scholars. There is no common answer as to how much influence he had on the process or on the product of the process.

Montanism

According to Metzger, this "enthusiastic and apocalyptic movement" of the second half of the second century proved to be a "significant factor in the 'hardening' of the canon of the New Testament."²⁵

²³Zahn, 595.

²⁴Hans Freiherr von Campenhausen, *Die Entstehung der Christlichen Bibel*, Beiträge zur historischen Theologie, ed. Gerhard Ebeling (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1968), 174.

²⁵Metzger, 99. Full discussion of this influence follows on pages ninety-nine through one-hundred and six.

Persecutions

Although early Christians endured persecution only sporadically, there were times when the pressure to hand over sacred books came. At these times it was important for the Christian to know which writings could be given and which writings were to be protected with life itself. Undoubtedly, this pressure did impact, at least to some degree, the process of canonization.

Internal Influences

Bruce Metzger lists the following three internal influences leading to the reception of a book as both sacred and authoritative to the Church:

- (1) A basic prerequisite for canonicity was conformity to what was called the 'rule of faith' (**o.kanw th" pistew"**, *regula fidei*), that is, the congruity of a given document with the basic Christian tradition recognized as normative by the Church.
.....
- (2) Another test that was applied to a given book to determine whether it deserved to belong in the New Testament was apostolicity.²⁶
.....
- (3) Another obvious test of authority for a book was its continuous acceptance and usage

²⁶Uwe Swarat, "Das Werden des neutestamentlichen Kanons," in Der Kanon der Bibel, ed. Gerhard Maier (Giessen; Basel: Brunnen Verlag, 1990), 43 makes the following observations about the role of the authority of the Lord and his Apostles in the canonization process: "Die Meinung, der ntl. Kanon sei in der Zeit zwischen Justin und Irenäus entstanden, läßt sich demnach nicht halten - weder unter dem Aspekt des altkirchlichen Normbewußtseins noch unter dem des Gebrauchs der ntl. Schriften im kirchlichen Gottesdienst. Vielmehr hat sich die Autorität der apostolischen Überlieferung von Christus aus innerer Notwendigkeit, wenn auch angeregt und beschleunigt durch den antihäretischen Kampf, kontinuierlich auf die ntl. *Schriften* konzentriert und sie dadurch zu geeigneten Kriterien gemacht, um die Übereinstimmung der kirchlichen Verkündigung mit ihren Wurzeln sicherzustellen. Diese Übertragung der personalen Autorität des Herrn und seiner Apostel auf die ntl. Schriften setzt bereits den Gebrauch der Schriften im kirchlichen Gottesdienst und ihre tiefgreifende Wirksamkeit als Quellen der Verkündigung und des Glaubens voraus."

by the Church at large.²⁷

The canon includes and excludes. While this may seem to be on the surface incontrovertible, it is not. Some scholars stress the inclusive function of the canon in its development, while others point to its nature as exclusive. Metzger noted,

Instead of suggesting that certain books were accidentally included and others were accidentally excluded from the New Testament canon -- whether the exclusion be defined in terms of the activity of individuals, or synods, or councils--it is more accurate to say that certain books excluded themselves from the canon.²⁸

Still others, of course, see the dual responsibility of the canon as a door to welcome some and shut out others.

In development, the primitive church recognized a body of sacred writings which contributed to their faith and practice, i.e., the Old Testament. Kurt Aland makes the following comments concerning the importance of the Old Testament to the early church:

Für das Neue Testament selbst wie für die Kirche der Frühzeit bis zur Ausbildung der Anfänge des neutestamentlichen Kanons ist ~~grahv~~ Altes Testament. Neben die Autorität dieser ~~grahv~~ tritt das Herrenwort, sowie in der ersten Zeit die unmittelbare Offenbarung durch den Herrn, wobei die Bezugnahme auf das Alte Testament etwa bei den Schriften der Apostolischen Väter unvergleichlich viel häufiger und umfangreicher ist als die auf Herrenworte.²⁹

In turn, these writings are found embedded, directly (quoted) or indirectly (allusions), in the writings growing out of the life of the early church.³⁰ At some point, the writings of the early

²⁷Metzger, 251-53.

²⁸Metzger, 286.

²⁹Kurt Aland, "Das Problem des neutestamentlichen Kanons," in Das Neue Testament als Kanon: Dokumentation und kritische Analyse zur gegenwärtigen Diskussion, ed. Ernst Käsemann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1970), 135-36.

³⁰E. Earle Ellis, The Old Testament in Early Christianity: Canon and Interpretation in the Light of Modern Research (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 53 says there are 250 quotations from the Old Testament and over 2,500 allusions to it.

church, containing portions of the canon of the Old Testament, became canonical themselves. In one sense, the *category* of canon did not have to be invented by the church, it only had to be further applied to the life of the church.

Beginning the New Testament Canon

The meaning of Second Peter 3:15-16 may offer an early clue of the process of "converting Christian writings into Christian Scripture."³¹ Sandmel believes that the church had reached a level of "differentiation from Judaism" to the point that the process of declaring certain of the writings of the church as Scripture may have begun. He suggests that

perhaps even prior to II Peter some Christian writings had already become sacred and even authoritative, but antecedently there was necessarily a period in which these writings were only writings.³²

The issue is not settled by scholarship as to when the Scriptures we now call 'canon' became such. Rainer Riesner in "Ansätze zur Kanonbildung innerhalb des Neuen Testaments" investigates two topics related to this: "I. Neutestamentliche Belege für einen beginnenden Kanon des Neuen Testaments? and II. Von der messianischen Autorität Jesu zum Kanon des Neuen Testaments." In part one, he looks at 1 Corinthians 15:3f.; Romans 15:4; 2 Corinthians 3:14; 8:18; Romans 16:26; 1 Timothy 5:18; and 2 Peter 3:16 as possible clues for the beginning of New Testament canon development.³³

Closing the New Testament Canon

³¹Samuel Sandmel, The First Christian Century in Judaism and Christianity: Certainties and Uncertainties (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 168.

³²Sandmel, 168.

³³Rainer Riesner, "Ansätze zur Kanonbildung innerhalb des Neuen Testaments," in Der Kanon der Bibel, ed. Gerhard Maier (Giessen; Basel: Brunnen-Verl., 1990), 153-64.

The New Testament canon as we know it today was noted for the first time by Athanasius. Aland, however, shows the tentativeness of that "closed" canon with the following comment:

In seinem 39.Festbrief von 367 dagegen führt Athanasius neben den genannten 26 Büchern auch die Apokalypse als kanonisch auf. Auch die Apokalypse ist jetzt im Osten also rezipiert; der Kanon des Neuen Testaments, wie wir ihn kennen, ist fertig, oder scheint wenigstens fertig zu sein.³⁴

F.F. Bruce titles one portion of his book The Canon of Scripture, "What if . . . ?" He discusses

what would happen if a lost document from the apostolic age were to be discovered, which could establish a title to apostolic authority comparable with that of the New Testament writings?³⁵

His discussion of this question ends with these words: "Unless and until such a discovery is made, it is pointless to speculate."³⁶ However, he does speculate that

the precedent of earlier days suggests that it would first be necessary for a consensus to develop among Christians in general; any papal or conciliar pronouncement that might come later would be but a rubber-stamping of that consensus.³⁷

For the tenets of canon criticism as pronounced by B.S. Childs, the question of the closing of the canon is not merely academic since he seeks to base his work on the canon product. For James Sanders, who speaks of canon process, the question is somewhat less significant. Still, for canon criticism the canonical text is a matter of concern for their discipline.

³⁴Aland, 141.

³⁵Bruce, 278-79.

³⁶Ibid., 279.

³⁷Ibid.

Relationship of Canon Criticism to Other Disciplines

It is helpful in the study of canon criticism to identify the parameters of the methodology in relationship to other biblical disciplines. While, this can also be an area of consideration for the hermeneutical presuppositions of the method, it seems better to discuss presuppositions in a positive sense, rather than saying what the hermeneutical presuppositions are not.

There are other disciplines for studying the biblical material among which canon criticism must try to make a place. More than that, canon criticism must both ask and answer questions of these methodologies. It is not a matter of simply settling in among neighbors and keeping quiet. James Sanders, who on the whole has a positive attitude toward the cooperation of the discipline of canonical criticism and the historical and literary disciplines,³⁸ comments as follows:

Enlightenment scholarship subsequent to the Reformation has so focused on original, historical meanings that it has very nearly decanonized the Bible. Its proper *Sitz im Leben*, or life setting, is the believing communities, Jewish and Christian, which find their identities in it and try to live their lives in the light of it.³⁹

Sanders makes a general historical observation as to why he thinks canon criticism had to join this family of critical scholarship in an almost forceful manner. Prior to the Enlightenment, he believes the basic meaning of canon was "authoritative Scripture." However, as scholarship began to apply to the Scriptures "the developing tools of historical investigation borrowed from literary study in other fields," it began "to devalue the meaning of the word *canon*" and to take away from the "believing communities" the "determination of the meaning of Scripture."⁴⁰ The

³⁸In *Canon and Community*, Sanders (3) observes that "like most other movements, biblical criticism has produced problems as well as exciting results; those problems have to do with the effect of the exciting results in the believing communities."

³⁹Sanders, *Canon and Community*, xv.

⁴⁰Sanders, *Canon and Community*, 1-2.

result of this kind of biblical criticism was to lock the Bible into the past.⁴¹

Childs stresses his view that "the study of prehistory has its proper function within exegesis only in illuminating the final text."⁴²

Canon Criticism and Textual Criticism

One of the most complex areas of discussion concerning canon criticism is the relationship of canon criticism to textual criticism. The two disciplines are brothers (or sisters), yet the question is whether they are friend or foe. Textual criticism looks for the original text, or at least the earliest text possible to find. Canon criticism focuses on the later text tradition, that which the community of faith arrived at following interaction of text and community life.

Canon Criticism and Tradition Criticism

Tradition criticism explores "the introductory questions relating to the appearance of certain traditions in the larger units of biblical literature."⁴³ According to Sanders, canon criticism

picks up with the results of tradition criticism and goes on to ask what the *function* or *authority* was of the ancient tradition exercised in the context of its use.⁴⁴

⁴¹Ibid., 3. Sanders (5) further remarks, "To protest that it did not intend to do so is of little value. It has happened, and it has been largely responsible for the gulf that now obtains between pulpit and pew, between the critically trained pastor and the lay parish."

⁴²Brevard S. Childs, The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary. The Old Testament Library, eds. Peter Ackroyd, James Barr, John Bright, and G. Ernest Wright (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), xv.

⁴³Sanders, Torah and Canon, xvi. Sanders (xvi) observes: "These questions have had to do with the form of the tradition, where it appears, how it appears, and why (its cultic usage); and they have to do with the historicity of the tradition."

⁴⁴Sanders, Torah and Canon, xvii.

CHAPTER TWO

HISTORY OF THE METHOD

The development of canon criticism as a conscious methodology is recent. Two men are largely responsible for the development of this discipline. They are Brevard S. Childs and James Sanders.

The Canonical Approach of Brevard Childs⁴⁵

The Starting Point: "Interpretation in Faith"

Foundational to the later work of Childs, his article "Interpretation in Faith"⁴⁶ called for a new "starting point" for responsible exegesis. For Childs, responsible exegesis entered into the full theological dimension of the text. In order to accomplish this task, Childs insisted that the exegetical task begin "from within an explicit framework of faith."⁴⁷

In this article, Childs reacts strongly against the emphasis of Krister Stendahl on a descriptive approach as "the core of all biblical theology."⁴⁸ Stendahl did not deny the importance of interpreting the text for the present day. However, he identified this task as an "act of faith" standing in contrast to the "descriptive task" which could be "carried out by believer and agnos-

⁴⁵This writer is indebted to Mikeal Parsons, "Canonical Criticism," pages 256-63, for this heading and for the general outline used for the discussion of the work of Brevard Childs.

⁴⁶Brevard S. Childs, "Interpretation in Faith: The Theological Responsibility of an Old Testament Commentary," Interpretation 18 (October 1964): 432-49.

⁴⁷Childs, "Interpretation in Faith," 438.

⁴⁸Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology," The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, George A. Buttrick, ed. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), Vol. I, 423.

tic alike."⁴⁹ As to his view of the canon of Scripture, Stendahl observed that "as far as the descriptive approach goes, the canon can have no crucial significance."⁵⁰

Childs expressed concern that the "descriptive task" of Old Testament exegesis had produced a "neutral" approach to the text. The objective search for facts resulted in a certain "detachment" by the exegete from the text. The historical method failed "to do full justice to the theological substance" by failing "to build a bridge from the neutral, descriptive content to the theological reality."⁵¹ Theology was forced into a subjective category outside the arena of objective verification and a wedge between Biblical and theological disciplines slipped into place.⁵²

In this article Childs developed a method of exegesis which he referred to as the "hermeneutical circle." Three dialectics formed this circle as follows:

1. The exegete interprets the single text in the light of the whole Old Testament witness and, vice versa, he understands the whole of the Old Testament in the light of the single text. . . .
.....
2. The exegete interprets the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament and, vice versa, he understands the New Testament in the light of the Old. . . .
.....
3. The exegete interprets the witness of the Old Testament in the light of the theological reality itself and, vice versa, he understands the theological reality itself in the light of the witness of the Old Testament.⁵³

The hermeneutical circle clearly shows the effort Childs made to see all of Scripture in

⁴⁹Stendahl, "Biblical Theology," 422-23.

⁵⁰Ibid., 428.

⁵¹Childs, "Interpretation in Faith," 438. The paragraph, highlighting some of the terminology of Childs, summarizes ideas taken from the full article.

⁵²Brevard S. Childs, Biblical Theology in Crisis (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), 79. Although written at a later date, Childs reviews the impact of the "brilliant article of Stendahl," drawing the same conclusions expressed in "Interpretation in Faith."

⁵³Childs, "Interpretation in Faith," 438, 440, 443.

the hermeneutical process. The witness of Scripture brought new dimensions to the exegetical task of any part of that Scripture and made incomplete the objective, historical methodologies. For Childs, "the theological task cannot end with an analysis of a historical witness but must penetrate to that reality which called forth the witness."⁵⁴

The Crisis Point: Biblical Theology in Crisis

The next work of Childs to call into question the division of biblical theology into two camps, the objective exegete and the subjective theologian, was his book Biblical Theology in Crisis, published in 1970. In this book, Childs first investigated the development of a "Biblical Theology Movement" in America following the Second World War. Then, he chronicled its slow dissolution in the late fifties and its "virtual end as a major force in American theology in the early sixties."⁵⁵

For Childs, the movement failed because of an "erosion from within"⁵⁶ and "pressures from without."⁵⁷ The internal problems included a failure of the movement to agree on the nature of history. Childs summarizes James Barr's indictment of the movement as follows:

His fundamental criticism was not that the Biblical theologians failed to take historical criticism seriously, but that they failed to take the Biblical text seriously!⁵⁸

Also under indictment was the movement's inability to treat the unity of the Bible consistently. From a somewhat settled "unity in diversity" system, the movement was challenged to reevaluate the essential unity by scholars such as Ernst Käsemann who "drew the theological

⁵⁴Childs, "Interpretation in Faith," 444.

⁵⁵Childs, Biblical Theology in Crisis, 87.

⁵⁶Ibid., 61-82.

⁵⁷Ibid., 82-87.

⁵⁸Ibid., 65.

implications that the modern Biblical theologian would have to operate with some form of canon within the canon."⁵⁹

The next wall to fall was the one built around the idea of a "distinctive Biblical Mentality"⁶⁰ that encouraged modern man to return to the ancient Semitic world, which inhabited both testaments, to properly understand the Bible. "Hebrew mentality" became a watchword for problem solving. Word studies opened to the "center of the Biblical mentality."⁶¹ James Barr almost single-handedly collapsed this wall with his book The Semantics of Biblical Language.⁶² Childs argues that as a result of the work of Barr,

There even fell a shadow across the mighty Kittel's *Wörterbuch*, which had begun to appear in English translation in the hope of revitalizing American Biblical scholarship. One began to sense that the future of this sort of theological analysis of words had moved into a period of much uncertainty.⁶³

The theological dimension of the crisis in Biblical Theology resulted in part from "the effort to distinguish sharply between the legitimate areas of work of the historian and the theologian."⁶⁴ It was this area that Childs had earlier addressed in his article, "Interpretation in Faith."

The pressures from without included the changing cultural climate of America in the six-

⁵⁹Ibid., 70. Going further, Childs (70) comments: "Here Buttmann's legacy, which had never supported the movement's concern for discovering some sort of unity within the canon, can be recognized."

⁶⁰Ibid., 70-72.

⁶¹Ibid., 47.

⁶²James Barr, The Semantics of Biblical Language (London: Oxford University Press, 1961). In his preface, Barr comments: ". . . I have come to believe that one of the greatest dangers to such sound and adequate interpretation comes from the prevailing use of procedures which, while claiming to rest upon a knowledge of the Israelite and the Greek ways of thinking, constantly mishandle and distort the linguistic evidence of the Hebrew and Greek languages as they are used in the Bible."

⁶³Childs, Biblical Theology in Crisis, 72.

⁶⁴Childs, Biblical Theology in Crisis, 79.

ties. The vocabulary of a Biblical Theology system, centered on the objective history of the biblical period, failed to meet the needs of the time. The gap grew wider. Two books aided this widening: John A.T. Robinson's Honest to God⁶⁵ and Harvey Cox's The Secular City.⁶⁶ These two authors, along with others such as Langdon Gilkey, "served both to renounce the past and to announce a new direction."⁶⁷

In the context of a perceived failure of the Biblical Theology Movement, Childs called for a new direction in Biblical Theology that does not limit itself to "the minutiae of historico-critical scholarship."⁶⁸ At this point, Childs introduced his thesis "that the canon of the Christian church is the most appropriate context from which to do Biblical Theology."⁶⁹ His call was for the interpretation of Scriptures "in relation to their function within the community of faith that treasured them."⁷⁰

The canon context of Scripture called for the Bible to "function normatively and not merely illustratively for the church."⁷¹ Childs sought to remove what he considered a "false di-

⁶⁵John A.T. Robinson, Honest to God (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963). Robinson finds inspiration for his reevaluation of Christianity in the oft-quoted works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Tillich, and Rudolf Bultmann.

⁶⁶Harvey Cox, The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective (New York: Macmillan Co., 1965). At one point Cox (246) muses: "Where in all this do theologians and preachers fit? Sociologically speaking, they represent the victims *both* of historical change *and* of social differentiation. Most people perceive them as cultural antiques. . . . or . . . as the custodians of a particular in-group lore."

⁶⁷Childs, Biblical Theology in Crisis, 85.

⁶⁸Childs, Biblical Theology in Crisis, 91. Childs (92) further observes that "there is a need for a discipline that will attempt to retain and develop a picture of the whole, and that will have a responsibility to synthesize as well as analyze."

⁶⁹Ibid., 99.

⁷⁰Ibid., 99.

⁷¹Ibid., 101. By *normative* Childs (100) means that "the Scriptures of the church provide the au-

chotomy between the book and the community."⁷² As far as he was concerned the historico-critical method "when operating from its own chosen context" was "incapable of either raising or answering the full range of questions which the church is constrained to direct to its Scripture."⁷³

Therefore, to Childs the canonical context linked "what the text meant and what it means" and both questions belonged "to the task of the interpretation of the Bible as Scripture."⁷⁴

Practicing Canonical Context: Exodus

In this commentary, Childs sat out to put into application his understanding of the canonical approach to the Scriptures. The first sentence in the preface of the book stated that,

the purpose of this commentary is unabashedly theological. Its concern is to understand Exodus as scripture of the church. The exegesis arises as a theological discipline within the context of the canon and is directed toward the community of faith which lives by its confession of Jesus Christ.⁷⁵

In this preface, one can see the battle Childs is engaged in against the exegetical methods which neglect the community of faith, both in the Scriptures and in the pew. He does not reject the disciplines that search out the historical meaning of the text; but he stresses that they have left the task unfinished.

The format of the commentary has been established to aid the reader in understanding the role of the canon approach to a theological interpretation of the text. The first section offers a fresh translation of the text. The second section considers seriously the historical development

thoritative and definitive word that continues to shape and enliven the church."

⁷²Ibid., 103.

⁷³Ibid., 141.

⁷⁴Ibid., 141.

⁷⁵Childs, Exodus, ix.

behind the final form of the text. The next section forms "the heart of the commentary."⁷⁶ This "heart" looks at the final canonical form of the text, its canonical shape, together with the historical forces producing the text. The fourth section of the commentary studies the New Testament's treatment of the Old Testament and "is a conscious attempt to take seriously the church's confession that her sacred scripture consists of an Old and a New Testament."⁷⁷ The fifth section covers the interpretation of the history of exegesis relating how the text and the community of faith have interacted. The last section is "a theological reflection on the text within the context of the Christian canon."⁷⁸

Reintroducing the Old Testament:
Introduction to the
Old Testament as Scripture

In this key work, Childs makes the break with the historical critical methodology as one that leaves

an enormous hiatus between the description of the critically reconstructed literature and the actual canonical text which has been received and used as authoritative scripture by the community.⁷⁹

Relating the biblical text to the community of faith was an important goal for Childs. He did not believe that biblical scholarship which separated the text from the faith of the religious community which was formed by it, and then in turn shaped the literature, led to a right understanding of the Scripture.⁸⁰ Childs suggested that historical methodology missed the mark when

⁷⁶Ibid., xiv.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Ibid., xvi.

⁷⁹Childs, Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture, 40.

⁸⁰In this context, Childs has specific reference to the Old Testament. However, in 1984 Childs addressed the same issues in his book The New Testament as Canon.

it looked to the "political, social, or economic factors" as the "determining force" of the text, "in disregard of the religious dynamic of the canon."⁸¹

Childs' concept of canonical shaping is introduced in this work. The shaping of Scripture resulted from the active involvement of the community with their writings. Childs makes the following observation:

A study of the biblical text reveals that this concern to pass on the authoritative tradition did not consist in merely passively channeling material from one generation to another, but reflects an involvement which actively shaped both the oral and written traditions.⁸²

In this work, Childs gave attention to the relationship between the biblical text and the canon. While textual criticism sought the earliest or best text possible, Childs suggested that "the canonical approach to the Old Testament is unequivocal in defining its goal as the recovery and understanding of the canonical text."⁸³ The canonical approach to the text insisted that the process leading to the canonical form of the text should be treated with integrity. The more "original" the text sought for, the greater likelihood that the authority of the canonical form of that text would be overlooked. For Childs, the Masoretic text served as "the *vehicle* both for recovering and for understanding the canonical text of the Old Testament."⁸⁴

⁸¹Childs, Introduction to the Old Testament, 41. Childs (41) observed that "because this issue [the fundamental dialectic of the literature and the community] has been confused throughout its history, the development of critical biblical scholarship has brought both great gains and also serious losses in understanding the Old Testament."

⁸²Childs, Introduction to the Old Testament, 78.

⁸³Childs, Introduction to the Old Testament, 96.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 97. It is for this reason that Childs (101) writes that "the first task of the Old Testament text critic is to seek to recover the stabilized canonical text through the vehicle of the Masoretic traditions."

Reinterpreting the New Testament:
The New Testament Canon: An Introduction

Although Childs' area of expertise was the Old Testament, he spent over five years of "primary research energy" to prepare himself to write on the New Testament.⁸⁵ He did this because he recognized that his "position regarding a canonical approach to the Bible remained incomplete and vulnerable without attention to the remaining part of the Christian Scriptures."⁸⁶

This introduction begins with a critical view of the role of the canon within New Testament introductions from the sixteenth century to the present. Greater attention is given to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Following his analysis of the positions on canon found in these works, Childs concluded that

the historical critical Introduction--whether in a liberal or conservative form is irrelevant--has not done justice in interpreting the New Testament in its function as authoritative, canonical literature of both an historical and a contemporary Christian community of faith and practice.⁸⁷

As Childs took on the Old Testament historical-critical methodologies for failing to complete the exegetical task of biblical theology, he also challenges New Testament critical methodologies. The following comment shows the general direction of Childs' attack:

It is the claim of the critical method for exclusively first priority which is the issue at stake. To allow the theology of the church to add a homiletical topping after the basic critical work has been done is small comfort. The theological battle has been surrendered at the outset.⁸⁸

⁸⁵Brevard S. Childs, The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), xvi.

⁸⁶Ibid., xv. One should not imagine that Childs lacked in formal training in the field of New Testament studies. Childs (xv) notes: "I am grateful to have been trained by some of the giants in the New Testament field: O. Piper, B.M. Metzger, O. Cullmann, K.L. Schmidt, and G. Bornkamm."

⁸⁷Childs, New Testament as Canon, 36.

⁸⁸Ibid., 45.

In one sense, Childs has simply returned to and refined his call for a more responsible exegesis in his earlier article "Interpretation in Faith." Only now, his answer to the problem of how to accomplish a Biblical Theology has been joined more strongly to the canon as beginning place. For the New Testament, Childs writes:

In my judgment, the entire biblical canon in the sense of the whole New Testament collection must remain the authoritative starting point for all exegesis; however, the interpreter must constantly strive to discern afresh a theological construal which does justice to the variegated texture of biblical thought in its dialectical relation to the modern world of the interpreter.⁸⁹

The Canonical Approach of James Sanders

Torah and Canon

Unlike Childs, James Sanders found no trouble in creating the term "canonical criticism" to describe what he referred to as "a sub-discipline of Bible Study."⁹⁰ He also more firmly supported the results gleaned from the literary and historical criticism methodologies.⁹¹ Nonetheless, his book Torah and Canon was written with the express purpose of calling Old Testament scholarship to give careful attention "*to the origins and function of canon.*"⁹² This attention was qualified by stating that this work must be done "in conjunction with and in light of all the

⁸⁹Ibid., 42.

⁹⁰Sanders, Torah and Canon, ix. See Chapter One: "Definition and Parameters of the Method" for additional information.

⁹¹Sanders, Torah and Canon, (xx) states his understanding of the relationship of these various disciplines as follows: "Tradition criticism, redaction criticism, canonical criticism, and comparative midrash must operate in that order of priority."

⁹²Ibid., xv. The italics belongs to Sanders.

aforementioned subdisciplines of biblical criticism."⁹³

In this work Sanders focuses on the concept of Torah as "the origin and essence of the Bible."⁹⁴ He expresses his indebtedness to G. Ernest Wright for calling attention to the relationship between biblical authority and the concept of "a canon within the canon."⁹⁵

For Sanders, that canon within the canon is Torah. Sanders makes the connection between the Old Testament Torah and the New Testament by describing the New Testament Torah as "the living Christ." He adds the following explanation:

Whatever else Christ was for the early church he was the Torah incarnate (Jer. 31:31-34); in this sense he fulfilled the meaning of Israel which had in part devolved at the birth of Judaism upon the individual. And the vehicle of the birth of Judaism in the sixth century B.C. was, in any final perspective, the vehicle both of Christ's resurrection (the birth of the church -- the affirmation of God's universal sovereignty -- the confirmation of monotheistic pluralism) and of Judaism's continuity in the first century A.D.⁹⁶

Canon and Community

In 1984 Sanders wrote Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism. The focus of this book

is on the function of the Bible as canon in the believing communities which formed and

⁹³Ibid., xv. The "aforementioned sub-disciplines of biblical criticism" were both literary and historical criticism. Form criticism, redaction criticism, tradition criticism, and comparative midrash come in for special mention.

⁹⁴Ibid., ix-x. Sanders arrived at his understanding of the concept of Torah through an effort to see the Bible holistically through a description of its "shape and function" (ix). His search led him to believe that "to speak of canon is first to speak of Torah" (x).

⁹⁵Ibid., xv.

⁹⁶Sanders, Torah and Canon, 121. In his introduction to Torah and Community, Sanders (x) states "I am working out a system of thought about the Bible, both testaments, which I call monotheistic pluralism, and some of that is here." The reader is able to see one statement reflecting this "monotheistic pluralism" in the above quote.

shaped it and passed it on to their heirs of today. Canon *and* community. They go together. Neither truly exists without the other.⁹⁷

In this work, Sanders describes two important foci in canon criticism. The first, is canonical process and the second is canonical hermeneutics. Canonical process views the history of canon through its own special set of lenses. As Sanders says,

it stresses the nature and function of canon, and the process by which canon was shaped in antiquity, not solely as shaped at the end of a history of literary formation, but as shaped from the earliest moments when repetition of a 'value' rendered it a tradition down to a final, ordered collection of those traditions.⁹⁸

Canonical hermeneutics is the effort to apply the Bible's own "unrecorded hermeneutics which lie between the lines of most of its literature."⁹⁹ For Sanders, the biblical writers are interested in the acts of God "in and through the givens of the situation described and what God might do again."¹⁰⁰

From Sacred Story to Sacred Text

Published in 1987, this work by James Sanders contains nine articles related to canon criticism which he published from 1975 to 1982. Most of the material in this book has been discussed above. There is, however, one article that deserves review at this point, "Canonical Context and Canonical Criticism." Originally, this article served as a review of Brevard Childs' Introduction to the Old Testament.

There are several differences in the approaches of Childs and Sanders to canon criticism. Sanders states, "My greatest problem with Childs's position is his divorcing the development

⁹⁷Sanders, Canon and Community, xv.

⁹⁸Sanders, Canon and Community, 22.

⁹⁹Sanders, Canon and Community, 46.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 52.

and growth of canonical literature from its historical provenances."¹⁰¹ In summary, Childs focuses on the final form of the text; and, so he must select a 'final form.' This is a literary decision, although it obviously involves the historical community of faith. Sanders refuses to see the canon as a product, but stresses the canon as a process.

Sanders' "strongest objection to Childs's work" is that he focuses on one form of stabilized Scripture, and what he calls its inner theological dialectic and conversation, and dissociates it from history altogether.¹⁰² Sanders does not feel that Childs is correct in valuing a moment "when a final canonical redaction gave the text the shape it finally attained," for "the overwhelming evidence points to the moment of final shaping as not particularly more important than any other."¹⁰³

Sanders highly values biblical historical and literary criticism as "a gift of God in due season." This view is one reason he is willing to use the term "canon criticism" to describe his work. The canonical process is viewed by Sanders as still continuing in communities of faith today. For this reason he is unwilling to lock on an ancient canonical product as the final shape.

The Rebuttal: James Barr

Perhaps no movement exists without its gadfly. For the Canon Criticism movement, James Barr plays that role. Barr is Regius Professor of Hebrew at Oxford University. Two of his works challenge, in part, the work of canon criticism: The Scope and Authority of the Bible and Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹James A. Sanders, From Sacred Story to Sacred Text: Canon as Paradigm (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 166.

¹⁰²Sanders, Sacred Story to Sacred Text, 167.

¹⁰³Ibid., 170.

¹⁰⁴James Barr, The Scope and Authority of the Bible, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980); and

Barr described the effect of reading Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture by Brevard Childs as "to convince me that the programme of canonical criticism was essentially confused and self-contradictory in its conceptual formulation."¹⁰⁵

Barr lists twelve major objections to the canon criticism movement in Appendix II of Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism. Both Childs and Sanders come under his attack. In general, Barr feels that Childs misunderstood the cause of the problems faced by biblical theology. For Barr, canon was not a problem area, but a central matter. His reaction to Childs is strong:

His [Childs'] proposal, when it comes, comes like a rabbit out of a hat. It could be the answer, but there was nothing in the fate of biblical theology that demonstrated that it was the answer.¹⁰⁶

Stronger words come later when Barr comments on Childs' extension of the insights gained from Form criticism to the Bible as a whole, i.e. the canon:

Form criticism, suitably extended, will yield a method by which the canonical form will tell us what is the purpose of the canonical whole. Not an unnatural extension, but a rather unthinking one.¹⁰⁷

Not stopping at this point, Barr uses strong ridicule to rebuke the exclusivist attitude he sees in canonical criticism:

Any doubt about the centrality of the canon, any suggestion that canonical understanding might have to share its influence with some other sort of understanding or might be modified by other forces, must therefore be rejected.¹⁰⁸

Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983).

¹⁰⁵Barr, Holy Scripture, 132.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 134.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 139.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 146. For the reader's convenience, page numbers will be inserted in the text when they indicate quotations taken from Holy Scripture during this discussion.

Thus, Barr concludes that "canonical criticism makes itself unable to discuss on equal terms with any other position (146)."

Barr also ridicules Childs' use of the term "canon." Barr makes this observation: "But the new 'broad' use of the term has a very simple value: its meaning is identical with the proposition 'Childs is right' (147)."

The failure of Childs to treat seriously the New Testament in his discussion of the Old Testament also called forth a sharp rebuttal by Barr, "There is no sign here of a perspective that looks towards the God of Christianity, becoming incarnate at a certain point of time (152)."

Barr also takes exception to Childs' view of the relationship of the church and the canon: But the church does not 'confess' the canon in that sense, and it certainly does not 'confess' all the intellectual paraphernalia of canonical criticism.¹⁰⁹

Barr's final conclusion concerning canonical criticism states: "In fact it is canonical criticism that is simplistic. Basically it has only one idea: the controlling place of the canon (168)."

CHAPTER THREE

HERMENEUTICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS INHERENT TO THE METHOD

The Canon as Norm

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 166.

The canon of the Bible is normative for the life of the church. Canon criticism places emphasis on the interchange between text and the community of faith and the community of faith and the text. The canon both shapes the community and is shaped by it. There is created a hermeneutical circle.

Canon criticism seeks to speak theologically to the community of faith from its Scriptures. However, the definition of the Scriptures is wrapped-up in the word canon. Rebelling against what was considered an atomizing of the Scriptures, this discipline focused attention on the product (so Childs) and/or the process (so Sanders) of the canon. Its basic presupposition is that all texts must be interpreted in light of the canonical whole.

A New Biblical Theology

Dissatisfaction with the way scholarship atomized the Bible served as one incentive for the development of canon criticism. Consequently, canon criticism serves a theological function in relation to the reading of the text. Canon criticism looks for the shaping of the text within the past community of faith as a guide for the message for the living community of faith.¹¹⁰

Consider both Old and New Testaments

Canon criticism insists on seeing both the Old and New Testaments as Scripture for the church. It is not by accident that one of the two leading proponents, B.S. Childs, has written commentaries on both the Old and New Testaments. Every text takes its proper place within the whole canon.

Interpret Scripture from Within

What is it that canon criticism presupposes in doing its hermeneutical work? Sanders

¹¹⁰Childs, The New Testament as Canon, 52-53.

states that "Canonical criticism looks for that shape [the canonical shape] in the hermeneutics of the biblical authors and writers themselves."¹¹¹ He then describes five "unrecorded hermeneutics which lie throughout its pages" as follows:

One, the Bible is a monotheizing literature. Two, it betrays a broad theocentric hermeneutic. Three, much of it celebrates the theologem *errore hominum providentia divina* (God's grace works in and through human sinfulness). Four, in it God betrays a divine bias for the weak and dispossessed. Five, there is a fourfold hermeneutic process by which it adapted international wisdom.¹¹²

One of the most insightful canonical hermeneutics suggested by Sanders is his position that a canonical hermeneutic is axiomatically one's view of God while reading the text. The question of historical improbabilities while not necessarily irrelevant, fades into the background.¹¹³

Childs states that

the canonical interpreter stands within the received tradition, and, fully conscious of his own time-conditionality as well as that of the scriptures, strives critically to discern from its kerygmatic witness a way to God which overcomes the historical moorings of both text and reader.¹¹⁴

Sacred Scripture

Issues of inspiration and revelation are often discussed matters in the understanding of the canon. Metzger surveys the use of the word *q̄eop̄neusto* in the early Church literature and concludes that "the concept of inspiration was not used in the early Church as a basis of designa-

¹¹¹Sanders, Canon and Community, 47.

¹¹²Sanders, Canon and Community, 51. These five features become topic of discussion from page fifty-one to page fifty-seven.

¹¹³Ibid., 50.

¹¹⁴Childs, The New Testament as Canon, 51-52.

tion between canonical and non-canonical orthodox Christian writings."¹¹⁵ The result is that

a writing is not canonical because the author was inspired, but rather an author is considered to be inspired because what he has written is recognized as canonical, that is, is recognized as authoritative in the Church.¹¹⁶

Sanders describes the traditional model of the inspiration of Scripture as one which follows a pattern that speaks of

inspiration from God or Holy Spirit to an individual in antiquity whose words were then more or less accurately preserved by disciples, students, schools, and scribes.¹¹⁷

Sanders presents a different model for inspiration of the Scriptures from the view point of canonical criticism.

The model canonical criticism sponsors as more nearly true to what happened, and what happens, is that of the Holy Spirit at work all along the path of the canonical process: from original speaker, through what was understood by hearers; to what disciples believed was said; to how later editors reshaped the record, oral or written, of what was said; on down to modern hearings and understandings of the texts in current believing communities.¹¹⁸

Canon has historically been used to differentiate between types of literature. Historically, people in the community of faith have had to decide whether certain books were holy enough for

¹¹⁵Metzger, 256. Metzger (256) is not denying the inspiration of the Scriptures. He is pointing out that "they are authoritative, and hence canonical, because they are the extant literary deposit of the direct and indirect apostolic witness on which the later witness of the Church depends."

¹¹⁶Metzger, 257.

¹¹⁷Sanders, *Canon and Community*, xvi. Sanders adds "The only difference between liberals and conservatives has been quantitative; for the one they were less well preserved, while for the other they were very well preserved."

¹¹⁸Sanders, *Canon and Community*, xvii. As illustration to this model, Sanders (xvii) observes: "If one can understand that it was not the prophet Isaiah who was canonical, but the Isaiah book which is canonical, then modern reputable scholars would not need to insist that the sixty-six chapters stem from a single author. Not even Jesus is canonical; at least, I have never heard of his being canonized. The gospels are canonical, and the epistles."

which to die.¹¹⁹

Holistic

Canon criticism goes beyond other types of biblical criticism which deal with the *bits and pieces* of biblical material. Canon criticism resists the atomistic division of the Scriptures that it often finds in the other disciplines.

Dynamic

A quick reading of the literature on canon criticism shows the importance of understanding the dynamic quality of the community of faith that both established the Scriptures and was established by them. The canon did not develop passively. It seems likely that most movements from religious speech to writing to special or canonical religious writing were hardly perceptible to those who first knew or used the writings. This is true for the New Testament as much as for the Old Testament.

James Sanders points to the dynamic quality of the canon with the following comment: In the final analysis canon addresses itself to those ultimate questions the community has when it realizes its transcendent reality, or is forced to face the possibility of its nonbeing; and its authority is in the life-giving dialogue the community sustains with it.¹²⁰

The dynamic quality of the canonical process includes what Sanders refers to as "its *adaptability* as well as its *stability*."¹²¹

Authoritative

In relation to the canon itself, the question of authority is an important one. Bruce points out that

¹¹⁹See the earlier section discussing the external reasons for the formation of canon, page ----.

¹²⁰Sanders, Torah and Canon, 120.

¹²¹Sanders, Canon and Community, 22.

authority precedes canonicity; had the words of the Lord and his apostles not been accorded supreme authority, the written record of their words would never have been canonized.¹²²

¹²²Bruce, 123.

CHAPTER FOUR
APPLICATION TO THE LITERARY GENRES
OF GOSPEL, ACTS AND EPISTLE

The work of Brevard Childs, The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction, is indispensable for an understanding of how to apply canon criticism to the literary genres of Gospel, Acts and Epistles. This five-hundred and fifty-six page book is the single best tool available for this task. It is impossible to share all the insights that the canonical approach brings to each of these genres. The focus of this section of the paper will be introductory. It could hardly be anything else.

Gospel

One search of canon criticism is for not only the form of the canon but also for its function. As Outler points out, this effort to understand the function of the canon behind its form raises the following kinds of questions related to the Gospels.

Canon criticism raises such prior questions (for example) as why the Gospels are styled as 'according to' whomever (*kata*) instead of 'by' (*dia*)? What does this imply as to the early Christian understanding of the genre and function of 'the gospel'? Or again, why does 'The Gospel according to Matthew' stand at the head of *all* the listings of 'the holy quarterion' (as Eusebius calls it)?¹²³

These questions are raised in the context of a canon already received by the church as a fourfold collection: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. This fact in itself raises some interesting questions necessary for discussion through the lens of canon criticism.

¹²³Outler, "The 'Logic' of Canon-making," 266. According to Outler (266), when canon criticism considers the relationship of Mark to Matthew, it is not so much interested in the synoptic problem as in asking: "What was the 'logic' in the canon-makers' minds in their placement of Mark directly after Matthew (with some interesting exceptions)?"

Formation of the Fourfold Collection

Scholars are in general agreement that the fourfold collection of the canonical Gospels had replaced the local use of one or more of the four by the end of the second century. Why this should be so is not a matter of agreement. Von Campenhausen suggests that the standardization of the Gospel resulted from competition with heretical groups. He makes the following observation:

Angeichts der wachsenden Flut gnostisch bestimmter Evangelien und angesichts des markionitischen Anspruchs, die wenigen echten und ursprünglichen Urkunden allein zu besitzen, können sich auch die katholischen Gemeinden nicht länger der Notwendigkeit entziehen, festzustellen welche 'Herrenschriften' als echt und maßgeblich anzuerkennen sind und welche nicht.¹²⁴

This authoritative collection had as one result the suppression of any other books claiming to be Gospels with like authority. It also sounded the end of "reducing the plurality of witnesses to one condensed or combined account."¹²⁵ A major factor in the reception of these Gospels, and no others, was apostolicity. Mark and Luke were accorded recognition as companions of Apostles.

¹²⁴von Campenhausen, Die Entstehung der Christlichen Bibel, 199-200. Von Campenhausen (200-201) continues with the following observations of the development of the canon of the Gospels: "Theoretisch standen zur Normierung der evangelischen Literatur drei Wege offen. Den ersten war Markion gegangen, indem er ein einziges Evangelium ausgewählt und dieses, in seinem Sinne bearbeitet, für das Evangelium schlechthin erklärt hatte. . . . Man konnte zweitens den Versuch machen, alle Texte, soweit sie glaubwürdig und brauchbar schienen, in einem einzigen neuen Evangelium zusammenfassen; und man konnte endlich verschiedene Evangelien auswählen und als vielfältige Einheit nebeneinander für gültig erklären. Diese letzte Entscheidung war durch die bisherige Praxis vorbereitet; . . . Die 'echten' Evangelien müten alte, von jeher gültige und überlieferte Bücher sein, wenn sie sich behaupten und Glauben finden sollten."

¹²⁵Childs, The New Testament as Canon, 145. von Campenhausen, Die Entstehung der Christlichen Bibel, 206 makes the following comment concerning the *Harmonie* of Tatian: "Jedenfalls hat sich in seinem syrischen Heimatgebiet seine Evangelienharmonie tatsächlich als das kanonische Evangelium der Kirche durchgesetzt, und dieses 'Evangelium der Vermischten' ist erst spät, im fünften und sechsten Jahrhundert, mühsam durch das sogenannte 'Evangelium der Getrennten' verdrängt worden."

When the four Gospels were collected, differences between them became noticeable. Augustine sought to find ways to harmonize those differences, while Origen looked for spiritual and mystical elements of the text. Allegory resolved the problem of unity, apart from harmonizations, "but at a frightful cost."¹²⁶

The nineteenth-century brought increasing problems to the four Gospels. Literary (Source) criticism looked for narrative rules that linked the Gospels and by so doing undermined the grounds for harmonization. The form-critical method, when applied to the Gospels, atomized the text even more than had source criticism. The history-of-religions approach to the Gospels looked far beyond the canonical gospels themselves to gather and compare information relevant to the gospel material, basically flattening the Gospels. Redaction criticism further reduced "the significance of treating the Gospels as a canonical unit."¹²⁷ In recent times, Ernst Käsemann saw the canon as a problem in finding unity in the New Testament. Käsemann observed that "Solche Variabilität ist jedoch bereits im NT so groß, daß wir nicht nur erhebliche Spannungen, sondern nicht selten auch unvereinbare theologische Gegensätze zu konstatieren haben."¹²⁸

The response of the canon approach to these directions is summarized by Childs, It is my basic thesis that modern New Testament scholarship has moved in a wrong direction when it has allowed its genuine insights into the history of the formation of the New Testament literature, won through painstaking research, to destroy the significance of the canonical collection of the four Gospels.¹²⁹

From a canon criticism perspective, the use of the title 'the Gospel according to (katav)

¹²⁶Childs, The New Testament as Canon, 146.

¹²⁷Childs, The New Testament as Canon, 148-50.

¹²⁸Ernst Käsemann, "Begründet der neutestamentliche Kanon die Einheit der Kirche?," in Das Neue Testament als Kanon: Dokumentation und kritische Analyse zur gegenwärtigen Diskussion, ed. Ernst Käsemann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), 128.

¹²⁹Childs, The New Testament as Canon, 151-52.

so-and-so' indicates that there is only one Gospel, though four evangelists. Childs notes, "the collectors therefore provided this material with a new context which allowed for its diversity, yet laid claim also on its unity."¹³⁰

The new context for the four Gospels shapes the way the material is to be understood. The single evangelist may even have had a different context originally; but the canonical approach views the one in light of the four. This does not mean that the integrity of any single Gospel is lost. Redaction criticism has a role in its pursuit of the individuality of each Gospel, but canon criticism looks at the canonical shape of the collection and insists that "the nature of the Gospel's unity be pursued with equal vigour" since "from a canonical perspective, the primary function of the Gospels is theocentric, not anthropocentric."¹³¹

In his discussion of "Gospel Harmony and Canon," Childs reviews the nature of the Gospel material as literature. He finds no exact parallel in the Old Testament for the canonical shaping of the four Gospels in the New Testament. He does observe that the development of the canon did not make an allowance for any one Gospel to be the key for interpreting the other three. His conclusion is that

in spite of the large amount of common material, both in form and content shared by the evangelists, the major formal sign of canonical shaping of the collection is the juxtaposition of the four books with titles which introduce the books as witnesses to the one gospel.¹³²

The presence of four Gospels in the Christian canon indicates a need to take seriously the

¹³⁰Childs, The New Testament as Canon, 152.

¹³¹Childs, The New Testament as Canon, 152-53. Childs (153) remarks, "To leave the theological questions at this stage [redaction criticism's diversity] is to miss the basic function of the canonical writings which was not to instruct the reader on the ideology of an author, but to bear witness to its subject matter, the Gospel. The individuality of the human author is subordinated to the theological significance of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ."

¹³²Childs, The New Testament as Canon, 155.

unity within their diversity. The canonical shape requires the reading of four Gospels, but offers "no one definitive entrance--neither literary, nor historical, nor theological."¹³³

Childs illustrates the effect of canonical shaping through a discussion of the infancy narratives, John the Baptist, Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi, the rich young ruler, the cursing of the fig tree, the anointing of Jesus, and the resurrection narratives. Each section has a full discussion of the canonical shaping that formed the texts.

For this paper, the longer ending of Mark's Gospel (Mark 16:9-20) will serve as the primary illustration of the view the canonical approach brings to the fourfold Gospel. This passage was chosen because it illustrates the earliest attempt at a harmonization between the Gospels.¹³⁴ Childs lists the elements of dependency as follows: "vv. 9-11 = John 20:11-18; vv. 12f. = Luke 24:13-35; vv. 14-16 = Matt. 28:16-20; v. 19 = Luke 24:50-53."¹³⁵

Childs draws attention to some characteristic features of this harmonistic attempt. First, "the three other gospels are used without any discernible order because all speak of the one resurrection."¹³⁶ Then, "the individual accounts are construed kerygmatically in terms of their func-

¹³³Childs, The New Testament as Canon, 156. Childs (156) elaborates as follows: "The basic error of the traditional harmony was the assumption that the canonical process had been deficient in leaving the Gospels in their plural form rather than completing the process by fusing them into a fixed, authoritative interpretation. . . . Conversely, the basic error of the historical critical position was the assumption that the canonical shape was of no exegetical significance and that valid interpretation depended on a critical reconstruction which re-aligned the Gospels in their original historical sequence."

¹³⁴Childs discusses the canonical significance of the longer ending of Mark in The New Testament as Canon (92-95). While canon criticism accepts the results of general biblical scholarship that these verses were not part of the original ending of Mark, it none-the-less draws different conclusions as to their canonical effect. Mikeal Parsons (276), "Canonical Criticism," points out in summary that "rather than dismissing the longer ending as useless and irrelevant, as historical criticism has largely chosen to do, the canonical critic would be most interested in the function of this ending in its canonical context and would attempt to make sense of Mark as it stands in its final form."

¹³⁵Childs, The New Testament as Canon, 206.

¹³⁶Childs, The New Testament as Canon, 206.

tion as witnesses."¹³⁷ Next, "the harmony of the longer ending has rendered the combined accounts into a consistent theological construal."¹³⁸ Finally, "the writer of the longer ending has not abandoned completely the elements of historical sequence in his harmony."¹³⁹

Focusing on the four Gospel accounts of resurrection, Childs draws some inferences for interpretation in a canonical process. Taken together, the four accounts still do not form a full narrative account of resurrection. The canonical shape of the texts is such as to preclude an exact historical reconstruction of what took place. This failure of history is not a failure after all. The writers are all interested in the resurrected Christ as their centre, not in an exact time-table of events. Childs concludes by noting that the canonical shape of the texts taken together "does not depend on historically correlating the number of angels at the scene, or the relation between appearances in Galilee and Jerusalem."¹⁴⁰

The unity of this canonical harmony rests in the attention focused on the resurrected one. There is, however, continuity within the accounts. The longer ending of Mark uses the temporal elements of the other accounts to fashion an ending for the Gospel. This is no accident. Canonical shaping did not form the resurrection accounts as existentialist moments. They relate history and faith in narrative form. This fact helps in the debate between the so-called "objective-subjective" interpretations of the resurrection. The canonical form of the texts point to God's act in raising Christ, not to the faith of those who became witnesses. Thus, as Childs continues, "the evangelists who shaped the Gospel texts in faith testify to the force of the resurrection in evoking that very faith."¹⁴¹

¹³⁷Ibid.

¹³⁸Ibid.

¹³⁹Ibid.

¹⁴⁰Childs, *The New Testament as Canon*, 207.

¹⁴¹Childs, *The New Testament as Canon*, 208.

The canon approach to hermeneutics does not fail to give recognition to the work of the historical critical method "in its recognizing the sociological setting of the tradents of the tradition," but it insists that these factors should not give the text its meaning. Childs concludes, "As a result of claiming to know better than the text itself, they only succeed in rendering its theological witness mute."¹⁴²

In relation to John, there are several questions that canon criticism can address to the text, as a whole and in part. Outler suggests one question for consideration by canon criticism: "Why was John 13 ignored as the dominical institution of yet another sacrament--by the same church that had taken Matt 26:17 so seriously?"¹⁴³

Acts

Outler raises two canon criticism questions concerning "The Acts of the Apostles." The first, asks why Acts was sundered from Luke "by the addition of a *fourth* gospel--from a later date and with a different perspective."¹⁴⁴ The second searches for meaning in the placement of Acts in the canonical lists.

Childs accepts the literary evidence for Acts as a second volume to Luke. He then raises the basic canonical question concerning the separation of the two works in the canon. Luke joined the fourfold Gospel and Acts was placed in another position in the canon. However, according to Childs, the importance of the exact position of Acts in the canon is not the issue.

Mikeal Parsons, among others, disagrees with Childs that the canonical position of Acts

¹⁴²Childs, The New Testament as Canon, 209. More strongly, Childs (209) writes, "Obviously an exegetical method which derives meaning from the New Testament only when it conforms to the ordinary conventions of human behaviour has difficulty fitting the Gospel accounts into such categories."

¹⁴³Outler, "The 'Logic' of Canon-making," 267.

¹⁴⁴Outler, "The 'Logic' of Canon-making," 267.

is not an issue. Instead, Parsons suggests that Acts serves as a bridge to the Gospels, to the General Epistles, and to the Pauline Corpus.¹⁴⁵

The issue is the canonical function of Acts. By preserving both Acts and the Pauline letters, the canonical collectors placed the reading of Acts in a new context different from that of its original publication. The book of Acts then provided a new setting for the reading of the Pauline letters. According to Childs, it should be remembered that

the canonical ordering of Acts and the Pauline letters was part of a larger process which both preceded and followed the decision respecting Acts' inclusion within the New Testament.¹⁴⁶

Finally, Childs suggests that Acts functions in the canon to aid later generations of Christians in understanding the significance of Paul's life and message.¹⁴⁷

Epistle

The Pauline Corpus

The difficulty of understanding the collection of Paul's letters into a canonical body can hardly be exaggerated. Some parts of the story seem clear. First, the letters of Paul were transmitted as a collection, not in isolation. Consequently, there is much discussion as to how the letters came to be collected and at what point they were considered as part of the canon. Second, the particular nature of Paul's letters underwent some process of universalization as they came into the wider use of the church. This process retained the basic epistolary setting of the letters, while broadening their function.

The reaction of scholarship to the Pauline corpus has been to seek to find the historical

¹⁴⁵Mikeal C. Parsons, "Canonical Criticism," 282-84.

¹⁴⁶Childs, The New Testament as Canon, 239.

¹⁴⁷Childs, The New Testament as Canon, 240.

Paul behind the body of letters attributed to him in the canonical shape of the Scriptures. Both liberal and conservative scholarship have engaged in this effort to discover Paul in the writings. The former find little of Paul, while the latter find more. Meanwhile, as Childs points out, "the setting of a letter within the canonical corpus is usually dismissed as exegetically insignificant because it does not reflect author intentionality."¹⁴⁸

The Pastoral Epistles

Within the Pauline corpus, the pastoral epistles occupy a place of uncertainty as to Pauline authorship. Childs refers to the results of this canonical process as a blurring of the sharp historical lines of the Pauline tradition. In other words, there may be canonical significance in the existence of the problem itself. At any rate, "a canonical interpretation of the new function of the literature is not directly dependent on the ability to establish an unbroken causal link."¹⁴⁹

The canonical shape of the Pastoral Epistles pictures the teaching of Paul as "authoritative doctrine which served as a guide to successive generations of Christians on how the entire Pauline corpus was to function."¹⁵⁰

Hebrews

Here, there is a need to focus especially on the epistle to the Hebrews. Canon criticism asks why this writing came to be part of the canon as the community shaped that canon. Sandmel raises the question of the relationship of Christianity to Judaism. It became clear at some point that there was both continuity and discontinuity between Judaism and Christianity. Ac-

¹⁴⁸Childs, The New Testament as Canon, 426-27.

¹⁴⁹Childs, The New Testament as Canon, 387.

¹⁵⁰Childs, The New Testament as Canon, 395.

According to Sandmel, this awareness can be discerned in early Christianity by "three different attitudes toward the potential sense of discontinuity."¹⁵¹

First, Paul's attitude . . . affirmed a basic, general overarching continuity, and the discontinuity was limited to the laws. Second, the attitude of Marcion, and of other Gnostics, was that the discontinuity was both general and specific, and, moreover, was total, to the end that it must be asserted that Christianity was never born out of Judaism, and owed no debt to it. . . . The third Christian attitude seems to me to be that of the Epistles to the Hebrews . . . namely that there is what one might call a higher continuity between the ancient Judaism and the new entity; in this higher continuity, the loftiest themes of the ancient Judaism have come unbrokenly to be aggrandized and even apotheosized in the younger movement.¹⁵²

Childs finds a canonical interest in the fact that Hebrews entered the canon in a position outside of, but complementary to, the Pauline corpus."¹⁵³

The Catholic Epistles

The Catholic Epistles are comprised of the letters of James, Peter, John, and Jude. The canonical shape of these letters is difficult to determine taking them as a group. They each seem to have a function within the canon that can only be understood with reference to each one individually.

James shares an integral place in the canon because of the view of faith which he presents as compared to Paul. While the exact historical relationship between James and the writings of Paul is not known, the existence of both author's writings in the same canon does send some kind of canonical message. Childs suggests that the letter "functions canonically in the context of the post-Pauline debate."¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹Sandmel, 173.

¹⁵²Sandmel, 173-74.

¹⁵³Childs, The New Testament as Canon, 418.

¹⁵⁴Childs, The New Testament as Canon, 436.

The canonical function of I Peter is not dependent on proving historical continuity or authorial intention. That the letter is attributed to Peter is important in canonical terms because Peter carried apostolic authority. The kerygmatic function of the message of this homily gains support from Peter's name.

Much attention has been given to the use of pseudepigraphy as a means of providing apostolic authority to I Peter. Childs stresses that pseudepigraphy is no real answer to the problem. By this, Childs does not mean that he believes the tractate is authored by Peter. He does believe there is a danger of

lumping all books of indirect authorship under a category of 'non-genuine' writings, and thereby destroying any chance of discerning the nature of the canon's peculiar theological construal.¹⁵⁵

Thomas Lea in "Pseudonymity and the New Testament" suggests that the New Testament evidence related to the subject of pseudonymity fails to support the idea of the practice. Lea mentions 2 Thessalonians 2:2; 3:17; 1 Timothy 4:1-2; Ephesians 4:15; and Colossians 3:9 to build a case against the acceptance of this practice in the New Testament times.¹⁵⁶

Second Peter's canonical function is

to address the question of how the fixed apostolic traditions represented by the figure of Peter function as written scripture for later generations of Christians.¹⁵⁷

In this sense, the letter of Jude differs from II Peter, though there are similarities in the content of

¹⁵⁵Childs, The New Testament as Canon, 462.

¹⁵⁶Thomas D. Lea, "Pseudonymity and the New Testament," in New Testament Criticism & Interpretation, eds. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 537. In this article Lea looks at pseudonymity from the literature of the Jews, the New Testament, the Ante-Nicene Fathers, New Testament Apocrypha, and biblical scholarship to the present. Bruce, The Canon of Scripture, 261 states, "It is doubtful if any book would have found a place in the canon if it had been *known* to be pseudonymous."

¹⁵⁷Childs, The New Testament as Canon, 492.

the two letters. Jude functions canonically to establish a guard against heresy in the church. At the same time, the larger canon functions to present the true message which Jude warns must be preserved.¹⁵⁸

The first of the Johannine Epistles serves the canonical function of connecting the reader with Christ and drawing some implications of life in Christ for the reader's day. The canonical role of the last two letters is "to illustrate the universal message of the gospel which is manifest in the daily life of the church."¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸Ibid., 485.

¹⁵⁹Ibid., 486-87.

CHAPTER FIVE
APPRAISAL OF A STEP BY STEP
PROCEDURE FOR USING THE METHOD

Introduction

One step in using canon criticism is to engage in canonical exegesis. Bruce defines this type exegesis as "the interpretation of individual components of the canon in the context of the canon as a whole."¹⁶⁰

Greidanus suggests three steps whereby preaching can make use of the results of canon criticism. First, the canon must be taken as context. Second, messages must rest on "canonical texts understood in the context of canon." Third, the canonical text must be understood as "inherently relevant, for this channel was formed for the specific purpose of proclaiming God's good news to future generations."¹⁶¹

Childs gives the single most helpful discussion on the way to *do* canon criticism. In his approach the act of interpretation begins and ends with the canonical form of the text. For Childs "the text's pre-history and post-history are both subordinated to the form deemed canonical."¹⁶² The exegetical task brings interpreter and text together in dialogue. The interpreter seeks "to discern how each writing within the New Testament canon construes its material in order to bear truthful witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ."¹⁶³ The interpreter's goal is in keeping

¹⁶⁰Bruce, 291.

¹⁶¹Greidanus, 76-77.

¹⁶²Childs, The New Testament as Canon, 48.

¹⁶³Ibid., 48.

with the kerygmatic purpose of the text in the form in which it is found. The canon itself marks the boundaries of the scriptures, but the interpreter allows the shaping of the text to lead to its special message "through a particular intertextuality."¹⁶⁴

The interpreter reads the text searching for the writers "expressed intentionality," that is "how the author intended the material to be understood, or of the effect which a particular rendering has on the literature."¹⁶⁵ The warning in this process is not to pull text and authorial intention apart. There are times when the larger view of a text's function in Scripture will provide a different meaning for the text than what the original writer may have intended.

Indications of Canonical shaping appear most often in the following places within and without the text: the overall structure of the book; the praescripts, conclusions, and superscriptions; intertextuality; message transmission; the function of the addressee; authorship; and the influence of the canonical shape of the collection on the individual parts.¹⁶⁶

Canonical Shaping

Overall Structure

The formal structure of the book affects its content. When the formal structure is uncertain, the reader must determine "whether a book's structure is equivocal and lends itself to a variety of possible interpretations (cf. Matthew)."¹⁶⁷ Childs cautions that "a construal of the structure which in fact eliminates portions of the book should be viewed with suspicion

¹⁶⁴Ibid.

¹⁶⁵Ibid., 49.

¹⁶⁶Ibid., 49-53. See Mikeal Parsons, "Canonical Criticism," 279-87 for an additional application of canonical criticism to the book of Acts. In this article, Parsons presents a model of canonical criticism at work.

¹⁶⁷Ibid., 49. Childs (49) observes that "within the books of the New Testament the structure of the whole is often unclear."

(cf. Luke 1-2)."¹⁶⁸ He also reminds the interpreter to look for features in the book, such as "patterns of interchange between dogmatic and paraenetic sections (cf. Hebrews)," which may be the "significant canonical function."¹⁶⁹

Praescripts, Conclusions, and Superscriptions

Read with care the book's praescript (e.g., Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-5) and conclusion (e.g., John 20:30; Heb. 13:22; II Tim. 4:6ff.). Authorial intentionality or canonical setting are sometimes revealed at this point in the book's structure. The superscriptions, though added later in the canonization process, "frequently give a valuable clue on how the church first heard the message (cf. Hebrews, Revelation)."¹⁷⁰

Intertextuality

The original historical referent of a passage must be compared with the form of the passage as it now stands in relation to other texts. Historical forces at work in the development of a text must be studied and evaluated as to their position in the background or foreground of the text.¹⁷¹

Two extremes are to be avoided at this point. First, diversity can be so emphasized that

¹⁶⁸Ibid.

¹⁶⁹Ibid. Childs (49) observes that "within the gospels, attention to the manner in which the narrative features render the material is of great importance."

¹⁷⁰Ibid. The textual references given in this paragraph are all taken from Childs' list of examples.

¹⁷¹Ibid., 50. Childs comments (49-50) that "a major polemic of the canonical approach is directed against the manner in which historical critics often treat this problem by assuming the centrality of a hidden historical reference even when omitted by the writer, or by assigning a major force to be the effect of the delay of the parousia (Luke, Acts), or of a developing 'early Catholicism' (Acts, Ephesians, II Peter);" or, (50) "one which reconstructs an allegedly original historical context and then refocuses the composition on the basis of such a theory (cf. Matthew)."

little or no unity is found in the book itself or between the book and its wider context. Second, unity can be so stressed that the exegete harmonizes all diversity, ending up with "a single monolithic block" of material.¹⁷²

Message Transmission

The canonical approach insists that the very phenomenon of a canon provides a basic warrant for inferring that the material of the New Testament was shaped toward engendering faith and did not lie inert as a deposit of uninterpreted data from a past age.¹⁷³

The controversy of the canonical approach with the historical critical method is strongest at this point. Childs states strongly that

the canonical approach regards it as a threat to exegesis when critics historize the New Testament material by assuming that the sharper the historical focus, the better the interpretation (cf. the debate over Romans).¹⁷⁴

¹⁷²Ibid., 50. Childs gives extended examples of most of the issues he raises in this overview. Most contrast the canonical approach with the historical criticism approach. But Childs (50) comments that "it is erroneous to infer that the canonical approach . . . is opposed to historical criticism in principle. The issue at stake turns on how it is used. Recovery of the pre-history of a composition, such as Q, can be useful in measuring both the continuity and discontinuity with the present canonical function. However, to insist on finding the key to the final form of the text in this early stage of development can easily become a hindrance in discovering its canonical role."

¹⁷³Ibid., 51. Thus, Childs' insistence that "the material is rendered into scripture in order to provide an access to its witness by successive generations of Christians who did not themselves experience at first hand Christ's ministry."

As one example of this, Childs (51) provides the following: "A variety of different techniques were used in the collection and reshaping of the Pauline corpus which sought to expand the canonical function beyond the scope of the original addressee, and yet to retain a high level of particularity."

¹⁷⁴Ibid., 51. Commenting further, Childs (51) observes, "Often the effect of postulating a specific, concrete referent is to destroy those very canonical features by which the message is rendered in its unique form."

Function of the Addressee

The original context of a text may be transcended by "the function of the addressee of a composition."¹⁷⁵ The historical context may present the original setting with seemingly little attention to the subsequent readers; or it may address subsequent readers through textual transparency.¹⁷⁶

Authorship

It must be understood that the canonical approach does not understand the question of authorship in the same way as the critical historical methodologies. Authorship questions function on a canonical scale, not simply on a solution to historical referentiality.¹⁷⁷

Influence of the Canonical Shape of the Collection on the Parts

One strong contribution of the canonical approach is its call to see the shaping of individual parts of the collection in light of the whole collection. In the process of canonization there were obvious influences of the whole on the parts. Childs draws attention to the fact that "at times the larger corpus exerts a major influence on the individual parts."¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁵Ibid., 52.

¹⁷⁶Ibid., 52. Two examples of this are given by Childs (52): the disciples words and actions are sometimes directly addressing the later church; and "a shift within a narrative or a letter from singular to plural, from 'I' to 'we', frequently signals a form by which to confront subsequent readers (cf. Acts)."

¹⁷⁷Ibid., 52. Three examples are shared by Childs (52) to show this difference in treatment of the authorship question: First, the "theological function of eyewitness claims (Luke 1:3; John 21:24); second, "the function of a claim to Pauline authorship of a letter which appears to have extended the witness beyond the historical period of Paul's ministry (cf. the Pastorals);" and third, "the role of a canonical portrait of Paul or Peter which is only partially congruent with a critical reconstruction of the historical apostles."

¹⁷⁸Ibid. Several examples are given by Childs (52-53) as follow: (1) The gospel of Mark reflects

CONCLUSION

The methodology of Canon criticism is still in the developmental stages as a biblical discipline. Yet, a great deal of spade work has been done in this discipline through the work of Brevard Childs and James Sanders. Only time will tell whether the highly critical remarks of James Barr toward the directions the methodology has taken will be tempered by the results of those who work in the discipline.

It seems clear that at some point there must be more preciseness in the definition of the term canon and of the term criticism. This weakness of terminology can be sensed as one reads the materials published in this area.

Not enough time has passed to evaluate canon criticism as a discipline able to forego the spirit of battle with other biblical disciplines and to develop a full way of cooperation with them. Should this cooperation happen, canon criticism can serve as a pair of glasses to other biblical disciplines helping them to see with new perspective the text with which they work and the community of faith who hold that text dear. Should, however, the other disciplines continue to see canon criticism almost as a return to a pre-critical discipline, there is not likely to be as much fruit produced from either canon criticism or the other biblical disciplines .

in its longer ending (Mark 16:9-20) "the effect of a holistic reading of the four gospels . . . which functioned to bring Mark's gospel into harmony with the fourfold collection;" (2) "the effect of including the Pastorals within the Pauline corpus"; (3) the division between Luke's two-volume work of Luke and Acts, "with separate and distinct functions within the canon assigned to Luke and to Acts"; (4) "the relation in one canon between books so different as Galatians and James"; and (5) the question of "whether a canonical 'harmony' of the four gospels is possible which avoids the pitfalls of both rationalism on the right and historicism on the left."

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