



Zigzagging through Deep Waters: A Guide to Brevard Childs's Canonical Exegesis of Scripture¹

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Brevard Childs, professor of Old Testament at Yale from 1958 until 1999 and prolific scholar until his death in 2007, sought in his work to reinvigorate the theological interpretation of the Bible through what he called a “canonical” approach to Scripture. His career was dominated by a central question: How could the critical biblical scholar best use the tools of historical criticism in the service of faithful and engaging theological interpretation of Scripture as the word of God for the church in our time and context? Childs expressed a growing unease in his 1979 *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*:

Two decades of teaching have brought many changes in my perspective....I began to realize that there was something fundamentally wrong with the foundations of the biblical discipline....I am now convinced that the relation between the historical critical study of the Bible and its theological use as religious litera-

¹This essay is a significantly revised version of an earlier piece, “Seeking ‘the Inexpressible Texture of Thy Word’: A Practical Guide to Brevard Childs’ Canonical Approach to Theological Exegesis,” *Princeton Theological Review* 14 (2008) 53–68. Adapted with permission.

Brevard Childs’s canonical approach to Scripture assumes that the Bible has been deliberately shaped and edited to makes its witness accessible to future generations as an ongoing word from God. Interpreting the Bible, therefore, involves a deep and careful engagement with the details of particular texts in the expectation of encountering, thereby, the word of the living God.

ture within a community of faith and practice needs to be completely rethought.²

In response, Childs developed his program of canonical exegesis as he wrote commentaries on Exodus and Isaiah, critical and theological introductions to all the books of the Old and New Testaments, an Old Testament theology, a biblical theology of both Old and New Testaments, a history of the Christian interpretation of the book of Isaiah, and a theological reading of the New Testament letters of Paul, which is being published posthumously.

During the subsequent thirty years since Childs's assessment in 1979, the relation between historical-critical study and the theological interpretation of the Bible has only grown more complex. A flourishing of new methods, perspectives, and approaches in biblical studies (including literary, social-scientific, postcolonial, feminist, womanist, black liberationist, Latino/Latina, postmodern, and the like) has complicated and enriched the landscape of biblical interpretation considerably. The relationship of historical-critical study to these often more postmodern approaches remains unresolved and under discussion.³ In my judgment, Brevard Childs's canonical approach to theological interpretation of Scripture continues to be a fruitful and practical framework for pastors and church leaders who seek to navigate between current critical scholarship of the Bible, on the one hand, and creative and engaging theological interpretation of Scripture for ministry in today's complex environments, on the other. This essay attempts to lay out a practical and concise version of Childs's method of canonical exegesis of Scripture for the sake of the church's ministry in light of the interpretive challenges that face us today.

FUTURE GENERATIONS AND THE LIVING GOD: TWO KEY ASSUMPTIONS OF CHILDS'S CANONICAL EXEGESIS

Two core assumptions defined for Childs what he meant by a canonical approach to biblical interpretation. First, Childs had a core conviction that biblical texts, through a great variety of distinctive strategies, had been theologically shaped and edited at various stages of their development in order to make them accessible to future generations as an ongoing word from God. The enduring truthfulness and relevance of a given textual tradition was tested over time by its use and adoption among diverse faith communities. Thus, the present canon of Scripture gradually emerged in an organic process of trial and selection among scattered communities in varied contexts in the ancient period. Fruitful theological interpretation focuses on these ancient textually embedded strategies for reappropriation

²Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 15.

³For example, see George Aichele, Peter Miscall, and Richard Walsh, "An Elephant in the Room: Historical-Critical and Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128 (2009) 383–404. For a survey of the wide range of new methods and approaches in biblical studies and their relationship to Old Testament theology, see Leo Perdue, *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology: After the Collapse of History* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

rather than stripping them away or ignoring them in order to get at something else as the central goal when interpreting the biblical text.⁴

A second key assumption of Childs's canonical approach is the affirmation of the reality of an external, out-there-in-the-world, living God who continues to speak through the use of the Bible in the church's life and ministry. Interpreting the Bible is not just about entering into another fictive or imaginative literary world, nor is it only about an objective reconstruction of ancient history, nor is it primarily about promoting a human social or political ideology. Interpreting the Bible involves a deep and careful engagement with the details and textures of specific biblical texts and their role within the larger witness of Scripture with an expectation of encountering, thereby, the word of the living God in judgment and salvation through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Canonical interpretation, then, is less concerned with debates about the boundaries of the biblical canon as an ancient list of core books (with some variety around the fuzzy edges of the canon among diverse traditions); it is more concerned with interpreting Scripture (however a given tradition ends up defining the extent of its scriptural canon) as a witness to God and God's strange and alien work in the world through the responsible use of the best and most fruitful elements of biblical scholarship.

ZIGZAGGING THROUGH DEEP WATERS: FOUR DIALECTICAL GUIDEPOSTS TO CANONICAL EXEGESIS

Childs's canonical approach is difficult to summarize in a few sequential steps, but I have found that introducing seminary students and pastors to four "dialectical guideposts" in Childs's canonical approach can be helpful for those who seek to be critically responsible but also theologically engaged interpreters of Scripture. Like a sailboat zigzagging back and forth in one direction and then another to catch the winds and move forward, the biblical interpreter moves back and forth among these four guideposts that are in ongoing dialogue with one another. In Childs's own words, exegesis does not "proceed in stages within a fixed sequence," but moves "within a circle which encompasses both the movement from text to reality as well as from reality to the text" within the dynamic of the biblical witness.⁵

The primary source for these four guideposts is Childs's book, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, and a section within the book titled, "Reading Scriptures in the Light of the Full Divine Reality."⁶ The section comes at the end of

⁴A good place to sample Childs's discussion of these diverse strategies for the canonical shaping of biblical books is his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, in which he surveys the canonical shaping of each book of the Old Testament. Compare, for example, his discussions of Deuteronomy, Amos, Psalms, Haggai, and Daniel, all displaying a wide diversity of canonical shaping.

⁵Ibid. Childs discusses his method of theological exegesis as involving three levels or guideposts. However, I have added a fourth guidepost below that I would argue is implied in Childs's method and practice of exegesis.

⁶Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 379–383.

an extended reflection on the Trinitarian identity of the one God of Jesus Christ in light of the combined witness of the Old and New Testaments and its implications for biblical interpretation.

*Guidepost One: "Fully Human and Fully Divine"—
Struggling to let the plain sense of the ancient text have its say*

As a first guidepost, especially when interpreting the Old Testament, it is "absolutely necessary to interpret each passage within its historical, literary, and canonical context" in order "to hear the voice of each biblical witness in its own right" and with its own integrity in its ancient Near Eastern or Greco-Roman context.⁷ This first step reflects "a wide consensus within the church and academy" through the centuries, even among those who use allegory or other figurative modes of interpretation, to begin by grounding all interpretation in the "plain," "literal," or "historical" sense of the biblical text.⁸ Childs understands the literal sense as the result of a close and informed study (according to the scholarly conventions of the day) of the details, texture, and plain sense of the text in its ancient context. What is involved in this first guidepost is an exercise in careful cross-cultural listening to the "other," in this case, the ancient biblical "other." We do so to the best of our abilities, recognizing that our knowledge and interpretations will often be partial, provisional, contested, and ongoing. Some rough approximation of "authorial intent" will be the goal at this stage, however challenging it may be to reach that goal.⁹

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This first guidepost, the concern to use the best available tools of scholarship to study the Bible as a fully human and historically contextualized literature, is grounded in the doctrine of the incarnation—Jesus as truly God and truly human at the same time. Childs explained it this way:

The Bible in its human, fully time-conditioned form, functions theologically for the church as a witness to God's divine revelation in Jesus Christ. The church confesses that in this human form, the Holy Spirit unlocks its truthful message to its hearers in the mystery of faith. This theological reading cannot be simply fused with a historical reconstruction of the biblical text, nor conversely, neither can it be separated. This is to say, the Bible's witness to the creative and salvific activity of God in time and space cannot be encompassed within the categories of historical criticism whose approach filters out this very kerygmatic dimension of God's activity. In a word, the divine and human di-

⁷Ibid., 379.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Brevard Childs, "Critique of Recent Intertextual Canonical Interpretations," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 115 (2003) 177.

mensions remain inseparably intertwined, but in a highly profound, theological manner. Its ontological relation finds its closest analogy in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, truly man and truly God.¹⁰

*Guidepost Two: “The New Is Already Present in the Old”—
An intertextual dialogue between the distinctive voices of the Old and
New Testaments*

The second guidepost in a canonical interpretation incorporates and extends the first literal/historical reading into a second level of intertextual dialogue between the Old and New Testament witnesses: “This reading proceeds from the fact of a two part canon, and seeks to analyze structural similarities and dissimilarities between the witness of both testaments.”¹¹ This guidepost does not involve just tracing a history of ideas or development of traditions. It is, rather, an analysis of the relationship of similarity and difference between the two Testaments grounded in the particularities of the prior literal/historical reading of biblical texts.

Specifically in terms of an understanding of God, what features do the two testaments hold in common respecting the mode, intention, and goal of God’s self-manifestation? A comparison is being made, but neither witness [OT or NT] is absorbed by the other, nor their contexts fused.¹²

At this stage, the interpreter should allow for one of many possibilities of how the Old Testament witness and New Testament witness might relate to one another. They may agree, disagree, create a dialectical tension, complement one another, fill in a gap left by the other, or overwhelm and render the other witness largely mute. The key at this point is to analyze the variety of possible relationships between the specifics of an Old Testament and New Testament text or set of texts.

The theological concern here is to allow the full chorus of diverse biblical voices, from both Testaments, to be heard in all their harmony, dissonance, complementarity, or tension. In a more recent article, Childs wrote,

The church has always confessed that the Old Testament is an integral part of the Christian Bible because of its witness to Jesus Christ. Of course, just how this confession has been understood has varied in the history of the church. Yet the newness of the New Testament in its witness to Jesus Christ is of a different order from that of the Old Testament. The gospel is neither simply an extension of the old covenant, nor is it to be interpreted merely as a commentary on the Jewish Scriptures, but it is an explosion of God’s good news. The theological paradox is that the radically new has already been testified to by the Old (cf. Mk. 1:12; Heb. 1:1).¹³

Preserving the Old and the New Testaments is critical to allow the distinctive witness of the two Testaments to be heard clearly without fusing the two prematurely.

¹⁰Brevard Childs, “The Canon in Recent Biblical Studies: Reflections on an Era,” *Pro Ecclesia* 14 (2005) 44–45.

¹¹Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 380.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Childs, “The Canon,” 45.

The question of the relationship of Old and New Testaments is a complex and subtle one, reflecting the complexity of the Trinitarian relationships of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as well as the mystery and struggle of the relationship between Israel and the church. As Childs believed and the church testified, the dynamic Trinitarian understanding of God and its implications for biblical interpretation emerged for the church out of the compulsion of the biblical texts themselves.¹⁴ The Trinity was not an alien philosophical imposition on Scripture but a reasoned interpretation out of Scripture that took centuries for the church to develop. In analogy with the doctrine of the Trinity, which sought to preserve the subtle dialectic of the inner unity of God within the diversity of three distinctive persons, fruitful theological interpretation seeks to preserve the distinctiveness of Old and New Testament witnesses. Only then should the interpreter bring the Old and the New Testament witnesses into mutual conversation, relationship, and constructive exchange toward a concrete and specific witness in a given time and place.

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*Guidepost Three: "We Are Neither Prophets Nor Apostles"—
Discerning a true witness to the living God through dialogue among texts, Scripture,
and the church's rule of faith*

A third and crucial guidepost to biblical interpretation involves a process of constructive theological reflection that moves "from the dual witness of scripture to the reality of God to which the witnesses point."¹⁵ The direction of the movement is critical for Childs; the interpreter moves always from a detailed engagement with the particulars of a biblical text to its use as a witness to the divine reality, an encounter with the living God.

Childs often reminded his students, "We are neither prophets nor apostles."¹⁶ The prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New Testament claimed a direct experience of the reality of God that was then remembered, passed on, edited, and recorded as a witness for future generations. The direction of the move for prophets and apostles was from divine reality (the experience of God) to recorded biblical witness. The collection of these witnesses into a biblical canon sets the era of the prophets and apostles off as an era that is now consigned to the past. With the rise of the church's body of Scripture, the church confessed its discovery that now the revelation of the reality of God does not come through an unmediated

¹⁴For a recent exegetical illustration of how understanding God as Trinity arises out of a theological exegesis of a particular biblical text like Luke's infancy narrative in its use of the Old Testament, see C. Kavin Rowe, "Luke and the Trinity: An Essay in Ecclesial Biblical Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 56 (2003) 1–26.

¹⁵Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 380.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 381.

encounter with the divine. Rather, the revelation of the living God now comes through the recorded witness of the prophets and apostles in Scripture. The direction for the community of faith is from biblical witness to divine reality. Any independent claim to know the voice or will of God apart from Scripture must be tested and judged against the witness of the Bible as discerned within communities of interpretation.

But how does this testing and judging of the truthfulness of an alleged word of God occur? At this juncture in the interpretive process, the reader or interpreter necessarily moves from a strictly literal/historical/plain sense reading of the biblical texts to a more “figural” or figurative interpretation. Such figural interpretation moves through diverse and complex inner-biblical webs of quotation, allusion, interconnection, metaphor, analogy, extension, and the like, allowing the biblical texts to speak across boundaries of time, space, cultures, and testaments.¹⁷ The larger connections made among biblical texts and our own contemporary contexts remain informed by attention to the intimate texture, contours, and shaping of individual biblical passages, the editing of biblical books and their mutual associations, and the structure and sequence of larger sections of the Bible (for example, the overall shaping of the Pentateuch as coming to a close before Israel’s entry into the promised land, the collection and shaping of the Minor Prophets into a meaningful historical sequence, or the fourfold form of the New Testament Gospels).¹⁸

Even the combined witnesses of the Bible and the church’s tradition are not the final end point of interpretation. These ultimately serve the purpose of witnessing to and enabling an encounter with a divine reality that is not fully captured in them.

Part of the interpretive dialogue also involves our testing of exegetical truth claims against the external testimony of other voices that we have grown to trust by virtue of shared vision, experience, and sense of belonging. These will include the church’s tradition of creeds, confessions, catechisms, and other normative testimonies. Such traditions make up the church’s operative Rule of Faith. This Rule of Faith has taken various forms in the life of the church, depending on the community or tradition of interpretation. In addition, some sampling of excellent interpreters in the history of Christian and Jewish interpretation on a given biblical text may provide insight, inspiration, or models in generating theological understandings of a scriptural passage. As contemporary interpreters, we cannot sim-

¹⁷On figural reading from a canonical perspective, see Christopher Seitz, *Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), and Stanley Walters, ed., *Go Figure! Figuration in Biblical Interpretation* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2008).

¹⁸For examples of a recent canonical reading of the Old Testament prophets along these lines, see Christopher Seitz, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics: Toward a New Introduction to the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), and *The Goodly Fellowship of the Prophets: The Achievement of Association in Canon Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

ply duplicate the methods of our ancestors in the faith, but we can continue to learn from them.

In the end, though, even the combined witnesses of the Bible and the church's tradition are not the final end point of interpretation. These ultimately serve the purpose of witnessing to and enabling an encounter with a divine reality that is not fully captured in them. Childs would remind us that the interpreter's fuller grasp of God's reality that he or she "brings to the biblical text is not a collection of right doctrine or some moral idea, but a response to a living God" who graciously lets God's self be known.¹⁹ The Bible's chief referent is the real and living God, the God and Father of Jesus Christ, revealed by the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.

Guidepost Four: "The Spirit Blows Where It Wills"—

Voicing, deciding, and living out the biblical witness in a particular time and place

Our exegesis of Scripture does not end until the Word becomes flesh and lives among us (John 1:14) in proclamation, prayer, song, decision, action, or habit. The key task for theological exegesis is to preserve the full richness of the scriptural witness so that the wealth and diversity of its theological treasure can be kept ready and waiting to be taken up in surprising new ways as the Spirit of God in Jesus Christ "blows where it wills" (John 3:8 RSV). There is a subtle dialectic between preserving this wide biblical freedom and diversity and the equally important need for some guiding theological boundaries as they have emerged through the struggles and debates over Scripture in the church's long history.

In another section of his *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, Childs reflects on the task of biblical theology in light of recent, new realities involving significant shifts in the gravitational pull of global Christianity toward the Southern Hemisphere and the explosion of Pentecostal or Spirit-based churches:

From the perspective of many of the Third World churches there is a renewed interest in the creative role of the Spirit in bringing forth new forms of the church's life and mission. In this context one is reminded of the resistance of the early Jewish Christians to Paul's new ministry to the Gentiles and how acceptance of his case only came when it was argued that God had given the Gentiles "the Holy Spirit just as he did to us" (Acts 15:8). "Why then do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples?" (v. 10). One of the great concerns of the modern ecumenical church is to respond to a growing awareness that the future life of the church cannot be any longer identified with its dominant Western shape, but to welcome and encourage indigenous forms of Christian response. Perhaps the major contribution of Biblical Theology to this complex issue [of the identity and mission of the church] is to illuminate the full diversity of the biblical witness regarding the church. Clearly no one form of polity has the sole claim to biblical warrants. Yet at the same time to make clear the fixed parameters which are drawn by Scripture outside of which the same threats of Gnosticism, Judaizers, and paganism are ever present in new forms. No Christian theologian should question the decisive role of the

¹⁹Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 382.

Holy Spirit in revitalizing older forms and creating new. However, the basic contribution of dogmatic theology will lie in insisting that the role of the Holy Spirit be understood as the Spirit of Jesus Christ and that the Spirit not be assigned an independent role in the service of private groups, racial or sexual identity, or national ideology. The frequently used expression “open to the future” in itself is inadequate to insure that it is the future of Jesus Christ within the kingdom of God which is being heralded, rather than the empty promises of an Adam Smith or Karl Marx.²⁰

“BECOME A BETTER PERSON”

The canonical approach to theological exegesis of Scripture offered by Brevard Childs is a complex enterprise with multiple dimensions and concerns. Typical parish pastors may not be expected to perform an exhaustive canonical interpretation of a given biblical text every week as they prepare their sermons or Bible studies. Nevertheless, Childs hoped his work would offer some practical guidance for the work and formation of faithful pastors, teachers, leaders, and students of Scripture who seek to encounter the word of the living God in their congregations, communities, and contexts. Ultimately, Childs knew that the mystery and gift of such exegetical encounters with the God of Jesus Christ involved the ongoing formation of the whole person. The story is told of a disgruntled Yale Divinity School student who had received a “B” on his Old Testament exegesis paper in a course with Childs. The student wanted to know what he had to do in order to write a better exegesis paper. Childs’s reply: “Become a better person!” It was as simple and as complex as that.

Becoming a better person meant becoming increasingly saturated in the study of Scripture in worship, prayer, and study. It meant deepening one’s relationship with the God of Jesus Christ and with the traditions of God’s church. It meant seeking to live out that relationship and faith in every dimension of one’s life. Becoming a better person and a better exegete involves an ongoing and lifelong journey with God, Scripture, and the world—zigzagging through deep waters, guided by the gifts and resources of the past, always open to the Triune God’s surprising future.²¹ ⊕

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²⁰Ibid., 448–449.

²¹An illustration of Childs offering a model of a canonical exegesis of two specific biblical texts (the binding of Isaac in Gen 22:1–19 and the parable of the Wicked Tenants in Matt 21:33–46) may be found in his *Biblical Theology*, 321–347.