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CANONICAL CRITICISM

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BY

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INTRODUCTION¹

Canonical criticism developed as an alternative form of biblical interpretation to the historical critical method.² As a relatively new form of interpretation, its practice is still undergoing changes. Canonical criticism is not looked at the same today as it was when J.A. Sanders first used the term in 1972 in his book, *Torah and Canon*.³ Even the current understanding associated with B.S. Childs is being evaluated and revamped by other biblical scholars. In light of this ever changing and heavily scrutinized form of interpretation, this paper will attempt to provide an understanding of the major issues and characteristics surrounding this approach. This paper will present the history of the methodology, as well as an overview of the current understanding of the term and the key players in its development.



¹Significant editing has been done to the format of this paper in order to bring it closer to conformity to the requirements of the Turabian Style Guide. Dr. Cranford

²Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*, (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 481.

³Mary C. Callaway, *Canonical Criticism*, Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes, ed., *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and their Application*. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 125.

CANONICAL CRITICISM

As logic might tell you from its name, canonical criticism places strong emphasis on the canon of scripture. It is only fitting that before discussing the history behind this method, that some time should be spent discussing the history of the canon.

“Tradition history has demonstrated that Israelite traditions were transmitted and reinterpreted by successive generations to respond to new situations, and the Bible is the result of layer upon layer of these resignified traditions and stories. At certain historical moments, notably the 6th Century BCE and the 1st Century CE, the process of shaping traditions stopped and the finished text became canonized.”⁴ We do not know a great deal about the process of canonization. How did certain communities decide upon what would be authoritative? Luckily, an understanding of the process is not necessary for canonical criticism. As will be shown, the modern understanding of canonical criticism does not spend much time with the process. It instead “begins with the assumption that biblical texts were generated, transmitted, reworked and preserved in communities for which they were authoritative.”⁵ The question becomes not how were these texts generated, but how can these canonical texts speak today.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

So now that we have a basic understanding of the assumptions relating to the canon, lets talk more in depth about the actual history behind this method. In her chapter on canonical criti-

⁴Callaway, 121.

⁵Callaway, 121.

cism, Mary C. Callaway gives three factors which she believes caused, or gave rise to this method of interpretation:⁶

1. Attempts to write a biblical theology, which had been taking place since the 1940's, began to unravel in the early 1960's.
2. Growing dissatisfaction with the results of historical-critical scholarship.
3. Disillusionment in churches that methods promising to make the Bible accessible had in fact locked it in the past.

The idea behind this first factor dealt with the efforts by biblical scholars to locate what could be considered the locus, or single reason for the authority of scripture. Unfortunately, years of research led to anything but one single reason. Walter Eichrodt believed it to be covenant, Oscar Cullman was in favor of the biblical idea of time, and Gerhard von Rad placed his emphasis on salvation history. Despite several attempts to answer the question, none were adequate enough to envelope all of the “idiosyncratic residents of the Bible”⁷ Childs, with his emphasis on the canon, attempted to solve this problem by shifting the locus of biblical authority from the Bible's content to its shape.⁸

In relation to the second factor, people were growing dissatisfied with historical-critical scholarship because it was proving to be impossible. There was a new assumption that the scholar could not stand outside of history in order to analyze it, and that their work was inevitably colored by their own historical contexts.⁹ Childs confronted this problem by addressing another assumption, which stated that authority rested in the earliest version of a biblical tradition. By discounting the earliest texts as the only authority, Childs provided a way around the histori-

⁶Callaway, 122.

⁷Callaway, 122.

⁸Callaway, 123.

⁹Callaway, 123.

cal problem dealing with the inability of the scholar to stand outside of history in order to analyze it.¹⁰ They no longer needed to worry with the ancient texts, because they can find authority in the current texts as well.

Lastly, Childs addressed the problem of earlier methods locking the Bible in the past. His intention with canonical criticism was to bridge this gap by emphasizing continuity between reading of canonizing communities and contemporary believing communities.¹¹ The current community is able to relate to the former, because we both function on a similar premise, the canon of scripture, and what it meant or means for each of our situations.

This approach of Mary C. Callaway provides one understanding of the development of canonical criticism. By addressing three issues which were troubling scholars of the time, B.S. Childs developed this new form of interpretation. In his mind, his new method would provide a means that would not have to struggle with the current issues in biblical interpretation. Unfortunately, the years have proven that his method, while maybe not dealing with these three factors, has its own issues which people have become quite critical of.

Two names have been mentioned thus far in this paper. Both B.S. Childs and J.A. Sanders are instrumental in the development and promotion of this canonical criticism method. As was also mentioned earlier, both men did not have the same understanding of this phrase. The next few moments will be spent discussing each man and their understanding of canonical criticism.

J.A.SANDERS

¹⁰Callaway, 123.

¹¹Callaway, 124.

James A. Sanders is a professor of Intertestamental and Biblical Studies in the School of Theology at Claremont, California. He is also a professor in the Claremont Graduate School, as well as the President of the Ancient Biblical Manuscript Center, also located in Claremont.¹²

Sanders became associated with the term “canonical criticism” when he coined the phrase in his book, *Torah and Canon*.¹³ His book begins with an introduction entitled, A Call to Canonical Criticism. In the first page of this introduction, Sanders says, “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.”¹⁴ The rest of the book helped to clear up what the authors intended purpose of canonical criticism was.

The following excerpt by Mary C. Callaway basically sums up Sanders idea of canonical criticism:¹⁵

Its goal is to recover the hermeneutics of those who interpreted older traditions into what became the authoritative version. Scripture does not offer eternal truths or theological doctrines but a set of stories, along with the various ways in which the believing communities have found life in those stories. The very nature of the canon is to be simultaneously stable and adaptable, a fixed set of traditions infinitely adaptable to new contexts by successive communities of believers. Hence, for Sanders, it is not the final form of the text but the process by which the community arrived at that form that is canonically significant.

So Sanders has presented quite a unique form of interpretation. It is a form based largely on tradition, and the exclusive roll that tradition played in each successive community of believers. It also places great emphasis on the adaptability of the scripture. Sanders does not view the

¹²James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), back cover.

¹³Robert Morgan with John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 214.

¹⁴James A. Sanders, *Torah and Canon*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), IX.

¹⁵Callaway, 125.

nature of the canon as static, never changing. He says instead that, “It is the nature of the canon to be contemporized; it is not primarily a source book for the history of Israel, early Judaism, Christ, and the early church, but rather a mirror for the identity of the believing community which in any era turns to it to ask who it is and what it is to do, even today.”¹⁶

Sanders does not view his method as the sole authority in biblical interpretation. He says that his canonical criticism “uses tools common to other sub-disciplines of biblical criticism but uses them differently because of the perspective.”¹⁷ He provides a more complete explanation of this when he says his method “reflects back on all the disciplines of biblical criticism and informs them all to some extent. Canonical criticism is dependent on all that has gone before in this line, but what has gone before may now be dependent to some extent on canonical criticism. If biblical criticism is to be redeemed from its own failings and from the serious charges being leveled against it, it should embrace this additional disciplinary and self-critical stance.”¹⁸

Even as Sanders was writing his books on canonical criticism, he knew that it was not an established method of interpretation. He said in his book *Canon and Community* that this method “has not yet fully developed perhaps into a discipline itself.”¹⁹ This does not mean that he was without direction or goals for canonical criticism. He later went on to say that it “is developing into a discipline of tools for handling the data pertinent to painting a reliable portrait of the reality of the canonical process in early Judaism, which issued in the received Bibles of Juda-

¹⁶*Torah and Canon*, XV.

¹⁷*Canon and Community*, 21.

¹⁸*Canon and Community*, 19.

¹⁹*Canon and Community*, 2.

ism and Christianity.”²⁰ The unfortunate part of this for Sanders is that his ideas and intentions for canonical criticism have been over taken by those of B.S. Childs.

B.S. CHILDS

Brevard S. Childs was a professor at Yale until the late 80’s. He is a leading figure in the fields of biblical theology and canonical criticism.²¹ His name has become synonymous with the modern day understanding of canonical criticism. Despite Sanders original intentions, it is Childs who has become the authority on what this method of interpretation entails.

It is interesting to note that despite being known for the method, Childs does not care for his form of interpretation to be known as canonical criticism. He rejects the term because “it implies that here is another technique that can take its place alongside source, form and redaction criticism.”²² This just proves one of the differences between Childs and Sanders. While Sanders wanted this method to work hand in hand with the others, Childs does not even want to be associated with them. So we can read from this that while Childs does not want canonical criticism to be viewed as another method of interpretation, he does want it to be seen as a stance from which to approach the reading of the Bible. To help provide clarity as to what this means, we will look at three characteristics of canonical criticism as presented by Rowan A. Greer in an es-

²⁰*Canon and Community*, 17.

²¹Bray, 470.

²²Callaway, 125.

say he wrote on Childs. Once again, these three points are designed to help us read scripture better, not to provide us with tools for interpretation. These three characteristics are:²³

1. There can be no such thing as a correct interpretation of Scripture; rather we must speak of valid interpretations and raise the questions of the limits of validity.
2. The meaning of the biblical text is not confined to its historical setting.
3. Chief aim of interpretation involves appropriating the scriptural message for a community of faith and practice.

To expound on the first characteristic, Greer draws upon an illustration provided by Childs. The illustration says that “The canon therefore provided a context for the gospel, but did not attempt a final formulation of its message. It marked the arena in which each new generation of believers stood and sought to understand afresh the nature of the faith.”²⁴ The canon set the parameters for discussion; it did not provide us with an interpretation. This, in Childs view, makes it possible for there to be many different interpretations. There is no such thing as only one right answer, so long as the answers are within the boundaries, they are okay. While Sanders was interested in the authority and hermeneutics which led to the formation of the canon, Childs is only concerned that it exists. His focus is on this final form, and the importance it plays in setting the guidelines for us as we read and interpret scripture.

The second characteristic deals with the text being bound to its historical setting. Childs feels it is necessary to loosen the canon from its historical setting to emphasize its ability to be used by all generations. When we concentrate on the historical circumstances surrounding the formation of the canon, it implies that it was only valuable for those who developed it. By taking it out of this historical foothold, others feel that it can be applicable to their life as well.

²³Rowan A. Greer, *The Good Shepherd: Canonical Interpretations in the Early Church?*, Christopher Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight, ed., *Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 307-8.

²⁴Greer, 307.

The last characteristic dealt with the appropriation of the scriptural message for a community of faith and practice. It is Childs understanding of the Bible which helps to clarify this point. “The role of the Bible is not being understood simply as a cultural expression of ancient peoples, but as a testimony pointing beyond itself to a divine reality to which it bears witness. To speak of the Bible now as scripture further extends this insight because it implies its continuing role for the church as a vehicle of God’s will.”²⁵ The chief reason we interpret scripture is because it is still a vehicle of God’s will. It still provides insight and a message for our community of faith. Childs view of scripture is summed up by Greer when he says, “Scripture is not a relic of the past to be reserved in a museum but is a living message to be appropriated ever anew by Christians in their own time.”²⁶

The works of Childs has come under much scrutiny. First of all, he has been criticized “for not allowing scripture to witness to God’s activity in the life of the biblical communities shaping the traditions of the text.”²⁷ With his emphasis on the final form of the text, Childs neglects the value of the earlier traditions which were instrumental in the shaping of the text. Others argue against Childs emphasis on the canon by saying that “canonization is but the final stage in the tradition building process and is not to be viewed as a greater theological value than any discernable stage in that process.”²⁸ Greer makes a case against these claims when he says, “It

²⁵Greer, 15.

²⁶Greer, 308.

²⁷Donald Mckim, *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics: Major Trends in Biblical Interpretation*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), 10.

²⁸McKim, 10.

is clear enough that he [Childs] does not mean by this claim that we can dismiss or ignore the original setting. Rather, the point is that Scripture is always capable of speaking anew.”²⁹

GENERAL OVERVIEW

As was stated earlier, since Sanders and Childs do not have the same understanding of what canonical criticism should entail, it is often confusing to try and develop a definition of the term. It is still a very modern method, and because of this, scholars are still working out the specifics. To help in understanding, I will present a few of the more modern characteristics surrounding the current canonical criticism.

One of the first characteristics commonly associated with this method, is its emphasis on the end product of scripture, not so much the process. David Dunbar spoke of canonical criticism this way. He said that it “focuses on the final form of the biblical text. This text describes and defines the history of the encounter between God and his people in a way which became normative for all successive generations of this community of faith.”³⁰ The reason this text became normative for all generations was due to its canonization. Many would ask however, why does canonization give a text authority, especially since we know little about how canonized scripture was decided upon? Dunbar addressed this as well when he said, “Canon is authoritative because through this human word the living Lord continues to address his people; this can be understood only in the context of faith.”³¹ Dunbar argues that scripture continues to speak and

²⁹Greer 308.

³⁰David G. Dunbar, *The Biblical Canon*, D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 348.

³¹Dunbar, 349.

guide communities of believers, and it is this living quality that sets our current canon apart as authoritative.

Mary Callaway presents four other features which characterize the emerging discipline of canonical criticism:³²

1. While using literary and historical methods, canonical criticism is primarily theological in its nature.
2. It focuses on dynamics by which communities of faith and the developing traditions shaped each other.
3. Canonical criticism assumes that hermeneutics by which the scriptures can be appropriated need not be imported from philosophical or theological systems but are to be found within the scriptures themselves.
4. Canonical criticism insists that authority resides only in the full canon, which is the context in which every biblical text must be read.

In reference to this first point, Callaway says that the underlying concern of canonical criticism “is to find the locus of authority in the biblical texts by analyzing ways in which texts were authoritative for the believing communities that received them as scripture.”³³ While our greatest concern is for the final form of the text, and how it can speak to us, the reason the biblical texts were authoritative in other communities is still an underlying concern.

On this second point, Callaway makes the statement that the “voices of individual authors preserved within the text are of less significance than the ‘voice’ of the text received by the community.”³⁴ As is often characteristic of canonical criticism, emphasis is more on the community than on the individual. The method is less concerned with who wrote it, and more concerned with why it was kept.

³²Callaway, 126.

³³Callaway, 126.

³⁴Callaway, 126.

In her explanation of the third point, Callaway as well makes reference to the illustration of which Greer alluded to. She says, “There is no one hermeneutical key for unlocking the biblical message, but the canon provides the arena in which the struggle for understanding takes place.”³⁵ Canonical criticism does not promote the usage of one hermeneutical method over another. The only thing it does promote is that when interpreting scripture, that you stay within the boundaries of the canon. Apart from the canon, there is no understanding of scripture.

The fourth point is very similar to the third. As one might recall from the beginning of the paper, Sanders viewed the scriptures as a collection of stories. These stories in turn were interpreted differently by successive generations. As canonical criticism developed, that idea of scripture changed a little. Callaway now says that “Canonical criticism views scripture not as a treasury of stories, but as a lively discussion in which theological ideas are constantly being reformulated in response to new data.”³⁶ By emphasizing the full canon, Childs cannot reduce it to different stories. If he were to speak of scripture as a collection of stories, then it would almost be as if there were several mini canons.

The following passage helps to provide an example of how one would address the reading of scripture canonically:³⁷

If we are trying to understand a Pauline epistle, we would not be preoccupied with the task of seeking to discern Paul’s intentions when he wrote this letter. Attempting to discover the “original intention of the author” is far different from interpreting the letter in the communal contexts in which it has been received, read and preserved. The key issue instead would be trying to interpret this Pauline letter itself in its context in the Christian canon. The Christian community has already heard the Word of God in this letter, recognized it as Scripture and assigned it to a specific place within the living tradition.

³⁵Callaway, 126.

³⁶Callaway, 126.

³⁷Charles J. Scalise, *From Scripture to Theology: A Canonical Journey into Hermeneutics*. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1996), 74.

As was mentioned before, canonical criticism does not focus so much on the process as it does on the final product. Why did Paul write his letters? What were his original intentions? Christian communities before us have already addressed and wrestled with these sorts of questions. Canonical criticism asks us to remember that these communities heard the Word of God in the writings. It is now our goal to read this Word and to listen for God as he speaks to us.

CONCLUSION

Canonical criticism, as a method of biblical interpretation, is still in its developmental stages. It is continually evolving and shaping into its own unique method. While the particulars are being worked out, one can rest assured that the emphasis on the canon will remain the foundational element. Whether it is simply a means of reading scripture, or a hermeneutical key for interpretation, is still being decided. Regardless, canonical criticism hopes to address scripture in a way which will allow it to speak specifically to the Christian community today, addressing our own needs and our own questions.

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