The Nature of Scripture According to Brevard S. Childs

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Abstract: In this article I illustrate the complexity of Brevard Childs' "canonical approach" to the Old Testament. Childs' theological exegesis results not from the use of a particular method but from a stance *vis-á-vis* the text and the world. For Childs, exegesis takes place within the economy of salvation and as such requires attention to historical-critical as well as dogmatic concerns. The article, therefore, presents Childs' approach from the angles of human and divine agency. Exegetical examples are given in order to ground the theory in Childs' actual practice.

Key words: Brevard Childs; Theological Interpretation; Canonical Approach; Karl Barth

1. The Theological Challenge to Exegesis

What is theological exegesis? How does one begin to answer this question? The complexity of the issue consists in the fact that the modifier "theological" presupposes knowledge of a dimension of reality not accessible to normal analytical criteria. Add the qualifier "Christian" and the problems multiply as issues of history, eschatology, authority, and ontology come to the fore. How can one make judgements concerning an "adequate theological hermeneutic" without first having some dogmatic preconception about God and His ways? And yet, how does one access this knowledge, given the very human and fragmentary nature of the witnesses to Him?

This article offers a synthetic presentation of the "canonical approach" of Brevard Childs, understood to be an attempt to articulate both the nature of Scripture and the nature of the reality in which it participates, along with the hermeneutical implications thereof. For those interested in demonstration from first principles, whether grounded in logic, experience, scripture, or tradition, this approach will be frustrating. Childs' starting point is confessional, not deductive. It takes the reality of God Himself, revealed to an elect people that constitute a community, as the source and measure of truth. And given the peculiar shape of this relationship throughout history, this is only right. As Childs says in his Old Testament Theology:

> I do not come to a hitherto unknown subject, but to the God whom we already know. I stand in a community of faith which confesses to know God, or rather to be known by God. We live our lives in the midst of confessing, celebrating and hoping. Thus I cannot act as if I were living at the beginning of Israel's history, but as one who already knows the story, and who has entered into the middle of an activity of faith long in progress.[1]

I believe that it is Childs' conception of "an activity of faith long in progress" that makes his work so inaccessible to many in the academy. Undergirding his canonical theory is a vision of a "divine reality" consisting of God, his people, and his purposes for creation, within which Biblical exegesis is just one sacred act. Presenting this integrated reality is not easy, and a number of access points could be chosen. For example, one could make a "pincer movement" in which one first argues *from* the text to theology (along the lines of Childs' Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture or his Old and

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[1] Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 28-29.

New Testament theologies[2]), and then *from* theology to the text (as can be found in his Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments, or his The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture[3]). I have chosen a different division: that between the human dimension of this history and the divine. My thesis is that Childs' terminology can be misleading, as he has attempted to present his idea in the context of the secular academy. My hope is that my artificial separation will infuse his neutral sounding terms such as "the religious use of tradition," the "forces at work in composition," or "the challenge of new situations/experiences" with more theological content. I also hope that the result will highlight the depth and richness of his exegesis.

2. The People of God

The Church confesses with Irenaeus "the Holy Spirit, who *through the prophets* preached the Economies."[4] In the New Testament, Paul believed that *the Church* is the sphere and the bearer of the proclamation (2 Cor 5:19-20).[5] In his appeal for the primacy of the Hebrew text, Jerome argued that the Jews were the *proper tradents* of the tradition.[6] Within the Old Testament itself, truth is something "which our ears have heard," which "our fathers have recounted to us" (Ps 44:2). Bengt Hägglund draws the conclusion that although Christian faith is primarily concerned with the reality thus proclaimed, it

> does not encounter us as a reality which we can directly apprehend, see, hear or touch. Rather it is a verbally mediated revelation [*durch das Wort vermittelte Offenbarung*], one which is mediated through the original witness of the prophets and apostles. This bondage [*Gebundenheit*] to the revealed and revealing word gives dogmatics, in comparison to all other disciplines and sciences, its particular characteristic [*Gepräge*]. The word "revelation" means, in other words, that we are concerned with matters which on our own terms we are not able to perceive or generate. We are dependent on the witness of others, on that which "we have heard," what others have related to us. It is for this reason that the "process of passing on" ["*das Tradieren*"] is accorded such significance.[7]

This insight has far-reaching implications for Childs, who was indebted to the article from which this quote is taken.[8] On the one hand, he wants to "penetrate the text," to get beyond the witness to the reality itself, to focus, for example, on the realities of covenant and election rather than just Paul's witness to these realities.[9] On the other hand, he is theologically committed to these concrete human

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[2] Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); *Old Testament Theology*; *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

[3] Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997); *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

[4] Dominic J. Unger, *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: Against the Heresies* (New York: The Newman Press, 1992), 49.

[5] Cf. Herman Diem, *Dogmatics* (trans. by H. Knight; Philadelphia: Westminster Pr, 1959), 149.

[6] Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 65.

[7] Bengt Hägglund, "Die Bedeutung der >regula fidei< als Grundlage theologischer Aussagen," *Studia theologica* 12 (1958), 1-44; here, 41 (translation mine).

[8] Cf. Daniel R. Driver, *Brevard Childs, Biblical Theologian* (FAT; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 251: "Apart from Seeligmann's essay on midrash, I suspect that no other single article has more impact on Childs than Hägglund's, and its importance only grows in the allegory phase of Childs' career."

[9] An achievement Childs credited to Karl Barth in "Karl Barth as Interpreter of Scripture," in *Karl Barth and the Future of Theology: A Memorial Colloquium* (ed. David L. Dickermann ; New Haven, CT: Yale Divinity

witnesses as "vehicles" of the reality. And, as historical criticism has made so clear, these men are men of their times, keyed into the issues of their day. The reality they proclaimed was a reality that broke into *their* world. As Barth argued, the *kerygmatic* function of Scripture is rooted in the original intentionality of its historical tradents.[10] This insight, then, keeps Childs bound to the historical witness of the prophets and apostles within the community of faith. The implication is that before he gets to the hermeneutical issues of intertextuality and referentiality, Childs must first deal in historical and form-critical categories. As he says, "To speak of the Bible as canon is to emphasize its *function* as the Word of God in the context of the community of faith."[11] Thus, it is by "establishing the initial setting of a witness within the history of Israel" and then "following a trajectory of its use and application within Israel's history" that a purchase is gained on the particular profile of the witness.[12] This kind of analysis has resulted in a number of historical observations which provide the bedrock of his approach.

In the first place, ancient Israel was in possession of sacred traditions of a *kerygmatic* nature, testifying to God's historical act of redemption on its behalf. At first, these traditions were oral, actualized and passed on primarily within the context of the cult.[13] "[I]ncreasingly in the late pre-exilic and post-exilic periods Israel's tradition was given a written form and transmitted by scribal schools…there was a growing tendency toward the textualization of the tradition."[14] Of significance in Childs' evaluation of this history is not in the first instance the *form* of the tradition (oral, textual), but rather the continuity of its *function*, which is proclamatory (*kerygmatic*). As Childs says, "To speak of canon is to speak of proclamation."[15] The traditions of Israel were not held to be static deposits of information but rather *vehicles* of guidance and instruction in the ways of its god. The thrust was theocentric and the function was deictic: a divine word was passed on to a new generation and the goal of the tradent was to efface himself in light of his profound referent. This word was creative, "history making," so

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School Association, 1969), 30-64; here, 34: "Barth wants to go through the text, to the reality, that the text becomes a transparency, that the walls that separate the reader are dissolved, and one then begins to confront the reality itself."

[10] K. Barth, *Einführung in die evangelische Theologie* (Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1962), 192-193.

[11] Childs, "The Canonical Shape of the Prophetic Literature," in *The Place is Too Small for Us: The Israelite Prophets in Recent Scholarship* (ed. R. Gorden; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 513-522; here, 52.

[12] Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 98.

[13] See Childs' numerous form and tradition critical theories in his *The Book of Exodus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1974). A particularly elaborate example is his theory concerning the existence of two forms of the Mosaic office rooted within different Israelite cultic institutions, the traditions of which were later combined at an oral stage of development before the authors of the source documents provided their own additional literary stamp, pending further shaping by a Deuteronomic editor plus glosses (344-360). Early on, Childs approved the form critical theories of M. Noth and G. von Rad. Though Noth is usually considered to be more of a historian than a theologian, he claimed that the Israelite amphictyony, for example, was grounded a theological construal (i.e. the Exodus). As such, it could only be abrogated by further prophecy and had the authority to shape history, even subordinating kings to its logic. See Martin Noth, *The Laws in the Pentateuch and Other Studies* (trans. by D.R. Ap-Thomas; London: Oliver & Boyd, 1966), 1-107.

[14] Childs, "Analysis of a Canonical Formula: 'It Shall be Recorded for a Future Generation'," in *Hebräische Bibel und ihre zweifache Nachgeschichte: Festschrift für Rolf Rendtorff zum 65. Geburtstag* (eds. Erhard Blum, Christian Macholz, and Ekkehard W. Stegemann; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1990), 357–364; here, 360.

[15] Childs, "The One Gospel in Four Witnesses," in *Rule of Faith: Scripture, Canon, and Creed in a Critical Age* (eds. Ephraim Radner and George Sumner; Harrisburg, Penn.: Morehouse, 1998), 51-62; here, 62.

that its impact on its addressees becomes part of the overall message. Seitz talks of "a word accomplishing what God purposes" (Isa 55:11), which "overtakes" the generations it once addressed to speak an abiding word to later generations (Zech 1:6), "creating of itself new scope and range of meaning."[16] The result is a vision of Israel's confessional life as consisting in a dialogue with tradition. There was (and is, see below) a constant dialectic at play as Israel, on the one hand, strove to understand the will of its god in terms of its authoritative traditions and yet, on the other hand, interpreted these traditions anew from the perspective of a deeper grasp of the divine reality. It was the word passed on which counted, the "substance" of the testimony which was the concern of both prophet and audience. Thus, Childs can talk of the intention of the editors of Isaiah as wanting

> to critically enrich earlier parts of the corpus ... as a means of clarifying and deepening a grasp of the substance to which scripture as a whole points. This concern is for the truth of the witness, which is measured by its faithfulness to its theological content rather than by modern criteria of testing the accuracy of a biblical text according to the original sequence of historical events.[17]

Earlier, Childs said that Israel understood its traditions "religiously."[18]

Prophets and apostles pass on a word, which impacts its faithful hearers who then strive to comprehend its fullest dimensions and register this for a later generation. Within this movement there is a process of elevation and subordination. It is not the case that all traditions within the history of Israel have equal weight, as if they can be absolutized and played off against each other.[19] The key is that the process was *critical*, and the standard was the theological content of the tradition:

> [V]arious editors exercised a critical function in registering from the received traditions that which they deemed truthful and authoritative. This shaping thus involved a *Sachkritik* which was not simply reflective of private, idiosyncratic agenda, but which arose from actual communal practice and belief. ... In a word, Israel shaped its literature confessionally to bear testimony to what it received as containing an established range of truthful witness. At the same time, the biblical editors subordinated other voices, either by placing them within a negative setting, or omitting them altogether as deleterious to Israel's faith.[20]

Accordingly, Moses, not Korah, Jeremiah not Hananiah, were judged to be faithful tradents of divine revelation. Though Childs affirms that the tradition-historical process involved change and growth, without the continuity of the divine word his approach falls apart.[21] This position not only undergirds

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[16] Christopher Seitz, *Word Without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Cambridge: Eerdamans, 1998), 44-45; 12. This fact illustrates the artificiality of separating the human and divine: the human responds to the divine, so that that the former cannot be spoken of without some reference to the latter.

[17] Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 102.

[18] Childs, "Response to reviewers of Introduction to the OT as Scripture," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 16 (1980), 52-60; here, 53.

[19] This is Childs' critique of Walter Brueggemann's *Old Testament Theology: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997); see Childs, "Walter Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament. Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 53 (2000): 228-233.

[20] Childs, "Brueggemann," 230. Elsewhere, Childs is keen to distinguish this understanding of Sachkritk from that of Käsemann, for whom the principle functioned as a "canon within the canon." Childs opts far a Barthian emphasis on the Spirit and the whole of Scripture. See Biblical Theology, 214. For Childs, "the Sache is defined in such a way as to do justice to the witness of both testaments," 85.

[21] "... a historical critical theory of Deuteronomy which would construe the book as a pious fraud created for propaganda reasons to support the political aspiration of the Jerusalem priesthood would, if true, raise serious questions about a canonical interpretation which claimed that the book was shaped by primarily religious concerns. Similarly, if the development of a sense of canon was only a late peripheral phenomenon of the

his approach and renders it theologically useable for the Church, it has implications for how the exegete is to handle the diachronic dimension of the text in relation to the synchronic. For example, Childs affirms the claims of redaction critics that Isaiah 6 displays evidence of literary retrojection. This insight is indeed important, as it shows us how the tradition set guidelines for the later appropriation of its message. Nevertheless, the issue turns on the *nature* of the process. Childs describes this in relation to Isaiah 6 as follows:

> What is here present is not a tendentious reading back of a subsequent political agenda, but is part of a process of canonical shaping that stems from a holistic reading of the larger prophetic corpus. The witness to God continues to grow in richness and understanding. This true subject matter is then often extended to earlier portions of Isaiah without attention to the age of its discovery, but rather only to the truth of its witness when measured according to its theological substance. Thus the portrayal of God's rule in 2:1-4 and again in 4:2-6 resonates with elements of Isaiah's vision of chapter 6 and is grounded in the reality of God's eschatological rule, revealed to the prophet in chapter 6. Likewise, 2:6ff. also reverberates with the imagery of God's glory, but here revealed in terror (2:21). The point to emphasize is that canonical shaping develops from a holistic wrestling with the subject matter of the biblical text, and as comprehension grows through encounter with the living God it begins to infuse the entire book with a truthful witness to the one story of God's salvific purpose with Israel.[22]

In this sense, then, "canon" does not reference primarily the final form of the text. Childs clarifies this in relation to the book of Isaiah: "By the term *canon* I am not merely interested in addressing its formal scope, but including the *quality of the theological testimony* identified with the prophet Isaiah."[23] His commitment to the final form of the text is not an escape from historical criticism, but rather an embracing of the implications of the text's true intentionality, a submission to the will of the tradents:

> The decision is not derived from a higher evaluation of the last level of redaction per se, but rather in the entire critical assessment provided by the final form of the text as to what is normative for Israel's faith involving all the different levels. It is constitutive of canonical shaping to offer this theological *Sachkritik* on the tradition in its entirety.[24]

In Childs' theological vision, then, God has spoken in time and space to and through elect tradents. Within the economy of God, these tradents function as "vehicles;"[25] their *raison d'être* is to point beyond themselves to the divine reality (Isaiah had a "God saturated stance").[26] In the course of time,

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Hellenistic period, my approach to the O.T. would be seriously damaged. For this reason, I have felt constrained to mount a reasoned case why such a politicized interpretation of Deuteronomy does less than justice to the biblical text, and why the forces associated with the canonical process lie at the heart of the entire O.T." In Childs, "Response," 56.

[22] Childs, *Isaiah*, 59.

[23] Childs, *Isaiah*, 3 (second emphasis mine).

[24] Childs, *Isaiah*, 441. One can express this Christologically: "To speak of the role of canon is only peripherally connected with the formal matters of canonization, but rather turns on the early church's effort to bring to bear on the entire tradition the impact of the exalted Christ upon the content of the gospel and the ensuing imperatives commensurate with a faithful response. Thus the Gospels, in very different ways, render the tradition from the perspective of Easter and do not seek to ground the Christian faith upon a preserved memory of a historical Jesus from the past." In Childs, *New Testament as Canon*, 688-689.

[25] For references to Isaiah of Jerusalem as a "vehicle," see Childs, *Isaiah*, 17 and 56.

[26] Childs, *Isaiah*, 32.

text replaces human tradent as the vehicle of revelation, though never to the detriment of the substance of the original proclamation. The form changed, but the function remains the same.

Interestingly, this switch proposed by Childs is not simply a historical-critical postulate, an analogy can be found in the Biblical narrative and it appears that Childs registered this. Note Childs' analysis of the relationship between human and textual tradent in the figure of Moses:

> Within the Pentateuch, Moses' writing activity is closely tied to his mediatorial role in receiving the divine law at Sinai. Whereas God himself is portrayed as writing the decalogue (Ex. 34:1; Deut. 4:13; 10:4), Moses not only proclaims the 'words and ordinances' of God to the people (EX. 24:3), but he is also commissioned to write them (v. 4; cf. 34:27). The significance of Moses' writing of the law receives its clearest formulation in Deut. 31. The context of the chapter is the impending death of Moses, and his commissioning of the writing of the law. Several crucial points are made in the chapter. The law, which derived from God's speaking to Moses, applies to every successive generation of Israel (31:11-13). It serves as a witness to God's will (v. 28). The law of God has now been transmitted for the future generations in the written form of scripture. It is placed next to the ark in book form to be read to the people periodically (10ff.). *Indeed, the original role of Moses as the unique prophet of God (34:10) who proclaims the word of God as a witness (31:27ff.) will be performed by the book of the law in the future (31:26ff). Moses will shortly die, but his formulation of the will of God will continue.* Throughout the rest of the Old Testament the identification of the divine law with Moses' writing of it in a book is continued (Ezra 6:18; Neh. 13:1; II Chron. 25:4).[27]

Within the narrative world of the Bible, the human "mediator" of the divine will has been replaced by a text. Historical criticism complicates the picture by showing us that the text that we have today has been expanded, so that much that is ascribed to Moses came from different periods. But it is arguable that the basic theological issue remains untouched: whether the movement is God→Moses→TEXT or God→Moses→TEXT←redactor/glossator←God (in which redactor/glossator is seen to be responding to the witness of the prior Mosaic text), the TEXT at the end of the process is a witness to the one will of God—in the latter case, now in fuller (redactionally enriched) form.

It is interesting to note that on leaving the Biblical depiction behind, Childs posits a historical scenario that would reaffirm theological continuity. He speculates that perhaps the role of Moses was continued in an office and later persons accordingly added material in the name of Moses.[28] Though Childs quickly dismisses the theory as lacking in evidence, it is interesting to see what possibilities he could countenance. In other words, a canonical approach requires that Israel's history takes on a certain shape in order for the final literary form to become the locus of theological authority. The process of "passing on" (*das Tradieren*; see the Hägglund quote above) has to have been of a particular "quality." In the process, the historical prophets and apostles have not been eliminated, but they have been "taken over,"[29] expanded, enriched, intensified, clarified (to use some of Childs' vocabulary).[30] The

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[27] Childs, *Introduction*, 133-134 (emphasis mine).

[28] Childs, *Introduction*, 134.

[29] Cf. Zechariah 1:5-6 and the discussion in Seitz, "How is the Prophet Isaiah Present in the Latter Half of the Book?" in *Word*, 168-193.

[30] One might ask in this connection why the later redactors/glossators (etc.) hid their identity, retaining only that of the original historical figure who stood at the "fount" of the tradition-historical "stream." Childs answers that "the claim of Mosaic authorship functioned as a norm by which to test the tradition's authority" (*Introduction*, 134). As a result, "one historical moment in Israel's life has

driving force is God. And could a true witness, one who is only interested in the object of his procla-mation, want anything else but to recede so that the full reality may shine forth?

It is in this sense that Childs talks of the text itself as a *tradent* of authority, whose connection with the historical witness cannot be lost:

> The text is the tradent of authority in establishing a link with specific prophetic figures. The literature has no life apart from Israel's life, institutions, and offices. The prophet serves as the living voice of God now preserved in a living text of Scripture. The text can certainly be extended beyond the scope of the original prophecy, but the theological link with its origin must be maintained in order to sustain its authority. It is impossible to have free-floating literary constructs which are totally without historical rootage because authority ultimately rests on divine communication through these prophetic messengers. The prophetic text is not a creation of nameless editors to manipulate for a private agenda, but it remains the irreplacable [sic] vehicle in the service of God for the sake of Israel.[31]

It is only by virtue of the *strength* of the "theological link" (on which, see more below) that Childs can speak of historical Isaiah "authoring" the final form of the book ascribed to him:

> The resulting shape [of the book of Isaiah] bears a truthful witness to the selfsame divine reality first testified to by the eighth century prophet Isaiah, but then continually unfolded, modified, and enriched by successive generations of prophetic tradents to serve as Israel's authoritative scripture, a prophetic word that stands for ever (40:8) and accomplishes its divine purpose (55:1).[32]

Childs' commitment to the historicity of Israel's witnesses, the peculiar dynamics of textuality, and the transcendence and continuity of the one referent explains the subtlety of his understanding of the nature of the final form of the text. "Canon" (without the definite article) is a cipher for the entire process of Israel's "religious use of its tradition":

> [T]o suggest that the final canonical form reflects only the theology of the last editor's hand is a misunderstanding of my position. My concern in showing the process of canonization is to demonstrate that the entire history of Israel's interaction with its traditions is reflected in the canonical text.[33]

The complicating factor when it comes to evaluating and theologically appropriating this diachronic "history of Israel's interaction with its traditions" is that "regardless of the exact nature of a text's prehistory, a new dynamic was unleashed for its interpretation when it was collected with other ma-terial and assigned a religious role as sacred scripture."[34] In other words, the literary turn created "a new medium of witness,"[35] in which "the formation of a sense of authoritative Scripture unleashed ... a set of forces which then tended to operate according to laws quite distinct from those at work in the

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become the norm by means of which all subsequent history of the nation is measured. If a law func-tions authoritatively for Israel it must be from Sinai. Conversely, if it is from Sinai, it must be author-itative" (*Old Testament Theology*, 55).

[31] Childs, "Retrospective Reading of the Old Testament Prophets," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 108 (1996), 362-377; here 375-176.

[32] Childs, *Isaiah*, 449.

[33] Childs, "Response," 54.

[34] Childs, "Response," 54.

[35] Childs applies the phrase to Luke's use of the "report genre," but the implications are the same. See "Gospel," 25.

development of oral tradition."[36] This is one factor explaining Childs' hesitance in placing too much emphasis on pre-scriptural levels of tradition as an arena for theological interpretation. Yet even with his focus on "textuality," Childs does not detach the text from its participation in external non-textual reality (i.e. it is not self-referential, as some literary approaches would have it). Even at the literary level, the function of the text remained "deictic," it points beyond itself. This is so much the case for Childs that he can even use this language in relation to Biblical *inter*textuality. Accordingly, inner-Biblical allusion serves to enrich a witness by confirming its truth and further revealing the reality it could only partially perceive. The hermeneutical implication is that the exegete must keep in mind "different degrees of consciousness"[37] present in the final form and handle their interaction with skill. An illustration of this is Childs' treatment literary expansion in Isaiah chapter 1:

> I would argue that vv. 27–28[38] are a good example of textual expansion (*Fortschreibung*). From the experience of the exile [i.e. when the editor added vv. 27–38 to vv. 21–26], Israel discovered a different dimension of vv. 21–26.[39] It was not that the Isaianic text had to be adjusted to fit the social realities of a later time, but exactly the reverse. From the coercion of the biblical text Israel learned how correctly to understand the new postexilic situation. Desolate Israel clung firmly as never before to the promised salvation of Zion and the final destruction of God's enemies. The scribal editor confirmed the promise of Isaiah as true: Zion—as far as it was truly Zion—would surely be redeemed. Moreover, this promised salvation would stem solely from God's justice ... and from his righteousness ..., not from Israel's virtue. Thus, this textual extension confirmed Isaiah's promise as true, and by using the vocabulary of Israel's later (postexilic) experience defined more clearly the implicit Isaianic concept of Zion as a faith reality, distinct from merely a political entity, but still containing the wicked along with the faithful.[40]

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[36] Childs, "Midrash," 53.

[37] Childs, "Response," 54. Again, in Introduction, 630, Childs claims that modern "midrashic" types of exegesis, which "evaluate the present composition consistently on the same level of intentionality throughout" fail to deal with "the historical dimensions of the canonical process which established a scale of intentionality." This rejection of midrash appears again in Childs' critique of Fishbane, who argues for strong continuity between pre- and post-biblical interpretation (in Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1985]). By way of example: "The actualization of the Exodus traditions by Deuteronomy which von Rad, for example, studied reflects a very different process from the proto-midrashic, inner-biblical exegesis of texts of the exilic and post-exilic periods." In "Review of Michael Fishbane, Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 (1987): 511–513, here, 512. Cited in Driver, *Brevard Childs*, 182.

[38] According to Childs' translation: "Zion will be redeemed by justice, her repentant ones with righteousness. But rebels and sinners together will be destroyed, and those who forsake the LORD will perish. For one will be ashamed of the oaks in which you have delighted, and disgraced because of the gardens that you have coveted. You will be like an oak with fading leaves, and like a garden without water. The strong man will become tinder, and his work a spark, and both of them will burn together with none to quench" (*Isaiah*, 15).

[39] According to Childs' translation: "How she has become a harlot, the faithful city! She was once full of justice, where righteousness dwelt–but now murderers. Your silver has turned to slag. Your wine is diluted with water. Your rulers are rogues and cronies of thieves. They all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the orphan and the widow's case never reaches them. Therefore, this is the declaration of the Almighty, the Lord of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: 'Enough! I will vent my anger on my foes; I will wreak havoc on my enemies! I will turn my hand against you, and smelt away your dross as with lye, and remove all your impurities. I will make your magistrates what they once were, and your counsellors like those of old. Afterward you will be called City of Righteousness, Faithful city'" (*Isaiah*, 14-15).

[40] Childs, *Isaiah*, 21–22. Numerous other examples could be given from both Childs' Exodus and Isaiah commentaries. See, for example, Childs' treatment of the Song of the Sea in *Exodus*, 249. He notes the

Taking into account varying degrees of intentionality requires nuance in dealing with literary blocks. For example, evidence of accidental factors, such as may be the case in the appendix to Samuel, need to be treated differently to more conscious examples of literary structuring. Again, regarding the juxtaposition of the two Testaments in the Christian Bible: the nature of the implied unity is of a different order to the canonical shaping of the individual books within each Testament. In this case, fact that the unity is achieved by the mere juxtaposition of two self-contained units rather than the imposition of a single overarching redactional pattern implies that "it is the resulting effect of the juxtaposition, rather than in a single editorial intentionality, that should guide theological interpretation."[41]

But these insights and their exegetical outcomes are just "the beginning of the show."[42] Neither of Childs' Exodus or Isaiah commentaries fulfils the task of truly theological exegesis on his own terms.[43] If it is the case that the authors of the Bible had a "God saturated stance,"[44] a *theocentric* focus, then exclusive focus on philological, historical, or literary issues can only be what Karl Barth called "prolegomena." Rather, one must move beyond the witness to wrestle with its *substance*, "*res*," "*Sachverhalt*," "content," or "subject matter."[45] An instructive example is Childs' treatment of the true referent of "*torah*" in Isaiah 2:3, as he not only critiques diachronic attempts to lock its meaning into the past, he also critiques a "canonical reading" which locks it to the final form of the text. The former approach identifies *torah* with the teaching of the prophets, independent of the Law of Moses

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chronological tension between the setting of the song after the deliverance at the Reed sea and its content, which references events well beyond Moses' horizon (e.g. crossing the Jordan). Nevertheless, "By taking seriously the synchronistic dimension of Ex 14 and 15 a characteristic theological feature of the Old Testament emerges. God who has acted in Israel's history is the same one who is acting and will act. The chronological tension which continues to disturb modern commentators apparently did not provide a problem for the Old Testament redactor. The epic style allowed the writer to move back and forth from the past to the present without sacrificing the concrete quality of specific historical situations."

[41] Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 76. Childs' approach is very nuanced. See his handling of the fourfold Gospel composition, especially as this relates to the task of Biblical theology: "the influence of the Old Testament on the individual shaping of the Gospels belongs to the level of the New Testament's compositional history and cannot be directly related to the formation of the Christian Bible qua collection. This means that the New Testament's use of the Old Testament, either by direct citation or allusion, cannot provide a central category for Biblical Theology because this cross-referencing operates on a different level. There is no literary or theological warrant for assuming that the forces which shaped the New Testament can be simply extended to the level of Biblical Theology involving theological reflection on both testaments (*Biblical Theology*, 76).

[42] "Attention to canon is not the end but only the beginning of exegesis. It prepares the stage for the real performance by clearing away unnecessary distractions and directing the audience's attention to the main show which is about to be experienced," in Childs, "The Canonical Shape of the Prophetic Literature, " *Interpretation* 32 (1978), 46-55; here, 55.

[43] Note Childs' comments in the preface of *Struggle*, ix: "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."

[44] As Childs claims for Isaiah in *Isaiah*, 32.

[45] I have attempted to approach such a theological interpretation of Psalm 24 in the vein of Childs in my book *The Substance of Psalm 24: An Attempt to Read Scripture after Brevard S. Childs* (LHBOTS 600; London: T&T Clark Bloomsbury, 2015).

(e.g. Isa 8:16; 30:9). Gerald Sheppard,[46] on the contrary, has argued that in 2:3 the term has been expanded by means of canonical shaping to include the revealed Mosaic legislation as the divinely given norm for Israel (e.g. Isa 8:20; 24:5). In the first instance Childs agrees; the canonical shape is an integral part of the Isaiah's witness. However, he goes on to argue that the semantic extension is not simply a matter of prophetic Torah being identified with the Mosaic:

> Rather, the subject matter of the prophetic message as divine truth continues to exercise a coercion on Israel such that the Mosaic Torah itself increasingly received its full meaning from the divine reality witnessed to by the prophets. On the one hand, the substance (*res*) of the prophetic polemic served to check all legalistic moves inherent in law (1 Sam. 15:22ff.). On the other hand, the unswerving appeal to the Mosaic Torah by the prophets (Jer. 7:1ff.; Mal. 4:4) blocked all attempts to mitigate the full force of the divine will that was given a concrete form at Sinai. In a word, both law and prophetic proclamation were expanded in terms of a deepening grasp of God's reality, but neither was subordinated in principle to the other. Of course, it was this understanding of the nature of Hebrew scripture that drove the apostle Paul to identify the divine truth of the entire Old Testament with the one reality made known through God in Jesus Christ (Rom. 10:1ff.).[47]

The challenge is whether a commentary can consistently be written at this level of intensity.[48] According to Childs, the most productive epochs in the Church's use of the Bible have been characterised by precisely this ability to keep *verbum* and *res* in intimate relationship.[49] A brief overview helps establish precedents and guidelines for the task.

For the first 100 hundred years after the resurrection the Christian mode of appropriating Scripture differed from the rabbinic, despite their common text. For the Church, the text was considered sacred due to the divine *content* to which it bore witness. This function was actualised by the Holy Spirit, who "brought life to the word to reveal its living testimony to Jesus as the Christ."[50] This interest in a form of theological referentiality led the Church it to adopt the interpretative strategy of *allegory*, which contrasts with Jewish *midrash*. Childs summarizes the difference as follows: "Midrash works at discerning meaning through the interaction of two written texts, allegory ... finds meaning by moving to another level beyond the textual. It seeks to discern meaning by relating it referentially to a substance (*res*), a rule of faith, or a hidden eschatological event."[51]

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[46] G. Sheppard, "Isaiah 1—39," in *Harper's Bible Commentary* (ed. James Mays; New York: Harper, 1988), 93-94.

[47] Childs, *Isaiah*, 30. See also Childs' treatment of Isaiah 40 in both testaments in *Isaiah*, 303.

[48] Childs considered Bonhoeffer's commentary on Gen 1–3 to be one of the finest examples of theological exegesis. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3* (ed. Martin Rüter, Ilse Tödt, John W. de Gruchy; trans. Douglas Stephen Bax; Vol. 3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

[49] Cf. Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 724-725: "The productive epochs in the church's use of the Bible have occurred when these two dimensions of scripture [text and content] constructively enrich and balance each other as establishing an acknowledged literal sense. Unfortunately, the history of exegesis has more often been characterized by severe tension between a flat, formalistic reading of the text's verbal sense which is deaf to its theological content—this was Luther's attack on Erasmus—or by a theological and figurative rendering of the biblical text which ran roughshod over the language of the text to its lasting detriment—this was Calvin's attack on the Libertines (Inst.I.IX.i)."

[50] "Jesus Christ the Lord and the Scriptures of the Church," in *The Rule of Faith*, 1-12; here 7.

[51] Childs, "Critique of Recent Intertextual Canonical Interpretation," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 115 (2003), 173-184; here, 182-183. Childs is particularly indebted to Andrew Louth's *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). See

The significance of substance over a surface reading of the text continued in the early church's appeal to the *regula fidei* in its fight against Gnosticism. This rule of faith was "a core of Christian belief on which the Christian faith was grounded, the one catholic tradition expressed in both oral and written form."[52] Following the analysis of B. Hägglund,[53] Childs insists that the *regula* of the early church refers not to a baptismal formula or the Scriptures but to the reality of the gospel itself to which these witnesses pointed.[54] Creed and Scripture, to use Hägglund's terminology, are *Träger der Offenbarung* [tradents of the revelation]*, Vermittler der Heilswirklichkeit* [mediators of the reality of salvation], and can only be called rules-of-faith to the degree that they reflect that reality.[55] Christian interaction with the text then was a "ruled reading," in which the reality proclaimed by the text functioned as the norm against which the text itself was critically read. Early attempts to do this are Irenaeus' appeal to God's one redemptive purpose uniting both Testaments, Origen's appeal to multiple levels of meaning in Scripture in which the reader is led from the external to internal as part of the divine pedagogy, and Augustine's appeal to God's ultimate intention: love of God and neighbour.[56] According to Childs, this is essentially the same stance taken by Luther and Calvin, who, in continuity with earlier patristic commentators, strove "to maintain the prophetic vision according to its proper *skopus*."[57] As Childs said in response to Protestant concerns that he was giving undue privilege to tradition and canon over the Word: "the appeal to the role of the Holy Spirit both confirms the centrality of the tradition as the vehicle of continuing instruction, and also subordinates the written word to God himself as the source of all truth."[58]

It is important at this juncture to point out the degree of continuity within this history of theological interpretation, stretching from ancient Israel and its traditions, through the creation of scripture, and on to post-Biblical exegesis. It can be expressed in terms of a dialectic. On the one hand, interpretation has had a consistently theocentric *telos*. This expresses itself for Childs in a focus on the *themes* of Scripture, as the reality to which the text points is always in some sense distinguishable from the text itself. A good example of a consistently thematic stance is Childs' treatment of the story of the manna

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also Childs, *Struggle*, 299-322 and Childs, "Allegory and Typology in Biblical Interpretation," (unpublished paper delivered at the University of St. Andrews, April 2000). This insight already distinguished Childs from Hans Frei in 1969. In a dialogue with Frei at a colloquium on Barth, Childs states: "One has to keep in mind that the early church, in the controversy with Judaism, took a quite different move [to pure narrative referentiality]. Where the Jews were saying, read the text! read the text!, the Christians said, there's something behind the text. It's what the text points to, namely: Jesus Christ. And there was a dialectic between the reality and the text," in Childs, "Karl Barth," 56.

[52] Childs, "Jesus Christ," 5.

[53] Hägglund, "Bedeutung." Hägglund analyses the understanding of the *regula fidei* or *regula veritatis* according to Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria and draws implications for dogmatics and Church history.

[54] Childs, "Jesus Christ," 5. Hägglund concludes that "the relation to 'reality,' 'actual event,' always plays an important role in the characterisation of Christian doctrine as 'truth.'" (p. 38; translation my own).

[55] Hägglund, "Bedeutung," 39.

[56] Childs, "Jesus Christ," 10. For more detail on these and other older theologians, see Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 30–53.

[57] Childs, *Struggle*, 304. This entire volume is an attempt to demonstrate areas of continuity in the history of Christian exegesis, finding linkages between Origen and von Rad! For a presentation of Childs' canonical approach in terms of what this volume considers to be the "constitutive features of Christian exegesis" see Philip Sumpter, "Brevard Childs as Critical and Faithful Exegete," *Princeton Theological Review* 14 (2008), 95-116; available at http://www.princetontheologicalreview.org/issues_pdf/38.pdf (accessed March 17, 2015).

[58] Childs, "Response," 55.

and quail (Exodus 16:1-36). At the level of the composition of the story itself, Childs notes an anach-ronism: the jar of manna was to be placed "before the Testimony" (v. 34), even though the ark hadn't been built yet. On the one hand, this is evidence of the author wrestling with various sacred traditions in Israel's history. However, the obvious chronological tension testifies to the fact that the editor's desire was to make a *theological* point. In short, "A jar of manna which is the sign of God's sustaining mercy is kept alongside the tablets of the law. ... the point of the text focuses on the testimony that the manna and the tablets belong together before God. In New Testament terminology, the gospel and the law cannot be separated."[59] This solution contrasts with those that seek to smooth out the tension by positing either a "prophetic perfect" or editorial incompetance.

This thematic appropriation continued within the broader canon. Deuteronomy 8 appears to contrast the manna with bread and to suggest that Israel learned humility through the eating of this food. The Priestly writer emphasizes the exact matching of the individual need. For the Psalmist the failure to respond to the gift of manna provides a major testimony to Israel's unbelief which leads to judge-ment.[60] Again, the New Testament continues this basic stance by avoiding the midrashic method, which attempts to "harmonize difficulties and render the material pliable for fresh practical applica-tion."[61] Childs emphasises the contrast:

> It is theologically significant to note that basically the New Testament does not follow this lead in its handling of the manna stories, although it does make considerable use of midrashic tradition. Rather, it finds its warrant in the Old Testament for selecting certain themes from the variety and elaborating on these. The gift of manna is above all a gracious sign of God's care which sustains a rebellious, murmuring people and seeks to point them to an apprehension of the real meaning of provision through this divine favor. Because this selective process already operates within the Old Testament, the New Testament approach does not provide a sharp contrast, as is frequently the case; rather, it extends and develops the direction taken by Deuteronomy and the Psalter. Even John's use of the tradition, which marks the furthest extension of the Old Testament in the direction of Philo's exegesis, begins with themes which are firmly anchored in the Old Testament. Indeed, his christological interpretation moves far beyond the Old Testament text but retains the central theme of 'heavenly bread which brings life to those who eat.'[62]

The post-Biblical church has operated with a different form of the witness: a two-Testamental canon rather than Jewish Scripture and oral tradition.[63] Nevertheless, the thematic focus continued: "The manna stories were frequently used by the early church Fathers as a homiletical vehicle for a great variety of themes," though often lacking originality on Childs' judgement.[64] The first real break in this tradition came in the high Middle Ages, when Jews started wrestling with the question of whether the manna was a natural phenomenon or not. The issue was taken over by the Church after the Refor-mation and continued until the 19th century.[65]

The danger inherent in this approach is that the thematic abstractions can easily become disconnected from the text and thus subordinate it to an alien logic. According to Childs, this is what happened

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[59] Childs, *Exodus*, 291-292.

[60] Childs, *Exodus*, 303.

[61] Childs, *Exodus*, 303.

[62] Childs, *Exodus*, 303.

[63] This constitutes a significant component of Childs' rejection of approaches to Biblical Theology which subordinate the Old to the New. See *Biblical Theology*, 77-79.

[64] Childs, *Exodus*, 297.

[65] For the details, see Childs, *Exodus*, 297-299.

with the four-fold interpretative scheme of the Middle Ages: "Not only were the levels of the texts conceived of in a static and arbitrary manner which resulted in the fragmenting of its unity, but the integral contact of text and subject matter was seriously blurred through clever interpretive techniques."[66] The safeguard against this is the second pole of the dialectic: a commitment to authoritative tradition, now in the form of the literal sense of the text or its "*per se* witness," as Christopher Seitz has put it. This dimension has been built into the Christian Bible itself in the form of an un-redacted Old Testament, juxtaposed to the New and not subordinated to it. It is in this "Jewish" form that the text must continue to function as Scripture for the modern Church. As Childs puts it: "For the Christian church the continuing paradox of faith lies in its encounter through the Jewish Scriptures with the selfsame divine presence which it confesses to have found in the face of Jesus Christ."[67] Indeed, as far as Christian theology is concerned, this is part of the function of "the mystery of Israel":

> Christianity can make no proper theological claim to be superior to Judaism, nor that the New Testament is of a higher moral quality than the Old Testament. Human blindness envelops the one as much as the other. Rather, the claim being made is that the divine reality made known in Jesus Christ stands as judge of both religions. This assertion means that Judaism through God's *ḥesed* has indeed grasped divine truth from the Torah, even when failing to recognize therein the manifestation of God in Jesus Christ. Conversely, Christianity, which seeks to lay claim on divine truth in the name of Christ, repeatedly fails to grasp the very reality which it confesses to name. In a word, two millennia of history have demonstrated that Jews have often been seized by the divine reality testified to by their Scriptures, but without recognizing its true name, while Christians have evoked the name, but failed to understand the reality itself.[68]

The Church, then, is caught in a dialectic between the discreet witness of two testaments, each preserved in their own idiom and function, as they relate to the one reality who is Christ. The function of this relatively closed corpus of scripture is to provide a "positive and negative criterion for assessing those interpretations that fall outside of the theological restraints provided for its faithful reading."[69] How, then, should the exegete proceed?

Childs calls for a "multiple level interpretation" (three, as he presents it), which he conceives to be "a single method of interpretation which takes seriously both the different dimensions constituting the text as well as distinct contexts in which the text functions."[70] Within this reconceived form of figural reading, one can access the text from any of the three levels. The crux is that they always be held together as part of an integrated whole.[71] It is also important to bear in mind that within this scheme, the final form functions as "transparency" to its substance, and is not the ultimate object of interpretation itself.

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[66] Childs, "Does the Old Testament Witness to Christ?" in *Evangelium, Schriftauslegung, Kirche*, (eds. Å. Jostein, S. Hafemann, H. Otfried, and F. Gerlinde; Göttingen: Vanderhoek & Ruprecht, 1997), 57-64; here, 61.

[67] Childs, "Witness," 64.

[68] Childs, "Witness," 63-64. Daniel Driver helpfully elucidates the meaning of this concept in Childs' thought. See especially chapter 5: "Canon and Midrash: Confronting the "Mystery of Israel," in *Brevard Childs*, 160-208.

[69] Childs, "Speech-act Theory," 383-384.

[70] Childs, "Witness," 61.

[71] The context of these thoughts is the Old Testament's witness to Christ. They can, however, be applied to both testaments.

Thus, one avenue of access is the discreet voice of each Testament, heard in its own right. This requires attention to historical, literary, and canonical contexts. In classic terminology, this means reading the text for its *sensus literalis*. Such a move, however, does not involve bracketing out theological questions because, as we have seen, it is the nature of the text to talk about and respond to God. Another avenue of access takes into account the whole of the two-Testamental Bible, perceived as a combined witness to one God. A relationship of content is pursued by means of structural similarities and dissimilarities where care is taken not to fuse the contents of each witness. The results should not contradict the literal/historical reading but rather extend it.[72] "Once again, a theological relationship is pursued both on the level of the textual witness and on that of the discrete matter (*res*) of the two collections."[73] The final entrance operates on the basis of the Christian confession that the Bible constitutes a theological unity, despite its two-Testamental division. Here, the full reality of the subject matter of scripture, gained from a close hearing of each separate testament, is explored.

Undergirding this approach is the dogmatic presupposition of the ontological unity of Scripture. Without it the canonical approach falls apart. An alternative could be to turn to J.A. Sanders' "canonical criticism" (not Childs' "canonical approach"), in which—on Childs' reading—the canon is understood to be a flexible paradigm functioning to identify the community's self-understanding and reinforce group consciousness.[74] Or we could turn to Walter Brueggemann's "post-modern" attempt, which chooses to focus not "on substance or thematic matters but on the processes, procedures, and interactionist potential of the community present to the text."[75] In order to give Childs' proposal the theoretical underpinning it requires, we shall need to give a more robust theological account of God as the author of scripture.

3. The Agency of God

In his critique of the theories of Frei and Hauerwas concerning the nature of Biblical authority, Sykes raises the centrality of the issue of divine authorship:

> In Christian theology, the authority of Scripture must be based not only in the social practice of forming a canon, which it shares with other communities, but in acknowledging God's unique activity in the formation and interpretation of Scripture. For theological purposes, the crucial point is not that authority of Scripture is political, but that it is divine. Not only does the community affirm that these stories are about God, but that they are of God, and therefore capable of sustaining Christ's church. And it is because God has disclosed himself in these stories that they have hegemony over other stories."[76]

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[72] Hans Frei's work in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (Yale University Press, 1974) is without doubt in the background here, see chapter one. For Childs' indebtedness, see *Biblical Theology*, 14.

[73] Childs, "Witness," 62.

[74] See Sanders, *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972) and "Adaptable for Life: The Nature and Function of Canon," in *Magnalia Dei—The Mighty Acts of God: Essays on Bible and Archaeology in Memory of G.E. Wright* (eds. F. M. Cross, W. Lemke, P. Miller; New York: Doubleday, 1976), 531-560. See Childs' critique in "The Canon in Recent Biblical Studies: Reflections on an Era," in *Canon*, 33-57; here, 38-39 and 40-42.

[75] W. Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), xvi. See Childs' critique in "Brueggemann."

[76] It is more of a supplement than a critique. See Sykes, "Narrative Accounts of Biblical Authority: The Need for a Doctrine of Revelation," *Modern Theology* 5 (1989), 327-342; here, 334.

In other words, it is one thing to talk of God as the *object* of Israel's proclamation, it is another to talk about Him as its *subject*. How we construe that, however, has hermeneutical implications. In order to understand Childs' approach, we turn to the work of Karl Barth, drawing on the work by Hermann Diem for help.[77]

Barth affirms the human particularity of the biblical witnesses, with all the historical and cultural conditioning which this implies.[78] Nevertheless, he transcends this particularity by means of what he calls the "three forms of the Word of God" (*das Wort Gottes in seiner dreifachen Gestalt*). Diem summarises the three forms as: (1) the present preaching of the Church as related to the word of Scripture and referred to it as a norm; (2) the witness of Apostles and Prophets as contained in the canon of Scripture to the Word of God (*Reden Gottes*); and (3) the Word of God itself as revelation (*das Reden Gottes Selbst in seiner Offenbarung*).[79] Despite the temporal and cultural distinctions, in all three forms God is the speaking subject. A significant characteristic of this speaking is that it is not a communication of information *about* God, as if revelation consists in collecting a body of information. It is rather an *action* of God toward us, convicting our consciences and showing us that the Gospel story is also our story.[80] It thus has the character of a mediated *force* dependent on the will of Another who reveals Himself as He pleases. As Barth says, "A truth of revelation is the free initiative of God Himself and that alone."[81] Diem concludes that within Barth's scheme,

> the secondary witness of Scripture is not only a historical derivative of the primary event of revelation, it is also a new and second form of God's dealings and conversation with men, a new phase of "the times of the Word of God." By means of a dogmatic presupposition (*dogmatische Setzung*) ... Barth transcends and eliminates the historical question concerning the development and transmutation of the witnesses to revelation, and this is probably the decisive point in his approach. Certainly these various times ... have a historical continuity even in earthly history. But again they receive their material identity (*sachliche Identität*) from a dogmatic presupposition,

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[77] It is generally recognised that Childs was deeply indebted to Karl Barth. His works are regularly cited, he is held up as a role model (in Childs, "Karl Barth " and "Old Testament in Germany 1920-1940: The Search for a New Paradigm," in *Altes Testament: Forschung und Wirkung: Festschrift fur Henning Graf Reventlow* [eds. Henning Graf Reventlow, Peter Mommer, and Winfried Thiel; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1994], 233-246) and he is even compared to an ancient Hebrew prophet in "Interpreting the Bible Amid Cultural Change," *Theology Today* 54 (1997), 200-211. See also Charlse Scalise, "Canonical Hermeneutics: Childs and Barth," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 47 (1994), 61-68. Though Diem is hardly mentioned by Childs, his *Dogmatics* is cited along with Barth in a footnote (n. 14) at a critical juncture in the development of Childs' argument that we should see the text as a "witness" in his foundational essay "Interpretation in Faith," 432-449.

[78] E.g. Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (trans. by Grover Foley; New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1963), 38: "each prophet ... spoke within the limits and the horizons of his time, its problems, culture and language."

[79] Diem, *Dogmatics*, 57-58. German original, 54.

[80] Cf. Diem, *Dogmatics*, 125-126: "this history requires from the hearer of its evangelical presentation, instead of the mere apprehension of facts ... faith that in this history a decision has been made affecting himself personally and his whole personal destiny" (emphasis original).

[81] Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God*. Vol.1, part 1 (trans. by G.T. Thomson; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1977), 15; cited in Diem, *Dogmatics*, 55.

namely their [contingent][82] contemporaneity (*kontingente Gleichzeitigkeit*) as the speech and action of God.[83]

Barth himself puts it thus: "The material identity underlining the continuity between the Old and the New Testaments lies in the speech of God which is self-identical in both dispensations despite all differences of time and mode."[84] An analogous position was taken by Childs in an early essay that outlines his theological take on the issue of exegesis: "The correspondence between Old and New [Testaments] is an ontological one. In spite of the tremendous variety of the witnesses, the Christian church confesses the same God at work."[85] This same confession, now developed beyond his early article, is found at the end of Childs' career in his Isaiah commentary where he talks of a *force* at work in the editing of chapters 1-12:

> the prophetic oracles developed as they were used authoritatively by those who treasured them as scripture, and they continued to address the changing needs of each new generation as the *vehicle of divine revelation*. Because the major *force* in the history of growth was the continued impact on the Jewish community of the *reality of God mediated through its authoritative writings*, it is a fundamental misunderstanding to attribute the development within the prophetic corpus merely to extrabiblical sociological or historical influences.[86]

In Barth's formulation, however, we go beyond just the temporal to include an ontological dimension.[87] There is not only a horizontal development (primary to secondary witnesses, witness to subject matter), but also a vertical dimension ("*sachliche Identität*," subject matter to witness[88]), where each form becomes a form of the one object.[89] One can draw on Childs' work on *Christuszeugnis* in the Old Testament for a Christological analogue (though Childs makes no explicit connection here to Barth):

> [T]he New Testament in relating the message of the Gospel to the Jewish Scripture goes far beyond asserting its relationship in terms of a historical sequence. Although the various writers make very clear that Jesus appeared at a given historical moment in the life of Israel—Gal 4.4 speaks of the "fullness of time"—this temporal orientation does not rule out at the same time moving the discourse to an ontological plane. According to John 1.1 Jesus Christ was the eternal Word who was with God in the beginning. Col. 1.15f. speaks of his being "the image of the

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[82] My translation. The published English translation has "potential" here.

[83] Diem, *Dogmatics*, 96-97. Original German, 89. It is in this sense that Barth can say, "The Bible is not in itself the act of divine revelation ... [but it is] the concrete means by which the Church is reminded of God's self-revelation." In Barth, *CD*, 114.

[84] Diem, *Dogmatics*, 161.

[85] Childs, "Interpretation in Faith," 442.

[86] Childs, *Isaiah*, 216; emphasis mine.

[87] In contrasting temporality and ontology, I'm drawing on Childs' definition of the term: "The term ontological refers to a mode of speech in relation to a subject matter which disregards or transcends temporal sequence." In "Witness," 60.

[88] The adjective in German is important for the connection to Childs. Sachlich links to Sache, which is another way to say "content" or "subject matter."

[89] Cf. Diem, *Dogmatics*, 62: "What makes [the acceptance by certain New Testament exegetes] of [Barth's] position so difficult seems ... to be that Barth sets to work only after the conclusion of the canon, and assumes the latter to be a unified and closed dogmatic whole, which has its basis in a special moment of the Word of God (in einer besonderen Zeit des Reden Gottes), and thus stands outside the factual estimates of historical criticism." Original German, 59.

invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created." Rev. 13.8 makes mentions of "the lamb slain from the foundation of the world."[90]

The hermeneutical implication is that on the one hand there is a place for a form of *Traditionsgeschichte*, in which tradition-historical development is registered and appreciated. As Barth, Diem, and Childs have all affirmed, this diachronic history is registered in the final form of the text, so that the historical dimension cannot be ignored.[91] Indeed, Diem theologically validates historico-critical analysis on the basis of the proclamatory nature of revelation and draws the supposedly "non-canonical conclusion" that "we cannot be content to regard the Biblical books in their canonical wholeness, but will always have to make enquiries in a certain sense into the background of the canonical text."[92] Nevertheless, there is a depth dimension to this reality which, though intersecting with ours, is not graspable in terms of the categories of this world. The result is that if one wants to comprehend what Barth called "*das* ganze *Wort*" ("the *whole* Word") and not just the fragmentary testimony of the parts, a hermeneutic of "*Zusammensehen*" ("syn-opsis") is required:

> Again and again [Theology] must distinguish between what God made happen and will make happen, between the old and the new, without despising the one or fearing the other. It must clearly discern the yesterday, today and tomorrow of its own presence and action, without losing sight of the unity.[93]

Turning back to Childs' Isaiah commentary, we can see one of many examples of how this ontological-unity-in-temporal-development becomes registered in the final form of the text. Childs notes the perplexing temporal perspective of chapter 26 in the context of chapters 24-27: "It strikes the reader as particularly perplexing that the preceding chapter speaks of the 'fortified city' of Israel's oppressor as having already been destroyed, of an eschatological feast in the presence of God for all peoples, and even of a vision of death being abolished in the new age of God's rule on the holy mountain."[94] How does one explain the apparent lack of coherence? He duly notes Seitz's comment that the Psalms also tend not to fix fully the temporal movement within God's economy, but holds that this does not get to the heart of the issue. It is worth citing Childs *in extenso*, in order to capture the subtlety of his approach:

> Up to this point, I have argued the case for seeing chapters 24-27 as a paradigmatic presentation of life lived in the end time. The approach of these chapters certainly cannot be described correctly as a systematic abstraction of their material. The particularity of the presentation remains sharply contoured by means of the imagery of apocalyptic speech and the conventions of liturgical language. Yet there appears to be an intentional distance established from those specific historical events, which are rendered as illustrations of larger patterns. In a word, there is a distinct typological flavor given to the account. Babylon is never mentioned, but a "city of chaos" receives its just punishment. Judgment comes not from a specified enemy, but rather terror encompasses the world as God opens up "the windows of heaven." Jerusalem is not named the strong city where God inaugurates his salvation—what other city could possibly play this role?—but rather

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[90] Childs, "Witness," 60.

[91] Thiselton notes that according to Demson, "apostolicity" grounds Barth's readings in history in a way that is not the case for Frei. See David Demson, *Hans Frei and Karl Barth: Different Ways of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), especially 69-110. Cited in Thiselton, "Introduction," in Bartholomew et al., *Canon*, 15.

[92] Diem, *Dogmatics*, 145.

[93] Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 10.

[94] Childs, *Isaiah*, 189.

we hear only of a city waiting for the righteous to enter. Finally, salvation is not presented as an escape from earthly oppressors, but as a life with God apart from death and human decay.

The effect of this manner of literary composition is that its coherence does not lie in a linear temporal sequence in which the righteous are sharply removed from the wicked and the new age always succeeds the old. Rather, the chapter is organized in an aspectual, typologizing manner, and a different scenario is unfolded in each chapter even when similar conventions are used that often overlap in context. For example, there is much similarity in the genre and content of 25:1-6 and 26:1-6. Yet in chapter 25 the appropriate response to God's approaching judgment is followed by a portrayal of a "heavenly" festival. In contrast, in chapter 26 the faithful response in prayer to God's judgment of the lofty city (v. 5) is followed by a lengthy reflection of this same community of faith, but under oppression from the wrath of God, which is still felt (26:20).

In sum, chapter 26 offers a great variety of conventional forms, but in the end it results in a highly theological presentation directed to the faithful, who testify to the effect of God's victory, yet still experience the full weight of divine and human judgment. God's salvation has been truly experienced; his righteous rule is confessed. Yet ultimately salvation is depicted in terms that transcend any one experience. Chapter 25 speaks of a life removed from death, while chapter 26 of the promise of resurrection to life even after the suffering of death.[95]

Ultimately, salvation transcends any one experience. It is an exceptional event, requiring exceptional literary documents and a specific hermeneutical procedure.[96] For this reason it is wrong-headed to think that one can have access to this reality by digging "behind" the witness to a supposedly more objective reality. As Childs says: "by defining the Bible as a 'source' for objective research [as opposed to a 'witness'] the nature of the content to be described has been already determined. *A priori*, it has become part of a larger category of phenomena."[97] It is rather in the proclamation itself that we are confronted with true revelation, and so it is the witness itself that must be the object of theological exegesis. This witness does indeed have a history behind it (an *Überlieferungsgeschichte*). Nevertheless, this history of transmission is characterised by a *Sachkritik* so that the final form pronounces a *theological judgement* upon everything that went before. The criteria for evaluating this history is the theological reality itself, and the arena for its apprehension is the final form—the "canonical" shape of the text.

Thus, the term "canonical," in Childs' use, references this entire reality, heavenly and earthly. It is a confession of the God of the gospel and His ways on earth:

The reason for treating the final form of Scripture with such seriousness lies in the peculiar relationship between text and people of God which is constitutive of canon. The shape of the biblical text reflects a history of encounter between God and Israel. Canon serves to describe this unique relationship and to define the scope of this history by establishing an end to the process. It assigns a special quality to this particular segment of history which is deemed normative for all future generations of this community of faith. The significance of the final form is that it alone

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[95] Childs, *Isaiah*, 189-190.

[96] Cf. Diem, *Dogmatics*, 96: "Barth presupposes that the events attested in the Bible, the revealing action of God, are exceptional events forming the real foundation on the basis of which all history is to be interpreted. He presupposes further that the canon of Holy Scripture contains exceptional literary documents, which because of the exceptional history to which they bear witness demand a specific hermeneutic procedure, which supplies the basic principles for general hermeneutics applicable to other texts."

[97] Childs, "Interpretation," 437. Again, on 438: "Approaches which start from a neutral ground never can do full justice to the theological substance because there is no way to build a bridge from the neutral, descriptive content to the theological reality."

bears witness to the full history of revelation. Within the Old Testament neither the process of the formation nor the history of its canonization is assigned an independent integrity. These dimensions have been either lost or purposely blurred. Rather, canon asserts that the witness to Israel's experience with God is testified to in the effect on the biblical text itself. It is only in the final form of the biblical text in which the normative history has reached an end that the full effect of this revelatory history can be perceived. [98]

A final corollary of the peculiar, living subject matter of Biblical tradition is that the moment of "theological interpretation" itself, the moment when we are confronted with the revelation and not just its witness, is an event outside our control. There are no definite principles as norms with which the community of faith can guarantee this moment. Rather, as Diem puts it, "the Spirit which has inspired Scripture can be recognised only by the Spirit which they alone have who are ἀπὸ κυρίου πνεύματος (2 Cor 3:18). Nowhere is there given any definite hermeneutical method of exegesis such as would furnish secure grounds for this recognition."[99] Childs attempts to illustrate the phenomenon historically by drawing on Kuhn's concept of a "paradigm shift."[100] For example, the paradigm shift represented by the Confessing Church in Germany in the 1920's and 1930's, in which "the strange new world of the Bible" was rediscovered, was not due to the use of a new method or the discovery of more detailed archaeological data. Rather,

> the perspective was sharply altered. One spoke of hearing an alarm, of suddenly coming to one's senses. There was indeed a paradigm shift, to use Kuhn's terminology, but how and why? I suggest that the political crisis gives only a part of the answer. One of the recurring themes of those who sought to move in a new direction was that the new vision of the Bible was not actually an innovation but rather one that had often sustained the Christian church in the past. Old images suddenly took on new life and power. It was as if suddenly, the church fathers and the reformers were also being rediscovered. Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, from strikingly different cultural traditions, together spoke of responding to a powerful force from Scripture itself. The coercion of the biblical text occurred in different ways, often matching the unique personalities of each interpreter, but theirs was always a stance of reception. They were hearing a divine word, encountering the direct presence of God, celebrating an overwhelming joy from the power of the gospel. In every case, the Scriptures were the vehicle for the transformation of perspective.[101]

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[98] Childs, "Prophetic Literature," 47-38.

[99] Diem, *Dogmatics*, 178.

[100] T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962). Discussed in Childs, "Cultural Change."

[101] Childs, "Cultural Change," 204. Cf. also Childs, "A Response [to James Mays Et Al.]" *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 2 (1980), 199–221: "As a young student who had fallen under the spell of von Rad, I shared with many others the conviction that his brilliant method held the key to a proper understanding of the OT… Yet [in the next generation] much of the excitement which his early post-war lectures evoked had died… Slowly I began to realize that what made von Rad's work so illuminating was not his method as such, but the theological profundity of von Rad himself. The same observation holds true for Wolff and Zimmerli. I am convinced that no amount of methodological refinement will produce a quality of interpretation which that generation achieved whose faith in the God of Israel was hammered out in the challenge to meet the Nazi threat against the life of the church," (p. 208). Formulated more theologically: "the God of the Bible is not a static, unchangeable figure, seated somewhere in heaven, to be found or lost depending on human disposition. Rather, the God of the Bible is one who makes God's self known but who also hides God's self," Childs, "Cultural Change," 209.

As Barth has put it, the history of the community of faith up until our present day is "the history of the government of the Church by the Word of God."[102] In addition, then, to Childs' foray into figural and literal reading outlined at the end of §2 above, a theological hermeneutic must take the stance of the present reader into account. From his review of theological interpretation in Church history, Childs identifies five pointers which constitute "a logic within the Christian rule of faith"[103]: (1) The Bible must be regarded as the main vehicle for encountering the living God. "The Bible is the source of the church's life; it provides the content for its liturgy and worship. To speak of moving beyond the Bible always signals a return to the wilderness and a loss of divine blessing."[104] (2) The Bible accrues its proper authority when it is read and celebrated in the community of the Church. That means that the Bible must be read as addressing issues of life and death, as a guide for faith and practice and as a critical theological norm. (3) Faithful interpretation should be able to identify a "family resemblance" with all past interpreters of "genuine understanding and insight" (Augustine and Bernard, Luther and Calvin, Pascal and Wesley, Kierkegaard and Kähler). "The likeness arises from the serious encounter with the selfsame God who shapes obedient response into Christian likeness."[105] (4) Faithful reflection also demands faithful action. "Where there is true understanding of the Scriptures, by necessity, there arises an imperative for evangelism and mission, a care for the impoverished and suffering."[106] (5) Finally, the function of the Holy Spirit as a continuing guide in faith means that understanding must grow and be renewed. "Our understanding of the Bible can never be static. Its pages continue to radiate fresh guidance into the knowledge of God and his Son, Jesus Christ."[107]

In light of this reality, the greatest challenge to the Church from the Enlightenment has not been its discovery that the Biblical narrative does not always accurately mirror historical events. It has been the assumption that the Bible is ultimately only "a vehicle of human self-expression."[108] Childs' dogmatic commitment to a different option will no doubt continue to be a stumbling block to the acceptance of his approach within the wider academy. It remains for the Church to decide the true nature of its scripture and thus take a stance *vis-á-vis* modernity.

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[102] Barth, *Gotteserkenntnis und Gottesdienst nach reformatorishcer Lehre* (Zürich: EDZ, 1938), 177; cited in Diem, *Dogmatics*, 146.

[103] Childs, "Cultural Change," 210-211.

[104] Childs, "Cultural Change," 210.

[105] Childs, "Cultural Change," 210.

[106] Childs, "Cultural Change," 211.

[107] Childs, "Cultural Change," 211.

[108] "For the heirs of the Enlightenment, in opposition to the traditional allegorical approach as a divine medium of revelation, there was a 'total commitment' to the literal or historical sense as the indispensable vehicle of human reflection on the divine." Childs, "Critical Reflections on James Barr's Understanding the Literal and the Allegorical," Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 46 (1990), 3-9; here, 5. See Driver's discussion of the different definitions of "allegory" used by Barr and Childs, in *Brevard Childs*.

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