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BREVARD CHILDS' CANON CRITICISM: AN EXAMPLE OF POST-CRITICAL NAIVETÉ

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John Barton speaks of an unease with the historical-critical approach to Biblical interpretation. Each method, though it might shed helpful light on the text, always comes up short as a definitive tool for interpreting a text before us. He says that none of the methods—not even all of them taken together—constitute the one "valid" way of reading the text.[1] With the rise of new criticism and structuralism it has become necessary to talk of something more than the addition of one more new method: One must speak of a paradigm shift, which has come about because of a dissatisfaction with the historical methods and their inadequacies for dealing with the texts in the canon.

One of these paradigm-shifting methods is Brevard Childs' canonical approach. He himself speaks of it as something absolutely different from what went before, something beyond just another new method. In *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (1970) and *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (1979), Childs sets out his method. Enough time for thorough assessment has now passed, and the reactions to Childs have run the gamut of positive and negative comments. H. Cazelles praised it as profound and successful, calling it an "anthological style," which he contrasted to the fragmenting approach of historical criticism.[2] On the other end of the spectrum James Barr satirized Childs' focus on the canonical context:

> It is like the Book of Kings: for failure to remove the high places, read now failure to read in canonical context. Only very occasionally does one discern an element of cautious hesitation in this monolythic principle (e.g., p. 476). If only Childs had recognized the value of the word *sometimes*! . . . He leaves it in no doubt that the canon is a good thing. The expression "the curse of the canon" is not a part of his vocabulary. The book is an utterance of entire approval of the idea of canon: everything about canons, canonicity, canonical form is good. No one in the history of theology or of biblical interpretation has accorded so much centrality to the canon.[3]

Rather than "decanonizing" the text by taking away all the contours of its canonical shape, Childs wants consciously to read the text in its

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[1] J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 78.

[2] H. Cazelles, "The Canonical Approach to Torah and the Prophets," *JSOT* 16 (1980) 28.

[3] J. Barr, "Childs's *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*," *JSOT* 16 (1980) 13.

canonical context and shape, looking for its canonical meaning. At the very least, Childs' approach may refocus attention on canonical issues and aid recovery of a more unified view of the text of Scripture. But the evangelical Biblical interpreter should be aware that Childs is not leading the way back into the fundamentalist fold. He is not turning back the clock on critical studies to a pre-critical stance. His method is clearly post-critical.

I. POST-CRITICAL METHOD

For all his expressions of dissatisfaction with critical methods, Childs does not call for an anti-critical approach; rather, he calls for a post-critical approach. He wants to hold on to all his critical tools and their yield while yet turning to a unified text to discover present-day meaning.

Paul Ricoeur speaks of a hermeneutical methodology that has three steps or moments: the moment of naive understanding, the critical moment, and the post-critical moment. At the first moment the interpreter turns to the text, treating it as though it were autonomous, as an artifact with style and with its own reference. He lets the text itself ask the questions. At the second moment the interpreter engages in the hermeneutics of suspicion, which provokes a "conscious distanciation" by "re-presenting" the kerygma in a new situation.[4] Ricoeur's third step is the post-critical moment. It is the place where the reader appropriates the meaning of the text by a dialectical internalizing of the testimony of the text in spite of conscious contradictions in reality. At this stage any remnant of naiveté is that which has been willfully retained by a free interpreter who claims the testimony of the text as his own testimony.

Childs has chosen to operate in a setting somewhat like Ricoeur's third moment. In no way is Childs going back to the simple confession of pre-critical believers. He takes seriously the critical claims that such a position is no longer an option for the honest reader of the twentieth century. After going through the first two moments—through naive acceptance of the propositional statements of the Biblical text and through critical suspicions of those statements—Childs thinks that Biblical studies has come to a testimony it can seize as an appropriate confession of faith. Apparently he agrees in principle with the sentiment Mudge expresses: "We have no alternative today to working through criticism toward a second naivete."[5]

So Childs is not a fundamentalist, though Barr thinks he is aiding and abetting them. Barr says Childs' approach is "in fact very close to the conservative/fundamentalist one" in spite of his disavowal of inerrancy in Scripture. When Childs talks about what an "utter disaster" critical approaches have turned out to be,

[4] P. Ricoeur, "Preface to Bultmann," in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (ed. L. S. Mudge; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 58.

[5] L. S. Mudge, "Paul Ricoeur on Biblical Interpretation," in *Essays* (ed. Mudge) 23.

> this is exactly what conservative ears want to hear. . . . All this will be deeply welcome to conservative opinion, all the more so because a clearly non-conservative scholar has written it; it will all be quoted by conservative polemicists for the next hundred years.[6]

Childs gives a barbed reply to this charge of lending illegitimate aid and comfort to fundamentalism, the archenemy of reasoned Biblical studies:

> I suppose that if one has a fixation on Fundamentalism and considers it as the major threat to serious biblical scholarship, then any measure of comfort would automatically suffice to condemn a position. I would have thought a book should be judged on its own merits and not from its possible misuse. If some Fundamentalists find portions of the book agreeable, I can only rejoice that they are not completely without light.[7]

Barr is adamant that, in spite of the decided differences in operating assumptions, fundamentalists will likely take up Childs' canon criticism, simply reading in a few of their own theological positions and baptizing it as the reigning conservative method.[8] This may be so, but it should not happen. Sanders' warning along this line is appropriate: "Literalists and fundamentalists can take only false comfort in what is happening in this regard: they should not be deceived into thinking that critical scholarship has come to its senses in repentance of its errant ways."[9]

Childs is not taking us back to the canon in the shape that critical scholars last saw it before they began dissecting it into its sources, forms and oral traditions. Barton explains this in the terminology of a post-critical approach:

> It is only after we have seen how varied and inconsistent the Old Testament really is that we can begin to ask whether it can *nonetheless* be read as forming a unity. To put it briefly: the canon critic is asking whether the Bible may not have a unity *after all.*[10]

For all his condescending tolerance of fundamentalists, Childs himself makes it quite clear that his position is not merely a moderated conservative viewpoint, which—if stripped of some minor liberal influences—would be quite acceptable as an orthodox approach to OT interpretation:

> Actually the dynamics of a canonical approach to the Old Testament is sharply at odds with the Fundamentalist position. The role assigned to the history of tradition, the function of the community as tradents of the

[6] Barr, "Childs's *Introduction*" 14, referring to B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 485.

[7] B. S. Childs, "Response to Reviewers of *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*," *JSOT* 16 (1980) 58.

[8] Barr, "Childs's *Introduction*" 23.

[9] J. A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984). Note that Sanders disagrees with Childs' canonical process because he has a much more fluid idea of canonical development. His thesis is that the OT canon was pluriform in text and canonical boundaries.

[10] Barton, *Reading* 99.

> tradition, and the time-conditionality of the canonical witness, all move in a direction which is antithetical to conservatism.[11]

An issue of OT studies that presses itself on OT scholarship is the question of the relation of what it meant to what it means, or how to appropriate the meaning of an ancient text as an authoritative guide for contemporary living. The historical-critical methods, says Sanders, "locked the Bible into the past," creating a crisis of meaning for present-day Bible readers. In its single-minded pursuit of original meanings, critical scholarship neglected the present believing community.

> 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 the pulpit and pew, between the critically trained pastor and the lay parish. For some the Bible has become a sort of archaeological tell which only experts can dig.[12]

Responding to this need, Childs, who does not question the validity of the historical-critical method, discounts its claim to unique validity as the sole avenue toward meaning. The myopic search for the original meaning—what it meant—has cut modern readers off from what it means, effectively excluding most readers from meaningful interaction with their own canon.

Because Childs accepts the main findings of the critical approach, it is quite possible in his view that no one may ever have meant what the text means. The currently appropriated canonical meaning, or "canonical intentionality,"[13] may never have been intended by any author, editor, or community. Several reviewers of his *Introduction* raised the possibility that the canonical shape of the OT might actually include some texts that make no sense, that have no meaning, because they were included without any hermeneutical reflection. Childs says that this is indeed possible. The final form, however, was the form adopted and used religiously. "In its final form the literature evoked its own dynamic which was only indirectly related to the history of its composition."[14] It is this very point that prompts Barton's warnings that a more radical literary approach, such as structuralism, may have to rescue that meaning once authorial intention, or historical meaning, is abandoned.[15]

In Ricoeur's dialectical process of hermeneutics, appropriation of meaning is only possible at the post-critical moment. Childs holds that this post-critical canonical meaning is the authoritative "shape" of the canon. It is at this level that the modern Church can testify to the truth of Biblical revelation, confessing God's activities on their behalf.

In keeping with his post-critical stance Childs refuses to allow any and every method in the door just because it might yield a unified

[11] Childs, "Response" 58.
[12] Sanders, *Canon* 5.
[13] Childs, *Introduction* 274.
[14] Childs, "Response" 55.
[15] Barton, *Reading* 179. This aspect of literary criticism will be discussed below.

understanding of Scripture. He rules out inauthentic expressions of faith, such as allegorization or extreme typology. Just how does he retain this autonomy over textual interpretation?

> The rule which excludes them is quite a simple one on paper, though desperately hard to observe without begging the question. It is that the critic must concern himself with what a given passage is actually *saying*, with its "plain sense," not with merely verbal details or merely formal resemblances to other texts.[16]

Though he finds useful such pre-critical studies as those of Calvin, Augustine, and even rabbinic commentaries, he wants to be selective. Ricoeur speaks of disqualifying the false witness and recognizing the true witness, of identifying the "predicates of the divine" that shape "revealed truths."[17] Childs wants to retain a degree of autonomy, in spite of his talk of the authority of the canon. But the principles that informed the unacceptable hermeneutics of the community that participated most actively in the canonical process were of the same stripe as those that permitted, or forced, recognition of the canonical authority of the text before them. It appears that an abstract notion of canonicity, separated from an external authority, will get us nowhere near the meaning or authority that the contemporary Church needs. If ultimate authority for canonization rested with the Church, its interpretive legitimation for that canonization should have the same authority as the canonical product: the canon. To put it another way, if the early Church's interpretation was of only relative value, their canonical decisions could have only relative value—and the present Church might well move the canonical process along to another stage.

Though there is no move among the critics engaged in canon criticism to continue the canonical process, changing the shape of the canon, there is a general move to blur the lines defining the canon, thus reducing its ultimate authority. Rudolph Smend says that Biblical scholarship was on the right track when it "relativised the significance of the canon historically and theologically":

> This relativising facilitated, indeed enabled, the exegetical-historical piecemeal work that attempted to comprehend the biblical authors in their individuality, with their own message and in their own setting—and often achieved such understanding in a convincing fashion.[18]

Childs seems at first glance to go against this trend. Barr, as already noted, grumbles about his unqualified acceptance of everything to do with canonicity. But Childs' canon-language is slippery. Some reviewers were frustrated with his overly broad—even undefined—terms: canonical process, (the) canon. Childs' response was to say that when he speaks of the

[16] Ibid. 85.

[17] P. Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," in *Essays* (ed. Mudge) 114-115. Previously published in *HTR* 70/1-2 (1977).

[18] R. Smend, "Questions about the Importance of the Canon," *JSOT* 16 (1980) 47.

"canonical process" he is only trying to take into account the history of formation of "the canon," which was formed from "canon." If some misunderstand him, this arises "from replacing my broad use of the term with a much narrower traditional usage, and thus missing the force of the argument."[19] But that hardly settles the question of what he actually means by those terms.

II. RELATIVIZED CANON/ABSOLUTIZED PROCESS

At times Childs appears to be working in the area Barton calls the "upper reaches of redaction criticism,"[20] but he seems quite set on interpreting the final form with reference neither to the theological *Tendenz* of the writers or redactors nor to the theology of the community that was involved in the canonical process. The meaning, he says, is in the canonical shape of the text.[21] Redaction criticism focuses on the agent as much as on the text itself, and his work may be disfigured by glosses and later editing of an inferior quality. But "canonical shape bears on the final form of the text (and not on the mind of the editor), warts and all."[22] Childs insists that his goal is not at all the same as that of any of the historical-critical methods.

> Because the shapers of the material usually hid their identity, ascribing it no theological value, I do not feel that the main focus of critical research should lie in pursuing the redactors' motivations and biases. Rather, the emphasis should fall on the effect which the layering of the tradition has had on the reworded text because of its objective status.[23]

So the questions are canonical, theological, and literary—rather than historical. Gerald Sheppard sums up Childs' method and goal:

> One must ask at once canonical and literary questions. What is the function of these history-like details in the literary-canonical shape? Do they serve simply as one of the interpretive clues that guide the reader to the appropriate way of hearing the tradition, or do they stand in their particularity as the focal point of the canonical shape? . . . Further, the canonical shape alone defines what historicity is central to the confession of faith. To conservative evangelicals the surprise will undoubtedly be how much history-like detail is used chiefly as dressing or preparation for the proper hearing of a tradition which is itself neither historical narrative nor bound up in an historical incident, but rich with a peculiar contemporaneity for those who in faith yearn to hear the voice of God.[24]

[19] Childs, "Response" 53.

[20] Barton, *Reading* 134.

[21] It is no wonder that Barton remarks, several times, that for this to work Childs will likely have to adopt something like structuralism to support his autonomous text's meaning (*Reading* passim).

[22] R. E. Murphy, "The Old Testament as Scripture," *JSOT* 16 (1980) 41.

[23] Childs, "Response" 54.

[24] G. Sheppard, "Canon Criticism: The Proposal of Brevard Childs and an Assessment for Evangelical Hermeneutics," *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 4 (1974) 14.

The operative question for Sheppard—and Childs—ought to be: How is it possible to determine what is central and what operates as an interpretive clue? A yearning to hear the voice of God is not likely to be satisfied by a godlike voice operating as window dressing.

Even Ricoeur recognizes that historicity is something more than window dressing. "A theology of testimony which is not just another name for the theology of the confession of faith is only possible if a certain narrative kernel is preserved in strict union with the confession of faith." When Ricoeur speaks of the "history-like" function of the Biblical narrative he emphasizes the impossibility of asking questions only about meaning and dropping those of historical reality. He indicates that the referential claims of the Biblical stories are unavoidable. The meaning the text bears to us may be only a "quasi-empirical meaning," but this is because the basis for our judgments about events and their meanings is testimony: On the basis of eyewitness testimony, one who has not witnessed the event can reach a decision about its meaning.[25]

The only context that counts for Childs is the canonical context. Neither the historical context of the original writer or audience nor that of the redactors or their readers has authority for determining the meaning of the text. Since one cannot work in an abstract context, and since the only context that counts is the canonical context, the question arises: Which canon? Is it optional as long as you choose one and stick with it? Is it a confessional choice where one adopts in faith the canonical shape of one's own church (or synagogue)? If not, which church (or synagogue)? The basic question really is this: What makes any one canonical process or product more legitimate than another? Childs glosses over this issue, which should be at the heart of his system.

Barton lists three possible canons: Jewish, Protestant, Roman. He rightly criticizes Childs' failure to admit that the Protestant OT canonical context is different not only from that of Roman Catholics but also from that of Jews. Though the identity of the OT books themselves may be the same for both Protestant and Jew, the Protestant has a different canonical context for his OT because the NT operates as context for the OT.

Other thorny issues intrude on the discussion. For example, Murphy questions the value of interpreting the MT where it is clearly mutilated:

> Must canonical authority be given such to a reading when the MT is only the "vehicle" for the recovery of the canonical text? What seems to be an obvious textual error should not be allowed this high status. The community of faith was not spared the ambiguities of textual uncertainty that is the bane of us all, and their wrestling with an indisputably corrupt text has merely historical interest and import. Textual emendations should not be indiscriminate, but neither should non-sense be allowed to prevail. The emendation based on the non-Masoretic evidence is not a case of setting up an arbitrary reading "which never had an effect upon any historical

[25] P. Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," in *Essays* (ed. Mudge) 123. Previously published in *ATR* 61/4 (1979).

community." It did have an effect on some group(s), and has just as much right to be considered a "vehicle" as the faulty MT.[26]

Barr makes the same point that Barton did, taking issue with Childs' argument for using the Hebrew canon instead of the LXX since it provides the Church with a common Scripture with that of Judaism:

> If we must "take canon seriously" as a basis for faith, then it must be *either* the Jewish canon of the Hebrew Bible *or* the Christian canon of the Old *and* New Testaments. If a Christian theological exegesis must be strictly based upon the canon as a guide, then that must mean the canonical shape of the entire Christian Bible.[27]

When Barr asks what reasons Childs can give for overthrowing the historical-critical approach for his canonical approach, for adopting the canonical interpretation, Childs' response is this: Accept it by faith.

> In my judgment, the acceptance of the canon as normative does not function initially as a derivative of reasoned argument. The canon is the deposit of the religious community's sacred tradition which one receives as a member of that body. The acknowledgment of a normative rule functions confessionally as a testimony to one's beliefs. Earlier attempts to ascribe to the Hebrew canon special qualities of excellence, as if it had the best text, or reflected a superior form of literature, or possessed a unique claim to historicity, seem to have been misplaced. Does this mean that the relation to the canon is irrational and beyond the scope of all reasoned argument? Certainly not. The issue at stake is the classic theological problem of the proper relation of faith to reason. The testimony of faith and not reason establishes the canon. Yet there is an internal logic of faith within the framework of confession.[28]

That is to say, the canon is a given: It cannot be subjected to empirical justification or verification by anything external to itself. The justification of the canonical boundaries cannot be generated by content analysis of the canonical books, as though one could prove they were nobler or more orthodox than certain other books that were omitted. In this, Childs is correct. It is incorrect, however, to say, "The testimony of faith . . . establishes the canon." Faith must have a proper object, or it is only delusion. Therefore it would be better to say, "It is the testimony of faith that the canon is established." Transforming the so-called divine passive into an explicit active mood would be even plainer: "It is the testimony of faith that God has established the canon." Of course that leaves me open to charges from Barr of fideism, as Childs is. But there is a major difference between believing in the canonical process and believing in the One who superintended that process, making it reliable.

For every claim Childs would make to support his canonical approach, an explicit theological claim is the only thing that will give it substance. Childs would rely on the canonical process, but one should rely on the

[26] Murphy, "Old Testament" 41.
[27] Barr, "Childs's *Introduction*" 22 (italics his).
[28] Childs, "Response" 56.

God who superintends that process. Childs would trust in the believing community's faithfulness to revelation, but one should rely on the revealer. Childs would rely on the final canonical shape, but one should rely on the Holy Spirit who preserves his word, confirming to every believer its trustworthiness. Agreed, Childs is correct in his assertion that the canon must be taken as a given. One must, however, receive it explicitly as a gift (truly a given) from the Giver.

James Sanders' thesis is that the canon remained fluid in the pre-A.D.-70 period. "Pluralism" is the key word as far as he is concerned. He objects to Childs' rather facile identification of the Hebrew canon as the Jewish canon, which the Church has adopted in common with the Jews. Sanders denies that the so-called council at Jamnia created the canon by executive fiat. Though it may have contributed helpful guidelines, which excluded what we now know as the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, it did not establish the canonicity of those books that we now recognize as canonical.

According to Sanders' description of the process, even the text of the accepted books was not frozen solid. Pointing to 11QPs[a], which showed some psalms not in the MT and others in a differing order, and noting the differing Hebrew texts for Jeremiah he asserts that the text was fluid. And citing Yigael Yadin he indicates his judgment that even the concept of canonicity was quite fluid, because the Temple scroll was viewed as canonical,[29] having as much authority as the Torah itself.

> It is clearly written in the style of Pentateuchal books, employing the same kinds of hermeneutics literary criticism indicates editors of the Pentateuch used in composing it. In fact if we speak of the fifth book of the Torah as Deuteronomy, following its Greek title in the Septuagint translation, we might well speak of the Temple Scroll as Tritonomy.[30]

Without following Sanders in all the particulars of his argument, one can agree that attempting some sort of empirical establishment of the single, authoritative text in such problematic cases as those where the LXX and MT differ substantially is no longer possible. We therefore are forced to recognize that no extant text is the canonical form in its purity. We must conclude, therefore, that for there to be absolute authority it must be founded outside the text itself. If it is community or process that brings to us the authoritative text, then one of two possibilities must be true: Either any and every community or manifestation of a canonical process is capable of being true, or there must be some other external authority authenticating the canonical process and its resulting canon. The one who refuses to make that step can never find a sure basis of authority.[31]

[29] Sanders, *Canon* 13, referring to Y. Yadin, *Megillat ha-Miqdash* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1977), 1. 298-300.

[30] Ibid., citing the suggestion of Merrill Miller, one of his former students. He concludes that there was possibly an open attitude toward even the Torah in the Qumran community (p. 14).

[31] Think of the difference between the Roman and Protestant canons, not to mention the Koran or other "scriptures."

Pluralism may extend even to the meaning of the canonical text(s). In fact, says Sanders, that very plurality, which manifests itself in paradox, is a hallmark of canonicity. Paul Ricoeur insists that one must avoid "a monolithic concept of revelation."[32] By that he means to proscribe the notion of a God speaking behind the human author. Ricoeur thinks a narrow focus on prophecy, to the neglect of wisdom or praise, leads to this basic error. For him there is no objective meaning standing behind the text or in the subjective intent of the author. Neither the underlying history and circumstances of the writing nor the spiritual state of the author is determinative for the meaning (i.e. today's meaning) of the text.

Especially in wisdom literature that paradoxical pluralism comes to the forefront. In the gnomic wisdom of Proverbs and in the contradictions of Job we can see that the design of God's wisdom is his mystery.[33]

Canonical criticism recognizes this pluralism and interprets the Bible in light of it. Rather than constructing facile harmonizations it recognizes that no program can rightfully be constructed from any particular strain of thought. Its contradictions are its strengths.

> It bears with it its own redeeming contradictions, and this is a major reason it has lasted so long and has spoken so effectively to so many different historical contexts and communities. Once a theme or strain or thread rightly perceived in the Bible has been isolated and absolutized, it simply becomes available for challenge from another theme or strain also there.[34]

This pluralism extends even to our time in the three possible canons that Barton mentions (Jewish, Roman and Protestant). Sanders even says that "pluralism is a part of responsible perception of the concept of canon."[35] With the rise of the modern ecumenical movement, reasonable people have come to realize that the content of and order within Biblical canon(s) depends on the denomination or community using it/them. No longer is it possible to think of canon in a singularist mode.

The canonical process was one of selectivity and repetition of meaningful material taken from a large corpus that was apparently highly valued in various communities. This selectivity took place over time, and it took place in the believing community—not in an authoritative council.

> That process of *repetition* in new, later contexts, with the process of *selectivity* that went along with it, is a crucial focus of canonical criticism. No party, denomination, or hierarchy in Jerusalem or elsewhere would have had the power to foist off on the people a literature which held little meaning or value for them.[36]

Therefore, like form criticism, canonical criticism takes seriously the notion that the Bible was shaped in the believing community. How does that influence Childs' notion of interpretation? First, Childs looks for a specifically theological mode of reading that asks the question about

[32] Ricoeur, "Toward" 74.
[33] Ibid. 89.
[34] Sanders, *Canon* 18.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid. 33 (italics his).

what the text means rather than what it meant. Second, Childs looks for the canonical meaning—that is, the meaning it has for the Christian when he reads it in the context of the whole pluralistic canon.

Given this view of the canonical process, we must agree with Barton's criticism: Childs' insistence on reading the Bible only at the canonical level of the final form gives too much authority to the canonical decisions of the early synagogue and Church. If we are willing to give them that much authority, why not follow their exegesis too—allegory and all? This is the key issue. If authority is in the process and the process is human, then the methodology of the process has the same authority as its product. If the canon that resulted from hermeneutical moves in the early Church has authority, then the hermeneutical moves have authority. Barton objects that Childs is trying to have things both ways: "On his view it is in principle possible that the very same generation of Christians who fixed the main outlines of the canon is also a hopelessly unreliable guide to the correct way of reading that canon."[37] Indeed, Sheppard seems to make a plea for recognizing their hermeneutics as well as their canon. He wants to revive the usefulness (authoritativeness?) of the history of interpretation that moved alongside the history of canonization. He wonders if the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura* has wrongly depreciated the history of Christian interpretation.[38]

> If it is essentially the Christian or Jewish community that defines the limits of the Old Testament canon, does this not mean that the interpreter is under some constraint, not just to read the particular *form* of the Old Testament his community accepts, but also to read it *in the manner* his community regards as normative?[39]

If one were to grant the major premise of that argument (Christian or Jewish definition of the limits of the canon) the rest of the argument would flow rather naturally, requiring adherence to the hermeneutics of the early Christian or Jewish community. Sanders points out that even the prophets, who have long been thought to be great original thinkers who could even quote God, would also quote earlier traditions to validate their message (i.e. they used tradition canonically). Sanders seems to agree and makes this claim:

> Canonical criticism might be seen in metaphor as the beadle (*bedelos*) who now carries the critically studied Bible in procession back to the church lectern from the scholar's study. And canonical criticism may permit the believing communities to see themselves more clearly as heirs of a very long line of shapers and reshapers of tradition and instruct the faithful as to how they may faithfully perceive the Bible even yet as adaptable for life.[40]

Childs recognizes that there is still a great deal of interest in the earlier stages of Biblical tradition, an interest that could even pull attention

[37] Barton, *Reading* 96-97.
[38] Sheppard, "Canon" 15.
[39] Barton, *Reading* 95 (italics his).
[40] Sanders, *Canon* 20.

away from the authoritative final form because the earlier stages are more exciting to study:

> I certainly recognize the force of the argument. Who has not felt the excitement of von Rad's brilliant theory of the "Credo" or of the "Solomonic Enlightenment" (although both are probably wrong)? Nevertheless, I have serious objections to this approach to Scripture. First, I think that the criterion of excitement is a product of the Enlightenment, and grossly misunderstands the responsibility of theological enterprise. Undoubtedly the Gnostics were more exciting than Irenaeus! Secondly, the development of a canon is by definition a community effort. It is characteristic of a canon to play down individual genius. The effect is to provide the Old Testament with a radically theocentric focus which always has been a disappointment to those whose interest rests primarily in man and his accomplishments.[41]

III. ARTIFACT (ICON)/IDOL

Many of the newer approaches to reading literature have in effect recreated texts that are quite distinct from those created by the original authors. These artifacts, cut off from their creators, are adopted almost as literary idols with autonomous significance.

Ricoeur, who has been influenced by Husserl's phenomenological thought, demurs at attempts to get to a world behind the text. Rather, he wants to look at the world in front of the text. He wants to focus on the independent career of the text once it assumes written form. In that form it is autonomous with regard to its author's intentions; it "can burst the world of the author." It is also autonomous with respect to the "finite horizon" of its original readers.[42] He views this autonomous text as a mirror of reality, as an icon. In doing so he absolutizes the poetic function of language at the expense of descriptive, didactic and informative discourse. Much like the new hermeneutic's language event, Ricoeur's poetic function is abstracted from the integrality of its relations in the cosmos. In the same way the new criticism has abstracted the text: It is cut off from historical questions about meaning, setting and intention. The text is granted an autonomy all its own.

The renewed focus on the text itself provided a much-needed corrective to the extremes of romanticist hermeneutics. Ricoeur rejected the romanticist notion that the goal of interpretation was to understand the author's spiritual state better than he himself had understood it. The new critics objected to using texts as nothing more than keys for unlocking the psychological compartments of the author's mind. But they have gone further: They have moved a long way toward eliminating any referential function at all. In their view, literature is not necessarily about anything. Extreme applications of this method overlooked the naive notion from which the simplest reader cannot be dissuaded: Texts are about some-

[41] Childs, "Response" 58.
[42] Ricoeur, "Toward" 99.

thing. The exclusive—often psychologistic—focus on the author's state of mind has indeed led to rank subjectivity. In turn, however, failure to pay any attention to him would too. Romanticist hermeneutics had studied everything but the text; the new criticism could sometimes study every possible meaning but the author's intended meaning. So E. D. Hirsch called for a middle ground where the interpreter pays attention to both text and author. Hirsch believes the interpreter finds the author's intent only through the text, and in turn he understands the text's meaning by understanding what the author could have intended.

Often this link that connects author's intention and what it meant to present-day meaning is severed. Despite his criticism of Childs' canonical approach, Barton himself sees a use for canonical criticism in his study of Ecclesiastes. He says it is acceptable to say that the message of the present book is one that no one ever meant.[43] This is entirely consistent with new criticism's claims that the text has an autonomous existence once it comes into being, so that it is unencumbered by excess baggage like author's intent or historical meaning. On the other hand, Barton still wants to hang on to authorial intention:

> Surely questions about intention need not be so crudely psychologistic as to lead automatically to speculations about the author's "inner life." At the level of ordinary language usage, most people can distinguish the question "What did the poet *mean* by saying X?" from the two questions "What was *passing through the poet's mind* when he wrote X?" and "What *psychological or emotional state was the poet in* when he wrote X?" . . . Whatever "intention" is, it is not difficult to see that it is something distinct from the psychological condition that happened to prevail at the time of writing.[44]

New critics did not allow the place for author's intention that Barton has tried to retain. For them the text's meaning was often thought to be whatever meaning the words could bear, regardless of the intent of the author, who might even admit: "I never really thought of that." But even such an admission is an indication that his intention is solidly bound up with his expression and that the expression is judged by that intention.

Structuralism has gone on to take the next logical move against authorial intention: outright theoretical denial that intent determines meaning. Structuralist theory binds up meaning tightly with conventional meaning, which resides in the expression itself, independent of authorial intention. Throughout his discussion of Childs' canon criticism, Barton indicated that he thought a consistent search for "canonical" meaning ought probably to lead all the way to theoretical structuralism, to a public and determined meaning. Much the same as structuralism does, Childs' insistence on reading the text itself—and upon reading it as canonical text—removes historical questions such as that of intentionality. For him the text takes on an autonomous existence that demands text-immanent exegesis. For that to work, says Barton, would "require the support of

[43] Barton, *Reading* 82.
[44] Ibid. 168 (italics his).

such extremely conventionalist and even determinist theories of textual meaning as are characteristic of 'structuralism.'"[45]

Structuralism makes comprehensive claims to be a way of interpreting all of human experience. One of its characteristic features is the extension of a linguistic metaphor to all levels of existence. But structuralists often forget that it is a metaphor, and when they do so they arrive at a heavily deterministic theory of meaning that depends entirely upon conventionality for its sense. Childs seems to be doing this in a subtheoretical way when he talks about the shape of the canon. That shape defines the conventional contexts in which any Biblical passage can have its meaning.

This approach operates with the assumption that meaning is a function of a cultural system rather than an expression of intention. Childs himself likens that canonical reading to Wittgenstein's language games, a conventionalist theory of meaning:

> I am attempting to describe one "language game," namely, the use of the Old Testament as scripture by a community of faith and practice. Expressed theologically, I am trying to explore how one reads the O.T. from a rule-of-faith called canon.[46]

For this approach, context is everything. The text in itself is not a text by itself; it exists as an exemplar of a conventional pattern of such expressions. In the case of a canonical text, the community that reads those texts as canonical texts gives the reader his conventional code. This intent to read the OT as a part of a larger whole—namely, canon—is either redaction criticism in an advanced form or it is a type of structuralism.

Childs sharply differentiates his approach from the historically oriented intent and focus of redaction critics, so Barton turns toward timeless structuralist concepts to explain what Childs is doing. What he is giving us, says Barton, is a theory of reading. He is telling the Church how to read the OT as canon. Rather than giving us a theory of what an author, redactor, or community meant he is offering us a theory of how we can read—not to perceive what was meant but to find "what meanings it is possible to perceive."[47]

What the fragmenting historical critics had found themselves unable to read as any known form of literature from the ancient world Childs places into the present "genre" of canonical literature, for which he gives us the rules that should lead to reading competence. Just as Clines discovers a rather naive unity in the Pentateuch[48] in the motif of promise and partial fulfillment, Childs is able to read the OT with a rather unstriking but comfortable unity. In Childs' case the unity seems to be a confessional unity. The doctrines that the community confesses are sup-

[45] Barton, *Reading* 87-88.
[46] Childs, "Response" 52.
[47] Barton, *Reading* 126.
[48] Compare this naiveté to Ricoeur's post-critical naiveté.

ported in the canonical shape, even though various isolated passages may contravene them.[49]

In spite of his notes of caution and criticism at places, Barton wants to "plunder the Egyptians," making good use of whatever he finds useful in canonical criticism. This is quite in keeping with the entire tenor of his book. He would not allow any of the historical-critical methods, or even all of them taken together, an exclusive claim to be the one valid way of reading the Biblical texts. He is willing to pick and choose insights that might lend themselves to a heightened level of reading "competence."[50] He agrees with Childs' emphasis on the text, though he wants to retain at least some reference to authorial intention as a hedge against total subjectivity. Doing that, he has allowed structuralism to highlight the range of possible conventions that might have placed constraints on the meaning of the text when it was written. Of course this is a very unstructuralist issue, because "when it was written" is not even supposed to be on the mind of a true structuralist. Barton is very much aware of this, but he still thinks the structuralists have put their finger on something important in their talk about conventionality.

> One way of putting this may be to say that structuralists have tried to abolish the author, but in fact have succeeded in showing what being an author involves. They have not succeeded in talking impartial critics out of the belief that literary meaning is produced by authors with intentions; but they have succeeded in laying bare some of the *mechanisms* by which meaning is produced, often without the conscious awareness of the author.[51]

Even if the authors were not wholly constrained by convention, we recognize that they were to some extent, and structuralism highlights those constraints on how meaning is produced, giving us better access to the meaning of the text—for then and, therefore, for now.

The structuralist concept of conventionality of meaning is indeed useful, but our acceptance of insights from structuralism is no indication of readiness to accept even its basic operating assumptions. Writing is not merely a way to produce texts as artifacts (icons); it is a means by which thinkers communicate their thoughts to others. In other words, writing is communication. That is of paramount importance to those holding the evangelical doctrine of revelation. Revelation is communication, and its purpose is bound up with what God meant.

A theoretical emphasis upon structuralist binary opposites, upon plurality, or upon any form of autonomous text held together by its own inherent dialectic does not do justice to a truly Christian doctrine of the unity of God's creation, and therefore it cannot recognize the unity of his truth. Sheppard says, "The ontological glue that held it all together for

[49] The convention-bearing context determines the meaning quite apart from what the individual passage may ever have meant historically in isolation from its canonical context.

[50] "Competence" is used here as a structuralist term.

[51] Barton, *Reading* 192 (italics his).

Childs was a dialectically charged canonical context."[52] Against this we must insist that the unity is not text-immanent; its source is its author. As all creation coheres in its Creator, all revelation coheres in the self-revealing God.

Childs' whole emphasis upon an autonomous text is a sort of post-critical Biblicism. Ricoeur refers to the "style" of an autonomous text, which is objectified like Pierce's verbal "icon."[53] The author may be seen as a craftsman, and the text as a *poiēma*, or artifact, which has a self-referencing capacity. The language about autonomy, shape, artifact, *poiēma*, icon, and so forth strikes me as the language of idolatry. By artisans artifacts are shaped, which are then granted an autonomy that cannot really belong to them. Autonomous texts are given status as the sole access points to reality, which is otherwise ineffable.

Whereas Ricoeur has absolutized poetic language, or the "poetic function" of the text, Childs has absolutized canonical shape, process and context rather than inspiration. Through a text-immanent canonical process, traditions assume the "trans-historical identity of normative Scripture"[54] in the paradoxical tension of canonical context. The special prerogatives as "Scripture" are not conferred by inspiration apart from a canonical context; rather, "inspiration is a way of claiming a special prerogative for this one context."[55] So the canon becomes more a heuristic model for opening up truth than an actual vehicle of truth. The Bible is no longer the Word of God and does not contain the words of God. Rather, it speaks with the authority of God when we read it as if it were the Word of God.

IV. CONCLUSION

This is a post-critical rather than an a-critical method. Childs' radical text-immanent exegesis, even though the text is the Bible, lacks a proper foundation for authority or meaning. The conventionality of its meaning is relativized till the confessional adoption of any particular text is its sole claim to authority. What this does, in effect, is to make of the text an idol (icon) created by artisans of tradition-shapers, whose adoption of the text as their icon renders it authoritative. To put it bluntly, the confessing community itself is the authority. The consistent message of the Scriptures, however, is that it is God's own authority that demands their adoption. The text is a given only because God himself has given it.

[52] Sheppard, "Canon" 6.
[53] Ricoeur, "Toward" 99-100.
[54] Sheppard, "Canon" 9.
[55] B. S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 104.