

Fuller Theological Seminary

Canonical Criticism

Paper for the Class

OT801: Critical Approaches to the Old Testament

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By

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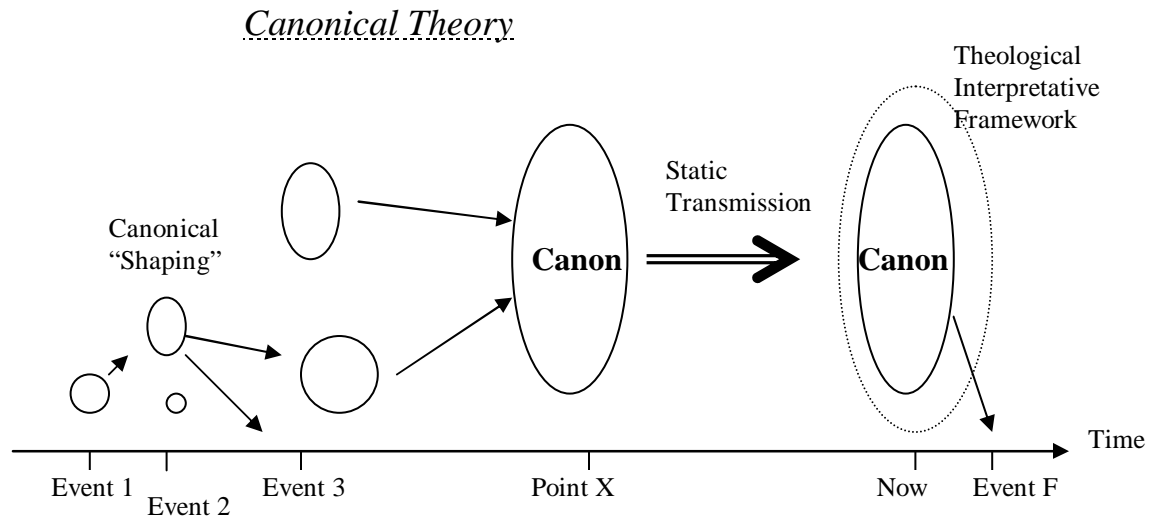
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Introduction

Canonical criticism is a fairly recent development in area of Old Testament Studies. Brevard S. Childs first developed a distinctively approach to Old Testament interpretation



which he called the *Canonical Approach* in the seventies and early eighties. The new approach seemed to challenge many established traditional approaches to Old Testament criticism and caused quite a stir in the field. James A. Sanders later developed a different approach calling it *Canonical Criticism* in critique of Childs' method. There are numerous other publications mostly evaluating Childs' and Sanders' approach. The most notable of those is probably Mark G. Brett's thorough critique and refining of Childs' ideas.

This paper tries to give an overview over the field of *Canonical Criticism*. Customarily the area of *Canonical Criticism* is understood to encompass both Childs' *Canonical Approach* and Sanders' proper *Canonical Criticism*. There might be a slight danger of confusing what *Canonical Criticism* refers to since it has a double meaning both referring to a method in the field as well as to the field as a whole.

The paper presented here tries to trace the discussion following Childs' publications and presents various critiques and enhancements of the original ideas by Childs. Mark Brett's work of analyzing and refining Child's thought is very important. A section at the end will focus on his evaluation of the situation.

Canonical criticism basically is dealing with issues of the canon of scripture. How can its development be understood, how did the process shape scripture, how to approach an understanding of scripture for today in such a framework and so on.

In order to understand the various key elements of canonical criticism I have drawn a diagram giving an overview about the basic elements occurring again and again in the literature discussed. The diagram depicts a sequence of events. Events 1, 2, 3 are significant religious events for the community that produces the texts. Those events have

an strong influence on a community of faith. They might be events when God was experienced in a special and powerful way. The events then become part of the common knowledge of the community. They are either remembered and orally transmitted or written down. In some way those events then become a way to understand God and a way for the community to communicate about God.

At first event 1 happens which is remembered and something that may be called a proto-canonical element develops. Other events are added to this proto-canonical element like for example event 2. When event 3 happens already a small proto-canon exists that has established a rudimentary interpretative framework. And thus event 3 is described in categories the community has gotten through the experiences of events 1 and 2 and is then over time also added to the body of knowledge about God. More and more literature is added so that bigger chunks of literature develop. That literature as a more and more significant influence on the faith in the communities. The bigger chunks are shaped into larger epics or are made to fit together into a somewhat linked narrative by redactors. The process is called *Canonical Shaping*. Canonical Shaping might also include activities of updating the way the material communicates to a community that has changed over time.

At some point (X) the canon has reached a degree of stability and becomes established as expressing a normative understanding for the community of faith. Additions to the canon stop since the canon is seen to be sufficiently rich to communicate what is important about God or the community sees dangerous deviations from its tradition and therefore protects its canon by describing its limits accurately. From X onwards only minor fluctuations in the texts occur.

At that point the canon becomes static. It can no longer be reshaped in order to communicate to new historical or linguistic situations since it has been fixed. Thus a body of interpretative knowledge develops around the canon to preserve its meaning for successive generation. That interpretative body is also used to make the content of the canon applicable to the contemporary situation. The interpretative body gives the canon a certain degree of flexibility back that it has lost through the fixation at point X.

With this canon and the interpretative framework a future even F might happen. That event is interpreted in the context of the canon using the interpretative framework and thus the canon can speak to the future situation F and can be applied in a different historical and cultural situation. Thus in some sense although the canon is an expression of a historical and cultural situations which no longer exist it can still be normative and influential in future situations.

Some important terms which are characteristically used in *Canonical Criticism* . A **synchronic** approach is an approach to understanding that looks at a text at a certain point in time as a whole. Commonly **synchronic** approaches focus on the relatively fixed canonical text.

Contrasting to the **synchronic** approach are **diachronic** approaches to the text which look at the process how the text developed over time. **Diachronic** approaches focus on

canonical shaping and historical and cultural influences on the textual development and are usually seeing the fixed canonical text as a patchwork revealing different textual histories.

Another thing to keep in mind in the following discussion is the distinction between emic and etic descriptions of texts or historical situations. The authors do usually not clearly follow this distinction but it is good to know the distinction while studying their approaches. An **emic** view of a historical situation is the view that a native in that situation would have. Thus an **emic** description must restrict itself to the categories available at that historic time and to the thought patterns of that historic culture. In contrast an **etic** view of a historical situation will use the full range of modern scientific methods to describe the situation in terms of modern sociology, historical and other categories which in turn might not be comprehensible to the native in the historical situation since those criteria will not have been known at that historical point nor most of the current scholarly thought patterns used to analyze the historical situation (Brett, 1991, 15).

Childs: The Normative Canon

Childs is the forerunner¹ of canonical criticism. He pioneered the field and most of the literature in the field of canonical criticism is in some way referring to his work showing the infancy of the field as a whole. This also has the consequence that some of Childs' ideas are not clearly articulated and his critics are easily able to see conflicts in his writings or put him into their favorite imaginative position. The response of Childs to his critics in *Horizons in Biblical Theology* gives some examples of misunderstanding and limitation arising out of this pioneering situation of Childs.

Mark Brett repeatedly states that he feels Childs' being confused about certain issues (Brett, 33, 41-46). The strength of Childs' writing is that he opened up a whole new field of Old Testament Studies. Many issues seem to be grasped by Childs intuitively and are not clearly thought out. It seems to me that such a situation is typical for a forerunner who has to develop radically new ideas based on insufficient old categories. I think Childs cannot be faulted for his somewhat fuzzy presentation but he should be congratulated on the accomplishment to open up the view to a new field of study. It might take decades to work out in detail all the implications of his work.

Childs's book *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* is showing his new approach to the understanding of the Old Testament. He takes issue with the "nature of the Bible's historicity" (Childs, 1979, 71). Childs wants to improve the study of the Bible itself by redefining the relationship between the historical critical methods and its theological use within the community of faith. Childs is trying to transcend the classic distinction between liberal and conservative (Childs, 1979, 15). He does so by changing the way the historical nature of the Bible is viewed (a new hermeneutic) in order to do "justice to the nature of Israel's unique history" (Childs, 1979, 71).

¹ The nature and characteristics of a **forerunner** are discussed for example in Heiko Oberman's *Forerunners of the Reformation*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1981 in Chapter one. Most of what he says regarding the nature of forerunners is also applicable to other historical situations with Childs' being a classic example.

Israel's understanding of God developed over time and the text of the Old Testament gives witness to this process. Thus the literature needs to be treated with respect to "its own integrity". The writings are both historically and theologically conditioned and have to be understood as such (Childs, 1979, 73). The biblical text reflects the history of the encounter between God and Israel.

Childs shares his concern with newer literary critics of accepting the text as an integrity on its own terms apart from the classic diachronistic reconstruction in historical criticism using "scientific criteria" (Childs, 1979, 74). For Childs the final form of the text (the canonical text) is normative for the understanding of the Old Testament. Only in the final form has the normative history of Israel reached an end and only in the final form can the full effect of revelatory history be perceived. The final text continued to be authoritative for the community of faith not earlier texts (Childs, 1979, 76, 75). In our diagram this would mean that scripture at point X is authoritative but none of the earlier proto-canonical stages.

The canonical process led to messages bound to a historical situation becoming actualized for different historical circumstances and thus those messages became transhistorically valid. Editors did their best to obscure their identity and thus the actual process of canonical formation is not clearly discernable. After the political Israel has passed away, Israel is then redefining herself in terms of the book (Childs, 1979, 79, 78).

Childs criticizes the classical historical critical method for failing to relate the canonical writings correctly to the community of faith. The identity of the community shaped the canonical writings and vice versa. Critical methods usually assume the historical reference as key to interpretation forgetting all about the role scripture has played in the community of faith (Childs, 1979, 41).

Canonical criticism sets the limit on exegetical tasks by taking traditional parameters seriously. The canon is a platform to start exegesis (Childs, 1979, 82).

How Childs' approach works in a concrete way can be seen in his introductory comments to the books of the Old Testament in *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*. Childs customarily starts out with an evaluation of how classic critical methods were applied to the book and usually judges most of those methods to fail to account for the actual message of the book.

In the case of Hosea Childs sees a complete failure of traditional methods to account for the message in the book. He does not see it as necessary to make the assumption of a preservation of the message of the person Hosea himself or to produce a reconstruction of the historical situation in which the book was written down. Instead the message is accepted in its full canonical form. But Childs sees that the message has been adapted to various circumstances. First Hosea's message is targeted to confront mythological elements in Canaanite religions, which is most probable the real reference point for Hosea's preaching. In a later generation the book of Hosea is understood metaphorically and more metaphorical content is added to the book. The book develops an "independent integrity" apart from the historical circumstances it was originally written in. The redaction

process results in joining judgement and salvation² which was originally distinct. Childs sees his method to account for the true historical dimensions of the book. Originally it was addressed to the Northern Kingdom. Then it was used to confront a different situation. Last it was transformed into symbolic language which offered judgement and hope beyond the temporal (Childs, 1979, Chapter XX).

Similarly Childs is accepting the multi-layered structure of the book for the book of Amos as a valid result of the historical critical method but does not consider this a reason to abandon seeing a unity in the book. The goal of canonical interpretation is “how the message of Amos was appropriated to serve as authoritative scripture within the community of faith” (Childs, 1979, 400) and thus Amos has to be taken as a whole despite a probably complex textual history. The key notion for Childs is to look for the *canonical significance* of the book. Childs develops a contrast to the historical critical method as exemplified for him by H. W. Wolff’s classical treatment of Amos in *Amos’ geistige Heimat*. Wolff sees the text developing as a response to a historical sociological situation and thus is concerned mostly with issues in a specific historical situation. Childs sees the development of the text in order to serve as the authoritative scripture and thus has a theological concern. Amos critique of Israel is taken out of its historical context for the purpose of providing a critique of distorted religion for later communities of faith (Childs, 1979, Chapter XXII).

Childs’ book *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* contains evidence of a more refined later approach. Here Childs objects to other commentators describing for example Moses name as being an Egyptian name for exegetical purposes. The canonical writings do not see the name of Moses as being of Egyptian origin but his mother names Moses with a Hebrew name in Exodus 2:10. Theological reasoning cannot begin with reasoning based on non-canonical meanings. Moses has to be seen through the canonical process in order to properly draw theological conclusion and not through the results of critical reconstruction at variance with what is communicated in canonical writings (Childs, 1986, 109).

The role of Moses is very interesting to Childs. Moses has a unique role in the Old Testament canon and transfers this role into a written text. The book of the law then carries the authority of Moses’ role to address future generations. To some extent this typifies the character and intend of canonical development (Childs, 1986, 111).

Barton: A Challenge to Traditional Forms of Criticism

For Barton canonical criticism shows the limitations of the historical critical method. The historical critical method tells us what is behind the biblical text but does not deal with the

² Salvation and judgement have to go together in messages in order to be effective. A message of doom alone is ineffective, similarly a message of salvation alone. Salvation and judgement together have the potential to offer a choice to the audience and move the listeners into a desired course of action. I doubt the validity of the reconstruction by Childs and others.

text itself. Scripture has to be read as a unity because we have received scripture as a unity with a unified understanding, which has come to us through tradition. The meaning of books are determined by the place within the larger canonical framework (Barton, 1996, 77-79).

Here we have a top-down approach in contrast to the bottom-up approach of the classic historical approaches. The classic method tries to assemble the whole by analyzing its parts (modernist paradigm) whereas the canonical approach looks at the whole and gives parts its proper place within that framework.

Barton reads B.S. Childs and sees him say that historical criticism is unsatisfactory since it is concerned with placing the texts in the ancient contexts. Those parts that canonize scripture (redactional elements etc) are seen as inauthentic and stripped off. But those parts are used to make the text relevant in the context of a canon and brought relevance out of the ancient contexts of those writings. The attempt to “free” the scriptures from the canonical context results in textual understanding firmly seated in ancient contexts. This historically bound understanding is problematic when it comes to applying the text to current contemporary situations.

Scripture thus has to be read in the context of the canon of Scripture and by accepting the inspiration of the texts as a prerequisite for further understanding. The question is what the text in the canonical form has to say to us today. The focus of reading scripture needs to be on what ought to be read instead of focusing on their original meaning. The meaning arises out of the tradition preserved by a community of faith (Barton, 1986, 79-81).

Barton sees a danger here that canonical approaches will harmonize scripture. Childs is saying not that all books speak with one voice but that the parts show coherence to some extent. Canonization is a mandate to read scripture as being coherent, as part of a whole and not in a way that scripture is made to contradict itself (Barton, 1986, 84, 86).

Another concern of Barton is the stability of the canonical approaches since Childs’ approach has some holes for example in not giving sufficient reasons for the acceptance of the canon as normative scripture (Barton, 1986, 87). But this again is probably due to the pioneering situation in the field.

Birch: New Avenues of Research

Birch sees Childs opening up new avenues of research into the canon. Childs has a valid critique that historical criticism had no place for the understanding of the canon as authoritative in the community. Scholarship was dealing with the pre-history of the text and not with the text’s own agenda. Interpretation has to start with the canon if it has to be valid for the community of faith who after all accepted the canon early on as normative (Birch, 1980, 124, 113, 114) and did not canonize the pre-history of the text but the text itself.

Childs is seen by Birch as charging scholarship as being reductionistic. Scholarship sees pre-canonic stages to be more authentic and dismisses later additions as inauthentic. Childs

is in effect proposing a holistic approach to scripture. Critical interpretation has ignored the canonical shape of scripture and therefore has not been acceptable to the community of faith at large (Birch, 116-117).

Birch is critical about Childs' seeming problem to distinguish between the process of developing tradition and scripture as the final product. Is the canon simply the end result of the process? Birch is charging Childs with letting the process continue on beyond the development of scripture and questions if Childs sees the canon as closed at all. If the process continues then scripture cannot be closed. Birch sees Childs as confusing the hermeneutical process with scripture itself. The canon cannot control interpretation anymore if canonization continues but the community of faith intended a canon that controls interpretation (Birch, 1980, 118).

Birch also sees Childs arguing that earlier pre-canonical texts are not scripture but only the final form as authoritative. But earlier forms are useful to understand the way material is used to balance things in the final form (Birch 1980,120).

Childs is accused of severing the text from history. The historic nature of God's action is the basis for hope that God is with the community in the future. Childs removes the roots of the text in history. The canon itself is not only the record of a destination but also a record of the way to get there. Thus historical criticism has its value. Pre-canonical traditions have to be interpreted in dialogue with canonical meaning in the same way as post-canonical interpretive traditions. The canon should be controlling the understanding in both directions (Birch 1980, 120-124).

Knight: A One-Sided Presentation

Knight is very negative about Childs' claims that he has developed a new approach to the understanding scripture. Childs is on the same level as other who highlighted neglected phases of the development of scripture. It is just natural that Childs overemphasizes his approach given the discovery of this neglected area and his fascination with the field. Childs accuses others of neglecting religious dynamical factors while he is neglecting other areas by himself. Consequently Childs' introduction to the Old Testament cannot stand on its own but is only usable as something complementary to conventional introductions. Moreover Knight feels that Childs is polemically arguing for his view throughout his introduction. There is too much of an agenda in his introduction to the Old Testament for it to be useful as a general reference work (Birch, 1980, 130-134).

What Childs does in Knight's opinion is contributing to the field of redaction criticism and overcomes the lack in that field of study. Childs is confused about the categories of development of scripture into a canon. Thus he sees redactional steps as "fully canonical" in intent. Childs sees the whole process of canonical development as intentional and identifies canonical shaping as the canonical process. Knight wants a sharper distinction between shaping and the non-intentional development of the canon. Canonicism was not something in the power of the writers but something that later generation bestowed on the books (Birch, 1980, 136-137).

The question that immediately comes to my mind as I think about the bestowing of canonical status is if there were not writers who also bestowed the canonical status. Both Ezra and Nehemia would be candidates for such possibilities. Thus the distinction might not be true in all cases.

Knight complains that Childs set the beginning of the development of the canon before the exilic period, which is in contrast to common scholarly opinion. Childs neglects political, social and economic factors in favor of theological considerations. It is not clear that the community of faith did intend to produce a canon. The intentions of the historical community are not clear (Birch, 1980, 137-141). People were simply giving witness to contact with God in scripture. This is a living process and no aim for a canon is discernable (Birch 1980, 146).

Childs also uses the concept of actualization in a wrong way. Actualization refers to application a historical text to the another time and does not mean changing the text itself. Childs is stretching the term. Childs wants to use his canonical approach to set limits on the exegetical task. Such an approach is per se illegitimate. Childs says that Old Testament writers obscured their identity but he still tells us to investigate the identity of those writers? (Birch, 1980, 142-145)

Knight thinks that Childs simply prefers the canonical approach because of the authority held by the canon through the tradition of the community of faith (Birch, 1980, 146).

In response to Knight Childs agrees that his book restricts the scope of the inquiry. The title of his book *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* was chosen because it was evident from the title that the mode of inquiry was limited by treating the Old Testament “as Scripture” meaning as an authoritative text (Birch, 1980, 208).

Childs rejects Knight’s concept that historical critical results are the basis for theology. Authority is bound to canonical writings and to the community not to the historical critical method. Authority is only in the final canonical form and the canon actually is used as a means of theological judgement on past stages of canonical development (Birch, 1980, 209).

Childs says on the issue of separation of the canon and scripture that those two are neither to be separated nor to be identified. Knight’s understanding of canonization as “a late, external ecclesiastical validation” is a misunderstanding of the process (Birch, 1980, 201).

Mays: An Understanding of “What is Written”

Mays has a different perspective than Knight on the purpose of an introduction to the Old Testament. For Mays the purpose is a description of the literature introduced to. It articulates literature whose origin is sought and whose applicability to today is important. Mays is positively impressed by the evident personal zeal for Childs’ cause evident in Childs’ books (Birch, 1980, 151-152).

For Mays the old historical criticism was not able to understand the “dynamics of Israel’s religious literature” (Birch, 1980, 153). Childs’ approach is situated in the midst of historical critical tradition but stands in contrast to others. It is advocating a reversal of priorities and of what is significant. Childs expands the nature of the canon. The canon is not only a description which books are included but the canon includes the shape of biblical books. Childs notion has “both confessional and historical dimensions” (Birch, 1980, 154-155) accomplishing a unity of the historical with the theological. The canonical approach overcomes the tension between critical methods and canon but still allows full use of historical studies. It was uncharacteristic for historical criticism to be concerned about theological and ethnical reflection but with the canonical approach those areas are connected (Birch, 1980, 154-157).

The historical critical method was characterized by ignoring “what is written” in favor of “what is written about”. It is Childs accomplishment to have overcome this central problem of historical criticism (Birch, 1980, 163).

Childs response to Mays is expressing appreciation that Mays has clearer articulated many issues than he was able to. The issues of biblical theology that Mays wishes to address and is looking forward to forthcoming solutions in the framework of Childs’ approach is problematic since a similar approach for the New Testament does not exist. The compartmentalization of theology in New and Old Testament make it difficult to develop a comprehensive understanding (Birch, 1980, 200).

My opinion on Mays is that his evaluation of the canonical approach is much too positive. He sees applications far beyond what the canonical approach has been used to so far and Childs himself responds by telling Mays about the limitations of the canonical approach for if used also for the New Testament.

Polk: A Bridge for Believers

Polk sees a basic problem between biblical scholarship and the laity in churches: They do not communicate. Results of biblical scholarship are not related and do not influence the laity in churches. Scholarship misses its mark. Biblical studies are entangled in the “limbs of the trees (and sometimes their roots) losing perspective on the forest”. Technical arguments do not help lay people to understand. Theological Literature is shallow because the orientation to the technical. Polk has the hope that Childs canonical approach will point to a way to build a new bridge so that scholarship will communicate with the laity. Childs work is refocusing attention to the final canonical form of scripture, which is also determinative for the church (Birch, 1980, 166-167).

Polk does not see Childs work as epochal but as a necessary corrective. He expects an enrichment of the field but not a replacement of his predecessors (Birch, 1980, 165, 170).

Points of critique (Birch, 1980, 168, 169):

- ❑ Childs seems to assume that the Old Testament and the Hebrew Bible are identical. Polk sees that a different canonical context exists for either of them. It seems that there is a problem for the canonical approach with different canons.
- ❑ Childs seems to be seeking refuge from the onslaught of historical criticism through the canonical approach.
- ❑ Where is the authority for faith? Childs seems to simply assume the authoritative nature of the canon. Why would the end result of a historical process be normative?
- ❑ Responding to Polk Childs agrees that he has not dealt with different canonical contexts. Introductions to the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament would not be identical (Birch, 1980, 206).

Childs clarifies further the misunderstanding of Polk and others to see the canon as always intentional. Childs definitely understands elements of the canon as accidental. The editorial process reflects unintentional biases that were introduced into the canon. But nevertheless the literature was received into a community of faith together with the assignment of certain roles of parts within the canon. Not every part of the canon has the same role. This is a problem becoming evident in a literal approach, which misunderstands the dynamic functions within the canon (Birch, 1980, 206).

Allen: Respect for Diversity

In his book review of Childs *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* Allen expresses appreciation that the holistic canonical approach does not reduce the diversity evident in the Old Testament. Childs tries to find diversity and assigns significance to it contrary to what would have been expected from an attempt to establish an overall structure (Allen, 1988, 98).

Childs also gives evidence of attempts to relate theology to the present, occasionally drawing out the issues of nuclear war, gays and feminism.

Allen seems to see a certain danger in the canonical approach being used to smooth out the diversity present in the Old Testament. Thus he says yes to the canonical approach but only if it allows freedom for the study of parts that comprise the whole (Allen, 1988, 98).

Oswald: Theology cannot be a Fabrication

Oswald's evaluation is one from the viewpoint of a classic inerrantist. He sees a general agreement in the field of biblical study that the Old Testament is unreliable as a source for historical knowledge. He complains is that there are divergent criteria of proof in archeology and the Old Testament. Archeological knowledge is trusted until proven false whereas Old Testament history is not trusted until proven true. The historical accuracy is of central concern for Oswald. Faith is not credible if the Old Testament is largely a fabrication. And this is what he sees most people including Childs to say about the Old Testament (Oswald, 1987, 317-318).

Canonical criticism is for Oswald admitting the result of destructive historical criticism but preserving the theological integrity. It is inconsistent. Oswald complains that Childs sees the inspiration through the community wrestling with the issues and not through the the inspiration of an author as classical fundamentalism and historical criticism would have it (Oswald, 1987, 318). At this point it should be evident that Oswald thinking is still in enlightenment categories expecting a monist character of truth and having individuals in isolation be the agents of communication rather than the widely acknowledged community bound nature of communication and tradition. A pluralism of approaches and a pluralism of divergent results does not seem possible for Oswald.

Oswald complains that Childs removes theology from its historical context. Oswald contrasts Childs and Sanders. Childs expects revealed truth in normative final texts, Sanders is looking for trajectories of canonical shaping that guide biblical interpretation. Sanders removes any confrontation with the divine word whereas Childs' understanding of truth has no contact any more with experience The canon is determined by an interplay of ideas. There is a Bultmannian danger of cutting meaning off from fact (Oswald, 1987, 319).

Oswald welcomes Childs' approach to insist that the interpretation of a book must be guided by looking at the book as a whole. But Childs is separating fact and meaning. The biblical writers appeal to historical events for the "authentication of their theology" (Oswald, 1987, 320). Childs seems to suggest that these events are not real.

Canonical criticism says that the inspiration resides in the community of faith and not in an author guided by inspiration. The Bible does not speak of inspired communities. Ultimately inspiration must come from God. God causes the interpretation not the community. Canonical critics tell about inspired theology through fictional accounts of origin. There cannot be a separation of literary context from historical context (Oswald, 1987, 321).

Oswald has no interest in any pre-canonical history of the text since he is skeptical regarding the possibility to establish any pre-canonical history at all.

I share many concerns that Oswald has regarding the authority of scripture. But I think his epistemology is caught in enlightenment thinking. Truth is usually an issue of community. Even prophets have to establish a way to communicate their message and thus they have to relate to the community. Prophets had people closely associated with them and there must have been people that preserved the words they spoke for future generations. The issues are not as simple as Oswald would have them to be. As much as Oswald wants a literary understanding of scripture I think this is a misguided idealism that does not do justice to the nature of the Old Testament. Revelation and tradition must of course be rooted in experience and in historical events but how those events are presented to us was not for us to decide but that decision was made a long time ago and we better learn to understand the way it is presented rather than try to fit scripture into our scheme of understanding.

Callaway: Transcending the Text

Callaway sees canonical criticism as dealing with the process between tradition and community which shapes the text. An ancient phenomenon is occurring: A core of traditions is continually contemporized for the community it is addressed to (McKenzie and Haynes, 1993, 121).

Classically both fundamentalists and liberals have assumed that the oldest version is the most authoritative. Canonical criticism questions that assumption and instead insists on the role a text has played versus the community of faith (McKenzie and Haynes, 1993, 123). Callaway makes an important point on how to distinguish redaction criticism from canonical criticism: Redaction criticism investigates the editorial processes leading up to the final form of the text whereas canonical criticism studies the effect of redaction on the final text and the theological dimensions thereof (McKenzie and Haynes, 1993, 125).

The resulting canonical text transcends even the intentions of the final redactor. The Rabbi's already were able to hear multiple voices in scripture. Canonical criticism can bring multiple approaches to bear on the text and can open up a pluralistic understanding of the texts (McKenzie and Haynes, 1993, 127).

Sanders: Canon as a process

Sanders is another very important person for the area of canonical criticism. Although he came onto the field later than Childs he developed his own unique approach. Whereas Childs calls his approach "Canonical Approach" and rejects the term "Canonical Criticism" as a devaluation of his approach since he sees it distinct from the other critical approaches. Sanders explicitly endorses the term "Canonical Criticism" and wants to see his approach lined up with other historical critical methods. Childs developed his approach based on a fixed canonical text. Sanders is looking at the canonical process in particular.

Sanders feels that he is in agreement with much of Childs thought. The attribution of a text to an original author is common both to liberal and conservative and both have bypassed seeing the role of the communities. Historical criticism was characterized by the search for an Urtext, locking the text in the past and making it unusable for the current communities of faith. Both liberals and conservatives alike therefore concentrated the authority based on what early communities received or what scholarship via conjecture assumed they had received. Scholarship was able to rewrite the Bible by relocating the nature of the authority of the Bible (Sanders, 1984, 163).

The Old Testament clearly contains textual problems and classic historical critical scholarship has focused almost exclusively on dealing with those problems thereby losing the reason the text was canonized in the first place. The text had given life to communities, which was the whole point of the text. That the text is not historically accurate according to our modern criteria is clear but the communities also developed as the text developed. Historical criticism was having a gap between redaction criticism and the conciliar decisions that were making the final decisions on the authority of those texts

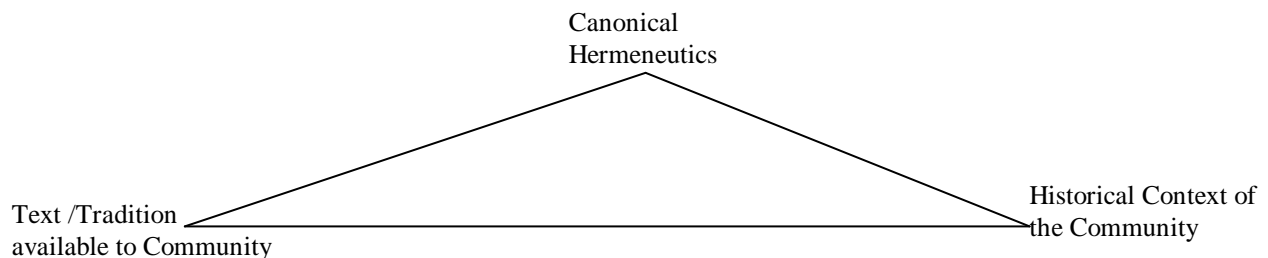
after the communities had widely accepted those text. Canonical criticism fills that gap and fills out the role of the communities played in interaction with the text (Sanders, 1984, 165). Of course certain individuals played roles in this whole process but their role is depending on how well they perceived the needs of the communities. The classic focus on the individual author alone is no longer sufficient (Sanders, 1984, 166).

Sanders objects to Childs focus on just one form of “stabilized Scripture”. He sees Childs as disassociating scripture from history completely. He does not see scripture function like this kind of stabilized scripture even up to the Reformation. Certainly the texts in existence were read as stories before but the hermeneutics of reading the text was not systematized. Instead various methods were imported from different sources according to need. Sanders suggests that Childs view of the canon is a perspective of the Reformation (Sanders, 1984, 167).

Sanders criticizes Childs focus on the Masoretic Text alone. The New Testament uses the Septuagint and thus is left “out in the cold”. The focus on a fixed stable canon is just plainly wrong for Sanders. A canon is flexible by its very nature. Childs canonical processes are basically processes leading to the formation of the fixed text whereas Sanders would include canonical processes to mean the history of the text after it was canonized (Sanders, 1984, 166, 167).

The more stabilized the canon gets the better hermeneutical methods are developed by the interpreting communities, the better the interpretative framework will be, to crack the canon open to make it usable in the time period of those communities. The way scripture is related to by historical communities is different from what Childs is proposing. Childs is insisting on using scripture in the context of the complete canon. That is not the case in the New Testament. The New Testament focused on the interpretation of isolated passages on their own. Similarly the Habakuk Peshera at Qumran does not show any evidence at all of contextual considerations. Childs is ruling out ancient ways of considering scripture in his approach (Sanders, 1984, 168 – 170).

Sanders finally sees canonical criticism as something positive as a gift from God. The revival of the awareness of the canon is important but it must be seen as an extension of



biblical criticism. Canonical criticism deals with the functioning of texts in communities. The exact form and structure of the canon is secondary. Sanders wants to extract “unrecorded” hermeneutics from the Bible and use them for contemporary purposes. For the recovery of those hermeneutics we need to employ the whole range of historical critical methods to establish the historical context and the text and tradition used by the

community in that historical context. We can then observe how the community used the text in such a historical situation and from that observation we can deduce hermeneutical methods used to interpret scripture (Sanders, 1984, 171).

Childs replies in response to Sanders that the canon has always had a firm role and was not flexible for the Early Church, the Medieval Church or the Reformation Church. The Early Church had a sharp distinction between apostolic teaching and later traditions. Sanders understanding does not do justice to the nature of a fixed canon in those contexts.

The Holy Spirit appropriates Scripture for every new generation since the fullness of God's revelation has come in the form of the New Testament. This process of actualization is different from Sanders view of canonization (Birch, 1980, 202).

Childs feels that Sanders projects his understanding of the Old Testament method to the New Testament in an way that Childs does not agree with. Childs thinks that the New Testament needs a completely different approach to canonical criticism than the Old Testament. The New Testament use of the Old Testament is done in a special apologetic and theological context using contemporary devices, mostly proof-text accepted in the surrounding environment, to justify their faith. The special New Testament situation conditioned that there was no focus "on larger canonical questions". The variation of interpretative technique does not call into question that there are canonical limitations on interpretation (Birch, 1980, 203).

Childs expresses that Sanders thinks about his approach being a purely literary approach. That is not true. The canonical context appropriates the historical material in a variety of ways, which is sometimes loose. The canonical context "bears witness to a representative reality which transcends any given historical situation. At other times the canonical context works historical material into its very core and make full use of a public witness to common historical reality The canonical process is, in no way, divorced from the historical process ... but the two processes retain their own integrity and are not to be fused" (Birch, 1980, 203). Childs certainly seems to see some importance in connections between historical reality and the canon.

Morgan: Nothing new

For Donn F. Morgan canonical criticism implies a canonical hermeneutic. Thus a new hermeneutical principle in reference to the canon has been established. There is not much basically new about it. Hermeneutical principles have been proposed before. Nothing fundamentally new for biblical scholarship is here (Morgan, 1990, 11).

A canon needs both a text and a community and the questions for both are intertwined but Sanders and Childs separate them. Childs focus is on the text, Sanders focuses on the community. For Childs the text transcends the community that shaped it. A certain polarity develops between authoritative text and its community, which is a central characteristic of a canon and canonical hermeneutics (Morgan, 1990, 13, 17):

Text	Community
Stability	Adaptability
Ethos	Mythos
Constitutive	Prophetic
Descriptive	Constructive
Stipulation	Story

The development of a canon is gradual. During the composition of the Writings for example the two other sections of the Old Testament the Torah and the Prophets were widely known in Jewish communities. There was no canon but a growing consensus that these special writings were central to their religion. The Writings give evidence of a plurality of approaches for the interpretation of the Torah and the prophets. Communities are concerned about how to live faithfully in difficult times and develop a variety of ways to apply the traditional texts to a contemporary situation. The Writings share a view of the authority of the Torah and the Prophets. The Authority of the Writings themselves in turn largely stems from the past or from past figures of authority like Ezra or Nehemia. The dialogue between the community and the texts leads to the development of a fixed textual tradition (Morgan, 1990, 71, 75).

For Morgan the Writings give evidence of five ways to interpret the Torah and the Prophets:

Sapiential	Wisdom
Liturgical	Use in individual or corporate Worship
Historical	Presentation of the history of Israel and Judah in light of contemporary concerns
Apocalyptic	Direction and hope for the oppressed
Edifying	Paradigms of behavior in story form and a moral boost.

As soon as the literature becomes fixed its nature changes. A hermeneutical process is now required in order to make the text significant for new contemporary situations. The Writings themselves provide such a hermeneutical process by relating Torah and Prophets to one another. A pluralism of approaches develops. We have texts who interpret texts. Books are collected and brought together based on the contemporary need but there is no overall theological system. The canon includes a pluralism of approaches, suggestions, traditions and presentation. Any attempt to find an overarching theological system has failed so far and is doomed to failure by the nature evident in the canon (Morgan, 1990, 109, 114, 119, 121, 147).

Morgan expresses it the following way:

The canon demands continued dialogue in a pluralistic context between authoritative text and community. This is its mandate. The matrix upon which such a pluralism rests is not a particular conception of God but rather the common dialogue between a text, conceived and valued in many different ways,

and a wide variety of very particularistic communities. In and through all of this, God is made known. And the people find their identity and mission. (Morgan, 1990, 147)

What strikes me most about this is that God is defined out of the loop here. God becomes an invention of the canonical process.

Morgan clarifies later:

.. with its affirmation that many have been given glimpses of God's purpose and none has the entire, complete, and final answer, the canon calls us to continue to study the text – bringing our problems, disappointments, and joys to it. Only through such a process, inclusive of all, can we discern and act upon the World of God in our midst. (Morgan, 1990, 147).

These are great words. Scripture is becoming a transhistorical reflective medium. It is becoming a global medium like the Internet today but with a delay in communication. I think the inclusivity here comes with a danger of going too far and risks a loss of uniqueness of Christian message. If all refers only to a specific community of faith then it would be understandable. The question also arises where the normative character of the text is if scripture is a reflective medium like that.

Mark Brett: Refining the Canonical Approach

I think Mark Brett's book *Biblical Criticism in Crisis* is the most important book recently on the subject of canonical criticism. Brett evaluates Childs' thought in light of contemporary authors in epistemology like Gadamer, Hirsch and Alasdair MacIntyre and refines Childs' ideas in many ways. Points where Childs is still holding on to an enlightenment style monistic hermeneutics are discovered and are replaced with a thoroughly postmodern notion both in hermeneutics as well as in epistemic principles.

Brett notices in Childs 1974 book *Exodus* a concern with the **meaning** of texts independent of an authors or editors intention at whatever point in the canonical process. Scholars often misunderstood this as a concern with redaction criticism, which is understandable given Childs usage of historical critical material. But Childs saw historical critical disciplines only as preliminary for the understanding of the meaning of those texts (Brett, 1991, 3). The methods Childs employed were ambiguous and he was not able to clearly define the relationship between canonical and historical critical approach as well as between diachronic and synchronic approaches. There is a tension between different approaches that turned to polemic against diachronic approaches in his 1979 book *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*. Childs saw his own canonical approach as resolving the problems of the historical critical method. The meaning of a text was not to be equated with the intentions of an author, editor or redactor (Brett, 1991, 4). The canonical approach offers "an interpretation of the final form of scripture relatively independent of any author, editor or reader in any past situation" (Brett, 1991, 6). The text develops a relative autonomy.

Brett sees the canonical approach as one approach to the Bible among others. He has a “pluralist” account of biblical studies, which provides a wide context also for the canonical approach. Conflicts in the field of biblical studies are sometimes due to the failure to recognize “different kinds of interpretative tasks”. Some of the approaches in biblical studies are incommensurable which is hard to grasp for scholars still tied to the enlightenment paradigm of one truth. The canonical approach should not be tied to a negative view of historical critical reconstruction. There is no need to see an either/or relationship between the canonical approach and reconstruction. Brett wants to allow the pursuing of “independent research programmes”. Those research programmes might not be commensurable in a way that classic historical critical methods were. Brett is in favor of “methodological pluralism” (Brett, 1991, 6, 13).

Brett separates historical criticism from the canonical approach in the following way, which I think is rather helpful:

Historical critics, and also canonical critics like Sanders, are intellectuals who find the complexity of the Hebrew canon a source of stimulation and interest; they want to identify the origins of all its cultural traditions and reconstruct the details and order of their synthesis. The canonical approach, on the other hand, accepts the selections and adjustments that have been made, and pays attention to the final result – the Hebrew canon of the first century CE (Brett, 1991, 21).

I do not think that Childs would agree with such a sharp distinction but I think this is the best way to define the canonical approach. The attention to and the acceptance of the final result is the distinctive mark of the canonical approach over against canonical criticism.

Brett wants to improve the canonical approach by relating it to (post)modern schools of theology especially to intratextuality. Brett sees an important nexus between the canonical approach and intertextual theology. A large number of scholars have suggested again and again that individuals “do not have any access to reality except through a socially constructed interpretative framework that is constituted by webs of culture, symbol and language.” In Christianity canonical scripture is the basis of this “cultural-linguistic framework” (Brett, 1996, 8). Brett wants to use Gadamer’s concept of a classic in order to improve Childs’ theoretical weaknesses. A classic gains a transhistorical value by its appeal to communities in different historical situations. Similarly the Bible has been evolving through a set of different historical circumstances and has been able to communicate in distinctive contexts. There is a commonality here that Brett tries to exploit in order to sharpen Childs’ thought (Brett, 1991, 11).

Brett cites Hirsch in support of his contention that authorial intent does not constitute the meaning of a text. Rather the intentions of the author only have limited control over the possible meanings of a text. The original author does not exhaustively determine the text he just fixes the principle of future applicability. A text can bear meaning that was never intended by the original author. The canonical approach does not rest on a “theory of ‘intentions to address future readers’” but the texts are relatively autonomous in the meanings they project on future readers (Brett, 1991, 25, 26).

Religious communities search for the word of God in scripture, which is still valid and applicable for today. Historical criticism pursued anomalies and abandoned lines of thought. This is not important for religious communities. Brett would suggest that Childs' approach be improved to have later communities of faith be "regarding the Bible as a product of the best theological 'science', or critical reflection, to come out of the biblical period" (Brett, 1991, 133).

Conclusion

Canonical criticism is a postmodern and thus a contemporary important approach to scripture. Mark Brett expresses that one strength of his modified canonical approach is the pluralism of approaches that can be combined into a final result. Exegetical Monism is probably an ideal of the modernist period that also Childs was still hanging on to. I really appreciate the balanced way in which postmodern elements are used in his book. These are in stark contrast to approaches I have seen in my native country Germany. German approaches to interpreting scripture have either the classic idealist monist characteristic (both fundamentalist and liberal using the same(!) approach)³ or go overboard in becoming totally unaccountable to the traditions of the Christian Churches⁴. Brett's evaluation seems to be right on target and yields the best understanding of central issues in canonical criticism and even in hermeneutics I have seen.

I think Mark Brett's book is showing the way forward for Canonical criticism. The problem with his book is that it is too detailed. I wish an introductory book would cover the material in his book. Since canonical criticism deals with all the aspects of critical methods as well as interpretative issues I think that such a book could be the most important book for people beginning to study theology and trying to get familiar with the approaches as well as with a working understanding of scripture for their lives. Instead of beginning with a New Testament Introduction students would be able to get an overview and then refine their understanding in the context of the overarching framework established by canonical criticism.

It is interesting to see a sociological element in canonical theory that is also in harmony with the understanding of Alasdair MacIntyre of the role of traditional knowledge (MacIntyre, 1990, Chapter IX). I am involved in leadership in some pioneering communities on the Internet and to some extent I can see dynamics at work to codify the tradition into a set of rules and into a history of the community to be identified with. Reflecting on my time involved in business I can see a striving to come up with a history

³ One such example: Viggo Mortensen *Theologie und Naturwissenschaft*, Gütersloher Verlagshaus (translated into German), 1995. He is starting from an ideal notion of a unified description of reality accessible through science (which I would contend no longer exists) and tries to found theology on that basis.

⁴ Example: Michael Welker *Schöpfung und Wirklichkeit*, Neunkirchener Verlag, 1995 or Ingolf U. Dalferth *Kombinatorische Theologie: Probleme theologischer Rationalität*, Herder Verlag, Freiburg, 1991. Both try to develop fresh ideas of understanding scripture but outside of the Christian tradition. There are certainly valuable ideas (even paradox approaches) in these books but how they would fit into any canonical interpretative framework is not clear to me.

of the business and the struggle to keep certain traditions alive. Of course these enterprises have a certain bias and the business history is something of an element of public relations.

In contrast scripture contains evidence that a smoothing out of contrasts was often seen as not necessary and divergent viewpoints were kept side by side. Thus if there is a bias in scripture it will be different and scripture has a pluralism that is to be appreciated as Morgan clearly sees.

I think Oswald most clearly brings out the reasons for concern about canonical criticism. Inerrancy had a simple answer on how scripture is related to historical facts in harmony with the referential ideals prevalent among the positivists at the beginning of the 20th century. I think even Childs sees that there must be some connection between the contents of scripture and history otherwise we are dealing with pure fiction as Oswald rightly sees. But even today we have enough evidence that the presentation of contemporary “facts” is heavily influenced by the manner of representation and to some degree we have to trust those bringing us the “facts”. Thus canonical criticism needs to have some answer to the question of historical reference. Childs answer: It varies is not very helpful. Studies of ancient customs of reporting historical events and story telling could be helpful to develop a theory what criteria were used in the presentations given in scripture and how we have to see the historical reference of those writings.

Then of course there is the nagging question what does God have to do with all of this? Is canonical criticism not just another sociological explanatory scheme that makes talk of God superfluous? I can see Morgan going into that direction. Maybe the sociological describable process of canonization can be seen as guided in a top-down manner by God in order to give us his revelatory word? The pluralism as a richness that enables God to speak to us in divergent historical circumstances and life situations?

If this approach should have any appeal for the average Christian then it must be rearticulated in order to be expressed in common lay terms as Mays correctly observes. The canonical approach could be a basis for a New Evangelical view of scripture and a clear refutation both of fundamentalist inerrancy as well as liberal rejection of “inauthentic” parts of scripture.

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