



STUDIES *in* THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

THE CHARACTER OF CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE

The Significance of *a Two-Testament Bible*



CHRISTOPHER R. SEITZ

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OF CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE

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Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Seitz, Christopher R.

The character of Christian Scripture : the significance of a two-Testament Bible / Christopher R. Seitz.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 978-0-8010-3948-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Bible. N.T.—Relation to the Old Testament. 2. Bible—Theology. I. Title.

BS2387.S38 2011

230'.041—dc23

2011025005

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11 12 13 14 15 16 17 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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INTRODUCTION

Starting Points

“And on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead.” (Acts 17:2–3)

The Christian church at its origin received the Scriptures of Israel as the sole authoritative witness (the “Law and the Prophets”; “the oracles of God entrusted to the Jews”; “it is written”). These Scriptures taught the church what to believe about God: who God was; how to understand God’s relationship to creation, Israel, and the nations; how to worship God; and what manner of life was enjoined in grace and in judgment. The church understood her character and purpose to be shown under a type in Israel and so read the Scriptures as speaking to her through the idiom of this “Old Testament,” as it would come to be called. When a second witness would in time emerge and take form, the first witness would be retained in its own form, and a dual scriptural canon would constitute the Christian Scriptures. The “New Testament” scriptural authority was given its logic and its material form with reference to the Scriptures as first received by the church. “Old” then referred not merely to something temporally precedent, but rather provided the signal point of reference by which to understand a second witness to the work of God in Christ.

It is here that the logic of the rule of faith operative in the ante-Nicene period must be properly grasped. What the received Scriptures said of God was everywhere held to be true of God and his essential character—as against rival claims, including those of the Marcionites and Valentinians, among others. Because this only true God sent his only true Son, the received Scriptures revealed the trinitarian God of Christian faith. The Logos was active in the life of Israel, from creation to election to law-giving to cult to prayer and praise to prophetic word to final promise, because the only Son was of one being with the Father.¹ The exegetical implications of the rule of faith were enormous in respect to the received scriptural witness, not least because as the sole Scripture of the early church, it served to preach Christ and show that his earthly life was in accordance with the purposes of God from all time, manifested in the literal and extended senses of what would come to be called the “Old Testament.” So the received Scriptures spoke of God as God was and is, and in so doing spoke of the Triune God, under figures and occupying that space prepared for such an extended understanding by virtue of the dynamic life of a personal God with his people.

The NT is of course not simply a later scriptural witness whose point is to show culminating events that temporally follow after those of the first Scripture, focusing on Jesus Christ as the Son of God by virtue of his earthly life, crucified under Pontius Pilate and raised on the third day. The NT cannot speak of these events—final as they are—without constant reference to the received Scriptures. It is not possible to speak of Christ without speaking of him “in accordance with the Scriptures.” That is, the confession of Christ as Lord can only follow when Lordship is stipulated as that life of God in the Scriptures that reveal him, the “One with whom we have to do.” To be given the name that is above every name (Phil. 2:9) requires that we know what that name is, what that name means, and what it declares about God’s forbearing and desisting mercy and judgment. Jesus Christ crucified and risen is that name bearing witness to God’s self and final purpose. And this Jesus Christ is at

1. St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *On the Apostolic Preaching*, trans. John Behr (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997).

the same time the one through whom all things were made in the beginning with God.

Given that the first witness appears repeatedly and in manifold ways in the second, the present two-testament canon presents a challenge. The First Testament was not glossed with mature Christian confession (“My God why hast thou forsaken me, he cried from the tree”). Neither was its end opened up and a continuous final set of chapters appended, which put the first chapters in their place as scene setting or crucial preliminary plot staging. Something ended, a material form was stabilized and received as such, and a Second Testament slowly over time emerged and took up its place alongside the venerable and undoubted authority of the first. Naturally, given the way the rule of faith cooperated to bring extended senses forth from the received Scriptures for the purpose of preaching Christ in the early church, collaterally and at the same time the apostolic writings were also manifesting this same process of accordance and fulfillment. That is, the material witness of the NT everywhere shows use of the Scriptures in order to speak of Christ. They do this with a very wide range of exegetical and hermeneutical reflections. Christ says “before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58 NRSV). Christ is promised both prophetically (“a shoot will come up,” Isa. 11:1) and figurally (the suffering David of Psalms). Israel is a type of the church, in mercy and in judgment, the twelve tribes and twelve prophets serving as types of the twelve apostles. The Scriptures’ declarations of election and ingathering are assumed and said to be on the point of fulfillment. The Law is good and holy, but also tutor to Christ, and—as it is so often in the OT—exposer of sin. The prayers of Israel are the prayers of Christ, who knew no sin, but whom God made to be sin (see the history of interpretation of Ps. 22—Israel and Calvary, David and Christ—the different interpretations enriching our understanding of them both). The list can be extended further to include salvation history, type and antitype, moral continuity and deepening. The point is that the rule of faith opened the Scriptures to a reading of extended senses, which were argued to be embedded in the literal sense of the OT in its given form and in its historical life, in order to clarify the most basic theological and trinitarian confession in the church’s lived life. The NT offers a sample of this kind of reflection, but within the larger framework of describing the earthly

life of Jesus Christ and its culminating significance for Israel, creation, and the whole world.

At present in NT scholarship, for a wide variety of reasons that need not detain us here, the use of the OT in the NT has moved to the forefront of scholarly exegetical and more theologically reflective attention. Great precision is being sought in how properly to understand this dimension: *Vetus Testamentum in Novo receptum*. Less clear is the point of the exercise, on theological grounds. One concern is that the character of Christian Scripture will become obscured, that is, as a two-testament canonical presentation in which a first witness is retained in its given form, and a second comes alongside it and makes use of it in its proclamation of the work of God in Christ. What does it mean to speak of the OT primarily through the lens of the NT's use of it and not as its own witness, through all its parts, to the work of God in Christ, in its own specific idiom, as an older and foundational witness? The term "character" is here being used because Christian Scripture exists in a specific material form, and appreciation of that is crucial to understanding the respective Testaments in their integrity as well as their dialectical relationship. The formal aspect of the Bible—viewed through the final form of two respective Testaments, and in the conjunction of Old and New—is a dimension that must be taken seriously, precisely because it opens onto a further dimension. The way Augustine phrased this is hard to improve on: Jesus Christ latent in the Old and patent in the New. Here he makes a claim about the Scriptures' theological character, based upon respect for its canonical form.

The point of this book is that what is latent of Jesus Christ in the Old has a character commensurate with this witness in its present form. Stated negatively, the theological dimension of the OT is not chiefly to be grasped by a historical reconstruction of what may or may not be going on when the second witness uses the first. It may well be very interesting, theologically and exegetically, to probe this dimension, and it is certainly true that once the engine is released to this purpose, better and worse forms of reconstruction can be found, and so, understandably, a sophisticated discussion ensues. Is Israel's exile of critical significance in reading the NT? Do we better grasp the NT's message when we are aware of intertextual echoes and such

like, and how can we organize this dimension in a meaningful way? Does the discussion by Paul of law and justification make sense as exegetically pressured in some way by the final form of the Pentateuch or the Minor Prophets? These questions are all very important ones, but at issue is the question of proportion, and of the character of the witness of Christian Scripture and the implications—stated or unstated—for proper appreciation of this character. Is the OT chiefly what the New makes of it, and if not, just what does highlighting this dimension entail for appreciation of the OT as Christian Scripture? Stated differently, how does an inquiry into use of the OT in the NT relate to biblical theology?

It has been held by some that there is only a *Vetus Testamentum in Novo receptum*, and if this is not so, what do studies of use of the OT in the NT mean to say about where this discipline fits, theologically, in respect of the OT and its interpretation by the church?

Concern with the character of Christian Scripture, against this present NT interest in use of the OT in the NT, is concern that the OT retains its theological voice as a witness to the Triune God. This theological voice may well map out against what one sees here and there in the canonical presentation of the NT, but the character of the first witness unto itself is not identical with the second; thus the classic tradition used great caution in interpreting the theological sense of the OT through the lens of the NT. And of course it would know nothing of historical reconstructions of the intentions of NT authors or the rules of exegesis said to exist at the time of the NT's formation and crucial for an interpretation of it in a generic or in a particularized, uniquely "Christian" form.

To be sure, this "unto itself" of the OT (*Vetus Testamentum per se*) has for several centuries been held captive to history-of-religion accounts of the OT's message, and these can end up for theological purposes being either semi-tragic (Bultmann) or semi-heroic (von Rad). "Unto itself" in the context of concern for the character of Christian Scripture is a theological category in the first instance, based upon the historical witness of the OT as canon. The OT has a salvation-historical dimension, but that dimension is by no means the chief way to understand the Scriptures of Israel as a Christian witness. That it has emerged in this way has to do with intellectual trends of

the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and however salutary they may have been in focusing fresh creative attention on the literal sense of the OT (and the NT), theological and hermeneutical sophistication did not follow in like measure. If one incautiously combines historical accounts of the use of the OT in the NT with a salvation-historical framework for assessing a two-testament Bible, the result is deep confusion about how the early church might have used a rule of faith, and how the character of Christian Scripture might otherwise be grasped, when it comes to reading the OT as a witness that both precedes, accords with, and follows the NT. Stated differently, the character of Christian Scripture, Old and New, involves thinking of their temporal relationship in terms other than salvation-historical only. It entails thinking about the OT figurally as well as predictively. It entails coming to terms with achievements of association often better set forth in older lectionary pairings. The dimension of use of the OT in the NT would enormously cramp and foreshorten the capacity of the OT both to speak of God in Christ and to be heard in relationship to the NT in ways the NT need not have contemplated or set forth in its own material form.

Behind many of the newer studies lies a sincere concern to show how fundamental the role of the OT is in the formation of the NT and in the way it makes its christological, theological, and ecclesiological points. What requires clarification is how such concern is actually related to the reading of the OT as such. Does the NT apprehension of the function of law or of justification by faith need to line up with the way the witness of the First Testament sets this out, or is the relationship of necessity more dialectical? Is “exile” a major index of the OT in its canonical form, or does this prioritizing come from a particular construal based upon salvation-historical reconstructions (in which Zion’s glorification or the ingathering of the nations—arguably far more prominent in the canonical presentation of Isaiah—emerge as derivative themes because less concretely “historical”)? Can a NT emphasis on such or such a theme become so totalizing that the canonical witness of the OT is actually subsumed?

But crucial in all this is just what it means to focus on the use of the OT in the NT and how this affects in turn our handling of the Scriptures of Israel as an abiding witness in their own right. It is

fair comment to note that the fact of a two-testament canon often leads to a disparagement of the first on the grounds that the second allegedly presses us to this conclusion: “Jesus brought a different religion.” It is less clear if the way to confront this challenge is by showing that the NT uses the OT appreciatively and that perhaps so should we.² At ground is a basic theological question: Does the OT speak of God in constructive trinitarian ways—to be sure in its own idiom—such that pitting the Testaments against each other can only result in an attack on them both (as Marcion ably demonstrated)? At issue are the theological deliverances of the OT as such, the status of the OT as Christian Scripture, and finally the character of Christian Scripture as a two-testament canonical authority. Showing that the OT is used appreciatively by the New, and that the NT sheds light on matters in the OT is likely an important exercise. But it does not address the fundamental question of how the OT is itself a witness to the Triune God, which is the real matter lurking in most questioning of the “religion of the Hebrews” as against the “religion of Jesus.”³

It is clear that interpreters should not be criticized for not doing what others wish they had done. But the problem is more subtle, and that is the reason for our concern. The danger of a maximal account of the OT that focuses on its use in the NT is that, rather than providing good reasons for proper interpretation of the OT, it can only speak of the importance of the OT in reference to its resourcefulness, historical centrality, and literary and material application as the NT bears witness to these. To speak of the OT as Christian Scripture requires a genuine interpretation of its literal sense according to its canonical form and character. This need never line up with this or that material use of the OT in the NT in the precise form that the NT demonstrates, much less in a form we are able to reconstruct and then imitate. The witness of the OT is far more manifold, far more

2. Richard B. Hays, “Can the Gospels Teach Us How to Read the Old Testament?” *ProEcll* 11 (2002): 402–18. Brevard S. Childs offers a brief critique in his new work on Paul (*The Church’s Guide for Reading Paul: The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008], 32–42). Hays is seeking to redress a misunderstanding of the OT as Scripture (he gives a particularly unflattering modern example).

3. See recent essays by Kavin Rowe, Kendall Soulen, Nathan MacDonald, and Christine Helmer, cited below. I have also written an entry on “The Trinity in the Old Testament” for Oxford University Press (forthcoming).

theologically ambitious, far more temporally challenging than can be comprehended by recourse to *Vetus Testamentum in Novo receptum*. At most the NT points toward a rich potential, yet untapped, and in that sense its material use of the OT is always a threshold and not the hearth. The danger in focusing on the use of the OT in the NT is that this reality falls from view. This is so precisely at the point where commendation of the OT finds its warrant in how the NT makes use of it, and not in how in its present canonical form it functions alongside the NT to speak of God in Christ.

In the chapters that follow we begin first with a summary introduction to the canonical approach of Brevard Childs. This helps set the stage for the main argument, found in chapters 2 through 7. I have chosen the word “character” because the proper assessment of the OT as Christian Scripture is not a two-dimensional matter. The very fact that the material can be appropriated as a foundation for modern Jewish religious life—read through the lens of secondary Jewish interpretation—or for religious purposes of a different kind, as background to Christian religion or as part of the welter of ancient Near Eastern religion, is testimony that the canon of the OT or Tanak requires some marriage between what it says and is, and what is held to be true about it in a more final sense, consistent with its literal sense. When the Christian claim is that the Scripture of Israel is a First Testament whose sense is properly disclosed by a second, it states this in terms of accordance—accordance and conformity with the claims the first makes in its own literal sense. “Old” is not a temporal term only, but a term pointing to a character understood only in relationship with a second witness. The second witness only gains its character as Scripture by its insistence that it is built upon the first and so its newness is not novelty or progress/development, but a drawing out of the intention of the first by a proper grasp of its own literal sense. This happens in such a way that the first is not subsumed or bid adieu, but the historicity of the second witness both in speaking of what God truly has done and who he truly is, is in relationship to final intentions consistent with his character and purpose revealed in the first. The economic (historical, narrative) reality of the First Testament is always also an ontological reality, because the subject of the Scriptures is God himself: “the LORD,

compassionate and merciful, slow to anger” making himself and his will known through time, yet consistent with his eternal character and self. To speak of the “character of Christian Scripture” is therefore to keep the character of its subject matter at the center and so to seek to honor the economic priority of the first witness by allowing its literal sense to connect with what the first witness strains to say more fully about the character of the One God, confessed as revealed in the subject matter of the second: God in Christ Jesus. That Jews and historians of religion will hear that finality differently (within their own ranks as well as against classical Christian claims) gets precisely at the necessity for entertaining as legitimate an inquiry into what we are calling the character of the OT and the character of Christian Scripture itself.

1

THE CANONICAL APPROACH AND THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

In previous publications I have written extensively, and appreciatively, about the canonical approach associated with Brevard Childs, and have adopted a similar approach in commentaries on Isaiah and in other writings. Much of what I say here will not be new to those familiar with my publications.

Nevertheless, this book on the character of Christian Scripture provides an excellent opportunity to review reactions to the canonical approach and to organize a fresh assessment of its strengths and of the horizons of this movement in theological interpretation. I hope that a basic examination of the canonical approach will serve as a proper introduction to the chapters that follow, where the use of the OT in the NT, the relationship between Old and New Testaments in one Christian Scripture, and the rule of faith are discussed in more detail.

One can also note, in the present period, a raft of new publications promoting an avenue of approach broadly termed “the theological

interpretation of Scripture.” It will be useful therefore to locate the canonical approach within this broader movement by giving attention to its parameters and ongoing concerns, as well as to the limits it believes are properly placed on theological reflection in light of the witness of Old and New Testaments in one canon of Christian Scripture.

Introduction

Uncontroversial is the observation that “canon” and “theological interpretation” are terms with wide usage at present. Their meaning is less clear. Where once historical-critical or form- or tradition-critical were the adjectives of special coinage and currency amongst interpreters, now we can observe the limitation, recalibration, or rejection of these objective approaches, or at least a sense that something more must be done. Here the term “hermeneutics” has pushed its way to the front.

But a lack of precision may mar what the terms “canon” or “theological interpretation” convey. Is a canonical approach “canon criticism” and if not, what is intended by the term and to what degree does a canonical approach build upon the prior phase of critical interpretation in which historical approaches dominated, in their own diverse and sometimes confusing ways?

This chapter will provide an overview of the canonical approach as it has been associated with the work of Brevard Childs. It is a working thesis of this chapter that already in 1970 the basic defining features of the approach had been laid out.¹ These have been modified only subtly, or in extending efforts as he proceeded to publish a series of magisterial works on the Old and New Testaments, the book of Exodus, OT and biblical theology, and the history of interpretation, including significant work in the book of Isaiah.² It is true that “canon criticism” was an approach associated in the 1980s

1. Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970).

2. Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); Childs, *Isaiah*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster, 2001); Childs, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

with James Sanders,³ but that project took the form of hermeneutical suggestions, based upon text-critical and tradition-historical instincts, and it never developed into a full-blown approach with subsequent publications or anything like the breadth of Childs's *oeuvre*. Indeed, it would be unfair to compare the two models or evaluate the merits of the two terms, as though they were valid competitors in a market yet to make up its mind.⁴

Already in Childs's 1970 work, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, now over forty years old, one can see at least five features emerging that have proved durable and of sustained interest for a canonical approach:

1. a critiqued and recalibrated use of the historical-critical method;
2. a unique handling of the final form of the text that, as we shall see, eschews harmonization and the peril of "the disappearing redactor" on one side, but also judges the partial observations of historical criticism to be much less compelling than the whole represented by the final stabilization of the diverse sources and traditions in a coherent literary form;
3. passing yet pregnant observations on the status of the Hebrew and Greek text traditions;
4. sensitivity to the so-called premodern history of interpretation and even to what has been pejoratively called dogmatic reading, but with a critical evaluation of this history based upon insights from our own historical-critical season of reading and analyzing texts; and
5. biblical-theological handling of the two Testaments, in which the Old retains its voice as Christian Scripture and biblical theology is more than a sensitive appreciation of how the New

3. James A. Sanders, *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); Sanders, *Canon and Community* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

4. See, however, the analysis of Childs and Sanders (for whom the term "canonical criticism" is deemed appropriate) by Robert W. Wall, "Reading the New Testament in Canonical Context," in *Hearing the New Testament*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 370–93. See also Frank A. Spina, "Canonical Criticism: Childs Versus Sanders," in *Interpreting God's Word for Today*, ed. Wayne McCown and James E. Massey (Anderson, IN: Warner, 1982), 165–94.

handles the Old—a dimension that Childs otherwise handles with aplomb in a series of fresh exegetical illustrations in the final section of *Biblical Theology in Crisis*.

The last of these concerns requires lengthier examination due to the present popularity of treatments of the use of the OT in the New, undertaken by NT scholars concerned to bring precision to the way Paul or the Gospels work with the Scriptures of Israel.⁵ Subsequent chapters will stay with this topic in more detail.

What one sees in the 1970 publication is that a canonical approach is fully a child of its own age (I mean this in the best possible sense; see Neil MacDonald's work on Barth in which a similar point is made⁶). The canonical approach belongs to an age in which the questions of historicity and ostensive reference are foreground ones⁷ and must be taken seriously for their own face value as well as evaluated theologically (much in the way that concerns with creation *ex nihilo* occupied the earliest generations of Christian biblical interpretation; or the Reformation period refocused the question of literal sense). That may be clearer now than at the time, when the critical analysis of the then regnant historical-critical approach threatened (so it was held, in our view wrongly) to highlight the discontinuity of the approach with what preceded. In our view, what was radical in the approach was not so much discontinuity, but what was being attempted: nothing less than the reconstruction, in a new form to be sure, of the length and breadth of aspects of critical reading that

5. Mention should also be made of the work of OT scholar Peter Enns (*Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005]). Enns sees the exegesis of the OT in the NT as a species of Second Temple interpretation whose significance is registered by attending precisely to the peculiarities of reading strategies characteristic of the period. The ability of the OT to exert a specific kind of theological pressure due to the canonical authority of the Scriptures of Israel, over against rival modes of reading, forms no significant control in his evaluation. The NT's distinction between "traditions of elders" and the letter of the text ("it is written") is not a factor in his analysis. See also Enns, "Fuller Meaning, Single Goal," in *Three Views on the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament*, ed. Kenneth Berding (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).

6. Neil B. MacDonald, *Karl Barth and the Strange New World within the Bible: Barth, Wittgenstein, and the Metadilemmas of the Enlightenment* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000).

7. Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972).

had devolved into various subspecialties, such that an organic and integrated presentation of the biblical witness might be had once again. History, literary analysis, text criticism, Old and New Testaments, the earlier history of interpretation—all these facets were brought back onto a single field of play by a figure whose competence was only slightly, if at all, outmatched by the ambition needed for such an undertaking. And history bore out the truth of that, for the next forty years would show Childs making good on detailed and painstaking analysis of each of these several disciplines in a series of major publications, culminating in a study of the implications of the canon for reading Paul.⁸

The “canonical approach” is a modern, historical approach, and it operates in this mode in a self-conscious sense. It does not seek to reprimatinate past approaches, even as it judges our capacity to learn from them at times obscured by thick historicist lenses or a failure to see the sophistication of appraisals of the literal sense in a period before that sense was identified with historical reference.⁹ It does not deny the historical dimension as crucial to what makes biblical texts something other than modern literature, nor the text’s inherent relationship to time and space and what has been called “ostensive reference,”¹⁰ even as it has a view of history that is far more than this.¹¹ It does not ignore dimen-

8. Brevard S. Childs, *The Church’s Guide for Reading Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

9. Christopher R. Seitz, *Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Brevard S. Childs, “Sensus Literalis of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem,” in *Beiträge zur alttestamentlichen Theologie: Festschrift für Walther Zimmerli zum 70 Geburtstag*, ed. Herbert Donner, Robert Hanhart, and Rudolf Smend (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977): 80–93.

10. Frei, *Eclipse*, 75–104.

11. On the difficulty of disentangling types of senses (literal, figural, allegorical) and then relating these to history, as this had meaning in a different period, see Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); or David Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). See also Christopher R. Seitz, “What Lesson Will History Teach? The Book of the Twelve as History,” in “*Behind*” the Text: *History and Biblical Interpretation*, Scripture and Hermeneutics Series 4, ed. Craig Bartholomew et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 443–69; “History, Figural History, and Providence in the Dual Witness of Prophet and Apostle,” in *Go Figure! Figuration in Biblical Interpretation*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 81, ed. Stanley D. Walters (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2008), 1–6.

sions of the text that can only be explained by recourse to “sources” or “authors,” which account for divergences and tensions in the final form, but it judges the task far from complete when attention to these features fails to ask what effect has been achieved by bringing them together in one historical-theological portrayal in the final form of the text.¹²

One difficulty attending the task of presenting the “canonical approach” is the degree to which it is tied to one individual. Almost any defense or criticism can easily become personalized, as, sadly, has been the tendency in some quarters.¹³ An account that only took its lead from criticisms would be incomplete or disproportionate. Yet because the project has ranged so widely, and has maintained a centrality for such a long period of time, it is inevitable that in its wake, specific and sometimes trenchant criticisms have been leveled. It would be artificial to proceed as if these were not a useful, if limited, way to organize a positive assessment. Fortunately, there is a small cottage industry in evaluating the contribution of Brevard Childs and the project of the “canonical approach” associated with him,¹⁴ and several of these evaluations have sought helpfully to referee aspects of critical engagement with him. So that need not be my chief task. It is simply an inevitable aspect of the ambition of the project of Brevard Childs that it would succeed in stirring up such a wide-scale and engaging debate. Childs has never himself majored in spotting deficiencies as a project unto itself, even as he has been a tireless evaluator of the field of biblical and theological studies.

One sadness I experience when reading Childs, especially in his later works,¹⁵ involves the awareness that Childs is one of the last persons

12. Christopher R. Seitz, “The Changing Face of Old Testament Studies,” in *Word without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 75–82; C. Kavin Rowe, “Biblical Pressure and Trinitarian Hermeneutics,” *ProEcl* 11, no. 3 (2002): 295–312.

13. James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (London: SCM, 1999), 401–38.

14. Mark G. Brett, *Biblical Criticism in Crisis? The Impact of the Canonical Approach on Old Testament Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Paul R. Noble, *The Canonical Approach: A Critical Reconstruction of the Hermeneutics of Brevard S. Childs* (Leiden: Brill, 1995); Daniel R. Driver, *Brevard Childs, Biblical Theologian: For the Church's One Bible*, *Forschungen Zum Alten Testament* 2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

15. Childs, “The Canon in Recent Biblical Studies: Reflections on an Era,” *ProEcl* 14 (2005): 26–45.

actually able to critique the discipline, and, more importantly, *to catalog it and identify it as a discipline in the very first place*.¹⁶ Postmodern attacks on objectivist approaches not only challenge historical-critical readings; they also obscure the actual historical character of the discipline of reading itself, both in its premodern and now in its modern form. Historical-critical approaches to reading once upon a time declared themselves a kind of unique mode of interpretation, superior to what preceded in the premodern period because capable of laying hold of a dimension of “historicality” unknown to previous periods. This threatened to cut away one aspect of history (reception history in its premodern form) in the name of another (the “real history” of Israel and Jesus to which the biblical texts erratically and imperfectly gave us recourse). Early practitioners could have little anticipated that the same fate would lie in store for them, as in time the need to account for the field as a coherent movement would fall to the side, now in the name of the reader in front of the text, with a tyrannical resistance to seeing him- or herself as historically limited and invariably in need of correction from a long history of reading—including the more recent phases of historical-critical analysis. But perhaps the real culprit here was the overreaching claims of the historical-critical method, which birthed endless subdisciplines and specialties, whose number and relationship became evermore difficult to taxonomize. Childs not only gave us a fresh approach. He is one of the last figures to comprehend the discipline he was critiquing and to control it at its maximal length and breadth, even as it was becoming unwieldy in the wake of its own limiting claims, on the verge of crumbling because it was simply too vast an empire. To be vast is not necessarily to be durable, coherent, compelling, or true.¹⁷

It has been argued since its inception that the canonical approach has this or that Achilles’ heel or minor weakness; is limited or defi-

16. That Childs actually sought to present himself as a serious NT scholar was by no means undercut by his command of the field, which most conceded was impressive. The same control of secondary literature—especially, e.g., recent studies of the Pastorals—marks *Church’s Guide*.

17. David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” *ThTo* 37 (1980): 27–38; repr. in *ExAud* 1 (1985): 74–82; and in *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics: Major Trends in Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 65–77.

cient in certain key areas; or is ill-conceived and disqualified as an approach. Rarely is it said that it seeks to do too much and is disqualified by virtue of its ambition. As noted above, it is this *desire for comprehensiveness* that I shall argue is the hallmark of the canonical approach and its legacy for our day, and so the fact that this is not singled out as a fault is worth keeping in mind as we consider the various weaknesses that are said to mar the approach. As we shall see, these “weaknesses” are often deemed to be such by those holding diametrically opposing views.

Among the several faults detected in the canonical approach, we can list:

1. insufficient attention to “the facts of history” as constitutive of any serious theological approach;
2. lack of attention to these same facts as crucial for nontheological reasons;
3. the importation of a dogmatic lens that overreaches and is prejudicial to an “unbiased” account of things;
4. overemphasis on the text as exercising a pressure or coercion on the reader, as an objective material witness;¹⁸
5. confusion about what is meant by special attention to the final form of the text, in light of its acknowledged literary prehistory (the “disappearing redactor” and other problems);
6. wrongful privileging of the text’s final form over against earlier phases of its development, and so giving a kind of moral authority to later institutionalizing instincts instead of the “genius of the original inspiration”;
7. the same criticism made on the grounds of a theory of original inspiration and inerrancy threatened by too many later hands at work (several Isaiahs, etc.);¹⁹

18. Walter Brueggemann is not keen on this. He characterizes Childs’s appeal to “canonical restraints” as “apodictic”; such “restraints” are personal and not text-immanent. See “Against the Stream: Brevard Childs’s Biblical Theology,” *ThTo* 50 (1993): 279–84.

19. Christopher R. Seitz, “Isaiah and the Search for a New Paradigm,” in *Word without End*, 113–29.

8. wrongful attention to the “discrete voice of the Old Testament” as a theological witness, independent of the New;²⁰
9. failure to let the God of the OT be a God without reference to the New.²¹

The list could be lengthened indefinitely, but one thing that should be manifest is: many of the criticisms of the canonical approach come from opposite standpoints and point to disagreements that plague the discipline *in any event*. The canonical approach, given its range and ambition, illustrates the deep and abiding disagreements that afflict the field of biblical studies in its modern and postmodern guises. This does not mean that the criticisms simply cancel one another out, but it does mean that the canonical approach requires careful study and attention to nuance. It has been around long enough now to engender discussion on various sides of the theological spectrum, at a time when the methods of biblical study are in disagreement about key issues, including: the objectivity of the text, what is meant by history, authorial intentionality, inspiration, the pressure of historical-critical findings on interpretation, the relationship between the Testaments, and the character and desirability of biblical theology as such. The point of listing challenges to the canonical approach at this juncture, before turning to a brief assessment of several of them, is to underscore that adjusting the approach to meet the demands of one kind of challenge will of necessity reinforce whatever criticism was aimed from the opposing direction. One conclusion to be drawn from this is that the canonical approach cannot be inherently flawed, for if it were, critiques on either side would be left to devour one another or pass like ships in the night.

The canonical approach, then, occupies a meaningful location in our late-modern environment, where anxiety over truth and meaning is high. The fact that opponents aim their objections from

20. Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 209–19; Christopher R. Seitz, “Christological Interpretation of Texts and Trinitarian Claims to Truth,” *SJT* 52 (1999): 209–26.

21. One could associate the names of Brueggemann, Rendtorff, and Goldingay with concerns of this kind, and their publications are generally well known.

opposing directions could well confirm that the canonical approach offers the most compelling, comprehensive account of biblical interpretation and theology presently on offer. That is the verdict of the present chapter.

Canonical Approach: Features and Challenges

Historical Reference

Some have argued that a canonical approach does not pay sufficient attention to history. Here is a classic place where criticisms are leveled for different reasons from different sides of the theological spectrum. What might it mean to pay better attention to history, one might ask?

It might mean trying to show that the Bible's literal sense fairly directly and unimpeachably reports matters of ostensive reference, and that for theological reasons it is invested in this kind of referentiality and a commitment to it above other things, *evenhandedly across its length and breadth*. This being the case, the interpreter is to show that the Bible straightforwardly lodges historical claims (Isaiah wrote the book of Isaiah; Jonah went into the alimentary canal of a great fish; hills of foreskins could be excavated and shown to line up with accounts about them; the sea parted and dry ground existed on the terms given by the words used to say this; the letters attributed to Paul were all written personally by him in the same basic way we think of individual authorship today) and that interpretation ought to move from text to reference at this level of concern, or a defense of it against competing claims, in a sustained way.

Of course, an opposite challenge would be to say that a canonical approach, insofar as it sees historical reference as taken up into a fresh account of what history in fact is, lodged at the level of the literary presentation of the final form, introduces a kind of history at odds with the concerns of modernity and its definition of history. Here both challenges meet as strange and probably unexpected bedfellows.

It has also been said that a canonical method subsumes history into intratextuality, or "the text's own world." Childs has himself worried about this aspect of reading more generally attributed to "the Yale

School.”²² The “strange new world of the Bible” to which Barth referred was not simply a story or community-creating narrative, however much it may have functioned this way in subsequent use. Indeed, it is the fact that the Bible *refers realistically to the world* that has kept the canonical approach insistent that a difference must be registered between midrash and the way traditional Christian approaches have thought about the Bible’s truth-engendering literary development.²³

What the canonical approach has done is to use the findings of historical-critical methods and then ask historical questions about what has in fact been discovered in light of the text’s final presentation. An example from Childs’s treatment of Exodus 33–34 will suffice. A problem exists in the presentation of the tent of meeting in Exodus 33 when one reads the larger accounts. The canonical approach accepts that a genuine problem is being encountered and that the best explanation for this is that different sources lie behind the final form of the text, with a certain roughness resulting.²⁴ There is no attempt to argue that Moses had two different tents, as a matter of ostensive reference; or that at the level of “story” some deeper significance is to be seen in the tension, independent of the fact that a tent did indeed get pitched and used at some point in time and space in the life of Moses and Israel, and that the text refers ostensively to this. Still, it is not the primary task of the interpreter to take the historical-critical observation for the purpose of reasonable literary explanation and then go about leaving the literary world and reconstructing the tent and the history of tent-sanctuaries in the ancient Near East as a piece of elaborated ostensive reference. This would be wrongly to proportionalize one dimension of the exegetical discipline and art. The canonical approach returns to the text and now asks why an aspect of historical reference that causes friction has been allowed to

22. See appendix A in Childs’s *New Testament as Canon*.

23. B. S. Childs, “Critique of Recent Intertextual Canonical Interpretations,” *ZAW* 115 (2003): 173–84. Compare the concerns of M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

24. “I fully agree with the literary-critical assessment of the passage as reflecting an old tradition of the tent of meeting which parallels the later Priestly account” (B. S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, Old Testament Library [Louisville: Westminster, 1974], 591).

stand, in light of some other theological issue that is the true concern of the final form of the text. As it happens in this case, that concern has to do with the theological significance of Moses as intercessor.²⁵ History of the ostensive reference variety is not unimportant, but the biblical narrative uses this realm of reference to write history of its own kind. Moreover, the development of the text into its final form is also a historical fact, worthy of investigation.²⁶

The preoccupation with historical reference (for reasons of apologetic defense of “facticity” and literal sense; in order to focus on original sources and their divergent accounts of the world of ostensive reference, as prolegomena to telling us what really happened; or as failing to deal with the text’s final presentation as a fact worthy of historical attention of its own kind, that is, in the text’s own historical emergence

25. Childs: “In its present position, without being specifically altered, the section witnesses to the obedient and worshipful behavior over an extended period of time, thereby providing Moses with a warrant to intercede in vv. 12ff” (ibid., 592).

26. Timothy Ward, *Word and Supplement: Speech Acts, Biblical Texts, and the Sufficiency of Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 248–50. Compare also the subtle critique by Childs of Francis Watson’s reading of the Exod. 34 account of Moses’s veil, which he judges to be limited in part because he reads the OT without sufficiently serious attention to the diachronic features that now make evaluation of the veil more complicated (*Church’s Guide*, 128–31). Second Corinthians 3 takes certain advantages of this uneven dimension of the literal sense in order to speak of life in the Spirit (enabling unveiled access as Moses had experienced). Failure to attend to this diachronic reality could lead to such a simplification as the following: Paul laid hold of the genuine intention of Exodus and its referentiality (Moses was seeking to hide the fact of a fading glory from the Israelites), rather than seeing the exegesis as creative theological reading governed by other factors about which Paul is concerned (the life of the Spirit). Compare the reading of Rowe, “Pressure,” 202. A lengthy quote from Childs demonstrates the enduring role that proper assessment of the historical dimension plays in theological reading:

Some of the anomalies of Exodus 34 derive from compositional growth from diverse oral traditions and literary sources. . . . Although I do not suggest for a moment that a historical critical reconstruction replace the final canonical context when reading the biblical text, this historical dimension cannot be disregarded as done by Watson. The hermeneutical significance of my argument is that not every gap in the biblical narrative belongs a priori to its canonical shaping involving a theological intentionality. Attention to the historical critical dimension serves as a check against exegetical overinterpretation of 2 Corinthians 3. The canonical function of the mask as a hiding of the fading glory remains a Christian understanding of the text. Whether this reading derives from Paul’s exploitation of a tension within the biblical text, or stems from a prior Christian theological understanding, is not crucial and is often hard to determine. (130–31)

More on the problem of the normative character of use of the OT in the NT below.

as what it is in the form in which we find it) has had a double fallout from the perspective of a canonical approach. Such an approach does not minimize the historical dimension; neither does it seek to do away with approaches that take it seriously enough to spot problems and tensions in the literary presentation. What is at issue is proper proportion and care to return to the final form of the text as its own piece of historical reality and witness to God's ordering of the world.

Harmonization and "The Disappearing Redactor": The Final Form of the Text

It has been argued by John Barton that the canonical approach doubles back on itself when it seeks both to honor the historical dimension (the depth of sources and traditions behind the final form) and at the same time believes the sum (final form) is greater than the parts. If the final redactor is so clever at merging the disparate sources into a tidy portrayal, why was he ever there to begin with?²⁷

This kind of criticism would appear to merge nicely with another concern of Barton's, namely, that the canonical approach has a tendency to harmonize or smooth over disagreement when it handles the biblical material. But in fact, the criticisms are distinct, if inconsistent.

Childs is quite prepared to indicate where the tension remains in the final form of the text, and indeed he has been critical of those who have sought to eliminate this element.²⁸ He does not in fact seek

27. John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*, 2nd ed. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1996), 56–58. According to Barton, Childs's analysis of Gen. 1–2 illustrates the close affiliation between the canonical approach and "redaction criticism proper" (49). Redaction critical analyses of Gen. 1–2, however, fall prey to the following dilemma: "If, say, Genesis 2 follows on so naturally from Genesis 1, then this is indeed evidence for the skill of the redactor *if we know that Genesis 1 and 2 were originally distinct*; but the only ground we have for thinking that they were is the observation that Genesis 2 does *not* follow on naturally from Genesis 1. Thus, if redaction criticism plays its hand too confidently, we end up with a piece of writing so coherent that no division into sources is warranted any longer; and the sources and the redactor vanish together in a puff of smoke, leaving a single, freely composed narrative with, no doubt, a single author" (57). Similar concerns with Childs's use of redaction criticism are registered in Timothy Ward's survey in *Word and Supplement*, 250–51.

28. See Childs's remarks on Calvin in his treatment of the tent traditions (more on this below). R. W. L. Moberly, *At the Mountain of God: Story and Theology in Exodus* 32–34, JSOTSup 22 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983), may also be open to this same criticism.

to be so clever in showing the work of the redactor that he pulls the ground out from under the threshold acknowledgment that sources or different authors in fact exist. A brief look at any of the places where Childs calls attention to the genius of the final form's handling of its prior literary history will demonstrate this. There are two different tent traditions. They cannot be harmonized; there is a problem with the first tent appearing when it has not yet been constructed and standing outside the camp rather than inside it. Or, there are two "creation accounts." The fact that a redactional notice seeks to link the two in the way Childs and others have noted does not eliminate the source-critical finding, nor does it amount to disappearance of the redactor. And in the classic area of harmony, the fourfold Gospel record, no one could find in Childs any interest in the typical harmonization. Indeed, he is a rather traditional deployer of the Markan priority theory and does very little in the way of minimizing the challenge of hearing the one gospel through four discrete witnesses.²⁹

What Barton's analysis fails to grasp is the organic character of what Childs has referred to, probably imperfectly, as "canonical consciousness." For Barton, canon is an external force that seeks to set limits or arrange things after the fact of their literary stabilization. For Barton, signs of efforts to relate things in the process of a text's coming to be can only be a literary move, and one cannot attribute to it any serious theological intentionality, much less use the term "canonical consciousness" to distinguish it from a bare literary move.³⁰

Yet what Childs is seeking to highlight need not be obscured because of the difficulty of terms used to describe it. When Jeremias shows how the messages of Amos and Hosea are related, he does not

Childs's particular indebtedness to diachronic (historical-critical) findings as crucial for apprehending "the canonical shape" has also been reaffirmed recently by Jon D. Levenson in his very insightful essay, "Is Brueggemann Really a Pluralist?" *HTR* 93 (2000): 265–94. See also the evaluation by Childs of Watson in n26 above.

29. B. S. Childs, "The One Gospel in Four Witnesses," in *The Rule of Faith: Scripture, Canon, and Creed in a Critical Age*, ed. E. Radner and G. Sumner (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1998).

30. See my remarks about the "achievement of association," building on the work of J. Jeremias, R. Van Leeuwen, Rendtorff, and others in *The Goodly Fellowship of the Prophets: The Achievement of Association in Canon Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009). The achievement is intrinsic and emerges from a theological concern for hearing the Word of God pressing forward through time.

describe a move at the level of what Barton would call “canon” (an external decision somehow to relate the two; something, by the way, Barton would probably question as having occurred even at the level of canon in the case of Amos and Hosea—the books are separated by Joel³¹). Jeremias sees the pupils of the two prophets seeking to edit the developing traditions in such a way that the two prophets are then viewed as a comprehensive and related witness.³² There is no disappearing redactor. One can see easily enough, in Jeremias’s analysis, where the older tradition ends and the newer editing begins; there is no confusion as to what the distinctive features of each respective prophet are; these features remain. But at the earliest level of their text’s circulation, long before the books receive final literary stabilization (including deuteronomic superscriptions), an effort is being manifested, and Jeremias shows this clearly, to bring the message of the two into coordination. This is not for reasons of literary or aesthetic tidiness. It has to do with theological convictions regarding God’s one word spoken through two discrete prophets.

A further example of the subtlety of Childs at this point can be seen in Bauckham’s work on the Gospel collection, to return to the example above.³³ Bauckham argues that John knows Mark and seeks

31. Incidentally, this is precisely why Joel has become the source of such attention and renewed interest in recent work on the Minor Prophets. In the development of the Book of the Twelve, Joel’s placement points to “canonical shaping” at the level of theology and hermeneutics. This “canonical shaping” is literary and theological, and does not sit easy to distinctions Barton would like to draw. Among a great many others, see Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “Scribal Wisdom and Theodicy in the Book of the Twelve,” in *In Search of Wisdom: Essays in Memory of John G. Gammie*, ed. Leo G. Perdue, Bernard B. Scott, and William J. Wiseman (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 31–49; and on Joel as “literary anchor” see James D. Nogalski, “Joel as ‘Literary Anchor’ for the Book of the Twelve,” in *Reading and Hearing the Book of the Twelve*, ed. James D. Nogalski and Marvin A. Sweeney (Atlanta: SBL, 2000), 91–109. I have produced my own account of canonical shaping in the Twelve in *Prophecy and Hermeneutics: Towards a New Introduction to the Prophets*, Studies in Theological Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

32. Jörg Jeremias, “The Interrelationship between Amos and Hosea,” in *Forming Prophetic Literature: Essays on Isaiah and the Twelve in Honor of John D. W. Watts*, JSOTSup 235, ed. James W. Watts and Paul R. House (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 171–86.

33. Richard Bauckham, “John for Readers of Mark,” in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 147–71.

to relate his Gospel to that witness. The Gospel takes form with attention to both itself and something outside it. The contours of Mark are not thereby blurred; it remains a discrete witness. So too, John can be read by itself. If Trobisch or others seek to show that a redactor has closed John with a notice that relates his message to the others in a final fourfold collection, this does not happen in such a way that the redactor need disappear, nor John and the other three merge into one.³⁴

Below we will return to the question of “the final form” and the degree to which it can be said to comprehend earlier traditions but also make its own special statement. What is at issue is the way in which what the canonical approach calls “the final form” requires the diachronic dimension as the lens to grasp its force and specificity as a theological witness. Related to this is the way in which “the final form” relates to, but also transcends the delineated prehistory. At stake here are complex understandings of “intentionality” and also “coercion” or the pressure exerted by the text. For now, the crucial thing to note is that “the final form of the text” requires attention to the text’s diachronic prehistory (with the proviso that this history will always be difficult to sketch, in specific literary terms, and so is always a kind of heurism). Ironically, perhaps, here it is that Childs commits himself clearly to a form of referentiality, in the realm of history. This is not “ostensive reference” in the form of “brute facts” requiring specification (how many Hittites were there? when did Amos write the parts of his book we believe he wrote? etc.), even as this dimension is the arena in which God’s Word, promised and then enacted, begins its journey on the road called “revelation.”³⁵ The referentiality exhibited by diachronic method entails various levels of authorial intentionality

34. David Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Trobisch, *Paul’s Letter Collection: Tracing the Origins* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994). See also Stanley E. Porter, ed., *The Pauline Canon* (Leiden: Brill, 2004). I also have a brief discussion of this issue in “Booked Up: Ending John and Ending Jesus,” in *Figured Out*, 91–102.

35. Long ago Barr did rightly note, “A God who acted in history would be a mysterious and supra-personal fate if the action was not linked with this verbal conversation. . . . In his speech with man, however, God really meets man on his own level and directly” (*Old and New in Interpretation: A Study of the Two Testaments* [New York: Harper & Row, 1966], 78).

as realities in history. The “final form of the text” is the way in which God has so commandeered that history as to speak a word through the vehicle of the text’s final form, as a canonical approach seeks to comprehend and appreciate that. In so doing, the prior history is not done away with, nor do editors appear and disappear, even as the prior history is taken up into a stable expression of how God is ordering the world and continuing to speak through the “final form” of the biblical text.

“Final form” will also require reattachment to “literal sense” as classically understood. Such a concern, however, moves us into the area of typology and how one text and another are related according to the “literal sense.” This is not the place to address such a significant issue, but it does remain the task of a canonical approach to show why its concerns have a much higher likelihood of linkage with the prior history of interpretation than historical-critical approaches.³⁶

Prejudicial “Dogmatic” Predisposition

This charge³⁷ is best suited to an environment in which “objectivist” reading was running on all cylinders. As we shall see, Childs has his own concern for the “objectivity” of the text and is criticized in other quarters for daring to use the noun “coercion” to describe it.

So this is one of those areas where the deep disagreements—with fault-lines people struggle to comprehend by recourse to terms like “modern” and “postmodern”—pollute the environment in which any reasonable discussion can be entertained in the first instance. How can Childs be characterized as “subjectively predisposed” toward this or that dogmatic stance, when he himself believes that a canonical approach must assume something like stable and objective meaning, or the quest for that as morally obligatory and theologically demanded?³⁸

36. See my final comments in “What Lesson Will History Teach?” in *Behind the Text*, 466.

37. From James Barr: “As we shall see, in many respects this book [*Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*] is neither a work of biblical theology nor one of canonical theology; it is more like a personal dogmatic statement provided with biblical proofs” (*Concept*, 401).

38. He quotes Sternberg to this effect in *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 20.

The answer of course is that Barr believes there is some kind of objective dimension to the Bible that Childs has encroached upon with his appeal to “canonical reading,” and the culprit must be a force outside the text, in this case, “Calvinism” or “Barthianism” or “Lutheranism”—all parts of a Reformation heritage Childs honors and which Barr feels Childs has not understood. This makes for an odd indebtedness and misrepresentation rolled into one.

Recently Barr has revealed that the extent of his concern at this level also reaches rather urgently to the newer reader-response methods, on the one hand (these do not believe in “objective” intentions and such like in texts; meaning resides in those doing the reading), and newer historical approaches, on the other (which eliminate any early depth in texts, as a historical fact, arguing instead that Israel’s account of history and itself is a very late importation).³⁹ So Barr appears consistent in his urgency, though the target is a moving one so far as he is concerned.

It would of course be very useful indeed to know just what kind of objectivity Barr believes Childs is encroaching upon, since by its own statement, a canonical approach seeks to pay attention to the literal sense of the text, and there is nothing if not a certain objectivist concern lurking about that sentiment. For Barr, the “literal sense” cannot do the objective work Childs seeks to make it do; when Childs does attempt this in each of his publications, he demonstrates thereby that a canonical approach is simply the expression of personal theological proclivities (or prejudices), and one can use whatever label one wants to attach to them (“Barthianism,” “Calvinism,” “Reformed dogma,” whatever).⁴⁰ That is, Barr has never sought to show that these various

39. James Barr, “The History of Israel,” in *History and Ideology in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 58–101. This appears to be his effort to improve on criticisms leveled by Iain Provan against the excesses of Lemche, Whitelam, and P. Davies, among others.

40. Barr:

No one who knows modern theology will doubt that this entire work is a manifestation of one particular offshoot of Barthian theology. There are indeed three heroes of the work: Luther, Calvin and Barth, in ascending order. The opinion that most of modern scholarship is in a poor state, which might have some truth in it, is coupled with the converse notion that the Reformation had the right answers all along, a pious delusion which even Childs does not seek to demonstrate. Anyway, the three heroes are pretty well always in the right, or would be, except when they differ amongst themselves. Then there

labels point to distinctive features, which surely they must, and then that these can be seen point by point in the canonical approach. “Calvinism” is less a coherent system than a kind of insistence by Barr that when Childs puts his finger on an objectivity in the text, and it is not the one Barr himself likes, then it cannot qualify as objective and so must come from somewhere else—call it whatever you will.

It would be far more reasonable if Barr simply left himself to the observation that he believes the Bible does a certain kind of objective work (in the history-of-religion) and not in the area of “literal sense,” without then adding to his problems by associating Childs with a species of reading he has not bothered to describe or justify as applicable in Childs’s particular case. Instead what we find is a kind of disparate rant, void of objective analysis—described by one reviewer as “academic terrorism.”⁴¹ If Barr wants to say, “Karl Barth has these five tendencies in his small print exegesis (see Job) and Childs does the same thing,” fine. But the question would be no further answered: is this a genuinely disqualifying matter, and if so, why? And not satisfied with this kind of tirade against Childs, he will then turn the tables and say that Barth or Calvin or Luther believed X or Y and Childs does not believe that anyway. Part of the

is a definite pecking order. When Luther differs from Calvin, it is Calvin who is right. Sometimes Calvin is superior to Barth. Barth’s exegesis can be poor in comparison with Calvin’s . . . which would make it look as if Calvin was the top hero. (*Concept*, 401)

On it goes. This simply cannot be credited as objective analysis, but instead is a kind of prejudicial mockery of Childs. As we shall see, Childs has a canonical approach with certain objective contours, and it is on this basis that he renders judgments about the success of the exegesis of Calvin, Luther, or Barth. But from Barr’s analysis, it sounds as though this is just a personality disorder in Childs, whom he claims gives no reasons for his judgments. This is one of the more embarrassing chapters in modern biblical studies for its devolution into highly personal, *ad hominem* evaluation.

41. A very judicious and fair review can be found in Walter Brueggemann, “James Barr on Old Testament Theology: A Review of *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective*,” *HBT* 22 (2000): 58–74. This is a sensitive and careful analysis, which also registers deep concern at the tone adopted by Barr and the substance of his account of Childs. He characterizes Barr’s treatment as “polemic,” “an embarrassing *ad hominem* attack,” “dismissive and contemptuous of all those who differ,” “emotionalism that contributes nothing to the discussion” (68), and then at the close tries even to provide a kind of psychological explanation for the invective “sense of wound from authoritarianism” (72). When the emotion runs as high as it does in Barr’s account, it is difficult to refrain from psychological speculation in an effort to reestablish a kind of equilibrium.

confusion is that Barth or Calvin or Luther do not appear in careful treatments, dealing with them as exegetes or theologians, but only in impressionistic and idiosyncratic ways.

Of course, Childs is fully on record about the kinds of limitations he spots in “dogmatic” reading (to choose one of Barr’s labels). To return to the example of Exodus 33, Childs shows how Calvin “was certainly on the right track”⁴² but was nevertheless hedged in by a specific view of the text’s relationship to reality, which forced him to adopt a midrashic instinct whereby Moses moved the tent outside the camp “because the people had just proved themselves unfit for God to dwell in their midst.” Childs is sympathetic with Calvin’s move and sees it as an improvement over other options, but it remains the case that Childs is operating with an entirely different range of options when it comes to his assessment of the issue. The Exodus commentary is replete with examples where Childs assesses the “objective” solutions (for that is what they claim to be, at a different period of interpretation) offered in premodern reading, and points out the difference between his approach and these earlier efforts—sometimes with sympathy when he spots a “family resemblance” (his term from the 2004 *Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture*) he can appreciate, and at other times, critically.⁴³ Childs refuses to countenance moves that ask that evidence be provided from something other than the plain sense of what the witness delivers, and his concern in our age with history-of-religion is precisely at the same level: that is, it has repropotionalized what the text literally delivers and so produces evidence and explanations that, however interesting or compelling in their own realms of concern, are to the side, literally. What Barr likely sees as “objective” in history-of-religion, Childs sees as objective but external to the proper task of exegesis.

It is also possible to turn to sections of the early Childs for essential objections to “dogmatic reading” as obscuring what the canonical approach is about. Indeed, Childs likens the obscuring potential of modern systematic theological reflection to the use by biblical scholars of theories of history (Barr’s history-of-religion would be

42. Childs, *Exodus*, 592.

43. Childs: “All these theories remain unsupported from any evidence within the biblical text itself” (*ibid.*, 590).

an example).⁴⁴ Both lead us away from the plain sense. Dogmatic readings in the premodern period do this less by recourse to philosophical categories and more by direct utilization of doctrinal claims. Childs views Luther's use of Psalm 8 to describe the two natures of Christ as obliterating the voice of the OT, on the false understanding that what makes the Old a Christian voice must be the hearing of it through the categories of the New.⁴⁵ More on this below, as it gets at the crucial issue of what is at stake in hearing the OT's own voice, but as Christian Scripture.

Calvin's approach is different because he does try to hear the voice of the OT through recourse to a kind of doctrinal symmetry across the Testaments, due to their shared commitment to the theological world of covenant. Calvin therefore tries to hear the psalm as speaking of an ideal state in the garden of Eden, from which humanity has fallen.

This honors the OT's capacity to speak theologically, yet it imports a dubious context from the OT's own doctrinal storehouse that is extraneous to the psalm in order to secure this reading. Childs sees Calvin as useful in his emphasis on the OT as a witness to the One God and his Christ, in its own idiom. But when an external dogmatic overlay secures that voice, it substitutes for the displacing voice of the New the displacing voice of doctrine and destroys the context (canonical shape) of the witness being interpreted. Childs seeks instead to hear the doctrinal voice emerging from the plain sense of Psalm 8, as a distinctive voice, in reciprocity with the New. At the end this will amount

44. Childs: "For systematic theologians the overarching categories are frequently philosophical. The same is often the case for biblical scholars even when cloaked under the guise of a theory of history" (*Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 158).

45. Luther does not always have this kind of instinct, and that should be duly noted (see Christine Helmer, "Luther's Trinitarian Hermeneutic and the Old Testament," *ModTh* 18 [2002]: 49–73). As is well known, Luther changes direction rather famously, in part because of his prolific style (this is particularly true in his many works on the Psalms), and because he is trying to conflate a literal sense reading with a christological referent (rejecting the fourfold sense and seeking to make a letter/spirit distinction work without recourse to allegory), and this requires numerous passes at the issue. In his latter years he looks at Hebrew as a purveyor of trinitarian semantics, as the Holy Spirit speaks through David and reveals the inner trinitarian life of the Father and the Son. At issue would be how far this kind of evaluation might extend, beyond select psalms. More on this below. The classic treatment remains James Samuel Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969).

to a return to Psalm 8 and its strong doctrine of creation as the OT's Christian and doctrinal corrective of (a potential mishearing by) the Letter to the Hebrews, drawing upon the OT's own plain sense. Here we get a clear sense of how Childs regards the OT in relationship with the New, which allows both voices to register, and not with the second voice being the way to assure that the first has a Christian word to say at all.⁴⁶ In this, he allows the concerns of early doctrinal readings to demonstrate possible options, but in the end he rejects them both as an insufficient interpretation measured against a canonical approach.

In sum, it is more accurate to say that Childs has sympathy for the doctrinal instincts of the earlier history of reading, to a degree that sets him apart from the vast array of modern biblical scholars. But it is equally true that Childs feels inadequacies can be spotted and he does this by careful attention to the concerns of the canonical approach as a distinctive mode of theological interpretation.⁴⁷ Childs is no more a "Calvinist" or "Lutheran" or "Catholic" reader than he is a canonical reader, and frequently there is sympathetic overlap. At times, we can see in the earlier history of interpretation aspects of a broader two-testament concern for interpretation that resonate and show us interpretative moves that modern reading has shut off, to its detriment. But the analysis is not a one-way street, and a canonical approach is not inoculated from registering criticisms of the past, anymore than it is inoculated from self-criticism or the kinds of limitations that are bound to afflict any, even comprehensive, approach. We shall see this below, where we look briefly at the adjustments the canonical approach has made within its own brief life span in order to take account of limitations spotted by others or by Childs himself.⁴⁸

46. See Richard Hays's essay "Can the Gospels Teach Us How to Read the Old Testament?" or, by sharp contrast, Brueggemann's emphasis on the Old as a non-Christian yet theological voice in his *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997). I deal in greater detail with the example of Ps. 8 in Hebrews in chapter 3 below.

47. See Childs, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as a Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

48. It is an incidental reference and so will not be pursued in detail, but an example of mishearing Childs when he adjusts an earlier view can be seen in Andrew Lincoln's essay "Hebrews and Biblical Theology," in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, Scripture and Hermeneutics Series 5, ed. C. Bartholomew et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 316n10. In 1970 Childs wanted to be sure the New's use of the Old was taken seriously as a theological achievement and not dismissed as exotic exegesis. So he focused on the biblical

The “Superiority” of the Final Form: In What Does This Consist?

This topic is allied to the one discussed above, but it situates itself more narrowly on what kind of claim it is to attend to the final form of the text, over against earlier levels of tradition. In this sense, it is a topic that deals with the relationship between modern reconstructions of “tradition-history” and the fact of there being an end point in that history, in the more or less stable (given text-critical realities) final literary form, arrangement, and presentation.

In a recent textbook account,⁴⁹ John Collins writes of the relationship between “original or earliest prophetic speech” and the later shaping and presentation of that into a corpus or canon. He is quoted at length as a fair and representative voice, in that his own work has clearly taken issue with Childs and the canonical approach.

Much of the history of scholarship over the last two hundred years has been concerned primarily with the original words of the prophets. In recent years the pendulum has swung toward a focus on the final form of the prophetic books, in their canonical context. Both interests are clearly legitimate, and even necessary, but it is important to recognize the tension between them. The historical prophets whose oracles are preserved in these books were often highly critical of the political and religious establishments of their day. The scribes who edited their books, however, were part of the establishment of later generations. Consequently, they often try to place older oracles in the context of an authoritative tradition. In some cases, this has a moderating effect on oracles that may seem extreme outside (or even in) their historical context. In other cases, the editorial process may seem to take the edge off powerful prophetic oracles and dull their effect. The preference of an interpreter for the original prophets or for the canonical editors often reflects his or her trust or distrust of political and religious institutions in general.⁵⁰

theological insights to be gained from such an analysis. When later he realized the danger latent in this—perhaps he has observed it in NT scholarship in the meantime—he pointed out the limitations of using the New as a lens on the Old for the purpose of biblical theology. Lincoln not only wrongly speculates on the reasons for this; he also pushes forward to argue that the great freedom of the New in respect of the Old (a new version of the “exotic”) ought to be a license for our treating the New in precisely the same way. See the discussion in chapter 3 below.

49. John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).

50. *Ibid.*, 286.

Probably four things are being said here that demand fuller explication. Is the final psychological hunch a good guide to anything, except perhaps to Collins's own instincts or personal worries? What does the term "establishment" actually mean in the history-of-religion? Did these scribes, if they existed, think they were linking something to an "authoritative tradition"? Does the movement from early to later track according to Collins's hunches? All these are questions that could be pursued in the history-of-religion of Israel or the modern sociology-of-religion (M. Weber et al.). But it is a fair observation that a pendulum has swung, to use Collins's language, and he is to be commended for acknowledging that.

From the standpoint not of the sociology of religion, but of canonical method, is Collins's brief account the only way to describe what it means to give attention to the final form? Collins's points can nevertheless be used to tease out what might be meant by attention to the final form, in relationship to earlier levels of tradition (however we, in fact, lay our hands on "the original words of the prophets").

Is there really a "tension" between original prophet and later editorial shaping in the narrow sense implied by this quote? Another way to view the process of development in prophetic books is to withhold judgment until one actually tracks what is happening, which may also look different from book to book. Not every prophet is highly critical of religious institutions; some have mixed attitudes (Hosea); some focus on the nations (Obadiah); some require belief in a remnant or a superior plan of God for the king and people (Isaiah); some preach forgiveness and undeserved grace (Deutero-Isaiah). So the starting point may not be the same at all.

Second, Jeremiah and others have shown the complex ways in which prophetic books acquire additions. In Hosea, the southern kingdom may be contrasted with the fate of Israel. But Judah can also be editorially supplemented into the same book in order to emphasize that she falls under the same word of judgment as her northern neighbor.⁵¹ Frequently we see a movement from local to global that heightens and does not relax the sharpness of the original word. This is particularly

51. Childs focused on this dimension in his *Introduction* account on Hosea, and Jeremiah pursues a similar interest in his work on Hosea and Amos (see n32 above).

true in the case of the Day of the Lord, for example, in the Book of the Twelve. Where Hosea may be shifted to first position to emphasize the grace of God in dealing with a wayward people (thus shifting what we mean by “original” in the strict historical—chronological—sense; cf. Amos), the latest canonical book actually raises the stakes in what one might believe to be the remnant of God as the Day of the Lord approaches. The canonical shaping reconstrues the beginning points as well as the later ones, and the presentations do not follow simple, straightforward patterns.

In sum, it may well be that notions such as those entertained by Collins are actually the result of historical-critical investigatory instinct and not the neutral findings of that method when it has done its allegedly objective developmental work. The canonical arrangement of the Twelve is but one place where, far from moving from sharp word to domesticated institutionalization, we find the Word of God gathering a kind of steam that resists any such characterization at all.⁵²

It is also possible to take issue with valorizing the final form of the text not on the grounds of obvious sociological or theological bias, but simply because it is selective. Is there some good reason why later levels of traditions ought to be given priority over earlier ones, regardless of how one characterizes the movement itself?

Frequently it sounds like this is a matter of examining a series of integers, all laid out in a row, and choosing the last ones over the first ones.⁵³

52. Indeed, in many diachronic treatments we end up with a grid of development in which the sharpness of an Amos gives way to the ambiguities of a Jonah, as in, e.g., Blenkinsopp’s textbook account (see my analysis in *Prophecy*, 22–23, 142–46). What prevents a diachronic reading from some form of philosophical predisposition is as old a problem as Wellhausen’s *Prolegomena* or genuinely Hegelian approaches in the previous century. See my discussion, “Prophecy in Nineteenth Century Reception,” in *The Hebrew Bible/Old Testament III*, ed. M. Saebo (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, forthcoming).

53. See Childs’s discussion of this issue in *Struggle*, 320–21. He mentions his disagreement with Nicholson over the characterization of his work—a confusion he sees as traceable to Barr (*Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983]), picked up by Barton (*Reading the Old Testament*, 1st ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984]), and now continuing in the work of Trebelle Barrera (*The Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible: An Introduction to the History of the Bible*, trans. Wilfred G. E. Watson [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998]) and others. Nicholson quotes with favor the work of von Rad in Genesis on levels in the text (*The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century: The Legacy of Julius Wellhausen* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998]). I have discussed this same appeal by von Rad and conclude that he is a far more likely candidate for seeing the genius of

But a canonical approach disagrees precisely with this understanding of the growth of tradition, and at this juncture it offers an alternative understanding of tradition-history. The book of Isaiah is not what the purported last levels of tradition say about it. Later levels of tradition seek to gain a hearing alongside and not above what precedes. If “Trito-Isaiah” says nothing about David, that cannot say anything decisive about what the book of Isaiah, in its final form, says on this matter.⁵⁴ A canonical approach does not value the later over the earlier because the final form of the text does not follow this kind of developmental logic: earlier levels of tradition may even be highlighted by secondary and tertiary accumulations of tradition. Joel may well bring into sharper focus the call for repentance issued at the end of Hosea, as it provides a concrete liturgical enactment of this call as its central burden.⁵⁵

Later intrusions of penitential voices in Jeremiah’s opening chapters do not lessen the prophetic denunciations in Jeremiah’s day; rather, they call attention to these and underscore how imperative it was to heed them, the failure to do so leading to such an awesome and dark tragedy of judgment. Later editors feel the need to say “let us lie down in our shame” and not “glad that did not happen to me, here in my institutional redoubt.”⁵⁶

In the context of a different discussion of this issue, Ward has also issued a challenge that might catch the allegedly “historical” purveyors of interpretation off guard. A canonical method, he suggests, does not value the later hands because of some moral superiority—or lack of it, in Collins’s view—they possess. Rather, the later hands have a greater historical perspective, due to the sheer range of their awareness of the

the final form of the text than is traditionally held (see “Prophecy and Tradition-History: The Achievement of Gerhard von Rad and Beyond,” in *Prophetie in Israel: Beiträge des Symposiums “Das Alte Testament und die Kultur der Moderne” anlässlich des 100. Geburtstags Gerhard von Rads (1901–1971) Heidelberg, 18–21. Oktober 2001*, ed. I. Fischer, K. Schmid, H. G. M. Williamson [Münster: Lit-Verlag, 2003], 30–51).

54. Christopher R. Seitz, “Royal Promises in the Canonical Books of Isaiah and the Psalms,” in *Word without End*, 150–67.

55. Christopher R. Seitz, “On Letting a Text ‘Act Like a Man’—The Book of the Twelve: New Horizons for Canonical Reading, with Hermeneutical Reflections,” *SBET* 22 (2004): 151–72.

56. Christopher R. Seitz, “The Place of the Reader in Jeremiah,” in *Reading the Book of Jeremiah: A Search for Coherence*, ed. Martin Kessler (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 67–75.

past, which is still unfolding at the time of early tradition-levels.⁵⁷ History lies out in front of “the original words of the prophets” because of what God is doing with them, under his providential guidance. It is a legacy of romantic theories of “inspiration” and “origins” that has set much historical-critical work off on the wrong foot, and it cannot be emphasized enough that this wrong footing has tripped up both conservative interpreters and their putative opposites.⁵⁸ This results in maximalist or minimalist accounts of what can be secured for the “original, inspired author/prophet/source/tradition,” starting from the same quest for an authoritative base independent of the canon’s own final-form presentation.

The final editors do not have any moral superiority, and it is not for this reason that a canonical approach values the final form of the text. The final form of the text is a canonical-historical portrayal, and the final editors have never ceased hearing the Word of God as a word spoken through history. Their very nonappearance, moreover, is testimony to the degree to which they have sought to let the past have its own say and in the case of Isaiah, have deferred to God’s inspired Word as it presses ahead in all its accomplishing work. No morally superior, or balefully institutional, second or third Isaiahs get the final word. That would be far too thin an understanding of what a canonical approach has sought to comprehend when hearing the present sixty-six-chapter book in its final form.

Biblical Theology and a Canonical Approach: Vetus Testamentum in Novo Receptum?

The state of biblical theology as a coherent movement, method, or discipline is under discussion at present, with James Barr providing a sustained and argumentative account in his 1999 publication (based apparently upon lectures originally delivered in 1968).⁵⁹ His book is subtitled *An Old Testament Perspective*. While there may be a decline in biblical theology—and the reasons for this are the subject of a good deal of profitable reflection—one development has not been chronicled, so

57. Ward, *Word and Supplement*, 249.

58. See the discussion in Seitz, “On Letting a Text.”

59. Barr, *Concept*.

far as I am aware: the renewed interest by NT scholars in the OT. Much of this turns on developments internal to NT scholarship. The so-called new perspective on Paul has turned its attention to Paul in his Jewish environment, with attendant fresh interest in the way the OT functions for him and his theological formulations. Several specialist accounts have been given over to describing Paul's use of the OT, with appreciation of the subtle and artful way in which the Scriptures of Israel work within his logic and arguments.⁶⁰ Richard Hays, N. T. Wright, and now Francis Watson are among the better-known names within the NT guild who have sought, respectively, to appreciate more comprehensively the way the "narrative world,"⁶¹ the literary potentiality,⁶² or the final form of the OT functions in the NT,⁶³ for Paul and for the basic character of Jesus's own self-understanding and mission.⁶⁴

Whether or not it is consciously intended (this is not always stated), one could see this concern with the theological use of the Old in the New as a species of biblical theology. So one kind of decline in biblical theology may be matched by a new interest in a different guise: biblical theology as an appreciation of the theological use made by the New of the Old. Hans Hübner is one interpreter who has expressly declared this to be "biblical theology."⁶⁵

60. For the theological minefield this has always been seen to be, consult the historical account of Hans Frei in *Eclipse*.

61. See my analysis of Wright's use of the OT in "Reconciliation and the Plain Sense Witness of Scripture," in *The Redemption: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on Christ as Redeemer*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 25–42.

62. Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). Hays has a considerably more interesting/fruitful account of the twofold witness in his essay, "Can the Gospels Teach Us How to Read the Old Testament?" The title, however, indicates a kind of prioritizing of direction that may prove telling. More needs to be said about this essay than can be tackled here.

63. Francis Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (London: T&T Clark, 2004). Watson moves in a different direction in this volume in respect of Childs and a canonical approach than what he espoused in his earlier work *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997). One finds a robust and strategic use of "canonical method" in the OT, while earlier the method of Childs was seen as misguided, measured against von Rad and others.

64. See also Ross J. Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News: Isaiah and Paul "In Concert" in the Letter to the Romans* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

65. Hans Hübner, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 3 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990–95). Also, Peter Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen*

There have been dissenters to this view of biblical theology, though the reaction is not typically directed at specialist work of the kind mentioned above. Instead, it comes to the fore in the recent concern to let the OT have its own say, over against various kinds of efforts to constrain its voice. For Walter Brueggemann,⁶⁶ these stifling efforts are due to what he terms “reductionisms,” and within the discipline of OT scholarship itself, these may be headed up by what he calls “historicism.” The OT is hindered in making its voice heard by demands that it speak up chiefly or only through historical reconstruction of various kinds. But Brueggemann also argues there is a kind of backdraft from the NT, or from Christian theological reflection (“established church faith”), or dogmatics more specifically, that blows over the Old and obscures its “wild and untamed” theological witness.⁶⁷ The unruly character of the witness—its polyphony, etc. (Brueggemann has lots of terms for this)—ought to be left alone, and this is the ingredient most encroached upon, he argues, when one comes at the OT with theological lenses provided by the New or by Christian theology. Jon Levenson has remarked on the problematical character of this approach, so far as Judaism is concerned.⁶⁸ In less sustained ways, and for different reasons, John Goldingay (in his recently published first volume of OT theology)⁶⁹ and Rolf Rendtorff⁷⁰ have voiced similar concerns to let the OT retain its own theological voice.

I believe it is fair to say that Childs occupies considerable space between the two trends just described. For Childs, biblical theology should certainly attend to the way the New hears the Old, just as it needs to hear the New as such. When, in the final section of his

Testaments, 2 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990–95). The titles are revealing. See the discussion of James D. G. Dunn on terminology in “The Problem of ‘Biblical Theology,’” in Bartholomew et al., eds., *Out of Egypt*, 172–83.

66. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

67. *Ibid.*, 107.

68. Levenson, “Pluralist?”

69. John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, *Israel’s Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003). See also my brief review in *IJST* 7, no. 2 (2005): 211–13; and C. Seitz, “Canon, Narrative, and the Old Testament’s Literal Sense,” *Tyndale Bulletin* (2008): 27–31.

70. Rolf Rendtorff, “Toward a Common Jewish-Christian Reading of the Hebrew Bible,” in *Canon and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 31–45.

book on Paul's use of the OT,⁷¹ Hays holds Paul up as a hermeneutical lesson for our imitation or edificatory modeling, to the degree to which this is meant to count for biblical theology, Childs finds the approach faulty if not eccentric.⁷² It is not possible to adopt the pneumatological stance of Paul, even if one thought this a good idea. Paul's stance on the OT is one in which there has yet to be formed a two-testament canon, and Christian theological reflection entails this material (canonical) reality, a reality that for Childs is foundational. Another problem involves the NT *as canon*. To stand with Paul would be to isolate his voice over against the other voices of the NT witness (it would also likely entail accepting the historical-critical canons of what with confidence we can attribute to Paul to begin with) and so to wrongly construct a category of biblical theology called "Pauline theology" (on an articulated historical grid). And then there is as well the problem of whether identification with Paul's pneumatological freedom is to misunderstand what the task of biblical theology outside the apostolic circle genuinely looks like.⁷³

Now to spot the problems with this particular understanding of biblical theology is not the same thing as saying just how the OT's theological witness is to sound forth, both for its own sake and in the light of a subsequent witness (the NT) in which its voice has been taken up (*Vetus Testamentum in Novo receptum*). Here Childs has referred to the "discrete voice" of the OT. He was earlier criticized by Francis Watson for, among other things, describing a dimension of the witness of the OT in ways that are indebted to historical-critical investigation.⁷⁴ Presumably, the innocent and proper worry here would be that such a

71. Hays, *Echoes*, 178–92.

72. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 84–85.

73. Much fuller reflection needs to be undertaken on this issue. There is often a readiness in Christian circles to collapse the church into the NT without further ado and then to think of the OT in clear contrast to this (the difference at this point with Aquinas's commentary on Psalms, for example, where Christ prays for his church, is instructive). A canonical understanding of the role of the Scriptures sees the church, for different reasons and to different degrees, in a less direct relationship to both Testaments and certainly not in one which amounts to conflation or simple contrast. More on this in chapters 2–4 below.

74. See his discussion in *Text and Truth* and in an exchange with myself in *SJT*: "Christological Interpretation of Texts and Trinitarian Claims to Truth," *SJT* 52 (1999): 209–26; Francis Watson, "The Old Testament as Christian Scripture: A Reply to Professor Seitz,"

(historically retrieved) account of what the OT has to say could then never be attached to the New's reception of it, because this latter phenomenon goes on without recourse to historical-critical categories or assumptions.⁷⁵ The live question, however, is whether this is what the discrete voice of the OT actually is *for Childs*, and here we are back again to the topic addressed above: how do historical-critical methods function in a canonical approach? It has been argued above that a "canonical approach" as adopted by Childs gives priority to the final form of the text, and this final form is what Childs means by the "discrete voice"; this approach by no means holds the final form hostage to historical-critical reconstruction, even as such methods might help us grasp it. To say this is to address the worry that a category is being invented ("the discrete voice") that cannot attach itself to the New's hearing of it.

The problem with Watson's earlier approach has now shifted to the opposite front: by issuing a warning against hearing the discrete voice of the OT, the voice of the OT may end up being only what moves uncomplicatedly into the New's version of its own witness.⁷⁶ That kind of "anti-discrete" move would mean a silencing of much that is in the OT, on the one side; and it would also threaten to misunderstand the way in which what the New has to say is *genuinely new and fresh and provocative*. This is an irony, in some ways, because this latter dimension had been the source of much focused interest and theological shoring-up in Watson's earlier works, and in his understanding of the relationship between the Testaments.

SJT 52 (1999): 227–32. See as well Childs's evaluation of Watson in *Church's Guide*, 128–31 (brief discussion above in n26).

75. This point has been made at another place by N. T. Wright, and it appears congenial for several reasons with a canonical approach. In a volume that included treatments of the suffering servant by OT scholars, Wright posed the question: why did they not ask "how Isaiah might have been read by Jesus' own contemporaries?" (W. H. Bellinger, W. R. Farmer, eds., *Jesus and the Suffering Servant* [Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998], 282). See my discussion in "Prophecy and Tradition-History," 38–39.

76. *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith*. In this volume Watson seeks to show that Paul hears the canonical shape of the OT better than his contemporary interlocutors do. The Pentateuch endorses the "second (theological) use of the law"—the law as death dealing. This is fine for portions of the Pentateuch—one thinks of the golden calf episode—but the "birth of the new" emphasis of Numbers and Deuteronomy is oddly muted in a reading said to attend to the canonical form. See Dennis Olson, *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New: The Framework of the Book of Numbers and the Pentateuch* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1985).

The simple point is that the “discrete voice” (as Childs means it) is not a voice that cannot sound forth in the New due to historical-critical privileging of some wrong sort (a proper worry), but it is a voice that sounds its own notes just the same, in its own registers, and in so doing is fully capable of doing Christian theology. The NT can attend to this voice when it takes up the Old, even as it will transform that voice for the purposes of its own “Second Testament” witnessing to God in Christ. But this category of reflection is not determinative for biblical theology in the way that Watson suggests (or Brueggemann, Rendtorff, or Goldingay might rightly worry about). It is an ingredient in biblical theology, but it is not biblical theological reflection, either of the New or of the Old Testaments in the Christian Bible.⁷⁷

This point was established in the 1970 volume, even at places where Childs was later to question the adequacy of his methods there.⁷⁸ Childs rightly saw in a later discussion that if one only focused on the places where the New had taken up the Old and used this for the purposes of biblical theology, the selection would be skewed and significant portions of the OT would fall silent in the work of biblical theology. An ingredient would become the full meal. But even given that probable limitation in his method, one can see in the 1970 volume how biblical theology according to a canonical approach nevertheless frees the OT to do the theological work proper to its own witnessing role. For example, Childs carefully analyzes Psalm 8’s discrete voice before turning to the NT’s reception and adaptation of it. As seen above, he distinguishes the canonical voice in the Old from a limiting doctrinal filtering he spots in the earlier history of interpretation. He then reflects on the NT’s hearing of the psalm in its own medium and according to certain explicit christological evaluations it is seeking to make. It is important to note that this movement, from Old to New, *then reverses direction*. The psalm’s high doctrine of creation is allowed to sound forth in the context of christological focus, and this assures that the incarnation and exaltation of Christ do not become isolated theological ideas, but are tied to God’s ways with creation, Israel,

77. See Childs’s comments in n26 above.

78. See Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 76.

and the world. The Old's voice does not somehow "correct" the New, or highlight its deficiencies—though if one read the New without this earlier witness continuing to have its proper theological effect, correction would indeed be in order. A canonical approach assures that the New's emphases remain rooted in the soil from which they have sprung. The danger is that in the enthusiasm to describe what the New is saying, modern readers simply leave unstated and unfelt what were most certainly the keen pressures and context supplied by the Old in the first evangelical efforts to account for God's work in Christ. For this, we do not have to ask what was in the mind of the authors of the New, because the OT exists as a canonical witness, showing us the horizons set forth from that witness in their own stable deliverance of them, reaching to the authors of the New and beyond to us.⁷⁹

Another analogy may be useful here, from text criticism. If one watched what the NT said of the OT in its own Greek language idiom and sought to contrast this with the Old's own sentences in a different language, what would one be discovering? Sometimes the sense is conveyed that between two conscious choices, one is being adopted and another ruled out by the NT author, so as to make this or that fresh and determinative theological point. Priority is given both to the language of translation and to the use made of it in the New, in a two-for-one deal. But in a great many places no such conscious decision is being made at all. The New simply operates reflexively in its own translational idiom and is not making a choice for this (Greek language) text over that (Hebrew language) text—and above all not a kind of preferencing that later academic analysis engages in, observing two different languages and choosing one over the other.⁸⁰

It is for this reason that the "discrete voice" of the OT is not to be identified with what the New makes of it, *simpliciter*. This would be giving to the New's use of the OT a kind of conscious replacing or displacing function, when there is little evidence to suggest that the

79. See the discussion of chapter 3 below.

80. And sometimes, in the Letter to the Hebrews, the author uses Greek sentences of Scripture that appear in neither an OT (Hebrew) *Vorlage* nor in any Greek recensions either. See the intriguing discussion of this and other matters in Karen H. Jobes and Moises Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000).

NT writers actually meant to be heard as functioning in this way, over against the authoritative Scriptures they are themselves commenting on. So, can we say with any confidence that Paul intended his use of the Scriptures of Israel to determine the direction of biblical theological reflection; that is, reflection on a twofold canon of Scripture in which his own statements would be taken up into a canonical witness involving a wide variety of different genres (Gospels, Epistles of very different kinds, Acts, Revelation)? Paul is obviously unaware that a comprehensive second witness will in time appear in a now *twofold* scriptural canon, formed on analogy with the one he himself has drawn upon in the narrower sense, but now with the same authority and claim to speak as did the prophets of old. I suspect we should be expected to believe in much recent NT work that he did so assume, or that we are nevertheless right to be following his lead as consistent with this view. And yet the formation of the canon points in a direction away from simple or complex imitation of Paul as the starting point for biblical theology. Paul's use of the OT now takes place within a larger canonical witness (the NT), which is itself given a status on analogy with the first witness. A properly *biblical* theology would need to account for the two witnesses in this analogous, but also different, relationship and form.

Childs's biblical theological reflections in his 1970 work formed the ground floor of what would become a series of comprehensive investigations into the relationship between Old and New Testaments, theology, and biblical theology. In a recent work on Paul and the OT, Watson has made a clear-cut decision to inquire into how the final form of the OT might have pressured a reading in Paul—that is, a reading often otherwise credited to christological or pneumatological insights provided from outside that witness.⁸¹ Here there appears to be some considerable movement on his part toward understanding what the proper relationship is between the “final form” laid bare by a canonical hermeneutic and the apprehension of this in the New.

81. Watson has a fine running discussion of the problems of J. L. Martyn's approach, in this case chiefly to be found in the magisterial commentary *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New York: Doubleday, 1997), dedicated unsurprisingly to Ernst Käsemann. Much more could be said on this topic but it falls outside the scope of the present chapter's survey.

The irony is that there persists a concern to demonstrate this dimension only within the narrower realm of what one might call “Pauline theology,” and that on at least two fronts. First, there is no attempt to register the limitations of asking about a “Pauline theology” over against NT or biblical theology; this seems somewhat strange in a work that will not tolerate any such “historicizing” moves as decisive for understanding the *Old’s* final-form witness. So for example, “Habakkuk” cannot be understood apart from the canonical form in which it appears (the Twelve and the Prophets), yet an “undisputed” Pauline corpus, determined by historical-critical judgments, is the point of departure in the NT for investigating the *Old’s* canonical shape. Why this discontinuity, treating the *Old* canonically and not (more narrowly) historically, but then reversing direction in the *New*? For the second problem we return to the issue mentioned above, but now from the opposite side, that is, how does the *OT* sound forth its theological witness? Watson wants to maximize the continuity between the *Old’s* voice and the *New’s* (Paul’s) hearing of it, on the grounds that this is historically the case (and he can—or indeed must—demonstrate this by comparisons with literatures contemporaneous with Paul and accessible to him, as he theorizes their existence and effect on him). That is, the historical Paul read the witness available to him at his moment in history, and he argued for this or that christological foundationalism on the basis of the *OT* and as an accurate hearing of it, over against rival attempts to do the same (or arguably in many cases, to do something different).

What happens is complex, it could be concluded, especially in the case of the law. In an effort to secure the special hearing of Paul as coming out of the *Old’s* canonical form, and not as the special effects supplied by the Gospel (Martyn, Käsemann), it will need to be shown by Watson that things like the law’s “fading glory” are deeply embedded in the law’s own plain-sense presentation of itself. In some ways what happens is that the two voices (*OT* and *NT*) are simply fused. The excesses of saying the *New* hears what it hears because of the overtones supplied by Christian confession, and so “reads into” the *OT* something that is not there,⁸² are thereby constrained; so too the sense that the *NT*

82. A problem Watson sees in John Barton’s understanding of Habakkuk’s influence on Paul. According to Watson’s (insightful) analysis, Barton depends upon a theory of

is arguing that the Old is a closed or wrongheaded book and cannot yield up such deep mysteries anyway. But the result is a single conflated agreement across the Testaments, at the cost of digging less deeply into the paradoxical way in which Paul is seeking to negotiate two distinct realities: the Old's plain sense and the work of Christ. The anguish that task causes him is even expressed by Paul, and rather clearly, in Romans 9–11, for example.

But even if this description does not completely capture the burden of Watson's model, what is clear is that the Old's theological witness comes alive for him only in respect of Paul's successful (as Watson has it) hearing of it.⁸³ At times this hearing works with a concept of intentionality one might call "canonical." At other points this is less clear.⁸⁴ One can conclude that Watson has thought deeply about the challenge of doing a species of biblical theology, and has outdistanced some weaker formulations, but that there is something eccentric or quixotic in what he attempts. There will always remain space between the New's hearing of the Old and the Old's plain sense. What is at issue is not the elimination of that space, but the careful appreciation of its character. Biblical theology will function properly when it deals with the material reality of there being two different witnesses and accepts that fact as foundational for interpretation. It is hard to see how the OT can contribute to biblical theology in the manner of Childs's handling of Psalm 8, as an example of the canonical approach, if Psalm 8 and Hebrews's use of it are maximally coordinated, for whatever reason. (Just here one sees how difficult it would be to extend Watson's project across the length and breadth of the NT canon.) Rather, both OT and NT witnesses function in a complementary way for the purpose of Christian biblical theological reflection.

Habakkuk's "intention," which Watson calls "historically naïve and hermeneutically perverse" (*Galatians*, 158).

83. In this sense, in Watson's hands, "canonical intentionality" appears to detach itself from Israel's lived life: the text refers not so much to events in its day as to a reception history yet to be known by it.

84. Watson has not entirely sorted out the problem of distinguishing Enlightenment "intentionality" from the intentionality of the final form. More cannot be said here, as it would require a greater attention to inconsistencies in Watson's otherwise ambitious discussion of "intention" than is warranted in this context.

Coercion, Adversarius Noster, “Untamed and Wild”: The Character of the Final Form of the Text

Twenty years ago John Barton wrote:

It is not surprising that Childs has little following in Germany. One misses in his proposals the sense so dear to the heirs of the Reformation (including many in his own Calvinist tradition) that the biblical text is something with rough edges, set over against us, not necessarily speaking with one voice, coming to us from a great distance and needing to be weighed and tested even as it tests and challenges us: *adversarius noster*, in Luther’s phrase.⁸⁵

Sweeping statements like this have a way of coming back to haunt one. It was only a year before this, at a public lecture at Yale, that Rolf Rendtorff spoke of his reaction upon reading Childs’s 1979 introduction: “it was as though scales fell from my eyes.” It is hard to say whether any non-German biblical scholar has ever been so thoroughly read and reacted to in German-speaking circles as Brevard Childs. Indeed, when Barton’s colleague James Barr speaks of his own training in biblical studies, what seems immediately apparent is the distinguishing fact that Childs was trained in Germany and Barr in another context.⁸⁶ It would be worth a monograph of its own to investigate whether the chief differences between them turn, in Barr’s case, on a very different climate of training and ecclesial

85. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, 95.

86. Barr speaks of never having divided a verse, dated a text, etc. and generally describes an Anglo-Saxon training devoid of sharp critical instincts and basking in the heyday of the Biblical Theology movement. (“I was myself never much of a historical-critical scholar. I do not know that I ever detected a gloss, identified a source, proposed an emendation or assigned a date. . . . On the contrary, scholars who thought that these matters were the essence of exegesis . . . were laughed at and looked upon as fossils from some earlier age. The cutting edge of Old Testament study, and its impact upon theology, seemed to lie in the concepts of biblical theology,” *Holy Scripture*, 130). Here is another place where Barr’s predictions about the field have not proven quite accurate; it is as though historical criticism is now passé, in Barr’s judgment. Yet someone like Nicholson is a good example of the persistence of classical historical-critical interests and concerns, and he is quite representative in many ways of British OT scholarship (cf. G. Davies, Williamson, Barton—all proud deployers of pretty traditional historical-critical methods; for someone interested in biblical theology, I suspect one would turn to the lone Walter Moberly—not a candidate for the “James Barr prize” for things mainstream, one might have thought).

life. Barr and Barton look in on the Continental Reformation as if it is a kind of distant phenomenon, which to some extent it is for them; and so it is strange to see their often partial and intriguing use of the Reformers. This is particularly true in Barton's citation of Luther here.⁸⁷

What Barton appears to have done in this citation is translate the observations of Luther about the content of Scripture (its *Sache* or referent) into the realm of materiality: the Bible is a kind of literary crazy-quilt, a tangle or puzzle demanding the proper critical tools to sort it out. Even when Luther uses this kind of rhetoric ("the prophets have a queer way of talking") it cannot be said that this is what he means when he says the Bible is "our adversary." Rather, he means more what Barth means when in a later day he refers to the "strange world" of Scripture. The Bible confronts us, squares up to us, with the content of its word and its address as such. It does not confront us because it has a strange, confusing, or paradoxical literality (awaiting historical-critical sorting). Barton refers to the "rough edges" of Scripture in a book on hermeneutics in the context of his concerns to keep historical-critical investigation at full employment, as a kind of necessity, given the project to which it must put its hand. Rarely, if ever, does one see the heirs of the Reformation seek to justify historical-critical work along these lines. In another context I have criticized Käsemann and Stuhlmacher for claiming that the Reformation instinct demands historical-critical quests for the "proximate."⁸⁸ But even that was not an appeal to the "rough edges" of the witness, but rather to the need to overcome what is presumed to be a theological or hermeneutical problem of access to the subject matter, due to historical distance. This kind of a problem, it can be argued, is different again from what worried either the Reformation, on the one side, or Barton

87. In Helmer's intriguing look into Luther's trinitarian interpretation of the psalms ("Luther's Trinitarian Hermeneutic") what one sees in Luther is an effort to find a solid footing in the semantics of Hebrew upon which to rest the church's dogmatic confession that the "Spirit spake by the prophets"—as over against the ambiguities in allegorical readings of the Holy Spirit warranted by creeds or church councils primarily, and not grounded in the scriptural clarity of the OT (which exists prior to councils and creeds). Luther is not describing an adversary here but a dogmatic ground floor.

88. Christopher R. Seitz, "Two Testaments and the Failure of One Tradition-History," in *Figured Out*, 35–47.

in his examination of canonical hermeneutics and the literary “rough edges” of the material form of the witness, on the other.

In a long series of published works, Walter Brueggemann has sought to keep the OT at some considerable distance for the purpose of explicitly Christian theological reflection, using the language of polyphony and other kindred terms, and this bears some similarity to the “rough edges” that Barton speaks about. But they are coming from very different places and end up in very different ones as well. Brueggemann worries about “christianizing” the voice of the OT, or, if a distinction can be made, mishearing or occluding the word of the Old because the interpretive lens of the New is being given precedence over it. The literary reality of the OT lines up for Brueggemann with a theological reality, making this a clear (and for his purposes, a desired) departure from traditional appraisals. The text is at odds with itself, because the God to which it refers only exists in the speech about “him” and this speech comes at us in testimony and counter-testimony. There is nothing about the “final form” of the text that points to a settling down of the “*hin und her*” highlighted by Brueggemann. Just because this is so, it follows naturally that the reader must seek some understanding of the text’s address, must read it out of the “wild and untamed” literary witness before us, and the idea that Brueggemann is *choosing freely* to hear what he hears and see what he sees is an idea on his terms without genuine alternative. I suspect the most that could be said in a methodological sense is that the text *can* be read this way and so this is the way Brueggemann chooses to read it. Such would be all that could be required, one assumes, on this kind of postmodern playing field (though why *any* reading is not possible, and also impossible to adjudicate as good or bad, remains somewhat unclear).⁸⁹

It is Childs’s notion of a final form, a stable witness, a “discrete voice,” that runs in a direction Brueggemann finds unacceptable. Historical criticism gave us a sense that the texts go through various phases of development. This is fine. The danger for Brueggemann is taking this fact and then constructing something behind the text,

89. Jon Levenson, “Pluralist?” Levenson helpfully points out how complex a representative of postmodernity Brueggemann actually is.

in a history-of-religion. This is a domestication or a reductionism, on his terms. The various phases of development point instead to a point-counterpoint, and there is nothing in the text itself that gives indication of that “*hin und her*” reaching anything like a coherent final statement (even one with dialectical aspects to it).⁹⁰

Childs has himself tried to assess this particular challenge (and widely disseminated alternative) to his approach and has done so most recently in a work on the history of interpretation of the book of Isaiah.⁹¹ It is striking in some ways that Childs has chosen to give the work a title that also bespeaks our “postmodern” situation: *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture*. The struggle, however, is not to do with an inherent restlessness of the literature itself, as an indispensable characteristic of it; it is rather to do with what it means to seek to hear the subject matter of sacred Scripture through the medium of two discrete, if juxtaposed, witnesses. Precisely because Brueggemann disagrees with the pressure of (the necessity of) hearing both Testaments as bearing witness to one another and to Christian foundational claims as crucial to the task of interpretation, one cannot use the term “struggle” as Childs means it to describe what he is doing.⁹²

On the surface, the idea that the first witness has a stable and more-or-less objective final form (even given text-critical realities we shall discuss next) probably ought to complicate the idea that we must also hear it in relationship to a second witness with the same characteristic final canonical form (comprised of various separate forms of discourse). And of course it does indeed. The “final form”

90. Christopher R. Seitz, “Scripture Becomes Religion(s): The Theological Crisis of Serious Biblical Interpretation in the Twentieth Century,” in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation, Scripture and Hermeneutics Series 1*, ed. Craig Bartholomew et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 26–27.

91. Childs, *Struggle*.

92. Hugh G. M. Williamson notes in a review that Childs has a (more or less) comprehensive coverage of the history of interpretation, with the exception of some more recent commentators. That is because, he conjectures, these newer readers of Isaiah have stopped having to account for the relationship between Old and New Testaments as part of the actual “struggle” of Christian interpretation (review of B. S. Childs, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture*, RBL [April 2005], available online at www.bookreviews.org/bookdetail.asp?TitleId=4494&CodePage=4494). Brueggemann, however, makes an explicit case for the necessity of having to stop, and so he is treated in more detail by Childs.

is neither a single narrative line (plot) nor a series of kindred genres, all lined up in a tidy way.⁹³ And the fact that the first witness makes final Christian sense in relationship with a second one, means there is always an act of correlation to be achieved, and for that the only proper description is “struggle.”

It is crucial to keep this aspect of canonical reading clear in one’s mind. At one level, Brueggemann’s unruly witness is not at all unlike what Childs means when he refers to struggle; indeed, by insisting that we read the OT on its own, Brueggemann has made interior to its witness a kind of inherent “struggling” that otherwise takes place, for very different reasons, when one seeks to do Christian theological reflection on a single canon comprising two discrete (and merely juxtaposed) sections—with the latter one taking up within itself portions of the explicit semantic level of the first, and also making the delivery of its claims operative primarily at the level of “accordance” with that same first witness.⁹⁴

This will mean that Childs has no trouble, on the one hand, speaking of the “pressure” (or “coercion”) of the canonical OT text, in its final form, as a discrete and stable voice; and yet, on the other hand, of the *sensus literalis* being a sense with extension beyond itself because of the challenge of rendering the subject matter, which now entails a second accorded witness (this “extensive” character belongs to the property of the literal sense and is not merely imposed upon it). A “rule of faith” is required to help us understand another, allied, theological pressure, at the heart of the act of Christian interpretation: the two Testaments are related on analogy with the basic Christian confession that the Creator God is the Father of Jesus Christ and the Son shares the eternal glory and life of the Father who sent him (Phil. 2:9–11). Yahweh is this Triune God and we know it from the first witness itself, when its literal sense yields this up in the light of the second witness.

93. See my review of John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, *Israel’s Gospel* (*International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7, no. 2 [2005]: 211–13), who seeks to isolate kindred genres and collate these for the purpose of three volumes of introduction. The rhetorical challenge of pulling this off without tedium is enormous and may signal why the final form of the OT—among many other reasons to be sure—has resisted this.

94. Seitz, “In Accordance with the Scriptures,” in *Word without End*, 51–60.

The best recent effort to describe what Childs means by the pressure of the literal sense, with sensitivity to the challenge of hearing two Testaments, is the essay by C. Kavin Rowe, the title of which gives indication of what is being sought in Childs's canonical reading: "Biblical Pressure and Trinitarian Hermeneutics."⁹⁵ In a piece of historical close reading, Christine Helmer has investigated "Luther's Trinitarian Hermeneutic and the Old Testament,"⁹⁶ and she demonstrates on the basis of Luther's understanding of Hebrew semantics how he was able to see the Trinity adumbrated, if not more fully manifested, in the OT quite apart from the traditional proof-texting. In some ways, then, we come full circle and confront again Luther's famous "our adversary." "Our adversary" is neither an unruly literality (Barton) nor a God resistant to creedal claims (Brueggemann)—indeed, on this latter point, Luther uses mature Christian confession precisely to lodge his point in contradistinction to churchly claims and pious enthusiasms both. "Our adversary" is the *Sache* of the Scriptures' plain-sense address.

When Childs speaks of "coercion" or the pressure of the literal sense, he stands far closer to what Luther meant by "our adversary" than Barton realized. The OT confronts us: as Law and, in Luther's more mature formulation, as gospel as well. It exposes, as in the famous deployment by Luther of the "theological use" of the law. It also orders our world, by telling us of God and his Christ and of the Holy Spirit, both in the Old (through its use of Hebrew and in its understanding of the Word of God) and in the New, where the literal sense of Scripture shows us more clearly the christological or spiritual referent both Testaments are fundamentally about. It is "our adversary," not in presenting us with a material form that is chaotic or whose parameters cannot be determined except by means of external aids (allegory or the ironic counterpart of this in history-of-religion or modern critical methods). It is "our adversary" in that it seeks to overcome our world and reorder it. It does this not just by catching us up for a while in imaginative construals. Nor does it do this chiefly by pointing to a world of ostensive reference that we need to reas-

95. In *ProEcdl* 11, no. 3 (2002): 295–312. See also "Romans 10:13: What Is the Name of the Lord?" *HBT* 22 (2000): 135–73.

96. In *ModTh* 18 (2002): 49–73.

semble or make more proximate by use of historical tools. It does this by means of the final form of the text, whose words point to a fleshly and a spiritual realm both, in Luther's complex understanding. Because its subject matter is Christ—and this is sometimes quite clear and forceful, and other times oblique (as, with Luther, Israel gazes on something it cannot have or cannot yet grasp)—it disrupts and reorders our place in the world and the world itself. This is what Childs means when he speaks of the Bible's address primarily with the language of “witness.”

It belongs to our specific providential place in time that we must struggle with how the Bible makes its two-testament word heard. But this has always been the case. When Childs speaks of the text's coercion or pressure, at our specific moment in time, it will be against a backdrop of challenges that did not obtain in the same form for Origen, or Chrysostom, or Theodoret, or Luther, or Calvin. Those challenges in our day have had to do with new understandings of historical reference, which make the task of hearing the “literal sense” sharpened and more finely governed by our sense of the pastness of the past. But that is simply a challenge, and it is akin to what it has meant to struggle to hear the Word of God through the medium of the historical witness of prophets and apostles in every age. A canonical method does not seek to diminish the challenge or change the subject, but it does insist that the “literal sense” can make its force felt all the same, even under the shadow of our awareness of the complex historical development of the text before us.

Still, this challenge has also come with its benefits and fresh insights. Who could read the historical back-filling supplied by George Adam Smith and not sense that the minor prophets were somehow coming alive again and making themselves heard in fresh ways, precisely because to his age had been bequeathed the legacy of newer historical methods?⁹⁷ He spoke of “fixing the indemnity” brought about by these methods, and that phrase is fraught with meaning, beyond what he might have seen, as the shadows cast by historical approaches were only beginning to lengthen.⁹⁸ The canonical approach has not

97. Christopher R. Seitz, “On Letting a Text,” 151–72.

98. Iain D. Campbell, *Fixing the Indemnity: The Life and Work of George Adam Smith* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004).

turned its back on this challenge, nor on the “indemnification” that would be required for our age. What has emerged in the canonical approach is a text undomesticated and able to speak a word—even “our adversary,” witnessing to the work of the Triune God who occasioned the speech about himself—and equipping us, by the Holy Spirit, to hear the divine word afresh in our generation.

Hebrew and Greek Canons: What Is at Stake Here?

Naturally enough, a canonical approach will be required to comment on the more traditional, material, low-flying questions of canon: which canon of the Old and New Testaments has authority for Christian interpretation and witness? But the question is immediately raised: Just what is meant by a very specific set of historical and theological/ecclesial parameters pertaining to canonicity? To speak of a canonical approach giving wrongful priority to a Hebrew versus a Greek canon (and then describing these as attaching to distinctive ecclesial bodies) is to hopelessly simplify matters. Under the rubric “Which Canon?” in *Reading the Old Testament*, John Barton’s brief treatment of this issue—about which he has written at length in other publications—gives a nice series of misleading impressions. But chief among them is the statement:

It is hard not to be swayed by the purely historical arguments of scholars such as A. C. Sundberg—writing before Childs had developed his theories—to the effect that before the Reformation there had never been a time when the Christian Church acknowledged any canon but that of the Greek Bible; so that the attempt by the Reformers to “restore” the Old Testament canon to its original limits was hopelessly anachronistic.⁹⁹

In this summary one would be forgiven for being unaware that Jerome and Augustine had a series of important exchanges over just this issue and that the latter was forced to develop something like a theory of inspiration that could cover both “canons”—a discussion that the canonical approach has itself taken pains to point out.¹⁰⁰ Jerome, of course, rather famously revised the Old Latin and Greek

99. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, 91–92.

100. See most recently, Childs, *Struggle*.

translations available to him by recourse to the Hebrew text. This instinct was followed in a different day and toward a different end, by “the Reformers” (by which Barton means Luther and Calvin et al.), but this also included fresh translations by Bellarmine and others on the other side of the “Reformation.” This instinct to carefully preserve the role of the Hebrew language version of the OT, and to correct extant translations on the basis of it, more than anything accounts for the concern of the canonical approach for not cutting loose the distinctive role of the Hebrew canon—alongside other matters of historical and theological argument, as we shall see.

Barton then goes on to speak of “Childs’s argument that we must take the MT as our norm”¹⁰¹ and here chiefly on ecumenical grounds, as he sees it. As we shall see, in the context of canonical text (including scope, language, and order) Childs has himself spoken about the “Church’s ongoing *search* for the Christian Bible.”¹⁰² While a canonical approach will call for significant attention to the Masoretic tradition, it does this on a combination of grounds and not for “ecumenical” reasons only. These grounds include (1) historical/recensional reasons, (2) theological reasons, (3) the history of the OT’s reception, and (4) conceptual grounds. In this latter area, Childs has argued against the sharp division of Sundberg, Barton, and others between what they wish to call canonical (scope and institutional fixation) and scriptural (some more open claim to a hearing prior to this) authority.¹⁰³

Still, to say even this is not to valorize a kind of pristine “Masoretic Text.” It needs to be made clear up front what Childs does *not* mean by calling Christian interpretation to attend to the Masoretic tradition of the OT canon. First, the MT does not have some sort of sacrosanct order to be identified over against the (emerging) different order/s of LXX texts;¹⁰⁴ a canon that ends with Chronicles

101. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, 92.

102. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 67.

103. See also Stephen Chapman, “‘Canon’ versus ‘Scripture,’” in *The Law and the Prophets: A Study in Old Testament Canon Formation*, Forschungen zum Alten Testament 27 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 106–10. See also my recent contribution in *Goodly Fellowship*, including reference to the creative work of G. Steins and K. van der Toorn, both of whom set aside the distinction.

104. Against Sweeney we cannot claim to know for sure why LXX translations adopt a fourfold internal division (where they do): Is it for theological reasons (LXX leans

does not sound some sort of clear and distinctive notes over against one that ends with Malachi. There is a variety of different orders, and the final position of Malachi in English printed Bibles is a modern convention without widespread attestation in the history of interpretation (Daniel, Esther are often last; the Twelve appears with Isaiah and usually precedes it).¹⁰⁵ Internal order and arrangement can well be important indices in a canonical approach, but one must approach the matter with discretion and care.¹⁰⁶ Second, Childs's appeal to the MT is registered in no small part because of an opposite tendency, namely, the effort to prioritize a distinctive LXX text over against the Hebrew canon, in the manner suggested by Barton's quote above. It is as if the Christian Bible ought properly to be regarded as a "Greek Bible," which can in turn somehow detach itself from the MT, either because of the history of the church, which did not "acknowledge any canon but that of the Greek Bible" (a simplistic and misleading statement), or because this allows the material reality of the NT's Greek-language form to say something theologically determinative about the canon of the OT.¹⁰⁷ For a canonical approach, this is a category error. We have

toward the New—this seems unlikely; an ending in Chronicles could also be argued to "lean forward") or for lower-flying reasons of confusion and a desire to taxonomize (make the "Former Prophets" into a category of historical books and then take those from the *ketubim* which are kindred)? See his either-or approach in Sweeney, "Tanak versus Old Testament: Concerning the Foundation for a Jewish Theology of the Bible," in *Problems in Biblical Theology: Essays in Honor of Rolf Knierim*, ed. Henry T. C. Sun et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 353–72. I discuss the matter in greater length in *Goodly Fellowship*.

105. On the variety of orders of the Christian Bible, see Earle E. Ellis, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity: Canon and Interpretation in Light of Modern Research*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 54 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991).

106. In a work concerned primarily with reestablishing the coherence and proper "coercion" of the final form of books in the canon of the OT (Childs, *Introduction*), the prophetic books were treated in their MT order but with little reflection on the shape of the XII as one structured collection (this latter is now an area of considerable and fruitful investigation). Presumably there was enough to do on the first front. Still, Childs will in fact comment on the final form of the Pentateuch, for example, as against a Hexateuch or a Deuteronomistic history beginning with Deuteronomy. I have written extensively on this issue in my own publications.

107. Any amateur reading the history of interpretation (say, on a text like Hab. 3) will immediately realize that the church's alleged appeal to a single, clear, contrastable, settled "Greek canon" is illusory.

mentioned the confusion introduced by an approach that reads the OT's theological witness *in Novo receptum*. There is a text-critical/canonical aspect to this confusion as well.

We can list several issues that this prioritizing of “the Greek canon” raises for a canonical approach.

When the term “the Septuagint” is used, what is meant by this? Because of its character as a translation, Greek-language versions derived from an earlier Hebrew text did not simply fall into a single type with a fixed length or a standard internal ordering.¹⁰⁸

This is also true in the history of the reception of the OT in the church. The wide variety of known Greek-language versions of the OT may be a source of excitement or exuberant shows of erudition for John Chrysostom.¹⁰⁹ For others it is a problem to be overcome, an irritation, or an occasion to prefer what appears to be a far more settled Hebrew textual tradition—whatever might be additionally claimed for the priority of the Hebrew on theological grounds.¹¹⁰

When appeal is made to “the Septuagint” what exactly is being said? The NT does not quote from a single LXX text; it can also quote from a (pre-) Masoretic text; and it can provide translations in Greek of the OT that are simply not known in any extant Greek

108. The Hexapla of Origen addresses this and other realities and seeks to organize the problem, if not also (it is not clear) to offer a way forward for resolution.

109. Hill writes: “Chrysostom’s purpose in offering such an array (of Greek translations in his Psalm commentary) to a congregation whom he faults for lack of basic biblical knowledge escapes us, unless it is to impress them with his erudition” (Robert C. Hill, *St. John Chrysostom: Commentary on the Psalms*, trans. and with an introduction by Robert C. Hill [Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998], 1:7). On the problem of sorting out the manifold Greek versions, we are not helped by Chrysostom’s own missteps: “His quotation of Job 31:13–15 (in commenting on Psalm 4:1) in a form markedly different from both the Hebrew and a modern composite text of the Septuagint like Rahlfs’s reminds us of the diversity of forms of the LXX current at the time” (Ibid., 6). “Reading to his listeners in one hit the four verses of 7–10 of Psalm 10 plus all the variants leaves us with a picture of a preacher with a mass of material to hand” (Ibid., 7).

110. Here it is clear that the claim that the church preferred a “Greek Bible” is manifestly in error. In the actual practice of working with a book like Psalms, the history of Christian interpretation in every age sees the natural problems introduced by a translation (Greek or Latin). In researching a volume on interpretation at Antioch, I have become aware of the *sui generis* character of many Greek readings in Theodore and his colleagues (some reflecting a special textual tradition, some closer to MT readings, some to large-scale Greek traditions identified as LXX).

translation.¹¹¹ Also, it rarely—probably never—quotes from a so-called apocryphal book as if this were on par with other Greek language versions of the more restricted Hebrew canon.¹¹²

What does it mean to speak of the Greek (or Hebrew) language “canons” of the OT as pointing to an open canon not fixed until the Christian era? If the implication is that the OT does not function as canonical Scripture until the church or synagogue later fixes its limits, this is to misunderstand the role of the church or synagogue in respect of how it handles its sacred inheritance (on this see below). The distinction maintained by Sundberg and others between theological and literary determinations in respect of canon cannot be sustained; his is simply a piece of historical speculation simplifying an enormously complex textual and canonical phenomenon, and one with roots in the very inception of the biblical books.¹¹³

It derives from this that a misunderstanding about the role of the OT in the New is frequently introduced. One cannot move from a notion of relative fixity or “openness” (in terms of scope or internal orders), much less the simple expedient/necessity of maintaining the same Greek language throughout the NT (the OT is not quoted in Hebrew in the Greek language NT), to a notion of secondary and subsequent canonical authority, imposed outside of the NT’s own plain-sense depiction of the authority of the OT (“the Law and the Prophets”).

111. The point is that to speak of “The Septuagint” could confuse and oversimplify—such a text would have to be critically reconstructed. The NT is a Greek text and the Bible it quotes is a translation. When people say the NT quotes “The Septuagint” what they mean is, the NT quotes a Greek OT that could in many cases go back to a single exemplar (to be critically reconstructed), but that also diverges from this, including some interesting readings that are closer to the MT as this eventuates. See the intriguing analysis of the use of the OT in Acts 15, undertaken by Richard Bauckham in *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting*, vol. 4, *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, ed. Bruce W. Winter (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); see also Attridge on Hebrews’s use of Ps. 40 in Harold W. Attridge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989); and Jobes and Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint*.

112. See the discussion in Richard Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990); and my essay “Two Testaments and the Failure of One Tradition-History,” in *Figured Out*, 40–42.

113. See Jeremias’s analysis of the literary and theological factors—these cannot be separated—that lie at the base of Amos’s and Hosea’s compositional history.

This final point is a crucial one to observe. I have pointed out in another context how confusing the argument about the alleged priority of the NT's assertions vis-à-vis the Old can be. Christ does not announce that the OT has an authority because he says so, but rather acknowledges its authority, claims it is about him, and distinguishes it from the "authoritative" statements made by men about it.¹¹⁴ Neither does the church declare the limits of the OT canon for the first time, as if before then it existed "only as Scripture," and so required stabilization and a statement about its authority (now as "canon") for its first-time appearance in a broader canon of Christian Scripture. The NT declares the authority of the Old, and the apostolic witness to Christ is authoritative precisely because it is "in accordance with the Scriptures." The authority of both the NT and the Christian Scripture as a twofold witness is derived from the claims of the OT—claims presupposed in the NT and asserting themselves in the milieu from which its own composition, as the "apostles" half of "prophets and apostles," is coming about.

In a rather surprising quote given the source, Adolf von Harnack chided Lessing about the latter's mistaken assumptions regarding the authority of the Second Testament, the NT, as being derived from the church (which also rendered the NT problematic for Lessing; Lessing thought something like "unmediated" witness was or ought to be available and that would be for him authoritative "truth"—if one could but get their hands on it). Harnack wanted to emphasize the independent way the NT made its force felt.¹¹⁵ He might have approached the matter as did Luther, who appealed dogmatically to the creedal confession concerning the testimony of the Holy Spirit as that testimony that gave the NT its "*entirely independent and unconditioned authority*"¹¹⁶—an appeal which also grounded the OT's authority, both for the NT's confession as well as for the church

114. A paraphrase from Matthew might be: "listen to teachers when they speak as Moses, but do not follow what they teach nor act as they act"; on "you have heard that it was said," see my essay "Two Testaments" in *Figured Out*, 45. Compare the more technical work of Markus Bockmuehl, *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 1–82.

115. Adolf von Harnack, *Bible Reading in the Early Church*, trans. J. R. Wilkinson (London: Williams & Norgate, 1912). See also my discussion of this with respect to N. T. Wright's work, in *Redemption*, 25–42.

116. Harnack, *Bible Reading*, 145, emphasis original.

(“who spake by the prophets”).¹¹⁷ Harnack defended the “entirely independent and unconditioned authority” of the NT as derived from the OT’s own specific and peculiar status. He states: “This was indeed only possible because the book [NT] at once took its place alongside the Old Testament, which occupied a position of absolute and unquestioned independence because it was more ancient than the Church.”¹¹⁸

In part, then, Childs’s appeal to the MT is not based upon an overweening concern for one Hebrew text with fixed boundaries and special internal order and a historically monolithic transmission prior to the New. Aspects of this description may well be true, but they require considerable nuance.¹¹⁹ Rather, what is at stake is the canonical authority of the Hebrew Scriptures as foundational and antecedent to Christian claims, claims that have to do with accordance and fulfillment and not with first-time establishment. The christological grounding of this perspective is given in the NT, as Christ opens the Scriptures and shows them to be everywhere about himself (Luke 24 and others).¹²⁰

Once this perspective is secured, it helps to account for the various rationales that then guided the church as it sought to make kindred claims for the New. Too often, however, this antecedent authority, its christological confirmation and clarification, and the character of them both as influencing the church’s claims about the authority of the New are forgotten. This leads to an error of enormous irony: that the Scriptures of Israel become Christian Scripture only by action of the church or by claim of the NT by transmitting them in the material form of their Greek-language expression. This puts the matter precisely in reverse.

117. See Christine Helmer’s insightful discussion “Luther’s Trinitarian Hermeneutic.”

118. Harnack, *Bible Reading*, 145.

119. See my own discussion in “Two Testaments,” in *Figured Out*, 35–47; *Goodly Fellowship* (my concern in this work is in showing the stability of the Law and the Prophets as a canonical grammar, whatever the scope and order of the Writings; the *ketubim* exist as their own special library and their internal order and total number are not decisive for questions of canonical authority, on the same terms as the core grammar. One can properly speak of an “open canon” and mean both canonicity and a degree of fluidity in the total number and order of the Writings).

120. See the more detailed discussion of the use of the OT in the New and a theological evaluation of this distinctive in the chapters to follow.

Brief Postscript

Mention should be made in closing about the larger canon of the “Greek Bible” and the fact that this rubric often serves as an assertion that the MT lacks the additional books which would establish its authority for Christian purposes. Much is made of the circulation of additional books in the larger canon of the LXX, though usually the statements made lack a clear proportionality for argument’s sake, and this is so at a number of key points.¹²¹

It is frequently stated that the NT’s reference to “the Law and the Prophets” indicates that only two-thirds of the Hebrew Scriptures (Tanak) are “closed” in NT times.¹²² Second, it is claimed that in the “open part” would be those books that circulate in the larger canon and that one can see clear evidence of these books being cited in the NT, on par with other books. Finally, it is said that the use of these books in the Christian church means that they are important books, widely read, seen as theologically decisive, and a critical sign that the “Christian canon” is not the MT.¹²³ From this the conclusion also follows that the canon of the OT is not closed until the church estimates this to be necessary, and this happens late (following the development of a Second Testament, whose authority and status are then translated to Israel’s Scriptures). The result is, in the language of this argument, a “Greek Bible” for Christians.

We have chosen to look behind these details to interrogate what three such assertions *may actually assume about the status of the OT as an antecedent and independent authority*. At the end of the day, arguments mounted along the lines above are not just learned assertions (which lack proper proportionality); they are the means by which one may call into question the stability of the OT—whether in Greek or Hebrew language—as an authority for Christian purposes, prior to the development of the apostolic writings and toward which the authority of the NT seeks accordance.

It should be uncontestable that the density of citation of books from the Hebrew canon in the NT vastly overshadows even alleged

121. See Barr, *Concept*, 563–80.

122. Barton et al.

123. Barr, *Concept*, 576–80.

citations of non-Hebrew books, by a factor of enormous proportion. Arguing for an allusion here or background noise there, measured against the phenomenon of direct citation (“proof text”), ought in reality to warn against any effort to compare at all. Appeal to “Law and Prophets” for the purpose of showing that only two-thirds of the Tanak is “closed” has been quite clearly shown to be a speculation at best, and without secure warrant.¹²⁴ And we have seen that the tendency of the history of reception is to be conservative in respect of the Hebrew textual legacy. To put it differently, no Christian proponent of the “Greek Bible” cautions against appeals to the Hebrew *because the former has more books or because the NT cites it in a form that shows the Hebrew canon was not closed*. At that point, modern argument and ancient convention part company.

If there were indeed a larger and “open” canon of the OT, the paucity of reference in the NT to books in it would be staggering and require explanation. This observation is tantamount to a declaration that the additional books are somehow secondary and insecure, or poorly circulating, and so forth—for reasons we can only speculate about.¹²⁵ More economical is a view that the OT canon is relatively stable, with exceptions to this picture in the NT very few and proving the rule.¹²⁶ Such an observation has nothing to do with Protestant versus Catholic proclivities, ecumenical hopefulness, or whatever. Jerome did not invent a distinction between Hebrew and Greek books (the latter to be read for edification but not doctrine). At a number of levels and for several good reasons—not least the plain-sense witness of the NT itself—he observed one.

124. Most recently by Stephen B. Chapman, *Law and the Prophets*. See the earlier work by T. N. Swanson, “The Closing of the Collection of Holy Scriptures: A Study in the History of the Canonization of the Old Testament” (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1970).

125. See Bauckham’s careful discussion in *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus*.

126. On the stability of the Law and the Prophets, see Seitz, *Goodly Fellowship*; and Roger T. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (London: SPCK, 1985). Beckwith’s argument for a single Genesis-to-Chronicles order has NT warrant in the “Abel to Zechariah” theme (Matt. 23:35; Luke 11:51), and in my view the influence of Chronicles on the shape of the Gospel of Matthew needs further study. I am less confident than Beckwith, however, on a single Genesis-to-Chronicles Hebrew exemplar for reasons explained in my new work, having to do with the character of primary associations in the Scriptures of Israel and a proper assessment of the *ketubim* (*Goodly Fellowship*).

In sum, the church did not bestow authority on the OT, but acknowledged it and explained its character for the church, following the dominical warrant. The church was the place where the confession was registered that the authority of the OT was from the Holy Spirit “who spake by the prophets.” Following Augustine, a canonical approach will acknowledge the Holy Spirit’s activity in both Hebrew and Greek canons, which guide and constrain the church’s reflection and confession. What is more properly at issue is the antecedent and independent authority of the Scriptures of Israel, in accordance with which, in the earliest Easter confession, Christ died and rose again.

Canon as Witness

Speech-act theory may be a way to negotiate (or finesse) problems associated with divine and human authorship of Scripture, whose last uncomplicated expression may have been that of Calvin.¹²⁷ Modern biblical interpretation “complexified” the matter considerably, not just because it may have found itself allergic to claims of “divine authorship” in the wake of Kant. With the rise of modernity, the more compelling region of complexity was *human authorship itself*, as the various biblical books “gave up the ghost” of the human authors said to be authorizing them (Moses, Isaiah, Jonah, Daniel, Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, Colossians, etc.) and breathed their last.

A canonical approach, it has been argued, has detached itself from a view of human or authorial intentionality.¹²⁸ The situation has,

127. See Childs’s discussion in *Struggle*, 209–13; cf. David L. Puckett, *John Calvin’s Exegesis of the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995).

128. Lindbeck in the Childs 1998 Festschrift writes: “Even biblical scholars such as Childs and Hays assume that the canonical sense of Scripture is to be determined as much as possible without reference to what was intended by either God or its human authors” (“Postcritical Canonical Interpretation: Three Modes of Retrieval,” in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, ed. Christopher R. Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 48). I confess never to have heard this statement made in Childs, and certainly not with the kind of transparency this quote suggests. Lindbeck continues, “Fear of the intentional fallacy, it seems, prevents them from recognizing that their exegetical practice is (fortunately) full of appeals to authorial intention.” Perhaps Hays runs afoul of intentional fallacy concerns, but it has

however, been seen to be far more complex than that.¹²⁹ One can indeed speak of “canonical intentionality” and find oneself back in the domain of the final form of a biblical book, with an “authorial intention”—to use the language of the debate at hand. Isaiah “authored” the book associated with him, or, as we shall prefer to say, the Holy Spirit “inspired” through Isaiah an intended word. Intentionality persists even as the older views of authorship have had to be adjusted to account for the unique character of biblical books, authors, and authorizing.

The problem of speech-act theory at this point is its level of abstraction, by virtue of introducing a philosophical construct to handle the theological problem of divine-human discourse.¹³⁰ The problem is also deeply historical, to put it in more concrete terms. It may be possible to say that God commandeers human language toward a specific intended end, but then to say practically nothing at all about the constitutive, historically real, indeed “elected and providentially chosen” manner of speaking through Moses and the prophets and Israel as such. Does the commandeering *depend upon prior, genuine, historical inspiration and human electing and acting?* What role does this dimension play? It would be an odd (if rather exalted) form of inspiration (speaking dogmatically) which insisted on divine intention and discourse, but which reduced the agents of that speaking to Origen’s plucked instruments—now on the other side of the Enlightenment and with the aid of a philosophical insight about language and communication.

The canonical approach has not released itself from the historical dimension of inspiration. It has broadened this considerably to

not been a feature of Childs’s discussion in any obvious sense I am aware of. It would be my argument that a canonical approach is a modern effort to rethink the relationship between human and divine authorship. Focus on the human author—on the right and on the left of the theological spectrum—fails adequately to deal with the surplus that results from divine inspiration, which in turns leads to an extension of the original proclamation as a truthful hearing of God’s Word: both within the OT itself and as the NT hears the OT in the light of Christ.

129. Christopher R. Seitz, “Changing Face,” in *Word without End*, 80–82; Brett, *Biblical Criticism*; Noble, *Canonical Approach*; Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*.

130. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

include the entire process and especially the consolidation of that process consisting in the “final form of the text.”¹³¹

There is an inspired and coherent Word of God to Israel and to the world, which arises from the historical speech of Amos and Hosea, in the canonical form of the Twelve, but which entails a “history” they saw only partially (and which God over time was revealing in his history). The canonical approach seeks to describe that process, and “success” is less in getting every diachronic detail right (that would be a wrong tack and would end in an “eclipse of biblical narrative”—to use Frei’s language) and more in accounting for the present structure and presentation of the Book of the Twelve, to choose but one example, as it now sits before us (or in front of us). The historical dimension of God’s real speech with real men and women is not eliminated. Amos preached a message to the northern kingdom and to Amaziah the priest at Bethel, and he likely did this before Hosea and probably certainly before Joel. A canonical approach wishes to understand this inspired speech in all its historical and human particularity. Those who shape the books associated with them and the collection of books within which they now reside did not treat them like “plucked instruments” or like the girl (was it a girl?) on the swing whose sweet (but fortuitous) singing converted Augustine.¹³² At the same time, they did seek to hear in their words the abiding and accomplishing Word of God, and so human authorship was always tied up with divine authorship and with the providentiality of the Holy Spirit’s knowledge and work.

Calvin may have been able to move easily between these two realms, but for him the nature of the task was far easier (however we judge

131. Lindbeck’s criticism is at this point over the clarity of what Childs is achieving. If he were clearer, would this meet with Lindbeck’s approval? He writes of Childs, “his primary vocation is to interpret Scripture for the canonical shaping of its content. To lump this highly diverse content together with the rubric ‘witness,’ however, does not add clarity to his task” (“Postcritical Canonical Interpretation,” 34n7). My response would be to question whether a “highly diverse content” is as Lindbeck characterizes it; others have viewed the canonical shaping identified by Childs as *too* tidy. Canonical intentionality can more easily connect to a view of “witness” than Lindbeck seems to suggest. See below.

132. The account assumes a signal position in the evaluation of divine discourse provided by Nicholas Wolterstorff in *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1–8.

his success at it). The biblical books and their human authors had yet to come apart (though Calvin is beginning to sense that a problem exists). It is difficult to say whether the ease of movement seen in him, between the realms of divine and human inspiration, turned on such an economical and as yet uncomplicated view of biblical authorship. What is easier to say is that, with the rise of critical methods, and with a severe complication introduced into this tidy picture, the organic character of inspiration came undone, and with a vengeance.¹³³

Speech-act theory may feel it can enter this realm of confusion and tidy it all up.¹³⁴ Whether it was intended for this kind of operation is another question altogether; I rather doubt it. The biblical witness is carrying too much historicality in its bosom, and it is difficult to see how this dimension will not get shortchanged by philosophical constructions being deployed, even if for good reasons and with a prudential concern to guard against something going wrong. A canonical approach retains a specific concern with historicality, and it judges the season of critical inquiry we have been in to be one that both cannot be avoided and that also brought with it a set of concerns that shed light as well as shade—even at times pitch darkness.

Providentiality covers the seasons of interpretation as well as the seasons of original, historical inspiration. The season we are presently in has raised the acute question of historicality and is sensitive to the

133. See chapters to follow. When, for example, Calvin says that David “prophesied Christ” in Ps. 2, does he mean that David’s mental apparatus as human agent grasped the details associated with Jesus’s future coming and life, or does he mean that God inspired David to speak about such details truthfully and without an attendant need on Calvin’s part to explain how that could be so via the human agent divorced from that divine intention? It is difficult to avoid the impression that the problem does not have the same urgency or contour for Calvin as it will later in the eighteenth century and into the modern period, where the category “anachronism” becomes more compelling.

134. See the discussion of Brevard S. Childs, “Speech-Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation,” *SJT* 58 (2005): 375–92. He concludes, “Wolterstorff’s application of speech-act theory to biblical interpretation is deeply flawed” (391). He then continues, “I would also hope that it has become apparent just how high are the theological stakes in this debate. Many of us can recall, often with much pain, that generations of Reformed theologians, especially in North America, were led astray in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield sought to defend Christian orthodoxy within the framework of Baconian philosophy. It would be sad indeed if a new generation of evangelicals would once again commit themselves uncritically to a new and untested philosophical model, allegedly designed for the twenty-first century” (391–92).

sheer temporal distance of the events the Holy Spirit occasioned in prophets and apostles both. New is newer than Old, to be sure, but the relative character of that cries out for resolution. Käsemann spoke of “proximity to reality” as guaranteed by historical methods.¹³⁵ A canonical approach insists that the inspired witness is building a bridge to us, which is sure and which has our seasons in mind. The character of canonical Scripture is precisely that it overcomes one account of past-present-future and so anticipates the reader and seeks to situate the reader in its own account of time. We are not prophets or apostles, but the canon appreciates this reality with all its witnessing majesty, as we are brought fully into the range of the Holy Spirit’s work by virtue of the canon’s shape and character as witness.¹³⁶

Childs has used the general rubric “witness” to organize in an underdetermined way the genre of scriptural testimony. “Divine discourse” has been viewed as a hopeful improvement on this genre by Lindbeck.¹³⁷ Lindbeck likewise contrasts “witness” in the canonical hermeneutics with a third “classic” approach (his language), which he associates with Richard Hays and others (“reading for narrative world”).¹³⁸ It is not the place here to comment on the taxonomy or the way in which both Childs and Barth fare in such a description.¹³⁹

Witness has to its credit the possibility, as a “classic approach,” of attaching to older dogmatic insights. Chief among these is the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit “witnesses” to the Father and the Son and so gives a truthful trinitarian account whose purpose is to order our lives in his body. As Luther argued in another

135. See the discussion in Seitz, *Figured Out*, 39–44.

136. The phrase “we are not prophets or apostles” is Childs’s. See my discussion in *Word without End*, 102–9, and in chapter 2 below.

137. See his essay in “Postcritical Canonical Interpretation.” He calls this “interpreting for authorial discourse.”

138. The phrase he uses, “Interpretation for Narrationally Structured Symbolic Worlds,” is more ambitious, if not more problematic (“Postcritical Canonical Interpretation,” 33). Hays finds himself rubbing elbows with Wayne Meeks and others here, and not just the Karl Barth he hoped to meet in his “strange new world.”

139. Lindbeck says, for example, of Barth, “It should be observed that the Bible on the verbal level is for Barth chiefly ‘God’s word in written form’ rather than ‘witness.’ That this verbalization is not in accord with the content of Barth’s position is, however, strongly argued by Wolterstorff” (“Postcritical Canonical Interpretation,” 34n7)—and it would appear that Lindbeck is in agreement with this view.

context, the OT has an authority grounded in the succinct creedal claim that the Holy Spirit spoke by the prophets. For Luther, this meant that David could actually see into the divine mystery and by the Holy Spirit could describe the relations between Father and Son in the inner trinitarian life—this all accomplished by the semantics of Hebrew language. What was at stake in this elaborate account was the authority of the OT deeply precedent to the church’s recognition and confession of it, crucial though that would be, because grounded in the reality of God himself.¹⁴⁰

For our age, less controversial than Luther’s exegesis ought to be his claim to understand how the OT Scriptures do their work. Historical agents are inspired to speak of things—to Israel, in Israel, from Israel—that both pertain to their day and also pertain to things the Holy Spirit alone can see and bear witness to, as an extension of what is vouchsafed to them.

One problem of appeal to “narrative world” is, in the end, “just whose world?” Typically, for normative purposes, this world will end up in the hands of someone like Richard Hays, “the narrative world of Paul,” who is then taken to be a normative model for Christian exegesis and faith and life. Who could dispute the sincerity and commendable character of this?

The problem is that, in the realm of a biblical theology of the Christian Scriptures as a twofold witness, the OT threatens to be swallowed up into Paul’s confessions and construals about it (or in an imaginative reconstruction of a narrative world said to be influencing him, by deduction).¹⁴¹ This narrative world is an abstraction derived by recourse to historical tools, and it exists apart from the canonical form of the Pauline Letter collection and the influence this form has on interpretation.¹⁴² Apart from the problem of reifying such a “narrative world,” it is also not clear whether Paul would accept the laurels bestowed on him. Why should his “narrative world” (as

140. Helmer, “Luther’s Trinitarian Hermeneutic.” See now also Heinrich Assel, “Der Name Gottes bei Martin Luther. Trinität und Tetragramm—ausgehend von Luthers Auslegung des fünften Psalms,” *EvT* 64 (2004): 363–78. I have an extended treatment of this in the entry on “The Trinity in the Old Testament” for Oxford University Press (forthcoming).

141. See chapters 2–4 below.

142. See Childs, *Church’s Guide*.

reconstructed by Hays) speak over the manifold witness of the OT said to be generating it? What for Hays is a narrative world exposed by his careful analysis of Paul or the Gospels¹⁴³ is a reduction of what can be said about the witnessing work of the Holy Spirit “who spake by the prophets” in the OT scriptural attestation. The OT generates its own christological and trinitarian doctrine, using its own specific idiom. Paul taps into this potentiality. He does not exhaust it, nor is his example at this local point the warrant for a wider choosing of the NT’s use of the OT, thus restricting the church’s tapping into the literal sense of the OT at its maximal length and breadth, on the terms of its own delivery, as Christian Scripture.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have sought to give an account of the canonical approach that does justice to its extraordinary range. Much more could be said, of course. Childs is unique, to my mind, because he has worked at a sophisticated and creative level in areas that are usually the domain of one scholar only, and he has done so with an amazingly integrative touch. New Testament, Old Testament, church history, reception history, text criticism, theology, and the practice of Christian ministry are but a sample of what he has sought to control and integrate. The canonical approach entails very specific concerns regarding interpretation, but these concerns have been at the service of Christian theology at the most basic and the most comprehensive levels. A canonical approach is an effort to read texts in a fresh way, to engage in questions of historical, theological, practical, and conceptual significance, and to keep the lines of communication between the Testaments, between the Bible and theology, and between them both and the church, open and responsive.

I have not dwelt in great detail on matters of historicity or the final form of the text, and I have only given a brief analysis in the overview above. The explanation for this is that I have written a good deal on these topics in other places and feel that the resources for discussing these topics intelligently are widely available. I also tentatively con-

143. Hays, “Can the Gospels Teach Us How to Read the Old Testament?”

clude that in a good many ways, Childs's proposals on final form and on matters of historical reference have actually met with consent (or curiosity and respect) and are presently bearing fruit in commentary treatments and in other areas. I suspect forty years ago no one would have imagined that treatments of Isaiah that did not deal with the challenge of the book as a totality would be peripheral and minority accounts. Even Childs himself did not push a detailed canonical approach in areas like the Book of the Twelve, though at present scholars as diverse as Jeremias, Nogalski, Sweeney, House, Schart, and Steck would be dumbfounded if this approach were not pursued with diligence, and if the delicate matters of historical reference were not front and center, and requiring a careful assessment. Work in the Psalter is similar and one could go on indefinitely at this point. Even in NT studies, where the resistance has been manifest (by design or by omitting to notice), canonical approaches and concern with the effect of arrangements and final literary presentation are making inroads. New Testament studies are often content to stay with specific fixed and well-known issues, and to cover them again and again, perhaps aided by some new data recently available, and there is a kind of innate conservatism in the field that is hard to account for. The sociology of knowledge and its relationship to NT studies is a topic of enormous interest, to my mind, but it cannot be pursued here.

With a greater appreciation of the effect and sophistication of the final form—a sophistication made even clearer on the other side of our seasons of historical reading—we are now in a position to dismantle the single most decisive claim made by historical-critical reading. And as much as some have sought to describe the historical-critical method as an ingredient in the Reformation, and its indispensable genius, gift, and fruit, this conclusion is far from clear. For the disentangling of general Renaissance and Enlightenment cultural developments from appeals to things like *sola Scriptura* is exceedingly fraught and requires multivolume treatments in the history of ideas with deep learning and enormous sensitivity to the challenge to hand. As time passes and one comes to terms with the exegesis of men like Luther and Calvin, it seems clearer that they inhabit a universe quite distinct, if not unbridgeable, from the one that historical-critical methods bequeathed us in their heyday. Indeed, what would “the Reformers”

really make of projects like dating the Yahwist, or the Q phenomenon, or even anodyne accounts of the history of Israel or the Greco-Roman milieu—areas in which we know more than the prophets or apostles themselves, for what that may be worth.

The decisive claim of historical-critical methods, to be able to provide an appreciation of the historical dimension of the Bible never before available, also meant a Promethean intuition that what had gone before was inherently limited because it lacked proper historical fact-finding, or just old-fashioned because it was premodern and so unable to tackle the tasks at hand. The canonical approach has not turned its back on the findings of historical-critical inquiry, but it has put these under a light and asked what is really being said that helps with interpretation of the literal sense of the text. Given the season in which canonical approaches work, it must be no surprise that a canonical appreciation of the final form is not the same thing as what Thomas Aquinas described as “the literal sense” in Psalm 21 [MT 22]. But the point is: a canonical approach can detect something like a kindred set of concerns linking the reading of Aquinas and its own sense of what is crucial in interpretation, and *it is persuaded that this capacity is crucial to its own success as a method for our day, because of and not in spite of historical-critical questions.*

It is for this reason that in the above I have chosen to look in greater detail at matters of (1) the relationship between the Testaments, including text-critical considerations, (2) the possibility of “doctrinal lenses” (or, the obverse, the impossibility of theologically neutral reading), and (3) biblical theology. In my judgment, because of the concerns of dealing with a two-testament scriptural witness, a canonical approach has had to make sensitive forays into the area of text criticism. It has done this not because it seeks to give some overstated priority to the Hebrew (Masoretic) text, but because a proper understanding of the relationship between the Testaments, as a piece of Christian theology, demands assuring that the choices are not made too stark. Of course, the Christian Bible has circulated with fuller and narrower reckonings of books (“the Apocrypha” et al.). What is at issue is not a (relatively interesting) piece of church history, but instead treating the relationship between the two Testaments of Scripture, for the purposes of Christian theological reflection, in a

flexible and nonmonolithic fashion. Efforts to reify a “Septuagint” often come in the name of seeking to prioritize the NT’s hearing of the Old—where said “Septuagint” is alleged to be crucial—over a sensitive account of how the OT actually does Christian theology from its own plain sense. That is why the issue is crucial from the standpoint of canonical approach: because of the need to account for the OT as Christian Scripture, where its own trinitarian doctrinal potential is not constrained by a new trend in historical-theological NT studies. What one sees in the history of interpretation is a genuine sensitivity to the “plus” the OT offers in the realm of basic doctrinal reflection, and a canonical approach wants to be sure that the truth of that basic intuition is not lost in the name of a biblical theology generated chiefly on the back of historical-critical developments of the past two centuries.

As for the second topic, doctrinal predisposition, what Levenson has shown in his discussion of Brueggemann, and in his own way, in Brueggemann’s analysis of James Barr, indicates that it is simply impossible to defer in any honest way the very necessary movement, back and forth, between plain-sense reading and a larger theological account of God and his relationship to the dual witness of Christian Scripture. In my judgment, canonical approaches have foregrounded this concern, and rightly, precisely because Christian interpretation will confess that one cannot read the Testaments apart from one another, and that because of this, first-order doctrinal claims will and must surface. Here Brueggemann, Levenson, and Childs actually all agree, even as they go their own ways, or start with different concerns and contexts. In the case of canonical approaches, the coincidence with postmodern and reader-response instincts is largely just that. All this means that the long and diverse history of interpretation of the Bible is no longer annexed in the name of theology-free reading, or due to the enthusiasms, now waning, of an objective historical approach.

The canonical approach, with its capacity to listen to, appreciate, and penetrate to the abiding theological concerns of a long history of interpretation, now has a long horizon stretching out in front of itself. Because it has not made Promethean claims on the order of older historical analysis, in respect of the inadequacies of the history of biblical interpretation, and because it has been prepared to

make adjustments and acknowledge blindspots and attenuations,¹⁴⁴ the canonical approach will always have as its chief task the theological interpretation of the plain-sense witness of two Testaments, and that task is unending. It is hard to imagine what the next season will throw up, under God, as its main challenge. History has been the ingredient most calling out for attention in our past season, and a canonical approach has, to my mind, handled that challenge with proportion and insight.

The area calling out for greatest clarity, at least in the guild of biblical scholarship, is just what is meant by the turn to *theological interpretation*. I have chosen in this chapter to focus on what several popular NT scholars are presently interested in, which is accounting for the role of the OT (Hebrew Bible) in generating NT thought, exegesis, and even ecclesiology. All of this is quite hopeful, and it arguably benefits from the inroads made by a canonical approach to Scripture—but *only or chiefly on the OT side of the canon*. This deficit must be corrected, for the result could be serious: the OT could function in its final form, for theological purposes, but what Childs has meant by “canonical shape” could become nothing more than a piece of reception history, seen from the standpoint of a NT utilization, theorized by recourse to a standard kit of historical-critical tools now put to a new purpose by NT scholarship.

More crucially of concern, and we have dwelt on this above, is the threat posed by using the second witness’s theological exegesis of the Scriptures of Israel, or a historical reconstruction of the narrative world it is said to be impressing upon key NT figures, as a normative category of Christian theology. The threat is potent because so very subtle. New Testament use of the OT is indeed a species of what might properly be considered biblical theology. But it is important to reiterate that Christian theological reflection on the OT has a life

144. Having finished writing a commentary on Isaiah, Childs writes in the preface of his next published work: “I have recently finished a technical, modern commentary on the book of Isaiah. The task of treating the entire book of sixty-six chapters was enormous, but in addition, the commentary had necessitated restricting the scope of the exposition. That entailed omitting the history of interpretation and relegating many important hermeneutical problems to the periphery of the exegesis. *After the commentary had been completed, I was painfully aware that many of the central theological and hermeneutical questions in which I was most interested had not been adequately addressed*” (*Struggle*, ix, emphasis added).

proper to itself. That this has fallen out and become largely a species of history-of-religion is a sad fact traceable to developments in the wake of historical-critical inquiry. Correcting this through appeal to a “canonical shape” is not intended to encourage a reinstatement of the OT, now as a piece of reception-historical utilization seen from the standpoint of a NT historical analysis. This improperly delimits the OT from functioning as a major doctrinal source for Christian reflection on God, and obscures or forecloses on the ontological thinking necessary for understanding Christ’s work in accordance with an entire scriptural witness. It also releases NT scholarship from the obligation to think through what it means to read the second witness *as a canonical witness* and to reflect theologically on the entire shape of the NT before attempting biblical theology in the comprehensive sense.

And here the turn to the prior history of interpretation will serve a welcome purpose, not just for reading the OT theologically, but also for reminding ourselves how the OT and NT *together do theology*. Such an examination will not serve to give us role models to imitate step-by-step for our day: that would be driving with the rearview mirror. What the history of interpretation teaches us is how certain critical interpretative instincts come into play when a variety of factors are demanding constant monitoring and attention, history being but one of these. The vast doctrinal potential of the OT in an earlier history of reflection serves as a warning not to believe that the best way to hear the Old is either through historical questions primarily or by letting the NT filter out what is most crucial on this score. On the other side of our great experiment in historical acuity, it is time to take stock and be sure that what we are discovering actually aids us in the task of hearing the plain sense and of relating that sense to the larger figural landscape of God’s work in Israel and in Christ, across a dual scriptural witness. History will not evacuate itself in such an endeavor. It will find its proper place as God has intended, by virtue of learning all over again just what the word “history” actually means.

We take up in the chapters that follow the concerns articulated here at the close of this evaluation of the canonical approach, especially the use of the OT in the New. The term “rule of faith” has also found

its way into recent accounts of canon and theological interpretation. Because we view a proper assessment of this rule as crucial for the theological handling of the OT at a time when the New is under construction, we will conclude the present study with an appraisal of the term's use in the ante-Nicene period. It is to be hoped that the rule's use in the early period will help us understand and appreciate the theological contribution of the Scriptures of Israel, and especially as this emerges without concern for the NT's own hearing of the Old. Only in this way will the centrality of the exegesis of Proverbs 8:22–31, for example, find explanation, as arguably one of the most significant testimonies to the identity of Christ in the early church, which at the same time transpires without extensive NT development or appeals to the use of the OT in the New.