

CANONICAL CRITICISM: A REVIEW FROM A CONSERVATIVE VIEWPOINT

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It is no secret that OT studies are in a considerable state of disarray today. All the old verities have floated away, and it is as though we were in the days of the judges—that is, everyone does what is right in his own eyes. Although it is still often necessary for a scholar who wishes the esteem of his peers to espouse the scholarly orthodoxy of J, E, D and P, once he has done so any strange mutation of that dogma seems to be perfectly acceptable. The result is that we have a plethora of criticisms being practiced today. There is source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, and tradition criticism, to name a few. Each of these has its own arcane methodology, and each yields astonishingly different results when practiced by different people

As stated above, the upshot of all of this is a discipline that is adrift. This is not all bad, of course. In a day when all move in lockstep, those who differ from the norm are effectively shut out. The only alternatives are “in” and “out.” This latter was the experience of many of our evangelical scholarly forbears. They were forced to the fringes of the learned debates by the monolithic commitment of OT scholarship to the Wellhausenian position. Today the walls are largely fallen, and as a result we evangelicals have a new opportunity to speak and be heard in the discipline as a whole. This is not to say that we have suddenly become respectable. There still lurks in the minds of our compatriots the conviction that a recent dean of Duke Divinity School voiced when asked if he expected to appoint an evangelical to his faculty. His answer was that he could not do so with integrity since evangelicalism is an intellectually dishonest position. While not all would be so forthright, it is still true that our points of view on Scripture and revelation are sources of profound uneasiness to many in the scholarly community. As a result, we may expect that respectability will always have the price tag of compromise on these points attached to it. The challenge before us will be to make our contributions in such a way that we can be heard without at the same time surrendering that which makes us who we are. Scylla and Charybdis loom on either side, and respectability sings a deadly siren song.

As we consider where and how to make our contributions we must recognize that amidst the general chaos in the field there are still some very important points of agreement. One of these that has particular relevance for this paper is the agreement that the Bible's reports of the history of the Israelite people, and of its own history, are largely unreliable. Kenneth Kitchen's comment of

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twenty years ago that scholars of the ancient Near East and of the Bible view their sources from diametrically opposing points of view is, if anything, more true today than then.¹ Whereas a student of ancient Near Eastern texts assumes that their reports of historical matters are true until proven false, OT scholars often assume that the Biblical accounts are false until proven true. Even in postexilic writings it is claimed that the authors have either knowingly or unknowingly falsified their accounts of historic events and meanings. Prior to that time the level of historical reliability is generally held to be even lower.

Such a point of view causes little problem for the scholar who is merely an antiquarian. In fact, it provides a fertile field for a demonstration of scholarly erudition as he or she is able to reconstruct from the slightest bits of evidence a picture that the ordinary reader of the text would never have imagined. However, these agreements do create a problem for the scholar who is also an evangelical. If the Bible's account of history is largely a fabrication and if its reports of its own origins are to a great extent fictional, then how can an evangelical give any credence to its theology? In other words, the net effect of two hundred years of higher critical work on the Bible is to render its theology null and void. Although Jack Sanders does not put it quite so baldly, he admits as much in *Canon and Community*.² He goes on then to describe a way of dealing with the Biblical text that, while admitting the destructive results of historical criticism, yet preserves the Bible as a theologically valid document. This method he wishes to call canonical criticism.

Partly because of the approach's relative newness and partly because of the disarray in OT studies, there is no real agreement as to the exact ways in which canonical criticism should function.³ Again, it is every man for himself. But, broadly speaking, those who would describe themselves as practicing canonical criticism would be marked as paying attention to the present form of the text in determining its meaning for the believing community. Although the history of the text prior to its recognition as canonical will have greater or lesser significance to different practitioners, all would agree that those matters are not the major issue. The stages in the process are not important; rather, it is the final product that has authority for the Church. In this view inspiration does not come to an author; rather, it comes through the believing community, which wrestles with an issue over hundreds, even thousands, of years, telling and retelling its traditions until finally those traditions express so well what the community is that the traditions begin to shape the community. Thus it can be said that the canonical form of the text is the only one in which full inspiration resides.

¹K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Intervarsity).

²J. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 4-6.

³ On the one hand, B. Childs would tend to say that it is the final form that has authority for the Church and that whatever the earlier forms may have been is of relatively little importance for contemporary believers (cf. "The Canonical Shape of the Prophetic Literature," *Int* 32 [1978] 53-55). On the other hand, Sanders believes that an understanding of the process whereby the final canonical form was reached is critical to our understanding of the meaning of that form for us (cf. *Torah and Canon* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972] xx *et passim*; cf. also *Canon* 35-37).

Understandably, conservatives have greeted these proposals with a good deal of enthusiasm. For at least 150 years we have been accustomed to denying, and pointing out the fallacies of, a greater and greater atomization of the Biblical text. We have insisted that the present form of the text is the very word of God and have demanded that any interpretation with pretensions of validity take into account that present form. Thus when scholars whose respectability is unquestioned begin to say things that sound very similar we are tempted to emit a large sigh of relief and open the gates.

But that gate-opening may be a bit premature. Without question, conservative approbation has been embarrassing to the advocates of canonical interpretation. Sanders makes it known in no uncertain terms that what he is proposing is not some sort of "crypto-fundamentalism." He affirms without reservation that canonical criticism rests squarely upon all the conclusions of Biblical higher criticism during the last two hundred years.⁴ Furthermore, and more importantly, he argues that the problem that canonical criticism is seeking to avoid is one that historical criticism and fundamentalism have in common: the assumption that inspiration resides in an author.⁵ If we must give up that assumption in order to practice valid canonical interpretation, are we willing to do so?

Yet again, especially as this approach is practiced by Brevard Childs, theology is essentially removed from its historical context. More so than Sanders, Childs tends to downplay the process by which the text supposedly grew up and to emphasize the final product. This perhaps reflects a differing conception of the function of the Bible in the Church. Childs seems to want to talk about revealed truths, whereas Sanders seems to want to talk about theological trajectories.⁶ For Childs the content is normative, but for Sanders the stages and direction of the process guide us in our theologizing. If Sanders' work has the effect of removing us from any confrontation with a divine word, Childs' results leave us in a curiously flat, two-dimensional world where truth seems to have little contact with experience.⁷ The shape of the canon is determined more by the interplay of ideas than by a confrontation with God in history. This has the effect of bringing us very near to Bultmann's concept of "verbal reality," a world where meaning is completely cut loose from fact.⁸

⁴Sanders, *Canon* 37.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁶B. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 136-137; Sanders, *Canon* 67.

⁷Childs, *Old Testament Theology*, shows this most clearly. It almost reads like a systematic theology because of the near total absence of historical reference. But this absence is not surprising. When he does use it he is clearly opening himself up to N. Gottwald (whom Childs criticizes cogently on pp. 24-25). The canonical picture of Moses (pp. 109-111) is a fiction. Yet we are to give it the status of theological revelation. If the history is fictional, it seems much more logical to say with Gottwald that it is all in support of cultural-materialist principles and not revelational ones.

⁸In my judgment C. E. Braaten's *History and Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966) still remains one of the most trenchant critiques of this position (cf. esp. pp. 53-76, 130-140).

What are we as evangelicals to say then to this new development? First of all, let us be very grateful for any recognition that the present form of the text must be interpreted as it comes to us. Whatever one's conclusions about the authorship of Isaiah, it is unconscionable that with one or two exceptions every commentary on the book in this century has been written in two parts by two different authors who write on their part as if the other did not exist. This is a denial of an historical fact: the actual present unity of the book. Childs' insistence that the book must be interpreted as a whole is a most welcome development.⁹

Furthermore, we may rejoice in the re-emphasis upon overall literary context. The conjunction of certain ideas in a certain structure is neither accidental nor insignificant. Each of those ideas is to be understood in the light of that conjunction and not in isolation. In sum, if a reputable OT scholar insists that the present shape of the OT is both a result of and an expression of the revelation of God through his people and must be so interpreted, that is cause for gratitude.

But does such gratitude mean that we can embrace this approach wholeheartedly? I think not, and that for two reasons. First, I do not see how we can separate fact and meaning as the canonical critics so blithely do. To say that we should look upon what the Bible tells us about its origins with the greatest skepticism and yet accept what it tells us about God with childlike faith demands a compartmentalization of thought that is fallacious.¹⁰ When truth is no longer consistent with fact it is no longer truth. This separation of fact and meaning is doubly fallacious when it is applied to the Bible, because the Biblical writers regularly appeal to historical events as the authentication of their theology. They tell us that since God has done thus and such we may believe thus and such about him. To discard the evidence but retain the conclusions is not impressive scholarship but defective logic.

Yet this is exactly what the canonical critics encourage us to do. Deuteronomy is not a revelation of God to Moses in the desert of Moab but a product of a believing community's reflection upon the issues of law and grace many hundreds of years later. Yet despite the community's inability to admit where they really got the text, we are called upon to submit ourselves to its inspired truth.¹¹ In other words, we are invited to stake our lives upon the truth of an idea despite the fact that the evidence given for that idea's truth has been created out of whole cloth. That is not faith but hunch. Now if a person's hunch is right, a leap into the dark is better than nothing. But apart from historical validation, who is to say that this hunch is any better than the Buddhist hunch or the hedonist hunch? In short, I do not believe that the commitment to his-

⁹B. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 325.

¹⁰It seems to me that Childs is hard put to explain why a "traditional narrative" should be equated with a revealed word from God (*Old Testament Theology* 23). He does not adequately explain either the source or the truth-factor of the knowledge being communicated. Later (p. 26) he resorts to the neo-orthodox language of "witness to revelation." But he is still unable to explain why fiction is an appropriate witness to truth.

¹¹Cf. Childs, *Introduction* 202-225; *Old Testament Theology* 108-112.

torical validation is simply a fundamentalist aberration that we happen to share, interestingly enough, with higher critics. We take this position, as the critics do, because the Bible takes it. We know God both because of what he did in history and because he caused an interpretation of those actions that is both faithful and authoritative to be written down. The two cannot be separated. To the extent that canonical critics tell us that we have an inspired theology coming to us through a fictionalized account of that theology's origins, to that extent an evangelical must part company with them.

My second reason for questioning the validity of the canonical approach as it is presently shaped is closely related to the foregoing one. This is the suggestion that it is possible to interpret a passage correctly solely by reference to its literary context. If one is convinced that the historical references are highly dubious, as is true of the critics, then literary context is all that is left, and one must make do. This seems to be the case in Childs' discussion of Isaiah. He accepts without question that Isaiah of Jerusalem, or I Isaiah, did not write chaps. 40–66 of the book ascribed to him. Instead a nameless prophet or prophets writing during and after the exile produced them. To his credit Childs is unwilling to interpret chaps. 40–66 without reference to chaps. 1–39. But in order to hold them together he must posit someone else, neither I nor II Isaiah, about whose historical context we know nothing, who has expunged all historical references to the exilic and postexilic periods from chaps. 40–66 in order to interpret them with chaps. 1–39.¹² The effect is to leave chaps. 40–66 with no historical context at all, neither 700 B.C. nor 500 B.C. nor yet that of the unknown compiler or compilers.

Again, if the critic is convinced of the unreliability of the text's witness to its origins and this is the best he can do in continuing to insist upon the integrity of the literary context, we should not be scornful of the effort. Surely Childs has gone much farther than his predecessors in this regard and is to be commended both for his courage and his insights. But the question remains: Will the Biblical evidence allow us to separate literary context from historical context? The Reformers would say "No." They taught us that there are two parameters for determining the meaning of any Biblical statement: the grammatical and literary on the one hand, and the historical on the other.¹³

Of course we do not believe that the tradition of the Reformers is divinely authoritative. But were they wrong in this case? I think not. When the Reformers taught us to ask what a passage was saying in its historical context they were recognizing a distinctive Biblical characteristic. When we compare the Bible to other holy books we discover something very odd about it. It is contextual. Whereas the others contain prescriptions and pronouncements that stand alone, purporting to give us plain truth, the Bible only rarely does so. Instead it teaches us truth in the context of a people's experiences and conveys that truth in a connected form of thought. I cannot overstress the importance of this observation, for it means that if we interpret the statements of the Bible apart from the experiences through which they were mediated and apart from the

¹²Childs, *Introduction* 325.

¹³See for instance A. B. Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 38–40.

literary context in which they now appear we must inevitably misinterpret them. Now it is a part of the amazing grace of God that he has managed to touch the lives of people even through the most egregious misinterpretations, but that is not a license for us to continue in them.

What this means is that just as we cannot treat the text as a hodgepodge of unrelated bits and pieces that have come together by accident, neither can we look upon it as a mystical hypostasis that will infallibly teach truth so long as we get grammar and syntax and structure right. If we evangelicals have for too long ignored the wholeness of Biblical books in our preoccupations with proof-texts and promises and with proving the historical statements correct, let us not now veer into the opposite ditch with an unhealthy dismissal of historical context. It is true that it is the present text that holds authority over us, but it would be dangerous, as I think I see some of us doing, to abandon the attempt to understand that text's meaning in its first historical setting. Between them, literary and historical contexts provide the channel for us to determine the meaning of any passage for our own lives. To destroy one bank of any channel is to move from river to swamp.

My third concern is more of a question than an objection. Canonical criticism posits that inspiration resides in the community rather than in an author.¹⁴ In and of itself that is not an impossible idea. Ultimately inspiration is from God, who can give it where and when he wills. However, the Bible does not speak to us of inspired communities. Rather, it speaks of inspired individuals speaking to the community. "God . . . spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets" (Heb 1:1). There is a distinction here that may be very important. Where does the Bible originate? From within a group of people who collectively seek and find God? Do they slowly investigate and discard unproductive ways while they come ever nearer the light? If that is what is meant by inspiration residing in the community, and I fear that it is, then we must resolutely oppose such a view. We must oppose it because it is directly contrary to the way in which the Bible tells us that inspiration came. The community, left to itself, is not a source of regeneration but of degeneration. Only when individuals are confronted by God and enter into an obedient relationship with him does revelation come to the community. Moreover, it frequently comes as a word of condemnation and a call to repentance. There is a progressive unfolding on God's part, and there is a deepening response on the part of certain segments of the community. But that is far from a largely unconscious reflection upon and sifting of traditions, with those that are both stable and adaptable rising to the top.¹⁵ In short, I am suspicious of any suggestion that seems to remove inspiration from the locus where the Bible places it: an individual and personal response to a divine initiative.

Now having said what I think is both helpful and not helpful about the canonical approach, it is incumbent upon me to give an example of the ways in which some of the elements of this approach might be incorporated into Biblical study. The text I will use is the book of Isaiah, since that is the material

¹⁴Childs, *Old Testament Theology* 26; Sanders, *Canon* 19.

¹⁵Sanders, *Canon* 22–23.

with which I am most familiar at this point.

Whether Childs or Sanders would care to own any of the things that I do I am not sure. For one thing I have no interest in trying to construct the pre-canonical history of the text. I suspect that would be a serious problem for Sanders and a somewhat less serious problem, though still a problem, for Childs. I lack such an interest because of my increasing skepticism over the ability of critics to perform this task with any degree of unanimity. While it is possible for scholars to reach considerable agreement about the physical limits of the various components of the present book, their inability to reach agreement on when the various elements of the components were written or for what purpose is nothing short of astonishing. After more than a hundred years of intensive work, it is not at all uncommon to find six different authors purporting to have used the same methods and yet reaching six widely differing conclusions about the provenance of a given verse. Perhaps I am naive, but this suggests to me that there is something wrong with those methods.

My approach is to ask whether, in some way or other, the text defines its provenance and purpose. If so, I take that at face value. If the text does not give such indications I look to the surrounding materials for clues. For example, a great deal of ink has been spilt over what is sometimes known as the "Little Apocalypse" in chaps. 24–27. Since the language is supposedly apocalyptic, the opinions as to its date range from the immediate postexilic¹⁶ to the Hasmonean¹⁷ and everywhere in between. However, the text gives us no clues at all, apart from the very dubious one of the language.

Personally I see nothing in the language that is impossible for a person in the eighth century B.C. to have thought or spoken. But that is not the point here. The point is that the passage is placed between the oracles against the nations (chaps. 13–23) and the pronouncements upon the false leaders of Judah who are trusting Egypt (chaps. 28–33). Furthermore, it comes in the middle of a long section of the book where the issue of trusting God or the nations is being considered (chaps. 7–39).

So what is the point of chaps. 24–27 here? On either side of it are particulars: Before it are the particular nations under judgment, and after it is particular Israel trusting helpless Egypt. In chaps. 24–27 the focus is upon the more general truths that undergird the preceding and the following. These are truths about God and his nature: God the cosmic Judge, God the Ruler of time, God the gracious Redeemer. Surely such a One ought to be trusted rather than the nations of earth. And so we read: "You will keep in perfect peace the one whose mind is fixed upon you, because he trusts in you" (26:3).

What is the function of these chapters? They conclude chaps. 13–23 and they introduce chaps. 28–33. Are they where they are by accident? No. Were they originally spoken expressly to be put in this place? I do not know. It is not impossible to imagine them standing on their own, or having been addressed to some other setting. But the canonical shape of Isaiah will not allow us that

¹⁶F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973).

¹⁷O. Kaiser, *Isaiah 13–39: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973).

luxury of speculation. And indeed such speculation is fruitless. It is the present text that holds authority over us.

At the same time I want to insist that it is within the historical context of the crisis of 705-701 B.C. that these chapters are to be understood. That is clearly the setting of chaps. 28-33, and that sets the frame for us as regards chaps. 24-27. If we interpret the chapters merely as timeless truth they lose their capacity to address us as time-conditioned human beings. It is when the truth is put into the context of history that it has a power of concreteness that abstraction never has. Frankly, this has implications for me as to authorship. I simply cannot imagine an editor in 200 B.C. inserting ideas he has just had into a context already five hundred years out of date. But be that as it may, I would insist that to pull these chapters out of their literary and historical setting, either for evangelical or for form-critical purposes, is to misuse them and to do violence to the whole nature of Biblical revelation.

Now let me tackle a more difficult problem. How shall we understand chaps. 40-66? It seems to me that we must avoid two pitfalls here. On the one hand, we must not commit the error of modern liberalism—namely, interpreting them without reference to chaps. 1-39. But on the other hand, we dare not interpret them solely by reference to chaps. 1-39, as I think I see some canonical critics doing. These chapters are addressed to people living c. 550 B.C. and 500 B.C., and we must allow them to say what they were designed to say to those people. Yet they were spoken during an historical period nearly two hundred years earlier. How shall we keep those two in tension?

I think we are enabled to do it when we discover that a single theme runs through the entire book. That theme is stated in the first five chapters. As most scholars recognize, those chapters constitute a literary introduction to the book. But the theme as set forth in that introduction contains a glaring contradiction: God has chosen a desperately sinful Israel to become servant Israel, and through them his light will come to the nations. Yet how can that be? How can sin and holiness coexist? That question cannot be answered merely by reference to events during Isaiah's lifetime. To answer it for his own people required Isaiah to look ahead to the exile and beyond.

In its canonical shape the book of Isaiah sets about to answer these questions in a methodical way. First of all, the prophet's own experience is set up as a model. When the nation of unclean lips will have experienced what the man of unclean lips did, the problem will be solved. Having stated the solution in brief form the book then examines it at length. First is the fundamental question of Israel's relation to God. Will she see him as the Holy One of Israel who can be trusted implicitly, or will she put her faith in the surrounding nations? The exploration of this question takes up chaps. 7-39, extending from Ahaz' refusal to trust (chaps. 7-12), through lessons designed to teach trust (chaps. 13-35), up to and including Hezekiah's experience of trust and distrust (chaps. 36-39).

But the book cannot end at chap. 39, because trust in God is not enough to resolve the contradiction between sinful Israel and servant Israel. To reach that resolution the discussion must move into the future. God can be trusted, but how does that help us when we are captives in Babylon? Will that not mean that God has either been defeated or has given up on us? No, says Isaiah, for precisely then God will motivate you to service by demonstrating just how

deeply his choosing of you extends. You will be his servants through whom he will show his power over Babylon and her gods. That motivation to service is the theme of chaps. 40–48.

Nevertheless, when the power of God's love to motivate a servant has been demonstrated, the question remains: How can a sinful human being serve a holy God? That question receives its answer in chaps. 49–55: the servant. Through the self-giving of one who will be all that Israel should be but is not, we may be at one with God. Touched by a charred coal from his broken body we can be made clean to serve him.

With the lovely benediction that closes chap. 55, it seems that the book should end. But it does not, because the theme of servanthood is not exhausted. It is not enough to become convinced that God is trustworthy, or to be motivated by his election love, or to be made clean by his atoning sacrifice. Beyond all of that is the actual performing of the service. Here the prophet looks beyond the exile to the day when a delivered people will run the risk of becoming a smug, inward-looking nation congratulating itself upon its election, never letting loose the unbelievable power of God to transform themselves and their world. If that were to happen, then despite all that had occurred previously the nations would still not receive the light as God had intended.

Here then is the key to the book's strange combining of three historical settings. In no other way could the total scope of servanthood and the servant be conveyed. Could the people of Isaiah's day comprehend all that he was saying? I would be very surprised if that were so. But the truth was there in a single setting where, when they finally had eyes to see, they could see it in its wholeness. Then they would say, "Who has declared this from ancient time? Who has told it from that time? Is it not I, the Lord?" (45:21b). So, just as chaps. 1–39 require chaps. 40–66 to be understood, chaps. 40–66 require chaps. 1–39.

Now if it is possible for a person to imagine this kind of unity of thought coming out of the kind of four-hundred-year-long committee meeting that modern redaction criticism of the book posits, so be it. I, for one, confess to a good deal of difficulty in envisioning this kind of outcome from that kind of process. But be that as it may, the book is a whole and must be interpreted as a whole. That is true whether one believes in revelation or not. Simple literary integrity demands that an interpreter interpret the piece as it comes to him or her. We do not have the luxury of rewriting the book as we think it was written or as it ought to have been. Perhaps one can do that with *The Bobbsey Twins* or another book of less than monumental importance, but when we are dealing with a piece of literature that is no less than one of the foundational documents of western culture it is a travesty to think that we could pull a piece out here and interpret it in isolation or reconstruct a piece there so as to divine that piece's true meaning.

Let me summarize. In that canonical criticism calls us to interpret a book in no less than its literary wholeness, it is a most welcome development. Furthermore, in that it challenges us to consider the significance of the way in which books and collections of books are arranged, it is commendable. However, in that it suggests that we can now bypass the vexed questions relating to the historical validation of the revelation, it is dangerous.