

**BREVARD CHILDS:
THE LOGIC OF SCRIPTURE'S TEXTUAL AUTHORITY IN THE
MYSTERY OF CHRIST**

Daniel R. Driver

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
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Brevard Childs:
The Logic of Scripture's Textual Authority
in the Mystery of Christ

A thesis submitted by

DANIEL R. DRIVER

*to the Faculty of Divinity in
St Mary's College, University of St Andrews
in candidacy for the degree of*

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Submission Date: 4 July 2008

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ABSTRACT

Brevard Childs argues for the inner logic of scripture's textual authority as an historical reality that gives rise to the material condition by which the church apprehends and experiences God in Christ. The church's use of (or by) scripture thus has a larger interiority: the shaped canon of scripture, Old and New Testaments, is a rule of faith which accrues authority in the church, through the vehicle of the *sensus literalis*.

Childs' work has been misplaced, however. Part one locates it internationally, attending to the way it has been read in English and German and finding that it has enjoyed a more patient reception in Europe than in Britain or North America. To illustrate, Childs' definition of biblical theology is contrasted with that of James Barr. Their differences over *gesamtbiblische* theology involve opposite turns toward and away from Barthian dogma in biblical inquiry.

Part two examines Childs on biblical reference, introducing why intertextuality is not midrashic but deictic—pointing to the *res*. This coincides with an understanding of the formation of biblical literature. Childs' argument for canonical shaping is juxtaposed with Hermann Gunkel on tradition history, showing "final form" to be a deliberate inversion of form critical principles. Childs' interest in the Bible as religious literature is then set alongside his studious confrontation of Judaism, with implications for inter-religious dialogue.

Barr and Childs are compared again in part three, which frames their respective senses of indirect and direct biblical reference in terms of allegory. Both see allegory at work in the modern world under certain rules (either biblical criticism or the *regula fidei*). Their rules affect their articulations of trinitarian dogma. Finally, Psalm 102 highlights divergences between modern and pre-modern interpreters. If scripture comprehends the present immediately, some postures of the church toward the synagogue may be excluded.

To Adriel, for your long-suffering and cheer

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Another factor in my decision to stay at St Andrews for the PhD and one which has exerted an influence on this project was the Scripture & Theology seminar, founded a decade ago by Prof Christopher Seitz. In it I had the opportunity to present drafts of two chapters and to receive engaging feedback from mentors and peers. Studies in the reception of the Psalms and Habakkuk also formed the most energizing collaborations of my student career. Beyond the seminar, Seitz helpfully supplied documents pertaining to Childs which could not otherwise have been obtained.

I was fortunate that my four years at St Mary's College spanned two life-cycles in its thriving postgraduate community. Many people made the Roundel so much more than a comfortable place to sit and surf the web: in the Hadow Room there was Ted, Steve and Gary, followed by Seth, Patrick and Gwendolyn; in Old Testament and cognate areas Amber, Tim, Josh, Drew, Steven, Ian, Grant and Don also deserve mention; and Aaron, Jeremy, Kelly, Kevin and Luke get a clause all of their own. Special thanks to Tim Stone in particular for carefully reading a complete draft close to the submission date, averting a handful of *errata*. Naturally, those and any larger mistakes that remain are all mine.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Brevard S. Childs:

- Memory* *Memory and Tradition in Israel*. London: SCM, 1960, ²1962.
- Myth* *Myth and reality in the Old Testament*. London: SCM, 1962.
- Assyrian* *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis*. London: SCM, 1967.
- Crisis* *Biblical Theology in Crisis*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970.
- Exodus* *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*. Louisville: Westminster, 1974.
- OT Books* *Old Testament Books for Pastor and Teacher*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977.
- IOTS* *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979.
- NTCI* *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984.
- OTTCC* *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985.
- BTONT* *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992.
- Einen Bibel* *Die Theologie der einen Bibel: Bd. 1: Grundstrukturen, Bd. 2: Hauptthemen*. Tr. by Manfred and Christiane Oeming. Freiburg: Herder, 1994, 1996.
- Isaiah* *Isaiah: A Commentary*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001.
- Struggle* *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004.
- Corpus* *The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008.

Other abbreviations not in *The SBL Handbook of Style* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999):

- CD 1/2* Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics, 1/2: The Doctrine of the Word of God*. Tr. by G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956.
- Concept* Barr, James. *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999.
- CHB* Rendtorff, Rolf. *The Canonical Hebrew Bible: A Theology of the Old Testament*. Tr. by David E Orton. Leiderdorp: Deo, 2005.
- JBTh* *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie*
- ügP* Rendtorff, Rolf. *Das überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem des Pentateuch*. BZAW 147. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1977.

All other short titles used in citation are listed after the relevant entry in the bibliography.

INTRODUCTION

In fact ... canonical criticism ... is simplistic. Basically it has only one idea: the controlling place of the canon. To others this may fall apart into several conflicting ideas, but to the canonical critic himself it is all one idea. There is of course complexity even in the canon, but all that complexity can be dealt with by the one simple idea... [T]he canonical principle leaves the believer at peace, alone with his Bible.

—James Barr

Criticism of my understanding of canon emerges as a recurrent theme in some of the responses of my colleagues. It is occasionally claimed that it is imprecise, unanalytical, and encompasses a variety of different phenomena. I feel that the complexity of the process being described within the OT has been underestimated, and that one is asking for an algebraic solution to a problem requiring calculus.

—Brevard Childs

Locating the work of Brevard Childs (1923–2007) can be difficult. A great deal has been said about what he is up to with his “canonical approach,” not all of it sympathetic, not all of it helpful (critics can of course be either one without being the other). Often the reconstructed portrait does not in the least match Childs’ self-presentation. This is nowhere truer than in the multitudinous detractions of James Barr (1924–2006), who charges that “canonical criticism [sic] ... is simplistic,” that the only thing its several features have in common is that they co-exist in the same mind.¹ For Barr the term canon stands not for a workable approach to biblical exegesis, but instead for a hopeless muddle. Childs, on the other hand, maintains against criticism like this that he would not offer “an algebraic solution to a problem requiring calculus.”² So which is it? Is the canonical approach a methodological train wreck, or is it a sophisticated attempt to address complicated problems?

In answering this question some have split the difference. Childs offers important insights, it is maintained, and yet due to the confusion and unworkability of his program, his

1. Barr, *Holy Scripture*, 168.

2. Childs, *Response to Reviewers*, 52.

method must be thoroughly rebuilt. The canonical approach is flawed but can be salvaged. In the view of this author, however, both the total and partial rejection of Childs' solution to "a problem requiring calculus" has been premature. Doubtless his approach has vulnerabilities and weaknesses—given the complexity of the challenge addressed one could not expect otherwise. But before criticism can be advanced at this level, it is necessary first to have a clear understanding of the canonical approach's aims, what problems it identifies, and how on its own terms these are solved or mitigated. Criticism has at times been so severe that one can appreciate why Childs in his later work begins to "resist the practice of some immediately to characterize [his] approach as 'canonical,' since the label has only engendered confusion."³ Yet in the end he neither abandons the term nor amends his use of it along the lines suggested by his reconstructors. As a charitable point of departure, then, it will be worth entertaining the possibility that his durable commitment to canon as a governing framework should not be construed as obstinacy or inflexibility—ironically the typical charge has been that Childs is labile—but as a knowledgeable embrace of an intricate, knotty subject.

Generally speaking, though, generosity toward constructive work with canon runs against the prevailing mood. Robert Kraft speaks of the "tyranny of canonical assumptions," for example. For him, and for not a few members of the Society of Biblical Literature he addresses, to speak of canon at all is a desperate anachronism. "Historically responsible philological work, of course, does not pay attention to these boundaries, either as limits ... or as touchstones."⁴ In a related vein, although involving a scholar one would expect to be more sympathetic to Childs' project, those who attended Rolf Rendtorff's special session at the international meeting of SBL in Edinburgh may recall the question and answer period that followed.⁵ Rendtorff was asked whether the death of the Yahwist (whom he had supposedly

3. Childs, *Isaiah*, xii. He continues, "I hope that this commentary will be judged on its own merits apart from any prior concept of what a 'canonical' reading ought to entail." The same request could preface all of his work now, early as well as late.

4. Kraft, *Para-mania*, 17–18.

5. The paper Rendtorff gave on 4 July 2006, "What Happened to the 'Yahwist'?: Reflections After Thirty Years," was made available on the SBL website at <http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=553>. Its content is incidental to the anecdote that follows.

killed thirty years prior) would have negative pedagogical consequences. The questioner explained his worry that, if Childs' canonical perspective wins the day, students will lose all the critical tools which have been honed by critical research. Would not the demise of literary-critical analysis have this result?⁶ Instead of responding directly to the question, Rendtorff distanced himself from Childs, his "close friend." First, in his early days Childs was far too invested in source analysis. Throughout his Exodus commentary (1974) we find him identifying J and E. Later, he left source analysis behind and took a dogmatic turn, for the worse, patterned on Karl Barth. Rendtorff's quick retort brought forth a round of applause.

The point is not that Childs was widely disliked—this may or may not be true, and it would hold little value even if it could be demonstrated. And anyway, personalized feelings to the side, Childs was himself a sharp critic of the work of other scholars. Rather, Childs is widely thought to have substituted dogma for a rational method—and therefore to be deeply confused, or else just dangerous. This can be demonstrated easily from the body of literature on Childs' method, and when the charge is made it almost invariably allies with Barr. Rendtorff's quip about Childs' presumed change on source criticism, for instance, is, willfully or not, an apt summary of Barr's take in 1999.⁷ It has become customary to dismiss Childs as someone who is constantly changing his mind, and who slides with too much ease into dogmatism. Probably within the guild, and certainly within the literature, there is a strong habit of incredulity toward the logic and self-presentation of the canonical approach.

Admittedly, development in Childs' thought is a genuine complication. His corpus has a cumulative scope. *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (1970) exhibits several unambiguous hallmarks of the canonical approach, and yet Childs would spend the next twenty-two years completing the project adumbrated there. As he remarks a decade on, just after the arrival of his landmark *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (1979),

-
6. I confirmed the content of J. H. Ellens' question in private communications, 18 and 31 July 2006.
 7. Barr, *Concept*. In Childs' Exodus commentary, Barr says it is "surprising to find that the analysis into J, E and P, in great detail down to half-verses and quarter-verses, is still there" (391). In later work, however, "the importance of canon is beginning to fade and the importance of doctrinal rectitude is beginning to increase" (396). In point of fact, Childs still speaks of layers in his Isaiah commentary of 2001—maybe to a surprising extent, depending on a person's notion of what canonical reading entails.

Most of the crucial issues such as the relationship of the two testaments and the other kinds of judgments beyond exegesis which are part of the hermeneutical task, I have not been able to address directly within the scope of an OT Introduction. [In *Crisis*] I tried to cover some of these larger issues. Only after the book had been published did I realize that the groundwork had not as yet been carefully enough laid to support a theology of both testaments. Therefore, I decided to reexamine the foundations before pursuing biblical theology any further.

IOTS could only be part of the reexamination, and here in 1980 he forecasts his next two major volumes, *The New Testament as Canon: an Introduction* (1984) and *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (1992): “However, this descriptive task is far from complete. A study of the New Testament from a canonical perspective would also have to be executed before one could adequately address the central issues of biblical theology.”⁸ Thus the publication of *BTONT* signals the completion of a personal goal of long standing.⁹ The challenge is not just that Childs’ work is voluminous, but that it comprises a coordinated effort. It virtually asks to be read as a corpus.

So the reader picking up some part of this work for the first time would do well to heed the words of one of Childs’ students, Gerald Sheppard: “Childs has shown an ability to change his mind on issues and approaches over time. Ambiguities or lacunae at later stages in his work cannot be uncritically clarified by appeal to earlier positions. Yet what persists from his earlier work may remain presupposed by later formulations.”¹⁰ To take just one instance, the argument from “midrash” in the early 1970s is an essential component of the argument for “canonical shaping,” a ubiquitous theme in Childs’ *oeuvre*. At the same time, the term “midrash” itself is increasingly rejected. Through the 1980s Childs comes to see it as an exegetical mode that modern Christian exegesis must not imitate.¹¹

Then again, care should be taken not to exaggerate this dynamic. Another of Childs’ former students rightly emphasizes major strands of continuity in Childs’ work over years. Christopher Seitz recognizes “that already in 1970 Childs had laid out the basic defining fea-

8. Childs, *A Response* [Mays], 199.

9. Christoph Dohmen frames the issue well in his preface to the German translation of *BTONT*, in Childs, *Einen Bibel*, 1:11–14.

10. Sheppard, Childs, 575.

11. See chapter five for details.

tures of the approach. 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, Biblical Theology and the History of Interpretation, including significant work in the Book of Isaiah.” Seitz points to five instances of “durable and sustained interest” to be found starting with *Crisis*: (1) critique of historical criticism, (2) special prioritization of the final form, (3) “observations on the status of the Hebrew and Greek text-traditions,” (4) critical but appreciative attention to pre-Enlightenment exegesis, 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 handles the Old.”¹² That Childs’ thought is in development to some extent does not make it a moving target.

The time has come for a fresh look at Childs’ approach. His own canon of writing is now closed, and it includes a phase beyond the one that culminates in *BTONT*, during which the last published accounts of Childsian hermeneutics drew their conclusions. After *BTONT*—a unique effort which itself has rarely been discussed, at least in English—there is a technical commentary on Isaiah (2001), which Childs feared health issues would keep him from completing. Reprieves in his illness permitted him to finish two further projects, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture* (2004) and *The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus* (2008). The manuscript of latter had been sent to the publisher just before his death on 23 June 2007, at the age of 83.

Is there a figure in the carpet, so to speak? It is of course still too early to gauge what sort of long-range impact Childs’ work will have. It is now possible, however, to look back at this library, and to attend to its contours. Patterns do emerge, I suggest, and have a discernible kind of logic. Nor are these shapes anything like as difficult to trace as those in the fictitious writings of Henry James’ Hugh Vereker. If one wants it in a single line, for Childs the shaped canon of scripture, Old and New Testaments, is a rule of faith which in the church accrues tex-

12. Seitz, *Theological Interpretation*, 59.

tual authority. That is his career thesis, and that, plus its internal implications, plus its relation to the accompanying criticism, is what this argument will attempt to unpack.

Childs ventured into many cognate fields over his career. He studied Jewish midrash in earnest after completing a PhD in the Old Testament; then upon writing an introduction to the OT he devoted no less than five years to researching an introduction to the NT; after that he wrote a Biblical Theology of both testaments, the first and so far the only one of its kind; and then, before finally returning to the NT, he gave considerable attention to church history, working especially on the problem of allegory in Christian exposition of the OT. Given all this, it will be impossible here to render anything like a definitive verdict on Childs' contribution. I take it that this is greater than sometimes suggested, but my purpose is neither to defend Childs' work against all comers, nor to commend it as a panacea. Rather, I hope simply to open up fresh vistas by taking the debate about its significance to less-trodden ground.

In any case, Childs himself freely acknowledges that tremendous difficulties attend the projects he undertook. For example, note what he says about the challenge of writing an OT Theology, which he attempted in 1985:

Seit ihrer Entstehung war es ein Charakteristikum der Disziplin alttestamentlicher Theologie, dass sie immer mit ernststen methodologischen Unsicherheiten zu kämpfen hatte. Ob schon sie oft als Krone der ganzen Disziplin bezeichnet wurde, sah es so aus, als ob ihre führenden Vertreter immer wieder einen unsicheren Blick auf andere Gebiete des Unternehmens werfen würden, voller Angst, ob nicht irgendeine neue literarische, historische oder philologische Entdeckung das Unternehmen gefährde... Nicht nur, dass die Disziplin locker definiert und in ständiger Revision war, sondern *gewisse grundlegende Spannungen* stellen nach wie vor ihre Gestalt in Frage. Ist die Disziplin alttestamentlicher Theologie nur deskriptiv oder enthält sie ebenso ein notwendiges Element konstruktiver Theologie? Was ist die Beziehung zwischen einer alttestamentlichen Theologie und einer Geschichte Israels? Sind ihrer Aufbauprinzipien historisch, systematisch oder eine eklektische Kombination beider? Und schliesslich: was ist die Beziehung zwischen jüdischen und christlichen theologischen Interpretationen der Hebräischen Schriften?¹³

These are all questions Childs takes up at various places in his work. Childs admits that it would be "supremely arrogant" to propose a simple solution to a nest of problems so complex they seem to inhere in the discipline. Nonetheless, he suggests an approach to Christian scripture that remembers constitutive features of Christian exposition which to his satisfaction

13. Childs, *Jüdischen Kanons*, 271–272, my emphasis.

have not been adequately pursued in the critical or post-critical age. “Ich möchte so in einer anderen Weise einige dieser quälenden methodologischen Fragen angehen.”¹⁴ At the center of this approach is a startlingly specific confession of the lordship of Jesus Christ. There is a christological core to Old Testament inquiry, Childs contends, as attested (however often overlooked) in the work of Gerhard von Rad, and it constitutes the heart of the larger project of *gesamtbiblische* theology, the theology of Old and New Testaments in concert. Sometimes the sheer difficulty of this claim sounds out loudest. “Allerdings bleibt schwer bestimmbar, was es bedeutet, im Alten Testament einen Hinweis auf Christus zu finden, und das Ringen mit diesem Problem führt ins Herz der Biblischen Theologie.”¹⁵ Just how should one move from the verbal or literal sense of the Bible to its true theological substance? Traditional interpreters do this readily. The capacity has largely been forgotten, however: has it been lost to modern exegetes forever? If Childs comprehends what is at stake in such “agonizing methodological questions,” there may be sense in talking about calculus after all.

The following study falls into three parts. Part one situates Childs’ work as it has been received in English- and German-speaking academic contexts while at the same time registering Barr’s wide influence in denouncing Childs’ approach as a thing that falls apart into conflicting ideas. Barr’s and Childs’ senses of the desirability of *gesamtbiblische* theology are then contrasted as a possible illustration of an English/German language gap. Here Rendtorff (and an array of others) side with Childs on at least one programmatic issue. Part two turns to the integrity of Childs’ approach on its own terms. The “inner logic of scripture’s textual authority,” or the argument for canonical shaping, is introduced as something with a larger interiority—i.e., it is not a form of biblicism, or a text-immanent reading strategy isolated from theological questions of truth. For Childs as a Christian, biblical reference, and hence biblical intertextuality, is not midrashic but deictic. The text of scripture points to its subject matter (*res*), which is the one God known in the face of Christ. Next, the same argument is juxtaposed with two very different perspectives. First, Hermann Gunkel underscores a forgotten

14. Ibid., 272.

15. Childs, *Biblische Theologie*, 24. See also *idem*, *Von Rad*.

aspect of research into the genres of biblical literature—namely, the canon—while establishing a point of reference for the radical inversion of tradition history at which Childs arrives. Second, Childs' early study of midrash, and then his reconsideration of it as a Jewish operation in the 1980s, is set forth in order to explain the expressly Christian nature of his later move away from midrash, toward allegory. Part three, finally, sets the "mystery of Israel," an awareness of which spans all of Childs' work from 1970, in the context of his pursuit of the "mystery of Christ" in a figural mode. Since Barr also re-discovers allegory at approximately the same time, Barr and Childs are again contrasted. They have different rules for allegory (one called biblical criticism, the other called the rule of faith), and this impinges on their doctrines of the Holy Trinity, which each in their own way attempts to uphold. As a closing example, a brief look at Psalm 102 in interpretation gives voice to St Augustine alongside a few modern, critically informed readers. Does the scope of that text encompass the church present as well as past? If it does, the way one articulates this reality could have consequences for Jewish-Christian dialogue along the lines broached at the end of part two.

The outline for this thesis was a long time in coming. I have dealt with the large body of secondary literature pertaining to Childs' approach first, although many of the issues raised in chapters one and two call for the fuller discussions in chapter three and following. Hence I must appeal to the patience of those unfamiliar with the long debate about Childs' purported method. This is treated in chapter one with as much economy as the argument allows, but prior to my own account of themes which have been much discussed (and much maligned), in part two, and of themes which thus far have been little regarded, in part three. Chapter one in particular could be skimmed without too much loss to readers who have no reason to doubt that a governing approach to scripture will be a very different thing than a particular method or technique of biblical criticism, and who also do not have strong preconceptions about the canonical approach's illogic.

PART I

**ON READING CHILDS IN
ENGLISH AND GERMAN**

CHAPTER 1 READINGS OF CHILDS IN ENGLISH AND GERMAN

An important aspect of biblical interpretation which has often been neglected is the transmission and reception of a writer's work into a foreign language.

—Brevard Childs

Attention has sometimes been paid to the way a scholar's work is transmitted into another language. Take one example each from systematic theology, New Testament studies and Old Testament studies. First, in an impressive survey Bruce McCormack traces the way two German kenotic christologies (those of the nineteenth-century theologians G. Thomasius and W. Gess) were taken up in Britain (in the works of P. T. Forsyth and H. R. Mackintosh), but he notes that I. A. Dorner's powerful criticism of Thomasius and Gess did not immediately follow them across the North Sea. British theology adopted German kenoticism after, and largely ignorant of, a sharp challenge to it in its native Lutheran setting.¹ Second, Markus Bockmuehl laments an increased parochialism in NT scholarship due to declining linguistic competence.

A generation ago, lip service was still paid to "keeping up" with scholarship in other languages, even if it was already a custom more honored in the breach than in the observance. For anyone inclined to the old-fashioned view (still widely held in the natural sciences) that serious scholarly inquiry is at least in principle a global enterprise, it can only be disheartening to observe how often footnotes in English remain remarkably untouched by directly pertinent recent publications in German, French, or Spanish—and vice versa. Rare is the scholar who bothers comprehensively with the key international publications.²

Positive examples may be exceptions that prove a rule. Third, Hans-Joachim Kraus concludes the third edition of his history of historical-critical research by urging his European colleagues to take a more global view, and in particular to heed important new developments in Anglo-Saxon OT and biblical theology:

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1. McCormack, *Passibility*, forthcoming in McCormack, *Humility*.
 2. Bockmuehl, *Seeing*, 35. Bockmuehl finds some comfort in the fact "that at least an Anglophone dialogue continues despite the accelerating continental drift separating Europe and America in religious, cultural and geopolitical respects" (36).

Es ist erschreckend, wie stark der historisch-verobjektivierende Distanzierungseffekt einer der Phänomene registrierenden 'Theologie' die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft isoliert und sie im Gefüge theologischer Forschungs- und Lehrinstitutionen zu einer unwirksamen historischen Disziplin prägt. Diese Bemerkung sei verstanden als ein weiterer Beitrag zu der von B.S. Childs und R.E. Clements ins Gespräch geworfenen Behauptung einer *Krise der Biblischen Theologie*.³

Here in 1982 Kraus sees that a broadened receptivity to foreign input will aid German-speaking scholars in overcoming a crisis exacerbated by institutionalized isolation.

In their own way all three of these examples point to the challenge different modern language contexts pose to international biblical and theological research. Viewed alongside the perspectives of a handful of experts in cognate disciplines, then, this chapter's epigraph rings true.⁴ More to the point, the desideratum Brevard Childs identifies pertains to his own work in two important respects. First, attention to the transmission and reception of OT scholarship in different languages, especially the exchange between German and English, is a significant minor theme in Childs' publications. (Not only these two languages, though they will be my focus here: late in his career, for instance, Childs appears to have learned Dutch in order to read W. A. M. Beuken's four-volume commentary on Isaiah 40–66.⁵) Second, the linguistic borders separating academies has led to a bifurcated reading of Childs himself. As I will argue, Kraus' appeal for international dialogue stands at a turning tide in Childs' reception. Just as Anglophones begin to tune the "canonical approach" out, many German-speaking OT specialists increasingly take notice.

To demonstrate both points, this chapter will overview Childs' tracking of international trends, then look at the way his work has been read in English, and finally characterize the rather different way it has been appropriated in German. It will also address a complicating factor in Childs' reception on both sides of the Atlantic, which in the introduction was called the habit of incredulity toward the logic and self-presentation of the canonical approach, and which is associated with the post-*IOTS* criticism of James Barr.

3. Kraus, *Geschichte*³, 559, cf. 557.

4. Childs, Wellhausen, 83.

5. Childs, *Isaiah*, xii.

I. ORIENTATION: BETWEEN AMERICA AND EUROPE

Childs has been called provincial. In 1979 James Smart criticizes *Biblical Theology in Crisis* for focusing exclusively on the American setting of the crisis. He senses a “failure to set the American crisis in its full international context which prevents Childs from recognizing the full character and dimensions of the problem.”⁶ For Smart the problem is international and the solution has to be so too. If one thing stands out in retrospect, however, it is the ease with which Childs moves between Continental, British and American academic contexts. Already in 1970 Childs marks the difference between Europe and North America, highlighting contours of the crisis unique to the American scene. Smart was mistaken, and his timing unfortunate. *IOTS*, which also appeared in 1979, exhibits an uncommonly broad and international range of engagement.

Yet the idea that Childs is somehow cut off from Europe has had other iterations. John Barton, surveying methods in biblical scholarship, introduces a “Professor B. S. Childs of Yale, whose antecedents are purely Anglo-Saxon,” as if the fact that Childs conducted his doctoral studies in Switzerland and Germany in the heyday of the European biblical theology movement did not impact his subsequent research in the least.⁷ Barton was shortsighted to write, “It is not surprising that Childs has had little following in Germany.”⁸ That circumstance was changing even as *Reading the Old Testament* (1984) went to press, and it had changed altogether by the time the popular book was issued in a revised edition in 1996, at which point Childs’ massive *Biblical Theology* had already been *translated* into German.

6. Smart, *Biblical Theology*, 29. Cf. Childs, Review of Smart. Barr appears to favor Childs’ account: *Concept*, 646n26.

7. Barton, *Reading*, 2. Barton is misguided about what Childs’ antecedents are. He alleges *logical* antecedents in structuralist thought (104; this of course has strong Continental roots!) and New Criticism (141, 153), and he ignores completely probable *historical* antecedents, those Childs encountered personally at Basel and Heidelberg in the early 1950s. The situation is made worse by Barton’s attempt “to give some idea of [Childs’] programme without for the moment going into its antecedents” (80). Barton spends several pages foregoing unlikely antecedents, which has the effect of severing Childs’ approach from *all* influences, real or imagined.

8. *Ibid.*, 95. Cf. Seitz, *Theological Interpretation*, 84.

Surely where Childs trained matters as much as where he taught. After serving in the army in Europe during World War II, he began a B.D. at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1947. Then he spent four years studying at Basel, in which time he also made use of the Ancient Near Eastern studies program at Heidelberg. To judge by the prefaces to his books, this was a highly formative period. Baumgartner and Eichrodt guided his doctorate, but Childs counts many other notables among his “unforgettable teachers,” including von Rad, Zimmerli, Cullmann, Bornkamm and Barth.⁹ In hindsight, Childs felt fortunate to have studied in Europe at a time when “the iron curtain which separates the two Testaments in American universities had not yet fallen”¹⁰—or conversely, his training made him “painfully aware that an iron curtain separated Bible from theology, not just at Yale, but throughout most of the English-speaking world.”¹¹ Whatever one makes of these variations on a Cold War metaphor, there can be no doubt that four years on the Continent stayed with Childs after his return to America in 1954, and long into his tenure at Yale from 1958.

Childs’ research shows a pronounced interest in the transmission and reception of biblical scholarship in foreign languages, particularly from German to English. Several examples exist, starting with *Crisis*. It purposes “to describe the emergence of a distinctive American way of understanding theology in its relation to the Bible.” The Biblical Theology Movement there “arose largely in response to certain European influences and continued to reflect a close relationship to the various theological currents abroad,” but, contra Smart, “its peculiar American stamp gave the movement a significant shape that distinguished it from its foreign counterparts.”¹² The term “Anglo-Saxon” appears at least once in all five chapters of the first half of *Crisis*, and contrasts with the European situation are noted throughout. For instance, discussing Bultmann and the hermeneutical turn, Childs comments on the German situation, then the American. He sums, “Again, [the debate] is dominated by German theologians whose

9. See the prefaces to Childs’ titles, including *Myth, Memory, Exodus*, and especially *IOTS, NTCI, OTTCC* and *BTONT*. Cf. Sheppard, Childs.

10. *NTCI*, xv.

11. *BTONT*, xvi.

12. *Crisis*, 13.

philosophical concepts are rendered into English often with tortuous results.”¹³ The pattern on Childs’ account is of partial understanding and delayed uptake of German-language trends overseas.

Similarly, the article “Wellhausen in English” begins with the line from which this chapter’s epigraph is drawn. Wellhausen’s work was mediated in the late nineteenth century by W. Robertson Smith, whose controversial career helps explain the initial mistrust of the *Prolegomena* in Britain, and in different ways in America. Six years later, with S. R. Driver’s *Introduction* (1891), Wellhausen’s reception in English began to change for the better.¹⁴ In an ironical twist, however, at the same time Wellhausen was gaining ground abroad, he was coming under heavy attack at home. W. F. Albright later helped bring this critique into English, laying distinctive emphasis on the idea that Wellhausen was a Hegelian. Yet this assessment too has often been “passed on uncritically,” in ignorance of the fact that L. Perlitt challenges and at a minimum seriously qualifies the Hegelian charge.¹⁵

Another piece from the 1980s, “Gerhard von Rad in American Dress,” makes the argument that some, especially in North America, take von Rad’s dynamic traditioning process as a warrant for their “theological liberalism.” Partly “there is a flaw in von Rad’s theology which has functioned ... to blur the Christological center of his theology,” and partly the Anglo-Saxon readers blatantly disregard this “center” of von Rad’s work.¹⁶ Again, an article in 1994 makes the point that, between the world wars, “theological debate concerning the Old Testament was confined largely to the Protestant German-speaking world, and was generally ignored or misunderstood in the English-speaking world.”¹⁷ And to take a final example, in his penultimate essay (2005) Childs reflects on the era of the canon debate.¹⁸ The entire piece is built around the contrast between English and German scholarship. An earlier German

13. *Crisis*, 81.

14. Childs, Wellhausen, 84–85.

15. *Ibid.*, 86. See Perlitt, *Vatke und Wellhausen*, and cf. Childs, Review of Perlitt.

16. Childs, Von Rad, 85, 82.

17. Childs, OT in Germany, 233.

18. Childs, Reflections on an Era. Interestingly enough, it is an era he judges to have drawn to a close.

consensus is first briefly summarized. Focus then turns to ways the debate unfolded “within the English-speaking world” in “a period of virtual silence” on canon in Germany.¹⁹ Next, Childs sketches the more recent German scene which, despite a few reservations, he evaluates more favorably.

There is an enormous gap in this late retrospective however—namely, Childs’ own research! At one level the omission is tactful, but it raises a pertinent question: where does his contribution to the canon debate fit? Childs gives hints that his is a minority view in the American academy,²⁰ and he is evidently happier about trends back in Europe. Furthermore, he places the work of one of his American advocates, Stephen Chapman, in the *German-language* section of his overview: “although written in English, it arises more out of the German context.”²¹ This provides a clue about where Childs feels his own scholarship belongs. Chapman’s title is set amidst the German debate almost for conceptual reasons, because it rejects the disjunction between scripture and canon (Sundberg), and so “the focus did not fall exclusively on the historical forces at work in the process, which dominated the English-speaking debate.”²² A biblical theological dimension was acknowledged as ingredient to the discussion. If Childs had named his own work in 2005, one might suppose that he would have placed it on the German side of the ledger. To a far greater extent than Chapman, whose work is probably a good indicator of the sort of associations “Old Testament at Yale” in Childs’ day ought to evoke, it can truly be said of Childs that, although written in English—with the notable exception of his dissertation in 1953 and a handful of articles in the 1980s and early 1990s—his scholarship arises more out of a German context.

My hypothesis is that Childs’ work on canon actually inaugurates, at least in part, the new course that the canon debate took in German-speaking contexts just as lines of debate

19. Ibid., 36.

20. Ibid., 32.

21. Ibid., 35, cf. 36, 38 and 40. Chapman does have ties in Germany, though his theological education occurred at Yale. Christopher Seitz supervised his dissertation (1998), published in 2000 as Chapman, *Law and Prophets*.

22. Childs, *Reflections on an Era*, 38. Chapman, *Law and Prophets*, 106–110, makes a strong case for the overlap of “canon” and “scripture.”

were hardening in Britain and North America. (Kraus, again, is prescient.) Taking a slightly expanded international view, Childs becomes a middle term in the canon debate. In its positive influence, his work exists somewhere between English and German, or more precisely between phases of the academic work on canon conducted in these languages. In the schema here I will not follow Childs in distinguishing German from English on conceptual grounds²³ but will differentiate simply by language of composition.

II. READINGS OF CHILDS IN ENGLISH

James Barr has mounted numerous attacks on canonical hermeneutics. He was not always so negatively disposed, but as he states in an appendix to *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (1983), the first extended discussion of Childs' proposals, *IOTS* became a tipping point. Barr explains in "autobiographical style" that his response to Childs through most of the 1970s was sympathetic. Everything changed in 1979. "The effect of Childs's *Introduction* was to convince me that the programme of canonical criticism [sic] was essentially confused and self-contradictory in its conceptual formulation."²⁴ Barr's evaluation of the canonical approach in 1983 raises this charge of incoherence at a variety of points. For one thing, Childs' broad use of the key term "canon" masks underlying incompatibilities.²⁵ Another issue concerns the status of Karl Barth's theology, about which Barr is not very sanguine.²⁶ A third involves the relationship of Christian theology to scripture. Childs quite ably describes the "cracking of the walls" in the biblical theology movement, but he is wrong to think that the

23. Not that this is his custom. The given example is to my knowledge the only one of its kind, and it comes with the proviso that *Law and Prophets* was readied for publication during a fellowship at Tübingen.

24. Barr, *Holy Scripture*, 132, cf. 133. For a similar narrative compare Barr, *Concept*, 234–235, 393.

25. Barr, *Holy Scripture*, 147: "the new 'broad' use of the term has a very simple value: its meaning is identical with the position 'Childs is right.'" The usage should be rejected because "the term is a result of confusion in Childs's thinking... Thus terminology is no accidental factor in the question. The endless repetition of the word 'canon' in canonical criticism is not accident, but necessity: for, as seen from without, the continual reuse of this word is necessary in order to hold together sets of arguments which would otherwise fall apart."

26. Childs does not understand Barth, Barr alleges, but he is quite like Barth in wanting to make his method "sovereign" (*ibid.*, 146).

edifice should be rebuilt. Canon delivers “the Grail for which the American Biblical Theology Movement had been the Quest,” and so Childs’ method “continues the older tradition in that it believes in biblical theology at all.”²⁷ Compounding this, the canon principle is about the form of scripture and not its content, according to Barr. It therefore abandons the task of theology, which must “say something about God, about his works, about Christ and salvation. But in order to do this it must take up just that which Childs forbids, a ‘vantage point outside the text’; for only so is it in a position to make estimative judgements, to make decisions about truth.”²⁸ Fundamentally, this is why privileging a canonical context makes the Bible into “a separate cognitive zone,” “a closed system” and “an intellectual ghetto separated from all other truth by the walls of relevance.”²⁹ If theology restricts itself to the Bible, it surrenders its claim to truth. Fourth, to Barr’s mind Childs’ argument depends upon that which it rejects. Childs “contradicts his own deep dependence upon the tradition of critical scholarship... In this respect his work gives the impression of a fulfilment of an inner death-wish of liberal criticism.”³⁰ Fifth, by emphasizing the Bible’s final form he moves in a direction that resembles New Critical formalism or structuralism even though he insists, contradictorily, that his outlook is historical.³¹ The list could go on.

There are many reasons to begin by profiling Barr’s case against Childs. Some of his indictments have an air of plausibility. For instance, can Childs climb the ladder of higher criticism and then pull it up behind him? Or can he use “canon” as a cipher for his entire approach without admitting imprecision? These are important questions. For another thing, Barr has exerted a wide influence on Childs’ reception, in English and in German. Ernest Nicholson will not be the only scholar who shares Barr’s distaste for “the strong zealous legalism” in Childs’ perceived wish to make the final form of the biblical text absolute and thereby

27. Ibid., 136, cf. 171.

28. Ibid., 137.

29. Ibid., 168. Hence “canonical criticism ... is simplistic. Basically it has only one idea: the controlling place of the canon.”

30. Ibid., 148, cf. 132–133. There are later versions of this in *Concept* (e.g., 48–49, 193, 203, 252n21, 310, 393, 399, 411–412, 433–434) and anticipations in Barr, Childs’ Introduction (esp. 14–15, 23).

31. Ibid., 163, 169.

to ignore or reject the history of the text's development.³² I will explore these and other points raised by Barr throughout this study, with reference to Barr's work in chapters two and six especially. The primary reason for introducing his critique at the top, however, is that it obstructs a fair and measured account of the canonical approach. Barr is of course known for a critical style as incendiary as it is incisive, and many find this to have tarnished his account of Childs. In a penetrating review of *Concept* (1999) Jon Levenson observes that "Barr is harshest on the scholar to whom he refers as 'my friend Professor Brevard Childs,'" and that "Barr vitiates his own potentially formidable case against Childs by continually allowing himself to be diverted from the great hermeneutical issues to attack Childs for this or that comment, some of them mere obiter dicta."³³ Something similar could be said of *Holy Scripture*. But many who prefer a more "fair-minded" account of canonical hermeneutics, such as that of Paul Noble, still buy into Barr's suggestion that Childs does not know his own mind, and so changes it at whim.³⁴ Thus to take Childs at his word when he writes of the *logic* of scripture's textual authority would appear to be a non-starter.

In other words, I begin with Barr to cast a shadow of doubt upon his notion of Childs as an addled method monger whose thought is not just in development, but incoherent. This portrait has travelled well, helping to establish a precedent for the critical reconstructions which turn Childs' proposals into a putatively more coherent method. Is there really no other kind of logic to the framework as it stands, on its own terms? Barr reached his negative verdict about Childs long before all the evidence was in (*Concept* did not really re-open the case, and there are now three books beyond the three standing between 1983 and 1999). The opinion has also exerted a considerable *Wirkung*, even upon more generous courts of appeal.

32. Nicholson, *Pentateuch*, 267, citing Barr, *Holy Scripture*, 92. Then again, Kugel, *Guide*, 768n36 finds this remark and its citation by Nicholson "odd."

33. Levenson, *Negative*, 61–62. He illustrates: "what point does James Barr score against the canonical method by telling us (in the text, not the notes) that Childs' indices are so poor that 'the name of Karl Barth (or, indeed, my own) is cited in the text at numerous places which have been overlooked in the index?'"

34. For just one recent example see Esler, *NT Theology*, 263, 309n28–29. Barr often supposes that Childs is labile (e.g., *Holy Scripture*, 152–153) and eventually wonders if Childs, in changing from a supposedly "canonical" outline in *IOTS* to a thematic one in *OTTCC*, has not abandoned a canonical approach altogether (*Concept*, 397, 422)—though cf. Childs' explanation in *OTTCC* (15) or *BTONT* (101).

CRITICAL RECONSTRUCTIONS OF CHILDSIAN HERMENEUTICS

Other treatments of canonical hermeneutics are less *ad hominem*. Childs' canonical method, on the other hand, emerges as thoroughly muddled. Following Barr's demolition there is a long line of people who offer their hermeneutical services to Childs, unsolicited, by reconstructing a less confused canonical *method* on Childs' behalf—nevermind that Childs claims to offer neither a criticism nor a method but an *approach*. In fact there have been no fewer than four monograph-length rehabilitations of Childs in English, and one in German.

JOHN BARTON: THE PROTOTYPE FOR RECONSTRUCTING METHOD

The prototype for critically reconstructing Childsian hermeneutics, which appeared the year after *Holy Scripture*, is a direct extension of Barr's ideas. In 1984 John Barton recommended "that the 'canonical approach' of B. S. Childs *ought logically* to be seen as a form of structuralism."³⁵ The suggestion is made in full awareness that Childs presents his development in other terms.

There is not the slightest doubt that the route which brought Childs to canon criticism [sic] was as he states it. But this still leaves room, so far as I can see, for all the speculations in chapters 6, 7 and 10 about his literary antecedents. The demise of biblical theology is the reason why Childs looked for something new. It does not explain, except in the most general way, the character of what he eventually found.³⁶

Childs cannot be trusted to describe the character of the canonical approach, Barton implies. One is compelled to look elsewhere to understand the logic of his proposal. Even the outline of Barton's book follows out this assumption. Chapter eight, on structuralism, begins, "We have arrived at structuralism *via* canon criticism, but it should be said at once that this is a very winding route, a route possibly never taken before." Structuralism clearly antedates

35. Barton, *Reading*, 133, my emphasis.

36. *Ibid.*, 211. This quotation does not appear in the second edition. The revised edition of *Reading* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996) is in most respects identical to the first edition up through Chapter 12, after which two chapters are added to bring the survey more up to date. Pagination differences affect only the conclusion and end notes. My interest is in the 1984 edition because of its place in the sequence I am tracing. Even so, the removal of the appendix just quoted has nothing to do with Barton's reading of Childs, as if he recanted of "all the speculations." It was removed in response to James Barr's review, which pointed out flaws in Barton's reading of the demise of biblical theology (xi, revised edition).

Childs, and Childs himself denies any connection with structuralist theory. The link between them has to be defended solely in terms of logic: “the order of presentation is *not historical, but logical*—and logical within the terms of my own argument, not in a way accepted by the wider scholarly community.”³⁷

Actually, logic is not a suitable word for the canonical approach left to its own devices, Barton thinks. He finds the method “personally attractive,” but “the valid insights that went into its making [must] be salvaged from the ruins.” Barr’s influence on Barton at this point is undeniable but not straightforward. *Holy Scripture* “should be regarded as the definitive demolition of canonical criticism in its present form.” There is “overlap” with the critique in *Reading*.³⁸ However, these acknowledgments (deleted in the second edition) appear in a footnote explaining that the book appeared too late to be incorporated into the body of his argument.³⁹ Strictly speaking, a direct lineage from *Holy Scripture* to *Reading* is not warranted. On the other hand, Barton states at the outset that his “debt to [Barr] will be apparent in practically every chapter.”⁴⁰ This is quite true. Barton and Barr had been colleagues at Oxford for several years at that point, and a number of Barr’s riffs on Childs appear to have been picked up by Barton in some way or other.

For instance, Barr and Barton share more than an aversion to fundamentalism. They fear that Childs, while not a fundamentalist himself, is liable for aiding and abetting the fundamentalist cause. Possibly the most illuminating statement occurs in a footnote: the re-establishment of what the Bible traditionally meant, as against what it originally meant, “is why Childs’s ‘canonical’ approach causes such anger, especially to those coping with fundamentalism: it seems designed to take the Christian, so recently liberated from the bonds of ‘the tradition,’ ‘the canon,’ ‘the *ecclesia docens*,’ straight back to the Egypt from which he has come. To such critics Childs seems to be undoing both the Reformation and the Enlighten-

37. Ibid., 104.

38. Ibid., 225.

39. The comment is deleted in the 1996 edition, but the discussion of the canonical approach has not been revised. See note 36.

40. Ibid., xi.

ment; small wonder that they treat him harshly!"⁴¹ Elsewhere, of Barr's "strongly worded suggestion" (in 1980) that Childs will "be quoted by conservative polemicists for the next hundred years,"⁴² Barton comments that the charge is overly speculative. "Whether fundamentalists will indeed draw comfort from Childs I am not qualified to judge," he admits. "But the structure of his arguments bears an interesting *analogy* to those used by fundamentalists," he continues.⁴³ And: "Canon criticism has many formal similarities with fundamentalism."⁴⁴

The basis of this comparison is also drawn from Barr, who asserts in 1983 that Childs' argument reflects an "inner death-wish." The same appraisal is visible *in nuce* in Barr's review of *IOTS*. In lieu of argument, Barr feels, the case is built upon "the contrast between the weaknesses and antinomies of historical criticism on the one hand and the virtues of the canonical reading on the other." More than that, the "picture painted of [historical criticism] is in fact very close to the conservative/fundamentalist one."⁴⁵ Lurking beneath Childs' polemic, however, is an ironic dependence upon the results of critical research. Thus "Childs' actual operation ... is bipolar."⁴⁶ Barton adapts this line of attack in 1984. Like fundamentalists, Childs claims to stand in continuity with pre-critical exegetes. But a major distinction between mod-

41. Ibid., 230n15 = 265n15. Cf. Barr, Childs' Introduction, 23 and idem, *Holy Scripture*, 148.

42. Barton, *Reading*, 224n7 = 259n7, citing Barr, Childs' Introduction, 15. For a response, see Childs, Response to Reviewers, especially 58.

43. Barton, *Reading*, 98.

44. Ibid., 99. In Barton's treatment of redaction criticism it becomes clear that comforting fundamentalists could be one of the canonical approach's "hazards" (49). Childs' discussion of P and J accounts of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 prepares the way for the Disappearing Redactor (49–51; cf. *IOTS*, 145–150). The case is later adduced to show the danger, "a biblical critic's conjuring trick," inherent in redaction criticism (and "canon criticism" to the extent that it is like it): "the redactor of Genesis has so cleverly integrated the two accounts of creation, 'J' and 'P,' by inserting Genesis 2:4a, that they no longer read roughly and awkwardly, and so he has achieved (what one could barely have believed possible) a text which the reader is *deceived* into thinking both smooth and consistent" (56–57, my emphasis). Further, this "conjuring trick" gives the fundamentalists the magic they most desire: "it is not difficult to imagine that the trick we have just described is particularly dear to the hearts of fundamentalist opponents of non-conservative biblical criticism, and in their hands it can well become a convenient means of showing that the critics are hoist with their own petard, or (to give our analogy its last run) that when the magic box that contained the redactor is opened, not only is the redactor gone, but Moses himself has stepped into his shoes: *a very frightening prospect indeed for a higher critic of any kind*" (57, my emphasis.). Barr's influence in linking a fear of fundamentalism to Childs, to a danger latent in his proposals, manifests itself on several occasions in *Reading*, not least with the Disappearing Redactor.

45. Barr, Childs' Introduction, 14.

46. Ibid., 15.

erns and pre-moderns should obtain. Those in the pre-critical era took the Bible at face value because another option had not yet been considered. It was simply the way everyone read the Bible back then. In sharp contrast, fundamentalism and “canon criticism” are oppositional in essence. In both, a polemical bearing is actually the one defining characteristic. “Neither could survive the demise of historical criticism, for they draw all their strength from being able to wage war on it. It is the enemy they love to hate. In both cases the claim to be recapturing a pre-critical approach is attractive but specious.”⁴⁷ By this logic, both are parasites on criticism, although for Childs the situation might be still more problematic. The fundamentalist wants to shut the door on historical critical research, but Childs has left the door ajar.⁴⁸

Central to *Reading* is the view that genre competence is a (if not the) central occupation of critical inquiry. It is a question of “reading as.”⁴⁹ Childs, by brooking source criticism in the first place, makes a mess of the genre competence criterion:

One could almost formulate the interpretative principle here as follows: Read all these texts as if they were written by one author (say, God) at a single sitting; set out what he must have meant by each of them if he also wrote all the others, and had a consistent purpose in doing so; then delete all references to the author from your final statement of their meaning. We know (from historical criticism) that the biblical texts did not in fact have a single author; but the meaning they have as a canon is the meaning they *would* have if they *had* had a single author.⁵⁰

“As if.” Note how we have drifted subtly from literary competence into the realm of wishful thinking. The assertion of a unitary canon in a critical paradigm is illogical.

47. Barton, *Reading*, 99.

48. The point is implicit (ibid., 99): “the canon critic is asking whether the Bible may not have a unity *after all*, just as the fundamentalist is asking whether it might not be right *after all*; and it is the ‘after all’ that defines the gulf—widest very often when it looks least daunting—which separates the modern critic of whatever persuasion from even the greatest of the pre-critical commentators.” A parallel statement can only apply to Childs. “It is only after we have seen how varied and inconsistent the Old Testament really is that we can begin to ask whether it can *nonetheless* be read as forming a unity.” Unlike Childs, the fundamentalist actually thinks the canon is a perfect unity. Source theory does not come into it. On this point, according to Barton’s reasoning, the fundamentalist position might actually be more *logical*.

To anticipate, Barr and Barton also believe that the advent of historical criticism (or just “criticism”) is a true Copernican revolution. See chapter six. As Barton writes here: “All historical-critical work in biblical studies, it is not too much to say, depends on [authorial intention]. The great, and liberating, achievement of biblical criticism has been to establish, for a large number of texts, what the original author(s) meant *as against* what the text had traditionally been taken to mean by the Church, the synagogue or individual pre-critical interpreters” (184, cf. 95). This is why Childs threatens to carry us back in to slavery in Egypt.

49. Ibid., 8–29, and esp. 134, 199.

50. Ibid., 102.

Like Barr, Barton uses a bipolar Childs to deconstruct the canonical approach in other ways. Childs' method wants to be old, but it is actually completely new.⁵¹ It wants to bring pre-critical exegesis back into play, but it refuses to allow "all the old abuses—allegory, harmonization, typology, even downright falsification of the text"—which he would be "far more consistent" to accept.⁵² Or again, a prime example occurs in the conclusion, where Barton borrows M. H. Abrams' well-known diagram of four poles of interpretation. Post-structuralism is reader-centric. Structuralism and New Criticism are text-centric. Redaction criticism is author-centric. But "canon criticism" cannot make up its mind. It looks like redaction criticism sometimes, but its main principles are text-centric. "Canon criticism is, as we saw, superficially like redaction criticism, ... [but] in reality most canon-critical suggestions do not depend on historical investigation at all... Here for the first time in Old Testament criticism we have a concentration on *the text itself* [the central node in Abrams' diagram], rather than on its relation to other things." Hence Childs' "move from redaction criticism is seen in its true light."⁵³ Childs is conscious that he is making a radical proposal; he is but dimly aware how unlike all critical Biblical scholars before him he becomes. Taking all his proposals at once, he could not even be placed on Abrams' diagram!

The upshot of all this perceived methodological confusion is that Childs must be "salvaged from the ruins." Barton is somehow attracted to the canonical approach—possibly the biggest difference with Barr—but he cannot accept it on its own terms. In the interest of logical consistency, the kindest thing to do is to shore up Childs' inadequacies on his behalf. He asks, "Is there any way of modifying the *method*, perhaps giving it a *narrower and less ambitious scope*, that would nevertheless do justice to our sense that its innovations are some-

51. Ibid., 100. Cf. 221n3 = ²256n3.

52. Ibid., 84–85, cf. 97. Does he really exclude these things (allowing for a moment that they are not always abuses)? Barton charges that "Childs's position would be far more consistent if he were to follow [de Lubac's] line of thinking, but his loyalty to Reformation principles about the 'literal' sense of Scripture holds him back, producing incoherence" (223n6 = ²258n6). In fact Childs' increased openness to figuration later in his career is perfectly compatible with, and even anticipated by, his early piece on the *sensus literalis*, which appeared in 1977.

53. Ibid., 202 = ²241.

times fruitful, not always perverse?”⁵⁴ In a sense this has become a mantra among certain of Childs’ readers. Barton’s own answer is to marry Childs to the New Critics (among his supposed Anglo-Saxon antecedents, and with Yale ties), although the dowry becomes yet another way of problematizing canonical hermeneutics.⁵⁵ Here too one suspects that in the background lies a suggestion first made by Barr, who writes,

canonical criticism would gain in theoretical strength and consistency by such a move [toward critical theory]. Any of these movements—modern literary theory, structuralism, Ricoeur’s hermeneutics—is based on a *far sounder philosophical foundation* than the often *muddled conceptual incoherence* of canonical criticism. A really non-historical, literary study of the Bible on the basis of its shapes, styles and motifs could be very interesting... The logic of canonical criticism, and especially of its antipathy to older criticism and its historical interest, seems clearly to go in that direction.⁵⁶

Separated by just a year, *Holy Scripture* and *Reading* delivered a quick one-two punch to the allegedly puzzled face of “canon criticism.” The combined effect was to make a way for several more critical reconstructions of Childs’ logic. Barton and Barr made it possible to take for granted that Childs had no coherent method to hand.

MARK BRETT: A CHARITABLE RECONSTRUCTION?

Mark Brett is a subtle thinker, and his “charitable reconstruction” of Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis?*, raises a handful of salient concerns. A discussion of the *theological* nature of Childs’ disagreement with representatives of the tradition-historical school is perceptive, if underdeveloped.⁵⁷ Nuance is evident in his treatment of the relationship of historical particularity to contemporary appropriation, and again in a section on synchronic interpretation.⁵⁸

54. Ibid., 100, my emphasis.

55. Ibid., 158: “New Criticism and canon criticism stand or fall together: they are children of the same literary culture, even if they have never met. In this chapter I shall suggest that they should probably fall—encouraged in this by the knowledge that one of them has already fallen.” Of course it could be that a Yale-style New Criticism lies somewhere beneath Childs’ so-called method—Cleanth Brooks taught in New Haven from 1947 to 1975—but that would not be the first or most likely place to look for antecedents to the canonical approach.

56. Barr, *Holy Scripture*, 161–162, my emphasis; cf. idem, Childs’ Introduction, 23.

57. Brett, *Crisis?*, 96–100. His failure to recognize the extent of Childs’ debt to this tradition shows an underappreciation of the German context for Childs’ work, and this despite attention to some of the relevant literature, by von Rad and Oeming (78, 168n4). *Why* does von Rad seem to anticipate Childs?

58. Both of these themes feature in his fourth chapter, “Has Childs fallen into Gabler’s ditch?” to which his answer seems to be: not necessarily (114).

Sometimes he defends Childs against unjustified criticisms, including from Barr and Barton.⁵⁹ The book has a fatal flaw, however, in that it rests uncritically on the premise that Childs' work is methodologically inoperable as it stands. Brett follows "Barton's balanced account," differing seriously only on the score of Childs and New Criticism. There are obvious affinities between them, he finds, but "there is a much wider range of literary theories that might be fruitfully compared."⁶⁰ (Actually, this departure is something of a necessity because New Criticism had served as another means to discredit the method.) Brett explains,

Our discussion, as with Barton's, is not simply an account of Childs's scholarly intentions. Nor is it an attempt to evaluate a biblical scholar by "external" criteria provided by the philosophy of interpretation. Rather, there are certain weaknesses in Childs's methodological reflections which can be *charitably reconstructed* by comparisons with the influential works of Hans-Robert Jauss, Karl Popper and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Childs has received some unjustified criticism, and I aim to show how the canonical approach can become a coherent mode of biblical interpretation.⁶¹

What exactly makes the endeavor charitable is not clear. Brett simply assumes that the logic of the canonical approach is completely detachable from Childs. "I have drawn from the work of Childs in a highly selective way, and this *ad hoc* method of reconstruction finds its justification in the fact that Childs himself has failed to provide a coherent exegetical theory."⁶² His whole evaluation of Childs builds upon this somehow self-evident fact.

Brett likewise redraws the portrait of a bipolar Childs. He separates that which is distinctive about Childs, in his judgment, from that which is confused or confusing. At times we almost have several people in our hands. One Childs is adamant about the priority of the final form. Another Childs is interested in the history of interpretation. Yet another wants to talk about the prehistory of collective meanings (streams of tradition, perhaps). But "in these cases he speaks as an historical critic (usually a sceptical one) and not as an advocate of a distinctive canonical approach."⁶³ The resulting picture is one of "*exegetical schizophrenia*," for "Childs is

59. Ibid., 117, 145. For a response to the former see Barr, *Crisis?*, 139.

60. Brett, *Crisis?*, 5. Brett's book also had the bad fortune to appear in print the year before *BTONT*, which immediately rendered some of its content obsolete (see especially 60–61).

61. Ibid., 5, original emphasis.

62. Ibid., 27. Making an appeal to *Holy Scripture*, he continues, "This lack of a coherent theory that has turned out to be one of the major obstacles to a balanced appreciation of his work."

63. Ibid., 172n20, cf. 66–67.

constantly switching hermeneutical hats.”⁶⁴ Again, Childs can argue like a “totalitarian,” hermeneutical monist, but in his better moments the pluralist Childs prevails. Obviously “the second Childs is to be preferred.”⁶⁵ This is also the thrust of the interrogative recasting of Childs’ 1970 title. A fragmentary discipline is not a crisis but something a consistent pluralist ought to embrace.⁶⁶

This strategy has the bizarre result of severing Childs from his argument for the final form in order to provide him with one. With respect to Childs’ claims for a canonical shaping by the traditions of the Hebrew text, Brett—who does not use the phrase “canon consciousness” or refer to the formative article of I. L. Seeligmann—tries to show that an interest in the text’s prehistory cannot coexist with the subsequent use of scripture in the church or synagogue, and feels that “in this respect some of Childs’s methodological statements are just misleading. However, this recognition in no way damages Childs’s overall argument [!], since his exegetical interest does not rest on a reconstruction of the canonical or textual processes. The main lines of his argument rest rather on a theory of continuous textual usage.” The truly significant interest pertains to “that golden thread of continuous usage which extends to the present.”⁶⁷ Neither does Childs need, however much he might want, to invest heavily in the history of exegesis, a “logically separable interest.”⁶⁸ All he really needs is a solid theory of continuous usage (Brett turns to Gadamer’s notion of a classic text) and, to escape the confusions of “canonical intentionality,” a “theory of relatively autonomous texts.”⁶⁹ Once these are in place the canonical approach will be freed to be its distinctive, formalist self and can get on with the business of generating new and interesting readings of biblical material. This is the basic shape of Brett’s “charitable reconstruction of the canonical process.”⁷⁰

64. Ibid., 68, my emphasis. Barr quotes the latter phrase approvingly (*Concept*, 392).

65. Ibid., 11, cf. 42, 68, 71.

66. The book’s parting shot is a conscious echo of Barton’s closing sentiment in 1984. Brett says, “Childs wants to put all our theological eggs in one basket—the canonical approach. It would be more responsible, on the pluralist argument, to distribute them widely” (167). Compare Barton, *Reading*, 211.

67. Brett, *Crisis?*, 64.

68. Ibid., 7, cf. 52–57.

69. Ibid., 26.

70. Ibid., 133.

In summary, Brett makes no effort to see why Childs might have coherent interests in the final form, its prehistory and its reception history all at once. His justification for isolating different nodes of interest, in an *ad hoc* fashion, derives exclusively from the authority of Barr and Barton, and his suggestion for salvaging Childs' method follows Barton's prototype. The *logical* Childs, the Childs we all want but must reconstruct, is the text-immanent Childs. Thus "Childs *qua* historical critic" analyzes one thing, but then the essential Childs forgets this and "focuses on the communicative intention of *text itself* without correlating this intention with a particular historical period, social group or author."⁷¹ Barton's influence, again, is apparent: the "canonical method' logically implies that the biblical text, or indeed any other text, can be read without paying any heed to the intentions of authors, compilers or even canonizers. It is not a sub-type of redaction criticism; it is an attempt to read 'the text itself.'"⁷²

It is with considerable irony, therefore, that Barr's review of *Crisis?* chides Brett because "he fails to read Childs's mind rightly."⁷³ Probably "Childs himself will reject this charitable approach," writes Barr, and "the book will not have served Childs very well."⁷⁴ Barr makes another very apropos observation. Brett has not considered why Childs does not himself take his approach in a pluralist or formalist direction more like, say, James Sanders. "Thus, though Brett has done very well in analysing many particular exegetical statements and arguments of Childs, he does not seem to have explained what lies behind them."⁷⁵ If it seems odd that Barr should take an interest in Childs' antecedents—historical as opposed to logical antecedents, contra Barton—the explanation relates to one thing Barr seems fairly pleased about, that *Crisis?* "adds to the total impression of incoherence." For him, what actually lies behind Childs' ideas explains the confusion. "Most obvious ... is the failure of the book to provide any study in depth of the influence of Karl Barth... For Barth is not only an influence but is very likely

71. Ibid., 68–69.

72. Barton, *Reading*, 102.

73. Barr, *Crisis?*, 139. Cf. also Moberly, Review of Brett.

74. Barr, *Crisis?*, 137. Barr changes his tune in 1999. Having then seen Noble's reconstruction (below), which is less useful to Barr, he declares Brett's account "the best discussion published" (*Concept*, 392).

75. Ibid., 137.

the source of the antinomies and peculiarities which Brett has so well identified.”⁷⁶ Barth combined with critical biblical scholarship “could not fail to produce contradictions.” And, repeating an earlier allegation, “there is nothing *difficult* in the canonical approach: it is easy to enter into, indeed simplicity itself, but its incoherences are equally easy to see.”⁷⁷ Barr can hardly value a reconstruction of logic he does not find compelling in the first place. But then, neither does Barr recognize the extent to which he made it possible to disregard Childs’ mind. Nor does his own answer to the question he rightly asks of *Crisis?* satisfy, as I will argue in the next chapter. Thus a still-outstanding question is whether Childs’ antecedents—let them be acknowledged, let them not be restricted to Barth—can be treated in a way that accords Childs’ approach at least a degree of plausibility.

PAUL NOBLE: ANOTHER RECONSTRUCTION OF THE HERMENEUTICS OF B. S. CHILDS

Paul Noble’s 1995 book improves upon Brett’s in many respects. To start with, it stands this side of Childs’ magnum opus, and so has to deal with the christological telos of Childs’ work. Noble also sees that *Holy Scripture* “shows little comprehension of the structure and goals of Childs’ programme.” Barton, too, “gives an unbalanced construal of Childs’ work.”⁷⁸ And “Brett has not really grasped what Childs’ distinctive ‘interpretative interests’ actually are”; his account is “an over-hasty dismembering of Childs’ work.”⁷⁹ Noble appreciates that the treatments of Childs before him are inadequate, and he manages to set the record straight on some counts. Yet he does not escape Barr’s theory of a bipolar Childs. As with Brett it is determinative for the entire account:

One important theme that keeps recurring throughout the secondary literature, however, is that Childs’ own methodological foundations are insufficient for the superstructure he wishes to build upon them; and this has naturally led to various thinkers and schools of thought being suggested as providing the theoretical underpinning which Childs’ work needs. In my view this is a potentially valuable way of trying to rectify what is, I believe, a significant defect in Childs’ own presentations of his work. Much of the present book,

76. Ibid., 139.

77. Ibid., 140, original emphasis.

78. Noble, *Canonical Approach*, 3.

79. Ibid., 6, 175.

therefore, will also adopt this strategy.⁸⁰

Noble wants to proceed more cautiously than those before him so as not to create another distorted analysis of the essentials of Childs' program, which should be permitted "to explain itself *on its own terms*." Only after that has been done will he suggest methodological improvements. Despite his caution the reconstructive aspiration is affirmed—he finds many tensions in method, and "these tensions have continued to haunt his later work, and are significant factors in [BTONT] falling some way short of Childs' goals."⁸¹ Childs' vision as Noble understands it needs to be "recast."⁸²

Noble's account remains useful in a qualified sense. For example, it offers a competent discussion of the literature on Gadamer and Childs. The links between these thinkers are explored in much greater depth than previously.⁸³ Second, Noble provides a measured orientation to the descriptive task and the differences between Stendahl and Childs. "Childs' purpose," he qualifies, "is not to *deny* that a distinction can be drawn between the descriptive and the normative but to *relativize* it."⁸⁴ Third, the handling of intentionality in Childs is more generous and comprehensive. Noble finds "Childs' work has received a seriously one-sided presentation in this respect from John Barton, who focuses almost exclusively upon the anti-intentionalist strand."⁸⁵ Even though the language of intentionalist and anti-intentionalist strands serves a parsing of Childs' thought to accommodate other ends—Noble prefers to have an exclusively intentionalist Childs—the presentation correctly draws out both.

80. Ibid., 7.

81. Ibid., 7.

82. Ibid., 369.

83. Ibid., 235–253, 254–271, 282–289, 328. In addition to Brett, earlier discussions include those of Scalise, *Theological Basis* and Fowl, *Childs* (more indirectly, see Oeming, *Gesamtbiblische*, which treats Gadamer and von Rad and also makes reference to Childs—though see below). Further analysis of Childs and Gadamer could be illuminating but is not integral to this study.

84. Noble, *Canonical Approach*, 23, cf. 30. Noble cannot see any difference between Stendahl and Childs in practice, though one wonders whether he has reckoned adequately with Childs' purpose in not making Stendahl's two questions *paradigmatic* (e.g., in Noble's summary, "(i) What did the biblical writers believe?; and, (ii) What ought we to believe?" [336, cf. 369]). Barr fails even to acknowledge Noble's discussion of Childs and Stendahl (*Crisis*, 189–190, 202 [cf. Levenson's review], 206, 379–380, 414), but others have been fully persuaded by it (Esler, *NT Theology*, 263–265).

85. Noble, *Canonical Approach*, 50.

Still, the book is not as successful at representing Childs' interests as one would hope. Regarding authorial intent, Noble concludes that "Childs ought therefore to maintain a consistently intentionalist stance."⁸⁶ Noble argues for an objectivist hermeneutic which must be moored in intentionalism lest it drift into indeterminacy—and for him this is a problem that needs correcting in Childs and Gadamer alike. Childs is misguided not to take sides in debates about the author—and in this basic sense Noble agrees with Barton and Brett. (Like Noble, Barton is more of an intentionalist. He thinks Childs would have been more consistent to go in a direction like Brett's, but this is not really a course he recommends. That is, against Brett, Noble and Barton seem to agree about the priority of authorial intent, but Noble chooses a "strand" to reconstruct that he actually thinks will work. Barton's reduction of Childs to an anti-intentionalist is ironic.) Yet as Stephen Chapman puts it, "What Noble fails to realize is how these claims fit together in a distinctive manner within Childs's hermeneutics—i.e. that for historical reasons both kinds of claims must be made."⁸⁷ Could it be that Childs' approach has its own kind of logic here? Like those before him, Noble does not entertain this possibility long enough.

Noble's reconstruction has its share of outright failures as well. The idea of a labile Childs creates very unlikely pictures of his development. In one case, Childs has "fluctuated considerably" on the place of historical criticism in his program. In an early article ("Interpretation in Faith," 1964) Noble finds strong statements for the place of historical research in a faith perspective. There are hints of the same in *Crisis*, only "now more muted." Surprisingly, in *IOTS* "all such reservations seem to have disappeared." But then *NTCI* "reintroduces doubts about the inherent soundness of critical tools."⁸⁸ Such extreme dithering from publication to publication is far-fetched, evocative of the caricatures drawn by Barr and Barton, and built on a dubious use of the evidence. Sometimes a narrative like this justifies Noble's methodological

86. Ibid., 328.

87. Chapman, *Reclaiming Inspiration*, 173n28. Is it really the case, as Noble maintains (*Canonical Approach*, 352), that one must choose between intentionalist objectivism or fideism? On the closely related issue of inspiration, Noble's presentation of Childs' position (208, 219–253 [esp. 299], 340–353) has likewise now been surpassed by Chapman's.

88. Noble, *Canonical Approach*, 58.

intervention on Childs' behalf.⁸⁹ At other times it leads to a premature dismissal of Childs' work. *BTONT* is a case in point. From the start we are told that the volume "falls a long way short" of Childs' goals.⁹⁰ But how does he know this? In addition to the idea that tensions of method "haunt" his work, Noble perceives a failure to inaugurate the Old Testament as a witness to Christ, one of Childs' basic goals for biblical theology. His culminating work "still seems to have made little progress towards setting the reading of the Old Testament as Christian Scripture on a methodologically sound basis. And likewise, therefore, he has made little progress towards hearing the two Testaments as co-witnesses to the one divine reality."⁹¹ It is doubtful that Noble gets to the heart of the "pan-canonical" problem, however.⁹² Discussion of the OT in the NT stalls out in a fairly superficial question of whether Paul's "midrashic" exegesis amounts to more than eisegesis.⁹³ Noble's own recommendation merely trivializes the challenge of hearing Christ in the OT: "Of course, the human authors could not, of themselves, have written proleptically of Christ; but positing God as the ultimate author of the canonical books provides the necessary epistemological underpinnings."⁹⁴ Very briefly this is attempted with Isaiah 53, in which Noble seems to need "genuine foreknowledge of the future," specifically Christ's passion, rather than merely "a general presentiment of a coming Messiah," entailing a much stronger account of inspired divine authorship than Childs gives—though the exegetical details are of secondary importance "since we are concerned with methodological principles rather than with the actual interpretation of Isaiah 53."⁹⁵ Lacking the full sense of how much Childs struggles with exactly this question (in 2001 and 2004), for which Noble cannot be faulted, one can still judge that his alternative is just a little too convenient.

89. Ibid., 35–36, 37.

90. Ibid., 76, cf. 7.

91. Ibid., 73, and see all of 65–76. On the face of it these claims constitute a *non sequitur*.

92. Ibid., 302. Cf. Barr's adaptation of the German term "gesamtbiblische" a few years later.

93. E.g., see *ibid.*, 305 (did Paul hear the intent of the OT or not?) and 158 (if midrash is not legitimate for us, why is it acceptable for the Chronicler or for Paul?).

94. Ibid., 345.

95. Ibid., 205–206. Again: "Only *divine* authorship could account for the meanings Childs wishes to find in the Bible" (206).

Another deficiency is the absence of any account of the scholarly context for Childs' work. No mention is made of the tradition out of which *BTONT* arises. Barr's point about *Crisis?* has not been addressed. In addition to a few scattered references to von Rad, one slight exception is an adjudication between Childs, Barr, Pannenberg and von Rad on the interrelation of "fact" and "interpretation." The shaping of the traditioning process is also mentioned in passing, but it simply does not suffice to dismiss Childs' critique of von Rad in a few lines.⁹⁶ Further, though Noble (contra Brett) rightly affirms Childs' interest in the motives behind the canonizing process, he cannot offer an accurate critique when he shows no awareness of where and how Childs develops the argument for the final form's shaping.⁹⁷ How can Noble suggest that Childs become "more flexible in his account of the tradition-process" lest, entering as he would need to "contemporary debates about the traditions behind the canonical text," he should find himself with "a daunting historical-critical mountain to climb," as if no engagement with this very debate had ever been attempted?⁹⁸ Still most disappointing are Noble's occasional attempts to improve Childs with Childs' own resources. An effort to connect the Testaments typologically calls on Hans Frei.⁹⁹ And Barth is praised as a more exemplary exegete of the OT as Christian scripture (not because of his exegesis per se, but because of the methodological issues Barth raises).¹⁰⁰ Noble is aware that Childs interacts with these figures, but the impression given is of the thinnest contact.

The Childs who emerges, in short, is a great assembler of proposals—the canonical principle above all—who desperately needs a methodology. *Crisis* was beset by problems of method. These went underground during a phase of descriptive work (1979, 1984) but resurfaced when Childs returned to writing theologies:

The full range of issues, however, is taken up again in the canonical Theologies; moreover, their nature is such that the argument has to be carried mainly by the exegetical studies of

96. As before, the perceived need here is for "some kind of doctrine of 'inspiration.'" Ibid., 140, 143.

97. Ibid., 179–180, 183 (cf. 146–7, 152–155). Is Childs' argument for the priority of the final form really "transcendental"? Tellingly, I. L. Seeligmann (see chapter five) is referenced nowhere.

98. Ibid., 186–187. Contrast *IOTS*.

99. Ibid., 306–327. "Clearly there are a number of ideas [in Frei's *Eclipse*] which are potentially of some value for a canonical approach to biblical interpretation" (309).

100. Ibid., 76–80, cf. 345–347.

the biblical texts rather than by the methodological discussions. As we have now seen, however, this quickly leads to the previously unresolved methodological problems resurfacing again. In view of this, therefore, it is not going too far to say that Childs' programme is currently in a state of crisis: It has long-standing methodological problems that greatly hinder its implementation, and which it has made little progress towards resolving.¹⁰¹

Despite a variety of advances in some particulars, Noble's reconstruction is still of a piece with Brett's and Barton's. Childs' most important antecedents are ignored or discounted; his program is inoperable as it stands. The canonical approach is an approach and not a brand of criticism (at last!),¹⁰² but it lacks a method as much as ever before.

In a way, though, Noble is right that Childs does not have a method. Of course, Childs often speaks of the methodological, or more commonly, the hermeneutical issues at stake, but as he explains clearly in the preface to *NTCI*, "In the end I would rather speak of a new vision of the text rather than in terms of method."¹⁰³ Later we will look at how canon entails a rule of faith for Childs—at least as early as 1970 (chapter six). The point for now is simply: lacking a set methodology is not the same thing as lacking an approach. Terminological distinctions between criticism and approach, between method and vision, turn out to matter quite a bit in Childs' case. The assumption that they do not participate in an old and tired bias that Childs does not know his own mind.

WILLIAM LYONS: CHILDS IN PERSPECTIVAL PERSPECTIVE

For the sake of completeness we can include W. J. Lyons' *Canon and Exegesis*, which makes few advances in the evaluation of Childs' corpus. Lyons declines to comment on *Isaiah*, so it is not much more up to date than Noble's study.¹⁰⁴ Positively, the rule of faith is added to

101. Ibid., 77, cf. 174, 313, and passim. Or as he sums up later, "As a methodological investigation, this book has been primarily concerned with the *genuineness* of Childs' programme"—genuineness for Noble being a question of whether "it is methodologically equipped to do all that a theology ought to do" (361–362). The enterprise is, with modification, "on the whole, methodologically defensible" (359).

102. On the habit of calling Childs' program "canon criticism" against his wishes, see especially Barton, *Reading*, 221n3 = 256n3: the phrase "canon criticism" is "hard to resist" as, seemingly, an emblem of Childs' continuity with method-mongers past and present.

103. *NTCI*, xvii.

104. Lyons, *Canon*, 32.

the mix,¹⁰⁵ and comments on the *sensus literalis* and referentiality go a little way beyond Brett by holding ostensive reference and historical background in tension.¹⁰⁶ An effort is made to redefine biblical theology in terms more favorable to Childs, interacting with Barr's *Concept*. Some recourse is made to German scholarship. This, however, has little impact on how Lyons locates Childs' contribution. Ebeling's call for a biblical theology of both OT and NT is rightly seen as relevant, though it almost appears as if Ebeling were the only impetus behind *BTONT*.¹⁰⁷ There is an account of Childs' *Ausbildung*,¹⁰⁸ yet for some reason the figures in Europe under whom Childs learned a profound interest in problems of biblical theology play almost no role in Lyons' discussion. Finally, Lyons shows that his book belongs with the other reconstructions: "like many others, I have tended to pick and choose among Childs's many fruitful suggestions, discarding those that I have deemed unhelpful."¹⁰⁹

Sometimes it seems as if Lyons does not feel another reconstruction is necessary. When detailing several aspects of "canon" Lyons defends Childs against an "appearance of weakness" left by previous treatments.¹¹⁰ "Although the interplay between these ... elements has caused considerable confusion for both Childs and his critics, it may also be responsible for much of the strength of Childs's canonical approach."¹¹¹ Later he tries to show how the fact that Childs' hermeneutics have "virtually always been regarded as requiring reconstruction" is not a setback: "this lack of development to Childs's hermeneutics does not necessarily mean that his approach is thereby rendered indefensible or in need of severe reconstruction if it is to survive. The question is, can Childs's language and concerns be explained and justified by a particular hermeneutical approach *without any substantive change in its self-conception or praxis?*"¹¹² Implicit, however, is the standard view that Childs lacks a mature hermeneutical

105. Ibid., 8, 28. Unsurprisingly, he finds that "a confusions exists in Childs's work as to the correct usage of this term."

106. Ibid., 69.

107. Ibid., 34.

108. Ibid., 25–26. The year of Childs' birth (1923) is incorrectly given.

109. Ibid., 32.

110. Ibid., 45.

111. Ibid., 42.

112. Ibid., 82, original emphasis.

framework. Lyons thinks he can “leave the essential contours of Childs’s work intact”¹¹³ by rejecting the “objectivist” approach of Noble in favor of the “perspectival hermeneutics” of Stanley Fish. “The final consequence of accepting a Fishian hermeneutic for the canonical approach is that Childs’s set-one terminology—that relating to ‘objectivity’—must be recast in terms sensible to the kind of language which can be used to describe a consistent set-two formulation of the canonical approach, to dress the canonical approach in ‘perspectival’ clothes.”¹¹⁴ Like the rest, Lyons takes what he likes and leaves the rest.

For Lyons the technique has an extremely subjective outcome. Frequently he speaks of “my” canonical reading. This plays out exegetically in a bizarre intrusion of “my ‘feminist’ problem” in the Sodom narrative, and in a psychologization of Abraham in Genesis 18.¹¹⁵ Coupled with his praise of perspectivalism, results like these leave this reader in serious doubt about whether Lyons has done justice to the “self-conception” of Childs, as professed. Lyons is almost aware of this limitation. Surprised at his exegesis, he writes: “Perhaps it is a case of being too close to one’s own work, of liking its results too much.” And his final comment on Childs begins: “In many ways I like what I have found exegetically in the canonical approach of Brevard Childs.”¹¹⁶ He also reveals how he finds himself “in the rather embarrassing position of offering a new reading based upon a canonical approach to the biblical texts.”¹¹⁷ Thankfully, it is not necessary to ascribe the embarrassment to Childs.

CONCLUSION: PRO-BONO PSYCHOTHERAPY IS NO CHARITABLE READING

Barton, based on a sense that Childs’ “innovations are sometimes fruitful, not always perverse,” wondered how Childs’ method could be made less ambitious, recommending (with

113. *Ibid.*, 85.

114. *Ibid.*, 122, cf. 95. But see also Noble, *Canonical Approach*, 57, 206–218.

115. Lyons, *Canon*, 266, 208, cf. 272–273. As he explains, “The strongest justification for my rejecting the coherence of Abraham was not originally its obviousness as a reading of the text, but rather my personal discomfort with the implications of the readings of Ben Zvi and von Rad for subsequent texts, for the whole canonical text itself” (273).

116. *Ibid.*, 275.

117. *Ibid.*, 269.

Barr) a route that he himself was not much inclined to follow. He thus sent many of those interested in canon off searching for a method to the madness.¹¹⁸ Barr asserted meanwhile that it was mostly just madness and reinforced the pattern of reading Childs against Childs. Their combined efforts in 1984 and 1983 spawned a persona whose mind is indeed divided, even fractured. But the Childs who needs treatment for an affective disorder or schizophrenia lives in an ungainly body of secondary literature. And that Childs, I suggest, is largely a work of fiction, a Frankenstein hatched in an unhappy dream that lingers in daylight much longer than it should. The several reconstructions of Childs' hermeneutics all share in the view that something in the canonical approach *is* perverse, even when they do not use Barton's exact language, because they proceed to excise whatever in Childs' approach does not suit the desired method. None answer the questions Chapman puts to Noble—how the putative intentionalist and anti-intentionalist strands might “fit together in a distinctive manner within Childs's hermeneutics,” or why “for historical reasons both kinds of claims must be made”—and thus none offer readings of Childs that qualify as charitable in the usual sense of the word.

Naturally there are other readers who do not see the need to offer Childs their charity. (Some may feel rather in his debt.) These could be set forth here in parallel to the trend detailed above. To take one example, Christopher Seitz and Childs have informed one another's work on Isaiah. Seitz dedicates his study of Isaiah 36–39, *Zion's Final Destiny*, to three honored teachers, one of whom is Childs, even as the book reconsiders Childs' main work on Isaiah up to that point (*Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis*, 1967).¹¹⁹ Childs in turn dedicates his commentary of 2001 to Seitz and does not hesitate there to probe and challenge the thesis in *Destiny*. Developments like this will not be outlined in detail, however, for a couple of reasons. First, as the present example illustrates, the work of these readers can be closely bound up with Childs'. It makes less sense to treat them as detachable phenomena. Moreover, the way in which they qualify as “readings” in the first place is less straightforward. *Destiny* attempts to

118. Examples could be multiplied. For one of the first, see Morgan, *Madness?*, 92.

119. Seitz, *Destiny*, x: “Ironically, much of Childs's own later work on canon has had a decided influence on the sorts of questions and modifications I have proposed here, vis-à-vis his original work.”

extend Childs' work—it is not an attempt to give an account of canonical hermeneutics as such. Some pieces fit the bill a little better.¹²⁰ But none of this quite matches the scale of the reconstructions. Also, these readers tend to accept that a canonical approach will have intricate operations, perhaps on the order of calculus, which just makes it harder to summarize.

Finally, the work of Anglophones more sympathetic to Childs' articulation of his approach informs this study, but at another level than Barr's demolition, or the subsequent reconstructions of Barton, Brett, Noble and Lyons. If contributions from scholars like Shepard, Seitz, Chapman and Kavin Rowe of North American, and Walter Moberly, Nathan MacDonald and Neil MacDonald of Britain, are less conspicuous, it is not because their many publications have been excluded from consideration. I trust that the impact of this latter group, amongst whom one might wish to draw finer distinctions, will be visible throughout. Nor can the extent of Childs' more positive reception be restricted to a catalog of those who might be counted among Childs' closest allies. Rather, my purpose has been to denude the structure that reinforces the predominant, dismissive way Childs has been read in English.

III. READINGS OF CHILDS IN GERMAN

Childs' reception in German is no more uniform than his reception in English. Something of the range can be seen in two installments of *Wissen*, C. H. Beck's slender paperback series, both of which appeared in revised 3rd editions in 2006. Christoph Dohmen's introduction to the Bible and its exegesis builds upon the view that, for an appreciation of "der literarischen Eigenart biblischer Literatur ist das ... Thema des *Kanons* von entscheidender Bedeutung."¹²¹ In contrast, Christoph Levin's short introduction to the Old Testament illustrates the durability of the old project of reconfiguring the biblical literature according to its historical development. Though it has unquestionably always been received as Holy Scripture, *history* rather than canon more nearly captures its true significance. "Man entdeckte und *entdeckt*

120. Seitz has work in this category, including, interestingly enough, an overview of the canonical approach in German: Seitz, *Approach*, I. AT. (Klaus Baltzer is another teacher to whom *Destiny* is dedicated.)

121. Dohmen, *Auslegung*, 15.

immer neu die Differenz zwischen biblischer Geschichtsdarstellung und tatsächlich geschehener Geschichte.”¹²² In a particularly striking counterpoint, Dohmen’s and Levin’s treatments of the canonical formulae in Ecclesiastes 12:9f highlight the extent of their disagreement. Dohmen gives evidence that a centuries-long process of growth is drawing to a close. Instead of the “Ergänzungen und Fortschreibungen” typically found in “Traditionsliterature,” a postscript (or to be precise, a pair of postscripts) indicates an awareness of the canon’s border and function. “Die Intention dieses Nachwortes ist deutlich. Der kritische Querdenker Kohelet soll in die klassische biblische Weisheitsliteratur eingeordnet werden.”¹²³ Levin also cites Ecclesiastes, selecting from 12:12 a slogan for his evaluation of canon: “Of the making of many books, there is no end.” Standing atop his book’s final chapter, “Die Unabgeschlossenheit des Alten Testament,” the verse introduces a retort to the topic surveyed in the previous chapter, “Der Abschluß des Kanons.” Not surprisingly, he rejects dogmatic understandings of scripture’s authority. The Christian “Inspirationslehre” constitutes a tendentious falsification of the meaning of the literature’s growth and has been among “der größten Hindernisse der historischen Bibelkritik.”¹²⁴

Dohmen’s argument—it is more than a simple survey of options available to exegetes—begins with a consideration of how the Bible, a book made of books, came to be regarded as the book of books. Essential to this theme is the question of canon. When defining the term, Dohmen recognizes that canon was not used in unambiguous conjunction with the collection of Holy Scripture until at least the 4th century CE. Yet he observes that the first appearance of this usage postdates the concept it came to signify; “vielmehr hebt der Begriff auf die Funktion ab, Maßstab oder Norm der Bücher und Buchsammlungen zu sein, die schon vorliegen und mit wechselnden Begriffen wie *Schrift, Heilige Schriften/Bücher, Miqra, Gesetz, Tora, Propheten*

122. Levin, *AT*, 123–124, my emphasis; cf. 21. Levin continues, “Die Bibel ist aber kein absolutes, sondern ein historisches Buch” (124). Why these must be stark alternatives is not wholly clear. The threat of fundamentalism may necessitate an ongoing “Streit um das Alte Testament” for Levin.

123. Dohmen, *Auslegung*, 14. For Dohmen’s distinction between *Traditionsliteratur* and *Autorenliteratur* see 11–12.

124. Levin, *AT*, 121.

bezeichnet werden.”¹²⁵ On his reading the late appearance of the term itself explains why, in critical research, “die Frage nach dem Kanon über lange Zeit als mehr oder weniger ausschließlich historische Fragestellung behandelt worden ist.” Dohmen continues: “Erst in den vergangenen vier Jahrzehnten sind die Fragen des Kanons aufgesprengt und durch die nordamerikanische Kanonforschung aus ihrer Eingrenzung auf das Feld des Historischen befreit worden, so daß heute allgemein anerkannt wird, daß die Probleme des biblischen Kanons nur noch im Gespräch zwischen biblischer, historischer und systematisch-theologischer Forschung zu behandeln sind.”¹²⁶ Doubtful as this statement is as a characterization of the general outlook, it is noteworthy in a couple of respects. The implicit recognition that the North American debate outpaced the German discussion is remarkable in itself. Also, though the analysis can in no wise qualify as a consensus, Dohmen points to the reopening of a question strict historical study was supposed to have closed. History was not rejected in itself, however: a later dogmatic term has, for Dohmen, plausibly been shown not to be anachronistic, but to suit its subject matter.

Childs and Sanders are the only people named in the context of the North American discussion. That Childs' work is more formative for Dohmen, suggested already by his use of “canonical approach” instead of “canonical criticism,” becomes undeniable in his enumeration of the most important two aspects of canon. *First*, canon pertains to the growth of the literature. *Second*, canon pertains to the closure and final contours of the literature. Both aspects are closely related, and in fact Sanders is criticized for emphasizing “Form”—the Bible's production—to the exclusion of its “Funktion für eine Gemeinschaft.”¹²⁷ Plainly, the claim that study of the Bible's production belongs together with the product itself is a hallmark of Childs' work.

B. S. Childs kommt in seinen Arbeiten zu der Einsicht, daß der Kanonbegriff nicht auf die späten Festlegungen des Umfangs der normativen Schriften begrenzt werden kann, son-

125. Dohmen, *Auslegung*, 20.

126. *Ibid.*, 21.

127. *Ibid.*, 23. Dohmen explains, “denn das, was uns als Kanon begegnet, ist ja nicht zu lösen vom Gedanken des Maßgeblichen und Richtungsweisenden, was der Aspekt des Kanons als *normative Sammlung von Schriften* und *Sammlung normativer Schriften* zum Ausdruck bringt.” Dohmen's equation of form with formation, and function with reception, recalls, but should not be identified with Childs' appropriation of form-critical terminology. See chapter four.

dern daß es sich beim Kanon letztendlich um etwas handelt, das *in den Schriften selbst* angelegt ist und nicht von außen herangetragen wird. Was Childs hierbei in den Blick genommen hat, ist das, was Traditionsliteratur ausmacht, nämlich die Haltung der Tradenten, die die Literatur sammeln, fortschreiben und weitergeben. Da dies konstitutiv für einen späteren Kanon ist, schlägt Childs eine Terminologie vor, die den Begriff des Kanonischen auf das Gesamte anwendet und dabei zwischen zwei Aspekten unterscheidet: Der Verschriftung und Tradierung auf der einen Seite—bezeichnet als “kanonischer Prozeß”—und dem Abschluß dieses Prozesses auf der anderen Seite—bezeichnet als “Kanonisierung.”¹²⁸

As much as anything to be found in the literature thus far, this summarizes well the core of Childs’ argument. Canon is not an extrinsic concept because one finds the judgments that gave rise to the term *in the writings themselves*. And Dohmen is persuaded that this offers a more comprehensive explanation of the formation of biblical literature than the strictly historicist one.

Wissen’s format permits no footnotes and few references, which apart from making the series palatable to non-specialist readers also forces authors to select only the most essential literature. For one Old Testament professor Childs’ recovery of canon orients the entire discussion. For another, Childs’ work is not even on the map. In Levin’s case the historical-critical paradigm endures as the best explanation of the received text, largely a jumbled product of historical accident. The literature’s growth “lief meist ohne Regeln ab.”¹²⁹ With surprising transparency his analysis operates according to an archaeological metaphor, often tried: “Weil die gegebene Überlieferung im Grundsatz unantastbar war”—that is, until the critical era—“ist der Ausleger in der glücklichen Lage, wie ein Test-Archäologe arbeiten zu können. Wenn er jüngere Schichten abträgt, darf er erwarten, jeweils auf ein älteres, intaktes Textbild zu stoßen.”¹³⁰ Hence he unravels original threads from secondary developments (variously termed “artificial,” “tendentious,” “embarrassing,” and on at least half a dozen occasions “fictitious”), frequently pointing out underlying ANE parallels as though the hermeneutical payoff

128. *Ibid.*, 22, my emphasis. Compare the earlier, more detailed comments in Dohmen and Oeming, *Kanontheologie*, 19–25.

129. Levin, *AT*, 25. The process is compared to a snowball. “Einmal ins Rollen gebracht, gewinnt der Schneeball mit jeder Umdrehung eine neue Schicht” (25). And why does the process stop? “Der Schneeball mußte irgendwann zur Ruhe kommen” (26).

130. *Ibid.*, 26.

there were self-evident.¹³¹ At one point the Exodus decalogue is cited, but *truncated according to a possible ur-form*.¹³² Levin should not be faulted for not registering a counter-position like this one articulated in 1974: “Ultimately the use of source and form criticism is exegetically deficient if these tools do not illuminate the canonical text. Gressmann likened literary criticism to an archaeological excavation in which no responsibility is felt by the scientist for rebuilding the mound. The analogy is inappropriate and highly misleading. The text under study is not only a record of history, but—even at its minimal formulation—a piece of literature with its own integrity.”¹³³ His remit here does not permit it. Still, his general introduction demonstrates the remarkable extent to which a major critique of the long-dominant devaluation of canon—which in Dohmen’s words has recently “zu einem der wichtigsten Themen der Bibelwissenschaft avancierte”¹³⁴—has fallen on deaf ears. Levin remains utterly unpersuaded.

Dohmen’s and Levin’s overviews mark two poles in reception of the “North American” canon debate in German-language scholarship. Dohmen may be right to say that the canonical approach is acquiring “Raum und Bedeutung.”¹³⁵ Yet it is undoubtedly true that one still finds business as usual in other quarters. Below I will attempt to sketch the way Childs’ work has crossed back over the Atlantic to an environment in which he once studied (though much changed since 1950, needless to say). Before proceeding, a final point of Levin’s is worth emphasizing. He writes, “Die Bewahrung der Schrift geschah ja *nicht* um ihrer selbst

131. Ibid., e.g. 23, 35, 45, 52, 56, 58, 75–6, 104. Discussion of a psalmic theme culminates in a telling phrase: it “ist religionsgeschichtlich keineswegs originell” (39).

132. Ibid., 66. Hence the “decalogue” is reduced to Exodus 20:2–3, 5a, 13–17a. Such probabilities and possibilities are often hazarded.

133. Childs, *Exodus*, 149.

134. Dohmen, *Auslegung*, 88. Dohmen’s rebuttal of the usual criticism of the canonical approach is on target, in my view: “Von hierher ist auch ersichtlich, daß einer der häufigsten Kritikpunkte an diesem Ansatz der kanonischen Schriftauslegung, er sei ahistorische oder gar fundamentalistisch, weil er bei der vorliegenden Endform des Bibeltexes einsetze, völlig fehlgeht. Der Ansatz kanonischer Schriftauslegung ist der Versuch, die literarhistorischen Besonderheiten der biblischen Literatur mit ihren theologisches in Verbindung zu bringen” (91). That Levin appears to accept the standard critique, on the other hand, is suggested by his closing comments (Levin, *AT*, 123–124). Honoring the “Aufklärung” as the decisive shift for biblical exegesis, and taking up the cause against fundamentalism, are unmistakably Barr-esque themes (key works on which appear either exclusively in German [Barr, *Bibelkritik*] or in translation [Barr, *Fundamentalismus*]).

135. Dohmen, *Auslegung*, 88.

willen.”¹³⁶ But this is precisely the issue at stake. Is the Bible’s function as Holy Scripture intrinsic to the biblical text itself, or is it a perverse imposition? It is not by accident that Levin, like Gunkel before him (see chapter four), finds in the Old Testament “die *Anfänge der Wissenschaft*.”¹³⁷ And this brings us up against one of the most fundamental issues posed by Childs’ scholarship. What, to continue the anthropomorphism, does the text want? Crudely, does it want criticism, or dogma? This issue will occupy us again, especially in chapter six.

CATCHING UP WITH NORTH AMERICA

One periodization of biblical interpretation declares that until it “came of age” in the 1980s, North American biblical scholarship was characterized by a “connoisseurship of premier German criticism.”¹³⁸ The characterization seems accurate enough through the post-war period. Exactly when and how Northern America went its own way, and whether this turn was salutary, would be difficult to establish. Did the direction of influence ever reverse? That scholarship on the Continent should play catch-up with scholarship across the Atlantic by no means follows, and probably has not been the rule—if anything, one might speak of a new period of international dialogue.¹³⁹ But with Childs, as H.-J. Kraus’ 1982 appeal to his colleagues to pay heed to developments in the English-speaking world anticipates,¹⁴⁰ the case can be made that German-speaking biblical scholars were for once beholden to North America. So it happened that the editors of a fledgling *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* dedicated an entire volume to the topic of canon in 1988, to apprise its readership of developments abroad. Introducing the volume, G. Stemberger and I. Baldermann explain: “Wir nehmen die im deutschsprachigen Raum kontrovers geführte Diskussion zum Anlaß, unsere Leser auch mit der Diskussion dieses Problems in den USA vertraut zu machen. Sie hat sich dort insbeson-

136. Levin, *AT*, 24, my emphasis.

137. *Ibid.*, 31, original emphasis.

138. Olbricht, *20th Century*, 556.

139. Transatlantically, Rendtorff has been an important figure. More recently and from the other side, Christine Helmer’s efforts deserve special mention. In addition to translations, a recent bilingual volume stands out: Helmer and Petrey, eds., *Interpretation*. On canon, see also Helmer and Landmesser, eds., *One or Many?*.

140. See the introduction, above. Kraus is referenced in Rendtorff, *Bedeutung*, 3 (= *Canon and Theology*, 46).

dere an den Thesen von *Brevard S. Childs* entzündet," above all over his thesis "daß die Kanonbildung nicht eine späte kirchliche Setzung ist, sondern 'a consciousness deep within the literature itself.'"¹⁴¹ In at least one area, then, the direction of influence reversed.

ROLF RENDTORFF SPOTS A GENUINE ALTERNATIVE

"As far as I can see, German-speaking discussion has yet to take up the theological problem of the canon."¹⁴² Rendtorff's judgement—correct for the time being, in 1982 (the date in the foreword)—was overtaken almost immediately, not least by his own work. The same *Introduction* which contains this remark makes tentative steps toward its undoing, for as he said in a guest lecture at Yale around the same time, in reading Childs' *Introduction* "it was as though the scales fell from my eyes."¹⁴³ Rendtorff is the first to seriously advocate the new perspective of canonical hermeneutics in Germany.

From a later perspective one can appreciate just how formative his encounter with *IOTS* was. In his farewell address at Heidelberg, delivered 19 July 1990, Rendtorff reflects on his four decades at the university since his arrival as von Rad's first doctoral student, in 1950. Each decade has a corresponding focal point. In the 1950s "history" was the watchword. In the 1960s key historical hypotheses began to crumble, but Rendtorff's attention had been pulled elsewhere by—this is his language—a decisive encounter with Judaism. During the 1970s he participated actively in the demolition of the old history-centric consensus, though in retrospect he views that "splendid era" with "a degree of nostalgic melancholy."¹⁴⁴ The 1980s, finally, saw the importation of canon to Germany:

In the 1970s a debate had developed in the United States about the question of the Old Testament canon. At first it hardly attracted any notice in Germany. I myself came across it in the final phase of my work on an introduction to the Old Testament, to which I had at last addressed myself. (It had already been planned in the 1960s but had continually fallen victim to the circumstances and needs of the times.) The most important book in this de-

141. Baldermann et al., eds., *Biblischen Kanons*, 5.

142. Rendtorff, *Introduction*, 291. I was unable to acquire a German copy (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1983) for comparison.

143. Seitz, *Theological Interpretation*, 84. Seitz remembers that Rendtorff actually had Childs translate this remark for the audience, to Childs' own embarrassment.

144. Rendtorff, *Canon and Theology*, 216.

bate was Brevard Childs's *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (1979), which drew me inescapably into the discussion. I very soon had the impression that in methodological approach what this book offered was not merely a variant of previous treatments of the Bible; it was a genuine alternative.¹⁴⁵

These four foci summarize well the shape of Rendtorff's career. His early historical work is transformed by a "decisive event: my encounter with Judaism."¹⁴⁶ Then, into a period of dissolution, came *IOTS*, which brought a new orientation to the theological problem of canon. Rendtorff's next remarks in the Heidelberg farewell problematize the relationship of these two eye-opening insights, however. Canon must square with the hope for a common Jewish-Christian theology. He explains, "I sometimes think that this could perhaps be the most important task for the years remaining to me: to make a contribution to this discussion, and to help free the Hebrew Bible from the captivity into which it was brought when it came to be labeled merely a preliminary step, now superseded and overcome, on the way to the Christian Bible."¹⁴⁷ By the time he completes his canonical OT Theology it is clear that canon, as perceived in Childs' work, is not quite compatible with the "discovery" of Judaism.¹⁴⁸

Three questions arise. How did Childs transform Rendtorff's perspective initially? What understanding of canon did Rendtorff develop for his own enterprise? And why did this eventually lead Rendtorff to distance his vision of biblical theology from Childs'? I will address the first question immediately but hold back two and three for the next chapter.

The justly famous *Das überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem des Pentateuch* begins with a crystal-clear statement of its thesis. Wellhausen's literary-critical method and Gunkel's form-critical, transmission-historical method, customarily supposed to be complements, are in fact opposed from the outset. The former separates the sources that make up the Pentateuch. The latter "takes its point of departure not from the final form of the written text of the Penta-

145. Ibid., 217. The paragraph's conclusion: "The debate about [canon] is now being vigorously pursued in the United States, and among us in Germany too the contributions of people who have come alive to it are increasing."

146. Ibid., 116. For a sampling of early work see Rendtorff, *Gesammelte*.

147. Rendtorff, *Canon and Theology*, 218. Compare "Toward a Common Jewish-Christian Reading of the Hebrew Bible," 31–45 in the same collection.

148. "Discovery" is his word. "Das wichtigste theologische Ereignis der zweiten Hälfte dieses Jahrhunderts ist die Entdeckung des Judentums für die christliche Theologie" (Rendtorff, *Bibel Israels*, 97).

teuch, but from the smallest, originally independent, individual units, and traces the process of their development right up to their final written form.”¹⁴⁹ Von Rad and Noth undertake major studies of the last stages of the process, with different results; but while both agree that the task is to analyze the entire course of the tradition, neither one has carried out the study in practice. Gunkel on the other hand investigated the smallest “units” but neglected to trace their incorporation into the entire Pentateuch. Thus Rendtorff aims to “close the gap in the study of the history of the origin and growth of the Pentateuch.”¹⁵⁰ He performs a “crosscheck” of the reigning documentary hypothesis and finds grounds to reject it. If one starts where Gunkel does and then traces the growth of the tradition from small units all the way through to the final form, “one does not encounter the ‘sources’ in the sense of the documentary hypothesis.”¹⁵¹ Literary-critical analysis as such is still valid, even necessary, but the result it was believed to have won stands no longer.

Given the way Wellhausen’s method is measured against Gunkel’s, it comes as something of a surprise that Rendtorff’s *Introduction* calls for a fresh analysis that starts with the “texts themselves.” True, officially it still “follows the approach founded by Hermann Gunkel.”¹⁵² But a new emphasis on the final form surfaces occasionally which, just a few years prior, is simply nowhere to be found. Sometimes it looks as if Rendtorff’s aspiration is still to write a history of the tradition.¹⁵³ Elsewhere, with nods to Childs, he notes that the Bible has functioned authoritatively in its received form, as a canon. He lodges a complaint that “the final form of the individual books as they now are, and of the Old Testament as a whole, are hardly taken into account.”¹⁵⁴ There is also an acknowledgment that a theological understanding of canon is not entirely congruent with tradition-history as typically practiced: “opposi-

149. Rendtorff, *Transmission*, 11 = *ügP*, 1.

150. *Ibid.*, 32 = *ügP*, 19.

151. *Ibid.*, 179 = *ügP*, 148.

152. Rendtorff, *Introduction*, ix. See chapter four, below.

153. *Ibid.*, 80: “The exegete must now be concerned to trace developments from the beginning of the formation of the tradition to the final form of the text as we have it today.”

154. *Ibid.*, 129.

tion” with a canonical approach “could and must” be overcome.¹⁵⁵ That various perspectives are to be held together can be seen in the very structure of the book. Part one canvases the history of Israel (the OT as a “source”), part two the *Sitz im Leben* of the OT literature, part three the biblical books in their final shape. A recognition is dawning, though, that goes beyond the knowledge “that the form-critical approach is not enough to explain the origin of the books of the Old Testament” (i.e., that material lost its connection with the traditional *Sitzen* in Israelite society as it was theologically shaped).¹⁵⁶ In a clearer formulation a decade later: canon “means first of all a *change of direction in the line of sight*.” Canonical interpretation centers “on the text in its now existing form, the wider complexes take on greater importance”¹⁵⁷—as opposed to the small original units (Gunkel), or to all detectable phases from the tradition’s beginning to its end (Rendtorff in 1977).

That said, it is not hard to see why *IOTS* so immediately struck a chord. A few remarks near the end of *Das überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem* point to the study’s theological implications. Rendtorff concludes “that clearly defined theological intentions were at work in the arrangement of these larger units.” Moreover, “the theological intentions of the preliminary stages of the Pentateuch as a whole are most clearly grasped in these larger units.”¹⁵⁸ There are successive layers of intentionality, so one would probably want to speak of theologies in the plural. Yet a late layer is uncovered that intends to transmit the Pentateuch as a single, intact unit. A “deuteronomically stamped layer of reworking is the first and, according to our examination so far, the only one which unambiguously views the Pentateuch as a whole and will have it understood as *one* great coherent complex.”¹⁵⁹ An intentionalist hermeneutic, in other words, is compelled to reckon with the Pentateuch as a whole at some point. In a sense, then, the step to Rendtorff’s position after *IOTS* is not enormous. His *Introduction*’s final chapter, on

155. Ibid., 130.

156. Ibid., 127, and see all of Section 7 there.

157. Rendtorff, *Canon and Theology*, 143, my emphasis; cf. 27–28.

158. Rendtorff, *Transmission*, 189 = *ügP*, 157–158.

159. Ibid., 196 = *ügP*, 164; original emphasis. Rendtorff is unwilling to state whether this deuteronomic layer is responsible for the basic shape of the Pentateuch or is a reworking of a received unit.

canon, summarizes: "One of the most important insights here is that the shaping of the biblical books in their present form is usually not the result of chance or of thoughtless and uncomprehending redaction, as was often supposed by earlier historical-critical exegesis, but that quite deliberate forces of shaping were at work which were often guided by a specific and often very pointed theological purpose."¹⁶⁰ Pages earlier Childs is commended in the strongest terms for stressing this point in conjunction with the further point that the canonical form of the books "have become the normative basis of the religious life of the Jewish—and later also the Christian—community." (Rendtorff's phrasing is notable in light of the distance he will later put between himself and Childs.) In short, Childs' "demand" in *IOTS* entails an adjustment across the entire field: "The final form of the Old Testament books and the theological intentions expressed in them must be taken seriously in quite a different way from what has so far been the norm in Old Testament scholarship."¹⁶¹ This judgment reaches even to Rendtorff's earlier views in 1977.

We will pick up other aspects of Rendtorff's contribution to canonical theology in chapter two. The point for now is simply that *IOTS* catches Rendtorff's attention in a major way in the early 1980s and thus he represents Childs' first significant inroad in Germany.

MANFRED OEMING: AN EARLY ACCOUNT IN GERMAN

Excluding reviews of *IOTS* by the likes of Smend and Zimmerli,¹⁶² Manfred Oeming attempted the first account of Childs' hermeneutics from within the German-language context as part of his Bonn dissertation, first published in 1985 with the title *Gesamtbiblische Theologien der Gegenwart: Das Verhältnis von AT und NT in der hermeneutischen Diskussion seit Gerhard von Rad*. An epilogue to the second edition (1987) adds a cautionary note on the challenge of reading scholarship across national and linguistic borders, which in Oeming's case applies above all to Childs. "Wer sich mit ausländischen Beiträgen beschäftigt, muß in seiner

160. Rendtorff, *Introduction*, 290.

161. *Ibid.*, 129–130.

162. Smend, Questions and Zimmerli, Rez. Childs.

Beurteilung sehr vorsichtig sein, da er die Kontexte häufig nicht gut genug überblickt, in denen diese Arbeiten stehen.”¹⁶³ He (rightly) proceeds to make judgments as best he can despite this hurdle, but his conclusion about Childs is incautiously sharp.

Oeming relies heavily on the review volumes of 1980, and his critique mostly just rehearses the English-language discussion of Childs up to that point.¹⁶⁴ He tells the familiar story of a turn from history to dogmatism, which amounts to a dereliction of duty.

Aus der Sorge um die theologische Verantwortung der historischen Exegese und dem Versuch, die historische Kritik gleichsam von innen her zu heilen, wird mehr und mehr eine Geringschätzung der historischen Arbeit. Gleichzeitig nimmt der Dogmatismus zu, mit dem der Kanon als die Lösung aller gegenwärtigen Probleme behauptet wird... Es handelt sich bei der zweiten Phase des canonical approach um eine *dogmatische Flucht aus den Schwierigkeiten des historischen Geschäfts* in einen in seiner Bedeutung maßlos überschätzten positiven Kanon.¹⁶⁵

Further, one hears that Childs has inadvertently given arch-conservatives and fundamentalists an alibi, that “canon” is being used in far too many different senses to be useful, that as a solution to all problems an appeal to the final form is too simple, and that “canonical intentionality” is a “mystic phrase” (so Barr). Oeming also has doubts about how well-suited a canonical approach is to the contemporary, pluralist world. Here he ventures one of his least careful judgments, against Childs’ prioritization of the MT as the *vehicle* to Jewish scripture: at the root of this, he thinks, could be “einer gut amerikanischen Hochschätzung des Positivismus. Nur was man Schwarz auf Weiß in Händen hält, der empirisch vorliegende Endtext, ist von sicherem Wert...”¹⁶⁶ Childs’ response to the whole account is therefore not surprising: “Meiner Meinung nach verfehlt M. Oemings jüngste Analyse meines kanonischen Zuganges ... völlig den Sinn meiner Darlegungen.”¹⁶⁷

163. Oeming, *Gesamtbiblische*, 269.

164. Cf. *HBT* 2 and *JSOT* 16. *Holy Scripture* is not cited in Oeming’s first two editions, but Barr’s 1980 review, and Smend’s and Knight’s which have some similarities, set the tone. Smart, *Biblical Theology* also features in the discussion.

165. Oeming, *Gesamtbiblische*, 195–196 (= ³204–205), my emphasis. The phrase with “dogmatische Flucht” is repeated in closing (209 = ³216) and is picked up by others (e.g., Barr, *Concept*, 505 and especially Brunert, *Psalms* 102, 72, on which see chapter seven).

166. Oeming, *Gesamtbiblische*, 208 (= ³215). Oeming fails to appreciate what “vehicle” suggests for the MT; the Hebrew text preserved by a Jewish community is a starting point, not a destination in the name of positivism. See *IOTS*, 97.

167. Childs, *Endform*, 248n6.

On the other hand, Oeming and his wife Christiane translated *BTONT* into German shortly after it appeared in English.¹⁶⁸ M. Oeming has invested further research into the problem of the Christian Bible's unity despite its two parts, too. Yet a third edition of Oeming's dissertation (*Das AT als Teil?*, 2001), which is accompanied by later essays, merely updates references in some footnotes and is otherwise identical to the initial account of Childs' approach. A few newer presentations of canonical hermeneutics, including Noble's, are listed in an expanded bibliography, but neither these, nor Childs' own mature statements in *BTONT*, have been integrated into the discussion. Regrettably, a dated account plagued by the misunderstandings of Childs which came of age in the 1980s has been freshly bound and propagated.

OTHERS MOVE IN A NEW DIRECTION

A competent and recent survey of German discussions of *Kanonhermeneutik* makes it unnecessary to provide another here. Barthel (2007) frames his topic this way: "Kanonhermeneutik ... ist die Reflexion der besonderen Verstehensbedingungen und -probleme, die dadurch gegeben sind, daß die biblischen Schriften die Gestalt und Funktion eines Kanons, d.h. einer (relativ) abgeschlossenen Schriftensammlung mit normativer und / oder formativer Funktion für die Glaubensgemeinschaft(en), haben."¹⁶⁹ That the author can define a field of shared interest this way suggests developments rather different to those in the English-speaking world, and indeed, he indicates that Childs rather than Sanders has left a bigger impression in the German reception of American studies of canon.¹⁷⁰ Though there are of course dissenting voices in German, a significant trend to emphasize the constructive exegetical and theological implications of canon surfaces in a debate alive to concerns which appear more marginal in the English-speaking world. It is also noteworthy that Barthel numbers

168. Childs, *Einen Bibel* (1994, 1996), n.b. the foreword in 2:9–12. Most of the work would have been undertaken while M. Oeming taught at the University of Osnabrück. Others there at some time or other had more minor involvement in the project: G. Steins translated the chapter on Genesis 22 as a sample for the publisher, and C. Dohmen provided the foreword to the first volume.

169. Barthel, *Kanonhermeneutische Debatte*, 5. In the same volume cf. esp. Janowski, *Kontrastive Einheit*. I discuss one problem with Barthel's taxonomy at the end of chapter four.

170. Barthel, *Kanonhermeneutische Debatte*, 11. In contrast, Childs, *Reflections on an Era*, 36 senses that Sanders quickly became the theological spokesperson for most in the English-speaking debate.

among the few anywhere who recognize the advantage to Childs in pursuing a canonical *approach* rather than a criticism or a method, and that his broad definition of canon actually serves him at precisely this point.¹⁷¹

Less well documented is the way Childs gained an audience in Europe just as interest in his research was cooling in Britain and North America. *IOTS* received the attention of no less than two review volumes in English in 1980.¹⁷² By comparison *BTONT* was almost not reviewed at all (undoubtedly the most substantial response came off Rendtorff's desk).¹⁷³ Then in a 2002 volume containing about thirty essays under the title *The Canon Debate*, Childs' position went almost completely unrepresented.¹⁷⁴ Astonishingly, that tome's introduction asks, "With such a long delay in the church's use of the term 'canon' to describe a closed body of Christian scriptures, one may well ask why there was an emergence of 'canon consciousness' in the church of the *fourth century C.E.* and *little evidence of it before?*"¹⁷⁵ It is as if the authors are unaware of what by that point had almost become a truism in the German literature, picking up on an argument made by Childs in the first instance and preeminently in *IOTS*, that a consciousness of canon lay deep within the formation of the literature.¹⁷⁶ Instead, most contributors share the will to impose a moratorium on all talk of "canon" in the biblical period, because of the term's anachronism. In stark contrast, a 2007 collection of more than twenty essays on canon, *Der Bibelkanon in der Bibelauslegung: Methodenreflexionen und Beispielexegesen*, does not once defend the Sanders/McDonald position.¹⁷⁷

171. Barthel, *Kanonhermeneutische Debatte*, 10, 14.

172. *JSOT* 16 and *HBT* 2.

173. Most were only a few pages in length. Three exceptions in English are Brueggemann, *Against the Stream*, Bauckham, *Biblical Theology and Seitz, Not Prophets*. Cf. Rendtorff, *Rezension Childs, the reply in Childs, Witness to Christ?* and also my discussion in chapter six.

174. The editors explain that minority voices were invited but could not participate (McDonald and Sanders, eds., *Canon Debate*, 17), but their title remains sadly ironic.

175. *Ibid.*, 13, my emphasis. Childs borrows *Kanonbewußtsein* from I. L. Seeligmann but is responsible for bringing it into wider usage, especially in English. See chapter five.

176. See Dohmen and Oeming, *Kanontheologie*, 23, Janowski, *Kontrastive Einheit*, 45 (citing Steins, *Kanonisch Lesen*, 53) and a host of other places, though contrast Frankemölle, *Frühjudentum*, 74–75.

177. Representatively, see Steins' discussion in Ballhorn and Steins, eds., *Bibelkanon*, 114–117, as well as my review of the collection, Driver, *Review of Bibelkanon*.

So if 1980 is the high water mark of Childs' reception in English, the tide in German discussions was then only beginning to rise. Throughout the 1980s Childs repeatedly wrote or had translated pieces that only ever appeared in German, oftentimes alongside other essays exploring the value of canon from sympathetic perspectives. The first was a short overview of differences in biblical theology on the American scene (1981).¹⁷⁸ Then there were two "catch up" volumes, in 1987 and 1988, the latter of which included a report on the state of the question in North America by P. D. Miller.¹⁷⁹ Both lead off with pieces by Childs. Another is included in the important 1995 collection *Eine Bibel—zwei Testamente*, edited by C. Dohmen and T. Söding. Slowly, Childs' work began to exert a *Wirkung* on a slice of Continental biblical scholarship, and with few exceptions the trend seems to have been the inverse of patterns in Britain and Childs' home country alike, even though canon questions stayed at the fore.

A number of those writing in German with an interest in the hermeneutics of canon have internalized and perhaps extended some of Childs' arguments—above all, that canonization proper is not (wholly) an extrinsic imposition on the biblical literature—but subsequently appear to have turned in new directions of their own. Dohmen, for instance, who was instrumental at Osnabrück for a time and was among the first in Germany to read Childs in earnest, now has an Exodus commentary (2004) with only a faintly discernible relation to Childs' of 1974.¹⁸⁰ No doubt that is much as it should be. Or to take another example affiliated with Osnabrück, Georg Steins has been particularly successful at galvanizing another generation of interest in canon—a generation which did not need to work quite so hard to bring (a minority voice in) the North American canon debate into German. Without wishing to detract from this achievement, my first purpose under the next heading will be to show how a pattern

178. Childs, *Differenzen*.

179. *ThQ* 167/4 and *JBTh* 3, in which note Miller, *Amerikanischen Diskussion*.

180. Thus far only Dohmen's second volume is in print. Childs' commentary is referenced occasionally, though it may anticipate Dohmen's more in its structure, its attention to *Wirkungsgeschichte* or its appreciate use of Benno Jacob than in exegetical particulars. (Childs recounts how in 1964 he found a rare copy of Jacob's Exodus commentary in Jerusalem, secured a microfilm copy, and brought it back to Yale, where he used it extensively in his own commentary of 1974—decades before Jacob's was published in English translation [1992] or its German original [1997]. See further Childs, Benno Jacob, and the section on Jacob in chapter five, below.) Still, cf. Dohmen, *Exodus 19–40*, 87–88, 130, 214, 217, 347.

established at a handful of British institutions, that of reconstructing Childs' allegedly incoherent method, likewise made its way to Germany. Barthel terms it the "*Methodisierung des kanonhermeneutischen Ansatzes*."¹⁸¹

GEORG STEINS: A RECONSTRUCTION AT THE CREST OF A SECOND WAVE

Characteristically, reconstructions of canonical hermeneutics split over how to fix "canonical intentionality." Barton and Brett make Childs into an anti-intentionalist, whereas Noble contends that he would do better as an intentionalist. With Steins, the pendulum swings back in the formalist direction of the first two studies: Childs' problematic intentionalism can be remedied with literary theory. Steins welcomes the fact that in the North American discussion canon "ist also nicht ein primär historisch-deskriptiver Terminus, sondern wird zur *hermeneutischen Zentralkategorie*,"¹⁸² but in outlining his distinctive canonical-intertextual reading winds up arguing with the other reconstructors, against Childs, that it is hermeneutically irresponsible to leave the matter of authorial intent open.¹⁸³

By 1999, the year in which *Die "Bindung Isaaks" im Kanon (Gen 22): Grundlagen und Programm einer kanonisch-intertextuellen Lektüre* went to press, it was easy enough to defend hermeneutical amendments to the canonical approach on Childs' behalf from a consensus in the English and German literature alike, namely, that no canonical method exists. Steins begins with what may be the first essay to spell out the implications of Barr in 1983 combined with Barton in 1984: "There is little if any *methodological* clarity concerning how one is to study the Bible canonically."¹⁸⁴ He then cites German literature to the same effect. Some of the most important input in the latter category comes from Norbert Lohfink, whose title essay in *Eine Bibel—zwei Testamente* suggests that the need to keep the Old Testament alongside the

181. Barthel, *Kanonhermeneutische Debatte*, 15, cf. 24.

182. Steins, *Bindung*, 10. Cf. now Steins, *Kanonisch Lesen* and Steins, *Anamnese*.

183. Chapman, *Reclaiming Inspiration*, points out that restricting exegesis to authorial intent, as Noble does, would "fully undermine Childs's approach" (173). The same is true for the inverse move, here. In Childs' approach both poles are needed.

184. Steins, *Bindung*, 11, Steins' emphasis, citing Morgan, *Madness?*, 84.

New “fordert, um verstanden zu werden, gesamtbiblische Intertextualität.”¹⁸⁵ Intertextuality is lifted up as a way of approaching the unity of a pluriform Bible.

Entstanden sind beide [Testamente] selbstverständlich aus vielen Büchern. Doch die Frage ist, ob es dabei geblieben ist. Es gibt in beiden Büchergruppen eine bei allen Variationen doch so stabile Anordnung und darüberhinaus so viele literarische Verstreungen, daß man mit mehr rechnen muß als nur einer Reihe von in sich selbständigen Büchern. Beide Kanones bilden in sich geschlossene Sinngefüge. Das wird erst in unseren Jahren durch die Forschung nachgewiesen, scheint aber schon genügend gesichert zu sein. Damit entsteht innerhalb der beiden Büchergruppen eine neue, intensivere Art von Intertextualität. Das hat beträchtliche Folgen für den Sinn der einzelnen Bücher, ja der einzelnen Aussagen in ihnen. Die Konsequenzen sind kaum schon gezogen.¹⁸⁶

Sound method is what the new talk of canon urgently requires,¹⁸⁷ and Steins' *Habilitation* attempts to tease out what consequences such a “neue, intensivere Art von Intertextualität” could have for biblical interpretation. If not yet at the “gesamtbiblische” level, Steins' use of terminology from Lohfink's essay is clearly an appreciative expansion of it applied to an important test case in the Pentateuch; so “*konturierte Intertextualität*” becomes a key phrase in the proposed canonical intertextuality.¹⁸⁸ Thus some of Childs' most sympathetic German readers are persuaded about the unworkability or nonexistence of his so-called method.¹⁸⁹

Steins is careful enough to recognize that Childs declines to work out an exact method. In words italicized as they are cited in *Bindung*, Childs says, “In the end, I would rather speak of a new vision of the text rather than in terms of method.”¹⁹⁰ Like Noble and others, however, Steins, who comments that this statement “verrät eine Ambivalenz; die ‘Vision’ beschreibt das faszinierend Neue, aber auch das (noch) Schemenhafte,”¹⁹¹ concludes prematurely that Childs'

185. Lohfink, *Eine Bibel*, 75. Further confirmation of this link is found in Steins, *Bibelkanon*, which begins with a nod to Childs for putting canon on the agenda, but then quotes almost two full pages from Lohfink's essay before sketching the proposed methodology in fourteen theses.

186. Lohfink, *Eine Bibel*, 79.

187. *Ibid.*, 80: “Die Entwicklung einer differenzierteren Theorie wäre sowohl für den ‘systematischen’ (an Sachfragen orientierten) als auch für den ‘exegetischen’ (Texte entlanggehenden) Teil der Theologie dringend erfordert.”

188. *Ibid.*, 79; cited Steins, *Bindung*, 23, Steins' italics, and cf. 232–233. Lohfink, following Braulik, *Bahnlesung*, favors a reform in the Catholic liturgy that (re)introduces a first reading from the Torah before a second OT reading outside the Pentateuch. Liturgy would thus commence with Torah, as in Jewish liturgy, and culminate in Gospel, as in Christian liturgy.

189. Cf. also Dohmen's remarks in Dohmen and Stemberger, *Hermeneutik*, 175.

190. *NCTI*, xvii.

191. Steins, *Bindung*, 12.

approach, as such, is inadequate. Familiar concerns are raised about intentionality and unity versus diversity, but on the whole a supposition reinforced by literature now in two languages permits Steins to say that while Childs brokers insights about the hermeneutical value of canon, his work must be leveraged with a suitable theory of canon before it will yield dividends.¹⁹² In order to render the “apparitional,” Steins augments canon with *Intertextualität*, in dialogue with M. Bakhtin and J. Kristeva, and *Lektüre*, with U. Eco and W. Iser. In this manner Childs is once again reproved for unclear thinking about authorial intent. Steins finds him stuck between a production-oriented and a reception-oriented approach. If canon stays in the first camp, how is it more than a mere shifting of emphasis within traditional historical-critical concerns? If in the second, how can the dynamic process of its reception ever truly get off the ground? “Allein im zweiten Fall kommt der Kanon als normative Vorgabe für einen offenen Rezeptionsprozeß zur Geltung.”¹⁹³

But the tension is not so easily resolved, as *Bindung* itself demonstrates. Reception oriented theory should make the best sense of what transpires in reading,¹⁹⁴ and even though “das Maß des Gebens ist nicht das Maß des Nehmens,”¹⁹⁵ it would still appear to align with the production of the biblical text, on Steins’ understanding, since in redactional activity “der Fokus nicht die Vergangenheit, sondern die Gegenwart und die Öffnung für zukünftige Rezeption ist.”¹⁹⁶ Accordingly, Steins’ method has two initial steps. First, identify and describe the presence/attendance (“Anwesenheit”) of each *hypotext* (e.g., Gen. 12, 21; Ex. 19-24; Dt. 8; Lv. 8f/Ex. 29; Dt. 12; Ex. 3-4) in the *hypertext* (Gen 22). Second, assess how the hypotexts illuminate the meaning of the hypertext.¹⁹⁷ Yet Steins limits the text-text links permitted in a competent reading of Gen 22 in revealing ways. To begin with, he constrains hypotexts to the

192. This reconstructive maneuver lies at the heart of the proposed canonical-intertextual reading: *ibid.*, 2, 11, 16, 27–31, 36, 73–75, 130–132.

193. *Ibid.*, 27.

194. *Ibid.*, 45–83. See also Steins, *Bibelkanon*, 188.

195. H. Blumenberg’s aphorism, cited Steins, *Bindung*, 215.

196. Steins, *Bibelkanon*, 192.

197. Steins, *Bindung*, 100. On 233 Steins suggests a third step: “Frage nach der Sinnkomplexion für den Hypertext.” This involves Lohfink’s contoured intertextuality, seemingly a kind of canonical tectonics in which geographic plates or zones contextualize intertextuality. Cf. 102.

Pentateuch.¹⁹⁸ Beyond that, abstract thematic links are also excluded. For example, Jon Levenson's discussion of child sacrifice in connection with Ex. 22:28b is disallowed because it lacks "lexematische Übereinstimmungen" with Genesis 22.¹⁹⁹ As a rule, unless explicit parallels can be found, candidates for thematic intertextual *Anwesenheit* in the hypertext are rejected.²⁰⁰

Theoretical considerations push Steins to forego problems of authorship and diachronic textual dependencies, and yet they seem to reenter through a back door. After carefully delimiting intertextual constellations surrounding the Akedah, Steins ponders how his results interface with text-genetic concerns. "Von einer kanonisch-intertextuellen Lektüre eines Textes, wie sie im vorangehenden Abschnitt in acht Einzelstudien dargelegt wurde, führt kein direkter Weg zu Einsichten in die Genese des Textes."²⁰¹ But then it may still be possible to detect something of the intertextualizing of the author in the intertextualizing of the reader. Steins writes:

Am plausibelsten lassen sich meines Erachtens die in den kanonisch-intertextuellen Lektüren entdeckten Übereinstimmungen damit erklären, daß der Autor von Gen 22 *bewußt* auf diese Texte angespielt hat. Die aufgewiesenen Text-Text-Relationen sind, zumindest größtenteils, *auch vom Autor intendierte Relationen*. Gen 22 ist geradezu ein Paradebeispiel für einen *intertextuell arbeitenden Autor*, der seinen Text gewissermaßen herausentwickelt aus einem schon groß ausgebauten Pentateuch.²⁰²

Although Steins aims to be more consistent than Childs by stepping fully into a reception oriented process, he may not be quite so fully in this arena as he supposes.

Then again, Steins' reconstruction of canonical method is the only one to which Childs troubled to respond. Childs begins by affirming some points of agreement, and though he goes on to push back on a number of other issues, ultimately deciding that *Bindung* lacks a

198. Space is a constraint (*ibid.*, 134), yet little direction is given about how one extend the Akedah's intertextuality beyond the Pentateuch.

199. *Ibid.*, 184; cf. Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 142.

200. Cf. the heavy qualifications on Gen. 21's *Anwesenheit* in Gen. 22, Steins, *Bindung*, 147–163, esp. 162. A few thematic links do sound through (210), but the restrictions tend to undermine expansive claims made in theory, e.g.: "Im Aufbau stets neuer Text-Text-Relationen wird der Hypertext immer wieder neu unter dem Einfluß der verschiedener Hypotexte beleuchtet" (226).

201. *Ibid.*, 214. If one only permits text-links that an author introduced, one ceases to be a reader and becomes instead a "Quellenforscher" (215).

202. *Ibid.*, 217, my emphasis. Given the number of intertextual links, he deduces, Genesis 22 was probably one of the last elements of the Pentateuch to be composed.

theological corrective to its borrowing of theory—“how does the sacred canonical text of a community of faith relate to Steins’ general theory of reception?”²⁰³—he seems to have taken this treatment more seriously than the previous four. (There are good indications that Steins has worked to sharpen his proposals in light of Childs’ criticism, too, even though he remains committed to the need for canon-hermeneutical method. A re-description of canonical-intertextual reading as anamnesis, reminiscent of *lectio divina*, aims to clarify the function of reading in a community of faith.²⁰⁴) Even more significantly, there may be a second wave of interest in canon in the German-speaking world, one which is increasingly preoccupied with the controversies surrounding methodology. Steins’ programmatic work is cited in well over half of the score of essays in the recent volume *Bibelkanon*, and it begins to look like a harbinger of another generation of hermeneutical reflection on and exegetical application of insights deriving from canon.²⁰⁵

CONCLUSION: CHILDS IN THE THICKET OF AUTHORIAL INTENT

What is at stake in authorial intent for Childs? On numerous occasions he has been told to discard the notion, but he has not done so. Resisting the suggestion in *Bindung*, Childs writes, “When Steins’ theory of intertextuality eliminates the privileged status of the canonical context and removes all hermeneutical value from any form of authorial intent, an interpretive style emerges that runs directly contrary to the function of an authoritative canon which continues to serve a confessing community of faith and practice.”²⁰⁶ But then neither can Childs take the thoroughgoing intentionalist advice of Paul Noble. Canonical intentionality includes the concept of canonical *loosening*, by which biblical texts are sometimes intentionally re-addressed to wider audiences and future generations. Hosea is a good example.²⁰⁷ Future gen-

203. Childs, *Critique*, 176.

204. Steins, *Anamnese*, 129: “einer kanonisch-intertextuellen Lektüre wäre missverstanden, wenn es als Spielart einer werkimmanenten oder holistischen Auslegung begriffen würde.” I will nonetheless contrast Steins’ emphasis on text-text relations with Childs’ prioritization of text-*res* relations in chapter three.

205. See Driver, *Review of Bibelkanon*.

206. Childs, *Critique*, 177.

207. Pronouncements in the North are enlarged to include Judah (Hosea 6:11), and the marriage to Gomer is rendered metaphorically so as to be applicable to a future generation (Hosea 4:15, 12:11). “But a

erations of the faith are right to read Hosea's prophecy in light of the present. The biblical text is time conditioned, but it is not intended to be a prisoner of the past.

Eventually Childs is happy to refer to the text's in-built actualizing dynamic as a form of "intertextuality" or "figuration"—the language is sometimes interchanged—but not if the historic dimension of canonical shaping is obliterated.

The role of intertextuality served as a means by which the coherence of the developing canonical corpus was sustained. By intentionally signaling a linguistic affinity between the past, present, and future, a substantive coherence was developed. This shaping of the text by the community was deemed constitutive for its authority. Of course, once the canonical corpus reached its relative stability, the text as religious Scripture continued to generate new intertextual relationships, but the distinction between text and figuration was maintained, at least in principle.²⁰⁸

Perhaps the best way to identify this bedrock intentionality is as the *sensus literalis*. According to Childs, "both synagogue and church assigned a unique value to the text's plain or literal sense. Implicit thereby was the concern to maintain some form of authorial intent" (he qualifies that this "is not an apology for authorial historicity, but for the hermeneutical significance of the designated writer"). Thus "Torah was assigned to Moses; the Gospel in its four-fold form to designated Evangelists. Figurative meanings were not rejected, but subordinated to the literal sense."²⁰⁹ The canonical approach cannot be reduced to a Schleiermacherian quest for the mind of biblical authors, but nor does it discard all forms of intentionality. The recontextualization of individual traditions into a larger corporate tradition introduces meaning that, strictly speaking, may not have been intended at every step along the way. Yet the transformation of meaning that occurred as the canon approached its final form did not wholly sublimate text into meta-text, or letter into spirit.

Whatever force drives the process of canon formation is the same one that makes itself felt on modern hermeneuts. If things work as they should, this literal/textual/authorial pressure alters the conceptualities which readers inevitably bring to bear on the text. Theory

generation later, to a different people and situation, Hosea's realistic language was understood metaphorically" (*IOTS*, 379).

208. Childs, *Critique*, 177.

209. *Ibid.*, 177.

has enriched biblical interpretation in the past, but it needs a “theological corrective” from the received text. Thomas Aquinas is a good example, as Childs explains in *BTONT*:

It is unlikely that any modern biblical scholar would be tempted to imitate Thomas’ appropriation of Aristotle. Yet the basic hermeneutical issue at stake turns on the fact that no modern biblical theologian can function without some other conceptual framework. Much of the modern search for the recovery of only internal biblical categories has been extremely naive. Rather the crucial hermeneutical issue turns on how well one can hear and understand the biblical witness even through the time-conditioned human categories which each interpreter has inherited or adopted. A study of Thomas is invaluable in seeing to what extent the author was able to adjust his philosophical perspective to the uniquely biblical message and in the process, cause his own alien categories actually to serve toward the illumination of the biblical text.²¹⁰

As he puts it in 2003, addressing Steins, in cases like Thomas’ “new theories were constantly being altered and radically transformed in the light of the powerful theological coercion exerted from the biblical text itself.”²¹¹ Or so goes Childs’ theory of theory.

Many will remain unsatisfied with Childs’ handling of theoretical problems. Reviewers of *Struggle* often judge the chapter on postmodern interpretation to be a disappointment (rightly in my view), and the critique of canonical intertextuality (against Moberly and Frei as well as Steins) will raise the eyebrows of anyone who has dabbled in literary theory. Does this weakness detract from Childs’ many other hermeneutical, biblical theological reflections? Probably yes, but then again perhaps not very much. The task of holding on to a form of intent while yet recognizing that texts acquire new significance as they cross contexts requires a good measure of subtlety already. There may be ways of negotiating the difficulties associated with the Bible’s authorship and reception without having a highly technical theory of reading. Nor is methodological refinement a self-sufficient good—Childs would not have been well-served by a hermeneutic that was overly *raffiniert*. And amongst those with an interest in writing a theology of the entire Christian Bible, there is wide agreement that the project, if it is not impossible, demands a pretty exacting set of special considerations.

210. *BTONT*, 41–42.

211. Childs, *Critique*, 175.

CHAPTER 2 WHAT IS BIBLICAL THEOLOGY? (DOES IT MATTER WHERE A SCHOLAR WAS TRAINED?)

The term “biblical theology” can be used in a wide variety of different ways... Barr distinguishes between biblical theology and other theologies, such as “doctrinal” or “philosophical theology” ... but if a theology is meant that comprises both the Old and New Testaments, Barr likes to speak of “pan-biblical theology,” with which he picks up on the title of Oeming’s book (1985). In German discussion, however, the term Biblische Theologie is used primarily in precisely this sense as theology of the whole Bible.

—Rolf Rendtorff

On the narrow topic of text criticism Childs once expressed his hope to reviewers of *IOTS* that “discussion would take seriously the full force of the canonical argument which has been mounted rather than simply to assume the validity of the older critical model in which we have all been trained.”¹ Barr took the latter part of this statement as emblematic of Childs’ attitude to historical-critical method more generally, and he objected. Childs “must speak for himself... I would not say that I was so ‘trained.’ What many or most of my generation were trained in was the atmosphere of the biblical theology movement, which Childs has described and analysed so well.”² Once again Barr’s remarks tell us as much about Barr as they do about Childs. Here too they raise a question about what difference it might make where a scholar was trained. Can that really matter?

Childs of course trained at Basel and Heidelberg under a generation of Old Testament scholars who capitalized theologically on tradition-historical research. Later he strove to overcome limitations he eventually perceived in their work, appreciating their theological brilliance while criticizing the method to which their theology had been fused. Childs’ perspective changed after his return to America, and his work since at least 1970 aims to be at

1. Childs, *Response to Reviewers*, 59, cf. *IOTS*, 84–106.

2. Barr, *Holy Scripture*, 130.

once a critique and an extension of the insight of his teachers.³ The Glasgow-born Barr, on the other hand, took a first degree in classics at the University of Edinburgh (his studies were delayed by service as a pilot in the Royal Navy) and then a B.D. in the Old Testament in 1951. Ordained in the Church of Scotland, he ministered for two years in Tiberias, Israel, before taking an academic post in the New Testament at Presbyterian College, Montreal. He returned to Edinburgh to become Professor of Old Testament there from 1955–1961. Subsequently he taught at a number of other institutions, including at Oxford from 1976–1989. Barr is less forthcoming than Childs about who his mentors were. The case will be made that one formative influence on Barr was his Edinburgh colleague T. F. Torrance, Professor of Church History from 1950–1952 and of Christian Dogmatics from 1952–1979. Torrance, who among other things worked to bring Karl Barth into English, had a strongly negative impact on Barr.

These circumstances appear to affect Barr's understanding of Childs and perhaps to account for one gap between English-language and German-language scholarship. As another test case for the theme of chapter one, that the reception of an author's work in another language is a neglected aspect of biblical interpretation, we will look now at how Barr and Childs understand biblical theology, and what their understandings of it have to do with conceptions of the same in German literature. As the epigraph anticipates, the argument will be that Barr is out of touch with a dominant current in the German discussion of biblical theology, and that Childs is not. I do not for a moment suggest that Barr has no contact with German debates—Barr's *Old and New* (1966) was translated into German the next year, and *Fundamentalism* (1977) within five years. Rather, my thesis will be that Barr misunderstands Childs in part because he is not sensitive to the context out of which Childs' biblical theological efforts arise, and that in contrast, Rendtorff (among others) points to a home for Childs' work. This chapter

3. "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" (Childs, *A Response* [Mays], 208).

makes a highly focused comparison of three large volumes, Childs' *Biblical Theology* (1992), Barr's *Concept* (1999) and Rendtorff's *Canonical Hebrew Bible* (1998, 2001, ET 2005), all set against a slightly wider discussion. The governing purpose, though, is to locate *BTONT* internationally.

I. COMING TO TERMS

From one perspective Childs' *BTONT* is a pioneering book. Some have even gone so far as to call it *sui generis*. Rendtorff, despite disagreements on other fronts, can say, "Es gibt bisher nur eine einzige wirklich ausgearbeitete 'Biblische Theologie,' nämlich die 1992 erschienene von Brevard Childs."⁴ The culmination of some twenty-two years' labor on Childs' part, *BTONT* is the first answer to a call long sounded within the German-speaking academy. Eichrodt set about his *Old Testament Theology* with an awareness of a "unitive fact," that something "binds together indivisibly the two realms of the Old and New Testaments—different in externals though they may be."⁵ For him a further step is required to examine the "essential coherence" of Old and New.⁶ With still more clarity, von Rad appended these lines to the end of the fourth edition of his *Theologie des AT*:

[Es] zeichnet sich aber ein noch ferneres Ziel unseres Bemühens ab, nämlich das einer 'Biblichen Theologie,' in der der Dualismus je einer sich eigensinnig abgrenzenden Theologie des Alten und des Neuen Testaments überwunden wäre. Wie sich eine solche biblische Theologie dann darzustellen hätte, ist noch schwer vorstellbar. Es ist aber ermutigend, daß sie heute immer lauter gefordert wird.⁷

Quoting part of this same passage, H.-J. Kraus concludes the second edition of his history of critical research similarly, asking in 1969, "Wird ein Weg gefunden werden, auf dem die Spaltung überwunden werden kann? Das ist jetzt die Frage."⁸ Writing a little later still, H. G. Reventlow is less optimistic. "A 'biblical theology' has yet to be written. The way towards it is

4. Rendtorff, *Bibel Israels*, 102.

5. Eichrodt, *Theology* 1:26.

6. *Ibid.*, 1:31.

7. Von Rad, *Theologie*, 42:447. See below for a discussion of text-critical issues.

8. Kraus, *Geschichte*², 509.

not only one of high hopes; it is also beset by a good deal of scepticism.”⁹ Yet as Rendtorff so neatly articulates, in 1992 Childs rendered statements like these “obsolete.”¹⁰

Yet Barr contests the notion that biblical theology should be a *gesamtbiblische* enterprise in the first place. Again, despite a variety of differences, von Rad, Kraus, Reventlow, and Rendtorff agree with Childs at a very basic level: “Biblical Theology is by definition theological reflection on both the Old and New Testament.”¹¹ Barr, however, contests Childs’ definition on the grounds that it does not “accord with most modern usage *in English*.”¹² He allows that the phrase has tended to have a more restricted meaning in German usage, for what he prefers to call “pan-biblical theology” (a phrase drawn from the title of Manfred Oeming’s *Gesamtbiblische Theologien der Gegenwart*).¹³ Defining terms this way might have its place in an overview of distinctively American or British views on biblical theology. But because Barr does not adequately reckon with Childs’ international focus, his terminological restriction of biblical theology to its English usage has serious consequences for his evaluation of *BTONT*.

To be sure, there are differences in German understandings. It is just that from the outset, Barr’s analysis of the concept of biblical theology relativizes, and even inclines against, the one context where Childs’ contribution most naturally fits. Barr calls the closing paragraph of von Rad’s second volume “pathetic,” supposing it to contain “words of apparent desperation.”¹⁴ Which paragraph does he mean? D. M. G. Stalker’s translation (Edinburgh, 1962–1965) has a text critical problem of some complexity here. Based on the second edition of von Rad’s *Theologie des AT* (Munich, 1957–1960), it adds a postscript that looks forward to—but does not match—the updated fourth German edition (Munich, 1962–1965). Recensionally, the translation is just slightly prior to the revision, and as others have observed, the fourth edition introduces substantial changes not reflected in the English. Although Stalker’s translation

9. Reventlow, *Biblical Theology*, vii.

10. Rendtorff, *Bibel Israels*, 102n25: Reventlow’s claim is “überholt.”

11. *BTONT*, 55.

12. Barr, *Concept*, 1, my emphasis; cf. 180. He appears to misjudge Rendtorff somewhat on this count (444).

13. *Ibid.*, 641n3, 497.

14. *Ibid.*, 510, 427.

includes a new postscript which von Rad must have supplied, and though a preface to the translation anticipates the changes of the fourth edition (2:ix), the concluding lines of Stalker's edition (2:428–429) reflect a different *Vorlage* than what I have quoted in German, above. Barr responds to the English version, where the final sentiment concerns the need to differentiate biblical theology proper from mere history of Old Testament religion.¹⁵ He thus neglects something that will become more central in the revision. Even so, the need for *gesamtbibliche* theology is also emphasized at the end of the English version: “only when Old Testament theology takes this final step to the threshold of the New Testament, only when it makes the link with the witness of the Gospels and the Apostles perfectly openly, and when it is able to make men believe that the two Testaments belong together, will it have the right to term itself a theological undertaking, and therefore ‘Biblical theology.’”¹⁶ Once again a project equal to *BTONT* in scope and ambition is being called for and anticipated.

Thus Barr's reading of von Rad mirrors his dismissive evaluation of Childs. Barr is as well read in German OT scholarship as anyone in the Anglo-Saxon world, probably better than most. He is aware that “writing a biblical theology” has a fairly technical meaning on the Continent that is not always shared elsewhere. Yet he stands far enough outside that context that a typical German usage of biblical theology is of minimal importance to him. By contrast, *the definition according to which BTONT is written* is so naturally assumed by Rendtorff that he can say, “Es gibt bisher nur eine einzige wirklich ausgearbeitete ‘Biblische Theologie.’” Not only does Childs tend to inhabit a very different scholarly context than Barr; Childs' work has been *received* differently on that basis. Rendtorff accepts *BTONT* as a Biblical Theology on its own terms. James Barr does not. Again, Barr supposes that Childs' work reveals a “failure to converse with the past development of biblical theology itself.”¹⁷ But that all depends on how one conceives of the development of biblical theology. Ironically, a move that was meant to

15. In addition to pages 510 and 427 in *Concept*, see especially 111. Cf. also Rendtorff, Lohfink, Barton, Albertz and others in *JBTh* 10. The relationship between history of religions and the biblical witness has a long and thorny history which extends back to Gunkel, as Werner Klatt illustrates. See his Klatt, *Gunkel*, especially 77, 80, 189.

16. Von Rad, *Theology*, 2:428–429 (Stalker's translation).

17. Barr, *Concept*, 426.

bring terminological clarity has obscured the degree to which Childs is dependent upon, and responding to, a well-established tradition of what biblical theology is thought to mean.

The contrast between Barr and Childs can profitably be taken a little further. Barr is highly skeptical about the very possibility of “pan-biblical” theology. For him, “‘biblical theology’ has clarity *only* when it is understood to mean theology as it existed or was thought or believed within the time, languages and cultures of the Bible itself. Only so can its difference from doctrinal theology, from later interpretation, and from later views about the Bible be maintained.”¹⁸ “Theology exists only in the minds of persons,” he continues, and establishing the sequence and development of people’s theologies is an historical task.¹⁹ Barr grants that texts can *express* theology, but only when they do so explicitly, and in this sense most of the Bible does not itself contain theology.²⁰ Drawing out theological aspects of biblical texts is a legitimate, perhaps a necessary, undertaking. But quite apart from whether it is advisable or possible to seek out a holistic picture of the theology of the New or Old Testaments on their own, it is simply inconceivable to expect a coherent presentation of the theology of the entire Christian Bible. “When taken as wholes” the two individual testaments “are not congruent, nor even closely analogical.” Hence Barr feels that between OT and NT scholarship is an “intrinsic separateness”; he recommends “that this should be accepted, rather than that vast amounts of further energy be poured into a task that has proved to be neither necessary nor salutary.”²¹

Little wonder that Childs’ Biblical Theology is “a fundamentally biblicistic illusion” on Barr’s reading.²² The terminological relativization of “pan-biblical” theology has the effect of ruling Childs’ project out *by definition*. If this sort of thing were ever allowed, it would have to fall under the domain of dogmatics, not biblical theology.²³ “Thus the striving of biblical the-

18. Ibid., 4, my emphasis.

19. Ibid., 214.

20. Ibid., 248, 251; cf. 226–227, 242, 244–252, 376. This could be one of the places “Barr momentarily defines his subject out of existence” (Levenson, *Negative*, 59), though it depends on what Barr means by theology.

21. Barr, *Concept*, 186–187.

22. Ibid., 252. That Childs is in view is made explicit in the footnote, 668n21.

23. As Barr explains, it is not a question of whether theologians should take an interest in the Bible. Obviously

ology to establish coherence and unity, even if it is viable up to the level of the entire Old Testament or the entire New Testament, involves *essentially doctrinal questioning* if it is to be carried up to the level of the entire Bible, and the effect of this is to put into question the existence of biblical theology as an operation independent of doctrinal theology.”²⁴ In sum, Barr has a pair of commitments that make it almost impossible for him to take *BTONT* seriously. First is his commitment to the complete restriction of exegesis to what was thought by individuals in biblical times. Second is his commitment to a strict separation of the disciplines—Old Testament from New Testament, exegesis from dogmatics, historical theology from normative theology. Both relate to what Barr takes “theology” to be, and to why scripture has only a very indirect bearing upon it.

Childs on the other hand pursues a holistic account: “Biblical Theology is by definition theological reflection on both the Old and New Testament.” The formation of the canon participates in the function of the final form. Canon proper is integral to the life of the church and, *mutatis mutandis*, the synagogue. Modern critical disciplines illuminate aspects of how the canon came together, how it functioned and continues to function as authoritative scripture. Dogmatists study the same subject matter, tackling related problems in parallel as their specialization allows, in a “division of labour.”²⁵ And biblical theology attends to the discrete witnesses of the one Christian Bible such that the various canonical voices are not obscured:

The basic hermeneutical problem of the Bible, therefore, is not adequately formulated by using the terminology of unity and diversity. The oneness of scripture’s scope is not a rival to the multiple voices within the canon, but a constant pointer, much like a ship’s compass, fixing on a single goal, in spite of the many and various ways of God (Heb. 1.1), toward which the believer is drawn... The recognition of the one scope of scripture, which is Jesus

they do. “The question is whether there is, or should be, a ‘biblical theology’ which seeks to bring together the entire biblical witness, or large portions of it, as a sort of intermediate activity between normal exegesis of individual texts and the regulative decision-making of doctrinal theology. That is quite a different question” (ibid., 242).

24. Ibid., 376, my emphasis.

25. *BTONT*, 370: “In terms of the aforementioned division of labour, those scholars trained in dogmatic theology are often better equipped to pursue in detail the nature of God’s being, especially in light of the modern challenges to the biblical witness from various forms of philosophy. Yet it is an equally important responsibility of Biblical Theology to assure that the reflection on the being of God remains integrally related to his redemptive action within human history for the sake of Israel, the church, and the world.” On the same page Childs criticizes Barr’s essay on “The Theological Case against Biblical Theology,” which appears in the first FS for Childs.

Christ, does not function to restrict the full range of the biblical voices. It does not abstract the message, or seek to replace a coat of many colors with a seamless garment of grey.²⁶

As with von Rad on Childs' reading, there is a christological center which focuses the unity. A similar sentiment is found in Eichrodt as well: "*That which binds together indivisibly the two realms of the Old and New Testaments—different in externals though they may be—is the irruption of the Kingship of God into this world and its establishment here.* This is the unitive fact because it rests on the action of one and the same God in each case."²⁷ Disagreements notwithstanding—and of course there are many—Childs shares with his teachers a commitment to a christological core that unifies biblical theology. It is a unity of the subject matter to which study is directed, God in Christ, that makes reflection on the entire Christian Bible essentially centripetal.

I will revisit some of these differences from another angle in chapter six. Meanwhile, we can contrast the relationships Barr and Childs have to the work of Karl Barth.

THE BARTH CONNECTION: BARR AT EDINBURGH

Barr celebrates the idea that Karl Barth has no theory of biblical theology. Barth had no need of it for the business of dogmatics, according to Barr, and positively rejected efforts to "induce the totality of the biblical witness." Barr quotes the *Church Dogmatics*:

Therefore a biblical theology can never consist in more than a series of attempted approximations, a collection of individual exegeses. There can never be any question of a system in the sense of Platonic, Aristotelian or Hegelian philosophy... How can we expound it except by surrendering ourselves to the recollection...? Biblical theology (and self-evidently dogmatics too) can consist only in an exercise in this surrender, not in an attempt to induce the totality of the biblical witness.²⁸

Barr then quotes N. Wolterstorff on Barth for support: "The unity of the Bible does not consist in a unified theology or world-view. There is ... 'no Christian view of things,' 'no biblical the-

26. *BTONT*, 725.

27. Eichrodt, *Theology*, 1:26, original emphasis.

28. *CD* 1/2, 483–484, quoted in *Concept*, 244, and cf. 414. Would Barth thus reject dogmatics also? What is elided in the penultimate sentence is also suspect. The full question reads, "How can we expound it except by surrendering ourselves with them to the recollection, their recollection, and to the expectation, their expectation?" This is actually a statement in favor of the unity of the two testaments in their witness to Christ. One looks ahead, the other back.

ology.' The unity of the Bible consists—so Barth insists—in the unity of its content, in the fact that all its parts point, in one way or another, to Jesus Christ."²⁹ Barr's conclusion is that these lines prove Barth "clearly does not provide a basis for biblical theology."³⁰ Dogmatics is something totally different. Childs "upholds what he thinks to be Barth's viewpoint" but is blind to "Barth's *rejection* of biblical theology as a mode of procedure."³¹ Yet this is a dubious reading of Barth and Childs alike. It is hard to imagine how Barr fails to see that concern for "the unity of Holy Scripture" drives the entire section from which he quotes, where Barth states that biblical "exposition is trustworthy to the extent that it not only expounds the text in front of it, but implicitly at least *expounds all the other texts*, to the extent that it at any rate clears the way for the exposition of all other texts."³² Thus "the on the whole irreversible distinction between the two witnesses is again completely relativised by the unity of its object."³³ Obviously Childs and Barth do not share identical agendas. But somehow Barr's lengthy treatment of biblical theology nowhere confronts the fact that for Eichrodt, for von Rad, for Childs, and indeed also for Barth, the central reason for positing a unity between the testaments is christological. This is a strange oversight. Furthermore, for these several *gesamtbiblische Theologien*, contra Barr, a strict separation between dogmatics and exegesis is therefore untenable. Any division of labor arises from other exigencies.

It is not clear how much all this has to do with Barr's "training," or his formative influences, but it seems likely that Barr's time at Edinburgh left its stamp, and one cannot but wonder how much his interaction with T. F. Torrance shaped his overwhelmingly negative view of Barth.³⁴ Torrance is punished time and again in *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, as much

29. *Divine Discourse*, 68, quoted in *Concept*, 244.

30. *Concept*, 244–245.

31. *Ibid.*, 245.

32. *CD 1/2*, 485, my emphasis.

33. *CD 1/2*, 482. Nearby one finds a clear analog to Childs: "When we have to do with Scripture, i.e., canonical Scripture, the Scripture which the Church has defined and we in and with the Church have recognised as canonical, when we have to do with Holy Scripture as witness, in fact the witness of divine revelation, we have to do with the witness of Moses and the prophets, the Evangelists and the apostles... The Old and the New Testament both have as their distinctive feature to attest in the one case the Messiah who is to come, and in the other the Messiah who has already come" (481).

34. I am told that T. F. Torrance's brother, J. B. Torrance, led the young Barr to Christ at a bus stop (personal

as or perhaps even more than T. Boman, J. Pedersen or N. H. Snaith, and yet he emerges there as one about whom Barr had a change of heart. It is surprising to learn that Barr collaborated with Torrance on the Church of Scotland's special commission on baptism, which drafted an interim report (1955) that was corporately revised by Barr among others and forwarded to the General Assembly (1958).³⁵ But by 1961 the interim report had become a parade example of the abuses of linguistic evidence in theological argumentation.³⁶ In a footnote Barr distances himself from the committee. "I myself was associated with the production of this document ... but would now disagree with much in its approach, which in my opinion does not sufficiently depart from the methods of the *Interim Report*. This latter report contains numerous examples of the kind of misinterpretation of language which is criticized in this book."³⁷ Indeed, it is almost as if something happened behind the scenes of the Church of Scotland commission that precipitated Barr's devastating analysis.

What is more, Barr seems to imply that the ultimate blame lies at the feet of Karl Barth,³⁸ with whom Torrance studied in Basel, and whose own pamphlet on baptism a decade before (ET 1948) was undoubtedly part of the impetus for Torrance's inquiry through the Church of Scotland from 1953.³⁹ Yet in 1961 Barr reacts not so much to Barth's well-known study, but to Torrance's reworking of it in Edinburgh, in and for the church in which Barr himself is a minister. Only this personal dimension explains how a relatively minor in-house report on baptism acquired such a high profile in *Semantics*.

And yet Childs raises questions about Barr's reading of Barth, as we will soon see. He also raises questions about Torrance's. "It is a little frightening when you see some of Barth's students trying his method and coming up with something else. After reading a few of Tor-

communication with Alan Torrance, 21 May 2008).

35. Torrance, *Interim Report* and see the introductory note in Torrance, *Study Document*.

36. Barr, *Semantics*, 5–6, 140–144, 262, 279. To this can be added a long list of Torrance's missteps: 106, 120, 129–136, 149–156, 161, 171–175, 198, 204, 254, 259, 264, 277–279.

37. *Ibid.*, 141.

38. *Ibid.*, 156, 188, 277–279. Here Barr does not differentiate between Torrance and Barth, but rather posits a close identification.

39. Barth, *Taufe* (ET Barth, *Baptism*), cf. M. Barth, *Sakrament?*.

rance's exegeses, there were problems in Barth that I have never seen before."⁴⁰ It is obviously well beyond the scope of this thesis to trace the ways Barth has been brought into the English-speaking world, but Childs suggests that distorting factors come into play once more. Childs knew Torrance at Basel, but their friendship does not prevent him from drawing a critical distinction between Torrance and Barth.

The main point is that Barr's treatment of biblical theology in *Concept* cuts him off from an important aspect of the venture where it has most often been taken up. For this reason one should be suspicious of his claim that "Childs comes closer to the conservative Barthian tradition which has been powerful in certain circles in the Anglo-Saxon world."⁴¹ Very likely this is the Barthian tradition Barr knows best, and distrusts most, but it is certainly not the tradition which mediated Barth to Childs. In Barr's favor, Barth may not call himself a "biblical theologian," and there can be no doubt that the terminology is strictly speaking anachronistic when applied to Calvin or Luther. But when Childs claims "Barth's exegesis is an exercise in Biblical Theology,"⁴² or something similar for pre-critical exegetes, is he really just "reading his own concepts into their minds,"⁴³ as Barr insists? To defend a reading of that sort, one would first want an accurate picture of Childs' conception of biblical theology. And this should probably include an account of Childs' formative years on the Continent.

THE BARTH CONNECTION: CHILDS AFTER BASEL

Much has been made of the link between Childs and Barth, not just by Barr. Too often this has been colored by a distaste for Barth, such that Childs becomes guilty by association. The one extended study of Childs and Barth to date, by Charles Scalise, was never published,

40. Childs, *Barth as Interpreter*, 35; cf. 32 concerning Barr on Barth.

41. *Concept*, 408–409.

42. *BTONT*, 589.

43. *Concept*, 414.

and unfortunately it is not as illuminating as it might have been.⁴⁴ Scalise does point to a probable source for Childs' idea that canon \approx rule. Barth writes:

“Canon” means “rule,” i.e., the “rule of truth,” and most significantly this conception was originally connected with the dogma as well as the constitution of the texts which are recognized to be holy. The Church cannot “form” it, as historians have occasionally said without being aware of the theological implications.⁴⁵

This important connection, which Childs begins to explore in *Crisis*, will occupy us more in chapter six. Scalise also draws attention to a Yale colloquium on Barth convened in January 1969, a month after Barth's death. Childs contributed, as did Hans Frei. A recording of that session was transcribed, and handful of hard copies were circulated.⁴⁶ Following Scalise, there has been a tendency to treat Childs' remarks more formally than the setting suggests, as though they constitute a proper academic article. In fact his paper at the colloquium has a conversational tone, and it brims with personal reminiscences of Childs' student days. Given the timing one could hardly expect otherwise.

Childs tells a simple narrative. He came to Basel to study Hebrew with Baumgartner, not to hear Barth, although he and the other “Bible men” listened to Barth. They formed a sort of “Biblical phalanx” and sat in the back when he lectured: “we came well-equipped with our Hebrew and Greek. And we would check his references and coach each other and sort of make fun of Barth's exegesis. Barth occasionally, when he got to the section, would look over at this phalanx and say, ‘Not that I don't know all about J, E, D, and P;’ and then would go on as if he

44. Scalise, *Theological Basis*, argues that Childs' canonical approach “is in large measure an extension of the theological hermeneutics of Karl Barth. For Childs the historical critical meaning of Scripture is subordinated to its theological meaning as discerned from the pattern of its theological shape. Childs' theological strategy, like that of Barth, enables the recovery of continuity with precritical interpretation, while incorporating the results of modern historical study” (197). Three main themes in common are: emphasis on the Bible as witness; opposition to existentialist hermeneutics (Barth : Bultmann :: Childs : Sanders); rejection of anthropocentric theology (122). Scalise's thesis (for a more readily available condensation see Scalise, *Childs and Barth*) is plausible, though it lacks insight and nuance. Very little differentiation is made between Childs and Barth, for example—almost none whatsoever beyond what Childs himself says about where he departs from Barth.

45. *KD*, I/2, 524; *CD*, I/2, 473. Cited *ibid.*, 66 (cf. Scalise, *Theological Basis*, 81; for an earlier discussion of canon and the *regula fidei* see *KD*, I/1, 103; *CD*, I/1, 113), though in fact Childs himself cites this passage in *CD* with his first use of the phrase “rule of faith” (*Crisis*, 105n7).

46. There are copies at Yale and Princeton; none made it to public libraries in the United Kingdom, however. My thanks go to Christopher Seitz for supplying me with a photocopy.

couldn't care less."⁴⁷ Barth's personal charisma, and his facility with languages, won no converts from the Bible students, but he disrupted some of their prejudices about dogmatics as a second-class field. And yet, Childs says, "perhaps what I'm saying is a confession of the sins of my youth. Because I do have a change of heart, for various reasons."⁴⁸ Barth's work is not perfect, but it survives. It has something still to teach.

For Childs, looking back, Barth's work survives despite the fact that many supposed to have been working in a Barthian way have become "hopelessly outdated."⁴⁹ There are still big problems in Barth's work, but somehow he never went in for things like *Heilsgeschichte* or the Hebrew mentality, which made others vulnerable. Some of what Barth got right sounds remarkably like a description of the canonical approach: "Barth always complained that one could not get behind the text, that one could not come at Scripture from a context other than the Canonical context as it had been received by the Church, that there was no neutral position from which one could start and then somehow make a bridge from neutrality to commitment."⁵⁰ Or: "Barth allows you to read the text from different contexts. It seems to me that he is always interested in different ways of studying it. But he continues to insist that ultimately the context from which theology has to be done is the context of Scripture—Old and New Testament—in the Canonical context."⁵¹ Barth's exegesis may be suspicious. Sometimes it seems to be.

And yet it seems to me it's the fact that Barth wants to go through the text, to the reality, that the text becomes a transparency, that the walls that separate the Apostle from the reader are dissolved, and one then begins to confront the reality itself—and for Barth there can be no antiquarian interest. And that means that Barth has the tendency always to move down, to move through, and talk about the transparency. Very soon one is wrestling with the realities of Grace, and Judgment, and Nature and Grace—all the rest of these things—and that remains a problem. It seems to me this may be somewhat of an overstatement, but it is true that the kind of work he does is of such a different genre that for one who has been trained in the traditional critical way, it does seem that wherever Barth starts, he ends up in these massive theological statements and most of us have trouble following him.⁵²

47. Childs, *Barth as Interpreter*, 30.

48. *Ibid.*, 31.

49. *Ibid.*, 31. Childs names "Wright and Anderson and Rowley, or Richardson or Hunter or Cullmann and Filson."

50. *Ibid.*, 32.

51. *Ibid.*, 33.

52. *Ibid.*, 33–34.

Problems remain, yet to Childs in early 1969 it seems “we still have much to learn from this word he leaves,” namely, “that dogmatics continues to be corrected by exegesis. So, exegete.”⁵³

Also noteworthy in the present discussion are a few off-hand remarks about Barr's criticisms of Barth. “James Barr's recent book on interpretation *Old and New* says it's one of the most chilling things in the whole Dogmatics to read that Barth says in 1948, Perhaps a time will one day come when dogmaticians will be able to depend on Biblical scholars. Then he says, Already we had Kittel, already we had Hoskyns on John. How could he possibly say that?”⁵⁴ Childs does not go into criticism of Barr's understanding of revelation, but he states, “I wonder again whether Barr really understood what Barth was doing.”⁵⁵

Another factor with Childs and Barth is the work of Frei. This of course refracts Barth's thought in its own way,⁵⁶ but it is also no accident that Childs and Frei, colleagues at Yale for so many years, have been connected in the literature. So far the most relevant primary source has been entirely overlooked, however.

The Yale colloquium ended with a discussion period. The panelists speak off the cuff, and Childs' and Frei's remarks address several pivotal issues with delicious clarity. Frei advances his idea of the biblical text as a narrative universe (in line with the later Barth, he suggests), whereas Childs counters that the text needs to be read as a transparency. In church history, perhaps in Barth, in exegesis today, Childs states, “I don't see how you can avoid a dialectic between text and reality, in some sort.”⁵⁷ (Frei's Barth is hardly more Childs' than Torrance's Barth is.) Yet at this early date, five years before *Eclipse*, still on the eve of *Crisis*, what stands out most is the strong agreement between Childs and Frei on the problem of the literal sense. In view of the long chain of disagreements between Childs and Barr, particularly over the letter and the spirit (chapter six), part of the dialogue stands to be quoted at a little

53. Ibid., 35.

54. Ibid., 32. Childs paraphrases Barr, *Old and New*, 96n1 (which is citing *KD*, III/2, vii; *CD*, III/2, ix), cf. 12, 90–96, 102, 181–182.

55. Childs, *Barth as Interpreter*, 34.

56. Two outstanding recent studies of Frei are: Dawson, *Figural Reading* and Higton, *Public Theology*.

57. Childs, *Barth as Interpreter*, 56. See chapter three.

length. A student asks the panel whether it would be possible to access Barth's genius in a more exegetically controlled way. Childs speaks up first.

CHILDS: Well it seems to me for the last twenty or thirty years people have been trying to combine the orthodoxy of Barth with the historical-critical approach. It seems to me that this enterprise has now come to an end and has proven unfruitful—that you are now at the turn of the road, you have to go either right or left; that the type of move that said Barth is right in seeing theological dimension, but now we have to take history more seriously and bring in the whole baggage—I don't think this can—

In other words, I'm suggesting that the problem is far deeper than this. It's a problem that certainly didn't just arise with Barth. (And much of what I've learned about this has come from talking with Hans Frei.) But it has often bothered and puzzled me. You see, when you read Calvin, he fights against the whole medieval tradition by saying it's the *sensus literalis* that counts—it's the literal sense—and you have page after page against the whole church dogma. But then you read Calvin on the Old Testament, and here's Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ. How could it possibly be? And everybody just says that Calvin is just inconsistent.

It seems to me that this doesn't at all touch the heart of the problem: that for Calvin, the *sensus literalis* IS Jesus Christ. And it was only when you have the eighteenth century identification of the literal sense with the historical sense that you're just hopelessly lost. And it seems to me that it's something along that line—that we've just been unable to understand what Barth is doing.

FREI: That's right.

[Julian] HARTT: Would you mind repeating that?

CHILDS: It sounds better in German, though.

STUDENT: Is it something we can do today?⁵⁸

This is a pregnant exchange. Here in 1969 Childs sees that theological compromise with the historical-critical approach is doomed (e.g., in the work of his teachers). He knows this partly because of a contrast between traditional exegesis and modern critical exegesis which can be captured in a sound-bite: for the Reformers, the literal sense of the Old Testament was Christ. Frei's explanation of the shift ("That's right")—in the Enlightenment the literal sense came to be identified with the historical sense, and thus to exclude Christ—will soon be argued in detail in the first three chapters of *Eclipse*, but already Childs has bought into the thesis. That the letter of the Old Testament should connect to Christ directly sounds counterintuitive today, even to a trained professional (Hartt), and the challenge to see the forgotten relationship will continue to animate Childs through the final phases of his career. Although biblical theology is not mentioned, one can easily extrapolate to Childs' later mandate that a theology

58. Ibid., 52–53. Frei says "Sure" and then steers the conversation in another direction.

of the entire Christian Bible must have a christological center (one place von Rad, Barth and Childs all agree). Finally, while I could only guess at what exactly sounds better to Childs' ear in German, the cryptic addition highlights how deeply his thinking about such matters is informed by wide reading in that language.

To sum up, from clues like these one gathers that Barr and Childs each had a change of heart about Barth somewhere early in their academic careers but subsequent to their doctorates at Edinburgh and Basel, respectively. Their turns are not quite mirror images. Barr sharply rejected an ethos associated with Barth via T. F. Torrance at Edinburgh. This appears to have transpired after his student days, possibly during his first appointment in Old Testament in which time he served on a special Church of Scotland commission on baptism and completed his discipline-transforming *Semantics*. Childs knew Barth firsthand at Basel but sat in his lectures with a "Biblical phalanx" that disputed his exegesis. Back in America, however, having experienced and studied the failure of the biblical theology movement, he reconsidered, concluding that Barth, despite some lasting problems, kept an important traditional perspective more or less intact—call it the necessary christological condition for biblical theology. Childs also perceived that others who worked in Barth's name were not nearly so immune to Barr's searching critique of 1961. Whether or not differences in training have anything to do with it, geography does seem to have been a factor in the gap that opens up between Barr and Childs. Suffice it to say that they have very different Barths in mind when it comes to the unitive scope of biblical exegesis, and that Barr's has more to do with Torrance.

II. RENDTORFF'S INPUT

It was argued in chapter one that Rolf Rendtorff changed his exegetical focus on the process of transmission to a focus on the final form because of an encounter with Childs' *IOTS*—the book provoked a change of direction in the line of sight. I also suggested that Rendtorff's interest in Judaism, which stems from the 1960s, conflicts at some level with Childs' understanding of canon. That leaves two issues to address here. (1) What understand-

ing of canon did Rendtorff develop for own enterprise? And (2) why did this eventually lead Rendtorff to distance his vision of biblical theology from Childs'?

(1) Rendtorff reads Childs against his own set of concerns, of course, the most evident being his transformative discovery of Judaism. Through the 1980s, as he fashions canon into his own paradigm, Rendtorff looks for resources with which to develop the link between canon and Judaism. In a paper delivered in Jerusalem in August 1981, Rendtorff's critique of the usual historical-critical procedure, his concern that Christian exegetes recover the Jewish exegetical tradition, and "the extremely exciting discussion" sparked by Childs are all merely juxtaposed.⁵⁹ Rendtorff does not continue to draw on Childs' thought much beyond this, however. He looks instead to his esteemed teacher, Gerhard von Rad.

Rendtorff's 1989 essay "Old Testament Theology: Some Ideas for a New Approach" illustrates the shift. A survey of models prior to von Rad reveals that OT Theologies typically follow outlines derived from dogmatic or systematic considerations. Von Rad's *Theology*, however, broke the trend. As von Rad puts it, "we must submit ourselves to the sequence of events as the faith of Israel saw them."⁶⁰ Von Rad begins with creation despite his view that it was neither old nor the primary saving event in Israel's history. Thus, according to Rendtorff, "we can talk about a 'canon-related' survey." But as a significant footnote explains, the scare quotes around "canon-related" flag "an anachronism inasmuch as the discussion about the theological significance of 'the canon' only started very much later, and since von Rad himself was not thinking here about the 'final canonical form' of the texts, as is the case in the most recent discussion."⁶¹ After an initial reorientation, von Rad's input displaces Childs'.

Rendtorff's reasons for transferring his new-found interest in final form exegesis to von Rad, a figure who anticipates Childs' canonical approach in a qualified way (chapter four), can only be guessed at. Rendtorff was a student of von Rad and will have appreciated how much Childs learned from their teacher. In terms of the substance of his own convictions,

59. Rendtorff, *Rabbinic*, 30 (= Rendtorff, *Canon and Theology*, 18).

60. Von Rad, *Theology*, 1:120 (= ⁴1:134), cited in Rendtorff, *Canon and Theology*, 9

61. *Ibid.*, 9. He is forced explain why von Rad deviates from this template with the prophets (10).

Rendtorff in the 1980s is attracted to R. Smend's defense of "Theologie im Alten Testament," that is, the OT's theological meaning understood chiefly as the *intent* of biblical authors or editors.⁶² This affirmation puts a little distance between Rendtorff and Childs, for whom biblical theology "is not confined simply to a historical description of the original author's intention,"⁶³ although this would not necessarily push Rendtorff toward von Rad. The best one can say is that Rendtorff and Childs alike lay claim to von Rad's legacy but revise it differently.

The heart of Rendtorff's program is striking in its simplicity. His canonical retooling of von Rad in 1989 is precisely the one that drives his OT Theology, *Canonical Hebrew Bible*: von Rad's "new approach" is named on page one, and the ensuing account understands itself as "an effort in running through the canon from its first to its last verse to allow the texts to speak in their present form."⁶⁴ Hence Childs' influence on Rendtorff amounts to an initial reorientation, a call to recognize the living function the final form in communities of faith, and to follow it. Beyond this the only emphasis imported from Childs is the history of exegesis, though this has a distinctive flavor, too. *Wirkungsgeschichte* for Rendtorff is far more exclusively concerned with the history of Jewish exegesis.

(2) Rendtorff's 2006 comments in Edinburgh (recall the introduction) cover two main aspects of his differentiation from Childs, sharpened especially by *BTONT* in 1992, both of which emerge in the final pages of *CHB*. First, Rendtorff worries that Childs is still so invested in source criticism that he barely manages to give a "canonical" reading of the text at all. In

62. Ibid., 143–144, cf. 12 (in the 1989 essay cited above). Rendtorff and Smend agree, against von Rad, that OT theology is not later extrapolation based on the "facts" of the credo. Rather, the collective overview is a late, deuteromic/deuteronomistic phenomenon (Smend, *Theologie im AT*, esp. 111–112). Hence theology exists within the OT, but at a *secondary* or even *tertiary* level. Theology, Smend emphasizes, is "historisch ein verhältnismäßig spätes Produkt" (116). The late theological intention Rendtorff finds in the Pentateuch is not far from Smend here, though he is less willing to accept Smend's continuation of Wellhausen's distinction between Israel and Judaism (*Canon and Theology*, 144). Still, he can later say that "Deuteronomy is perhaps the most theological book in the Hebrew Bible" (*CHB*, 74). Rendtorff also recognizes that Smend's interest in canon, such as can be found in the opening pages of Smend, *Entstehung*, is different in kind to what Childs proposes (Rendtorff, *Introduction*, 129). See also Smend, *Questions*.

63. *BTONT*, 7–8. Childs' entire discussion of Ebeling's classic essay on biblical theology (1–9) stands in sharp contrast to Smend's affirmation of biblical theology in the narrowest sense—"was das Alte Testament enthält"—using Ebeling's very words (Smend, *Theologie im AT*, 116, citing Ebeling, *Wort*, 86 [= Ebeling, *Meaning*, 94]).

64. Rendtorff, *CHB*, 413. Before translation the work appeared as: *Theologie, Bd. 1* and *Theologie, Bd. 2*.

BTONT more words are spent on a description of the P and J accounts of creation than on “the effect of the joining of the sources into a continuous narrative.”⁶⁵ Childs is not canonical enough! (Though note how long this is after 1974.) Second, Childs is believed to have inappropriately yielded to dogmatic considerations. Early on, in the 1980s, Barr’s invective against Childs is noted but not much regarded. Rendtorff occasionally says that the attack has the character of “a religious war.” Though voicing misgivings about “some dogmatic-sounding formulations,” he indicates that his “sympathies are on the side of Childs.”⁶⁶ By *CHB* Barr’s attacks have clearly received more attention. A final and very oblique comment on the link Childs wants to forge with dogmatic theology simply refers the reader to three chapters in Barr’s *Concept* which problematize that effort. (The second of these traces Childs’ alleged dogmatism back to Barth.) *IOTS* may have opened Rendtorff’s eyes to the importance of canon, but in contrast, *BTONT* seems to lead into an impasse. A core conviction of the latter volume is “diametrically opposed” to what Rendtorff envisions.⁶⁷ “It is of crucial significance that the church maintained Israel’s Bible *unchanged*,” Rendtorff explains.⁶⁸ That the point is actually directed against Childs, who often makes a similar sounding argument, emerges only later, when Childs is criticized for writing of an Old Testament “transformed” by the New. “For the maintenance of the ‘Scriptures’ in the form in which it was transmitted in the Jewish faith community is precisely an essential element of continuity between the Old and the New Testaments.”⁶⁹ But such comments are little developed in *CHB*.

Fortunately, Rendtorff’s article-length review of *BTONT* offers a more complete explanation. Beginning with an acknowledgment of the book’s uniqueness,⁷⁰ the review is often

65. *BTONT*, 113, cited by Rendtorff, *CHB*, 722. A “dependence on the dominant literary-critical classification stands in the way of the express interest in a ‘canonical’ overview” (723). Lurking nearby is the thesis of *Das überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem*, perhaps. When priestly elements are mentioned at all in *CHB*, it is as a “priestly layer” (42) rather than a source. But Rendtorff overlooks Childs’ more subtle claim that “[t]he J material functions on the level of figurative language, once-removed now from its original literal sense” (*BTONT*, 113).

66. Rendtorff, *Canon and Theology*, 195, cf. 171.

67. Rendtorff, *CHB*, 755.

68. *Ibid.*, 749, my emphasis.

69. *Ibid.*, 755.

70. Cf. Rendtorff, *Bibel Israels*, 102, cited above.

appreciative. At the same time, Childs is “eher konservativ” for his treatment of creation in Genesis 1–2.⁷¹ It seems Childs has become almost as problematic a canonical reader (one who proceeds from the from first verse to the last?) as von Rad himself.⁷² Again, and more importantly, Rendtorff objects to *BTONT* because of its understanding of Judaism. It builds on “bestimmten dogmatischen Voraussetzungen”—christology above all, as a strategy for broaching the unity aspect of canon—that separate it decisively from a Jewish understanding.⁷³ “An dieser Stelle muß ich die Rolle des Berichterstatters aufgeben, denn ich habe Schwierigkeiten, Childs’ Position zu verstehen.” Rendtorff’s explanation is telling:

Über die Frage der “Arbeitsteilung” zwischen den theologischen Disziplinen kann man verschiedener Meinungen sein; ich stimme Childs zu, wenn er sagt, dies sei eher eine Frage der Strategie als eine Grundsatzfrage, wenn ich auch selbst die Aufgaben anders bestimmen würde. Was ich nicht verstehen und nicht akzeptieren kann, ist der Vorbau dogmatischer Entscheidungen vor die exegetische Analyse. Vor allem verstehe ich auch inhaltlich nicht, was es heißt, daß das Alte Testament Zeugnis von Christus ablegt. Ich bestreite überhaupt nicht, daß es theologisch legitime Weisen gibt, das Alte Testament mit dem Neuen zusammen als christliche Bibel zu lesen und dabei die christliche Bibel als Ganze vom Christusereignis her zu deuten. Aber dadurch wird doch das Alte Testament selbst nicht zum Christuszeugnis.⁷⁴

When Rendtorff resumes this theme at the close of the review, it becomes clear just how closely bound his objection to dogmatic (= christologizing) readings of the OT is to his work for a *rapprochement* with Judaism. He names two ways in which he cannot follow *BTONT*. First is in the prioritization of dogmatic over biblical theology. “Daß das Alte Testament Christus bezeugt (nicht einen kommenden Messias, sondern Jesus Christus), verstehe ich nicht. Eine Hermeneutik, die grundlegende historische Sachverhalte ignoriert, ist mir nicht nachvollziehbar.”⁷⁵ It is hard not to think that the second objection gives the first all its teeth. Childs

71. Rendtorff, Rezension Childs, 362. The details are almost identical to what will appear in *CHB*. It is doubtful whether Rendtorff has seen to the bottom of the “figurative” reading being suggested.

72. *Ibid.*, 360–363. Rendtorff is right to puzzle over the historically chronological treatment of the NT—Paul before the Gospels. It may even be fair to call that section of *BTONT* “eine Art theologische Literaturgeschichte des Urchristentums” (363). Yet one must still try to answer why this belongs in *BTONT*, and in what sense it qualifies as “canonical” on Childs’ understanding. When Rendtorff says he attempts “viel konsequenter ‘kanonisch’ zu arbeiten, als Childs in diesem Buch tut” (369), it is a question of what each means by “canonical” in the first place.

73. *Ibid.*, 364.

74. *Ibid.*, 365.

75. *Ibid.*, 367.

thinks biblical theology is “ausschließlich eine christliche Disziplin.” But what about the possibility of Jewish biblical theology? “Für mich ist dies ein ganz entscheidender Punkt. Ich bemühe mich, niemals Aussagen über das Alte Testament zu machen, die von einem Juden nicht nachvollzogen werden könnten.” Christians will of course come to the text with different questions than Jews. “Aber meine Antworten, d.h. meine Auslegung des Textes müßte für ein Juden verständlich und akzeptabel sein.”⁷⁶ I submit, therefore, that Rendtorff’s later reaction against Childs’ so-called Barthian dogmatism stems ultimately from his own theological commitment to a certain theology of the church’s relationship to Jewish scripture. This and not “history” is closer to the heart of why he feels *BTONT* threatens the “Integrität” of the Old Testament.

In chapter five I will attempt to account for Childs’ own complicated relationship with what he calls the “mystery of Israel.” The question is fraught. By no means do I wish to trivialize its complexity, either for Rendtorff or for Childs, or as an issue in its own right. Still, with respect to Rendtorff’s understanding of Childs on the matter—as a kind of “reading” of Childs, which is of course not the limit of Rendtorff’s contribution⁷⁷—insufficient attention has been paid to how the literal sense functions for Childs, how it can be extended through figuration, and what all this has to do with his claim that the unifying referent of both testaments is Jesus Christ. Rendtorff’s work does not supply a sufficient account or critique of Childs, including in the restricted domain of Childs’ relationship to Judaism.

76. Ibid., 368.

77. Rendtorff’s dedicated labor in the area of Jewish-Christian merits study. He has invested a career in Leviticus (above all see Rendtorff, *Leviticus*) and has posed forceful theological questions: “Does the interpreter consider the pre-Christian (i.e., Jewish) meaning of the text to be theologically relevant or not?” (Rendtorff, *Canon and Theology*, 14). He is adamant that “a clear distinction must be made between the *interpretation* of the Old Testament in its canonical framework—that is, under the presuppositions and conditions of its development up to the close of the canon—and its *appropriation* by the Christian church, especially since that church has become an exclusively Gentile one; so that the Old Testament has been introduced as canonical document into a religious society which came into being only after the close of this canon and on its foundation” (ibid., 117). Yet assuming for the moment that it is possible to cleanly separate interpretation from appropriation, one wonders just how the OT has continuing relevance for the church on these terms (beyond awakening it to its fraternity with the synagogue), or how the OT witness connects with that of the NT. Or, it may be self-evident to Rendtorff what the contemporary relevance of Pentateuchal legal material is (*CHB*, 650), but I doubt whether many in the church today would take the same view. (Similarly, Gerstenberger, Review of Rendtorff, asks why so little use is made of the “Ziel” rubric in the Leviticus commentary.)

Moreover, one can find reason to doubt how well Rendtorff manages to represent the work of his mentor, von Rad. As von Rad concluded his seminal essay on typology, backing away from his earlier harsh review of W. Vischer's controversial book, *Das Christuszeugnis des Alten Testaments*: "So muß also—um endlich das umstrittene Wort zu nennen—wirklich von einem Christuszeugnis des AT gesprochen werden."⁷⁸ At issue is how the Old Testament can retain its distinctive voice as a pre-Christian witness, and at the same time function as the Old Testament, as the foundational part of the two-part Christian Bible. The matter is not easy.

Yet in closing it is striking to note that Rendtorff, despite increasing disagreement with Childs and perhaps an increased regard for Barr's portrait of Childs as a Barthian, still recognizes Childs' definition of biblical theology as quite appropriate to at least one scholarly context. "Barr likes to speak of 'pan-biblical theology,'" he notes. "In German discussion, however, the term *Biblische Theologie* is used primarily in precisely this sense as theology of the whole Bible... And this is how the term is being used here."⁷⁹ In this Rendtorff appears to me to represent a strong current in the German discussion.⁸⁰ Disagreement about the status of the Old Testament as Christian vis-à-vis Jewish scripture notwithstanding, the domain of biblical theology is much as Childs understands it. What more urgently needs exploring is the modern Christian Old Testament scholar's ambivalence about Christ and the witness of the scriptures of Israel. Von Rad hesitates but in the end affirms the *Christuszeugnis*, and in his own way so does Childs.

78. Rad, *Typologische*, 33 (= Rad, *Typological*, 39). On this question compare Rendtorff's "Christological Interpretation as a Way of 'Salvaging' the Old Testament? Wilhelm Vischer and Gerhard von Rad," 76–91 in Rendtorff, *Canon and Theology*.

79. Rendtorff, *CHB*, 751.

80. As Ebeling's 1955 essay attests (ET Ebeling, *Meaning*), there have long been two main currents in the definition of "biblical theology." If Smend, followed by Barr and Barton, represents one (see note 62), Janowski, *One God*, shows that the other is alive too. Rendtorff may actually have feet in both streams.

PART II **“THE INNER LOGIC OF
SCRIPTURE’S TEXTUAL AUTHORITY”**

CHAPTER 3 THE HEART OF THE MATTER (*RES*): CHILDS AGAINST NARRATIVE AND INTERTEXTUAL READINGS

As the realistic narrative reading of the biblical stories broke down, literal or verbal and historical meaning were severed and literal and figural interpretation, hitherto naturally affiliated procedures, also came apart. Figural reading had been literalism extended to the whole story or the unitary canon containing it. But now figural sense came to be something like the opposite of literal sense.

—Hans Frei

Part two of this thesis takes its title from a piece Childs wrote in 1996, on the way to his Isaiah commentary, which argues that biblical intertextuality arises as a forward looking extension of a text or as a retrospective enrichment of traditional language and rests in either case “on the same inner logic of Scripture’s textual authority.”¹ If one can understand what Childs means by this, one is well on the way to an understanding of his entire project. Exploration of the inner logic of scripture’s textual authority drives *IOTS*, *NTCI*, *Isaiah*, *Corpus*, and a number of less substantial efforts as well. And there is indeed a kind of logic to this thinking despite a large body of secondary literature committed to the illogic of canon in Childs’ own operation.

This key phrase does not capture all the hallmarks of Childs’ approach. As this thesis’ sub-title indicates, it needs to be combined with another phrase which we shall explore in part three; Childs defends the formal logic of scripture’s authoritative function in the church, on some analogy with its function in the synagogue, within the mystery of Christ. But I am getting ahead of things. There may be a sense in which one can appreciate what Childs means by “inner logic” without recourse to his wider interpretative apparatus. The way scripture develops, its formation, could entail a certain use quite apart from what we know about its actual

1. Childs, *Retrospective Reading*, 376.

subsequent use by historic faith communities, even if this way of talking about the Bible already begins to sound vaguely Protestant. Childs employs “inner” here in a way analogous to the expression “inner-biblical exegesis,” an accepted phrase that on closer inspection also kicks up tensions and ambiguities. The argument for canonical shaping, which derives in complicated ways from a meditation on Jewish midrash, can be separated from other aspects of Childs’ work, and will be in some of the discussion that follows, but if it were left in isolation, imagined as the sum total of the canonical program as has been considered with some of Childs’ readers, considerable attenuation would result.

Thus the first and last thing to say in part two is that the inner logic of scripture’s textual authority has an outer logic as well. Appeal to strictly inner-biblical logic of the Old Testament is usually not enough to settle the exegetical conundrums an interpreter confronts. And yet none of this obstructs the route many people follow in taking scripture to be the proper court of appeals in such matters—that is, in receiving scripture as scripture. To muddy the waters, there is another sense in which what I have just called the outer logic has a broader inner logic, too. We will revisit this suggestion at the end of chapter five.

At present I will set forth the reasoning behind Childs’ resistance of purely inner-biblical, non-referential hermeneutics. Something compels him to move “beyond the textual,”² and this leads him to reject, at least in part, the programmatic theories of Hans Frei and Georg Steins, among others. Since Childs has often been thought to be up to something very like what Frei does with biblical narrative, this chapter will help effect a transition from common misperceptions of “canon criticism,” the burden of part one, to a more probing account of exactly how this approach ruled by canon restricts and enables Christian biblical exegesis in a critical age. The argument has three stages. After first complexifying the idea of a “Yale school,” it will contrast Childs’ assessment of the canonical process with that of Steins. Then it will differentiate Childs from Frei on how canon functions according to its literal sense, while at the same time identifying important agreements between Childs and Frei. Over and against

2. Childs, *Critique*, 183.

a more critically informed usage of “intertextuality,” it will broach Childs’ idea that intertextuality, rightly considered, is a subset of figural reading.

I. THE NOTION OF A YALE SCHOOL: CHIEFLY ON BIBLICAL REFERENCE

In a jointly authored essay on “Story and Biblical Theology,” Bartholomew and Goheen follow the convention of classifying theological and philosophical interest in narrative geographically—the Yale school, the Chicago school, the California school—and declare a primary interest in the Yale school associated with Hans Frei and George Lindbeck. In the same piece, however, the authors recognize that Childs himself contests the conclusion of the so-called Yale school, and they opine that it would be better to split the difference between Yale (excluding Childs) and Chicago. In this way the storied world of the Bible can attach to the real world; narrative theology needs to plug in to ontology and history.³

But for Childs a crux arises in the wake of a radical change in the perception of biblical reference wherein the historical world drifts apart from the history-like world of the Bible. Once these two realities diverge—that is, with the rise of biblical criticism—all biblical interpretation enacts some form of response. People can give minimalist or maximalist accounts of biblical history, or can transpose meaning into another (idealist) register, but it became impossible to take the correspondence of biblical narrative and its ostensive historical referent for granted. This circumstance was of course detailed in Frei’s *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1974), and as was seen in the last chapter, Childs accepts Frei’s basic account of the change to the Bible’s literal sense in the shift from precritical to critical interpretation no later than 1969. Also at that early date, at the Yale colloquium for Barth, Childs keeps his distance from Frei’s narrative prescription. In the discussion session panelist Robert Johnson states, “So, from the

3. Bartholomew and Goheen, *Story*, 146, 154, 162. The authors find Barr’s early emphasis on story more helpful, but it may be doubted whether he, like them, would “wish to privilege the final form of Scripture as we have it, and ... maintain that in this final form all the books, in one way or another, are closely connected to God’s unfolding story” (160).

point of view of what Hans is arguing, what [Barth's] really talking about is not the historical context but the literary context." This is Childs' rebuttal:

That's where Hans and I differ somewhat. I move in a little different direction here. In other words, it seems to me that there are problems when you get—I would agree fully with Hans when he's combatting those historical critics who would want to go behind the text, but it's interesting when you begin to deal with the narrative text, as a context. One has to keep in mind that the early church, in the controversy with Judaism, took quite a different move. 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.

It seems to me, what buttresses this from getting into the kind of ontology you're talking about is the scope of the canon: namely, the reality which is in dialectic with the text, defined by its canonical context. I don't see how you can avoid a dialectic between text and reality, in some sort.⁴

The discussion continues between Johnson, Frei and a student, who asks about Frei's sense of story. Childs then sides with Johnson and declares "that the new hermeneutic is not only mistaken, but is one colossal *cul de sac*."⁵ Frei's diagnosis is correct, but even from *Crisis* Childs searches out medicine more effective than the self-contained world of biblical narrative. For him the eclipse Frei describes so well provokes a dialectic that involves the canon, its scope and the divine referent which is identified by, but not identical to, its text.

As often as Childs has been harangued for a Yale affiliation with New Criticism, it is regrettable that his lucid differentiation from Frei was not more widely known until much later. Barr, for whom "[t]heology as a mode of understanding comes into existence only when one moves out of the plane of the text itself and begins to ask about the extrinsic realities to which the text refers," might have found a little common ground.⁶ Even Brett, who had the benefit of Excursus III in *NCTI*,⁷ makes a complete muddle of Childs on biblical reference by arguing that he has two different and incompatible theories of reference. One is a theory of historical background in the text's prehistory. The other is a theory of theological reference.

4. Childs, *Barth as Interpreter*, 56.

5. *Ibid.*, 57–58. Presumably he means New Criticism. Frei appears to retreat after this: "I don't know at that point [that it all coheres in story] how much I'm reading myself into Barth. But yes, I think that's it" (59, cf. 62).

6. Barr, *Holy Scripture*, 102. This is felt to be a point *against* Childs, for whom, according to Barr, the text is a "closed system" and thus a "ghetto" (168). Cf. Barr, *Concept*, 416.

7. "The Canonical Approach and the 'New Yale Theology,'" *NCTI*, 541–546. Cf. now *BTONT*, 18–22.

Because he tends to privilege the latter, it would be more consistent to drop the former and adopt the methodology of New Critical formalism.⁸ Yet although Childs, like Frei, thinks an exclusive concern for meaning as historical reference gets biblical exegetes into trouble, the critical problems of positivity do not go away if they are evaded.

Perhaps it should not be surprising that Anglophone readers treat Childs' source-critical analysis as either a liability or a disposable interest. If Frei's analysis of the situation in the seventeenth and eighteenth century is right, responses to the split between explicative meaning and historical reference took on different profiles in England and Germany. In England the main focus was on externalist accounts of reference, on raw historical fact (e.g., did geology confirm the flood of Noah?). Eighteenth century Germany stayed closer to "the broader hermeneutical issue of the meaning of biblical texts. Unlike the English discussion of the fact issue, which had by this time become completely mired in the external evidence question, the German scholars' procedure was therefore almost exclusively internal, i.e. literary-historical."⁹ It may be that this variation in the history of ideas has more recent iterations, in which case Childs' education could have instilled in him a way of talking about biblical reference that is more German than English, so to speak. If so, then it would be no surprise to learn that amongst Childs' readers (chapter one), it is mainly the Germans who can be brought into serious dialogue with him on the issue canon formation. The next section will contrast Childs and Steins on the genesis of the final form. There are a number of correspondences despite Steins' recommendation to move in a formalist direction.

8. Brett, *Crisis?*, 31–47. He acknowledges some separation from Frei (174n8) but discounts it by concluding: "synchronic final form readings cannot use diachronic reconstructions without lapsing into confusion" (46).

9. Frei, *Eclipse*, 56. Cf. 218: "In Germany, in contrast to England, there was a strong, continuing interest in the Bible not only as true or false report but in addition as a large series of written sources with their own literary history, an interest augmented by the hallowed tradition of belief in the text's inspiration. In the pursuit of such matters, the narrative features of many of the biblical writings were not ignored, and interest in them was strengthened by the developing quest for a manageable view of the Bible's unity through the development of a single history traced in its pages."

II. PARSING “CANON”: IS ITS FORMATION CENTRIPETAL OR CENTRIFUGAL?

An important thing to recognize about Childs' use of the term canon is how it serves in his work as a “cipher,” a shorthand expression with which “to encompass the various and diverse factors involved in the formation of the literature.”¹⁰ In *BTONT* at least, looking back at his Introductions to the Old and New Testaments, this is how he claims to have used “canon” and “canonical.” Childs lists several factors in the way the the biblical “material was transmitted through its various oral, literary, and redactional stages by many different groups towards a theological end” that, consonant with the tradents' concern “to maintain a normative function [of the traditions] for subsequent generations of believers,” belong under one umbrella. As a cipher, canon

was, above all, useful in denoting the reception and acknowledgment of certain religious traditions as authoritative writings within a community of faith. The term also included the process by which the collection arose which led up to its final stage of literary and textual stabilization, that is, canonization proper. Emphasis was placed on the process to demonstrate that the concept of canon was not a late, ecclesiastical ordering which was basically foreign to the material itself, but that canon-consciousness lay deep within the formation of the literature. The term also served to focus attention on the theological forces at work in its composition rather than seeking the process largely controlled by general laws of folklore, by socio-political factors, or by scribal conventions.

“Canonical,” adds Childs, “also included ... a theological extension of its primary meaning” in that the final form of the text is normative for living, contemporary communities of faith whose members affirm the canon still today, in line “with the faith community of the original tradents. The modern theological function of canon lies in its affirmation that the authoritative norm lies in the literature itself as it has been treasured, transmitted and transformed—of course in constant relation to its object to which it bears witness—and not in ‘objectively’ reconstructed stages of the process.”¹¹ Canon is about the parameters the biblical tradition acquired in history, and which it continues to exert in its established form.

10. *BTONT*, 70, cf. Childs, *On Reclaiming*, 5. A similar point is made by Chapman, *Canon Debate*. Though I question whether the introduction of “cipher” is a substantial departure from Childs' earlier usage of canon, it is at least a clarification in view of Barr's criticism of 1983.

11. *BTONT*, 70–71.

Many have denied that all this constitutes one thing. In a fairly typical move after Barr's *Holy Scripture*, Steins parses Childs' use of canon into five aspects. Into a block quotation of the above passage from *BTONT* he inserts the following numbers:¹² "Canonical" refers to (1) a faith community's reception of authoritative traditions; (2a) the process by which the traditions were assembled along with (2b) the resulting stabilized body of literature—showing that "canonization proper" was not "basically foreign to the material itself, but that *canon-consciousness* lay deep within the formation of the literature"¹³; (3) "the theological forces" driving the process; and (4) how the tradition continues to be normative today. A striking thing about this particular way of carving up the process of canon formation is that it runs against the grain of Childs' talk of a single "cipher." By making (2a) distinct from (2b) Steins drives a wedge between two factors, the canonical process and canonization proper, between which Childs posits the closest identity.¹⁴ The smoking gun here is that (2b) has not been made (3). Steins has to be at least implicitly aware that his parsing of the process contradicts the logic of Childs' own proposal. Just how deep does a *Kanonbewußtsein* lie deep in the formation of the biblical literature?

Childs' imprecision, Steins believes, stems from his terminology and needs mending.

He summarizes his problem with *BTONT*:

In der bisweilen opak wirkenden "erweiterten" Verwendung von "Kanon" bei Childs lassen sich zwei grundlegende Sichtweisen unterscheiden, die ich als semiotisches Konzept und als funktionelles Konzept von "Kanon" bezeichnen und im folgenden erläutern möchte. Um alle seines Erachtens wichtigen Aspekte von "Kanon" zu integrieren, verbindet Childs eine Bedeutungstheorie des Kanons mit einer Funktionstheorie und wechselt je nach Bedarf die Ebenen ohne explizite Hinweise.¹⁵

A more controlled use of the term canon should differentiate between two senses:

Kanon (1) = *Kanon als* (der kanonisierte) *Text* (der Bibel) und

Kanon (2) = *Kanon als Metatext* (Metasprach/metalinguistischer Rahmen).¹⁶

12. Steins, *Bindung*, 13.

13. Steins italicizes *Kanonbewußtsein* when citing the German translation.

14. One could concede that the German translation of *BTONT* leaves the riven sentence *slightly* more open to dissection. The German reads, with Steins' numbering and italics, "(2a) Der Begriff schloß auch den *Prozeß* ein, durch den die Sammlung entstand, (2b) und der sie bis zu ihrem letzten Stadium der literarischen und textlichen Stabilität führte, was dann *Kanonisierung* im eigentlichen Sinne bedeutet."

15. *Ibid.*, 14.

16. *Ibid.*, 14.

By way of clarification, Steins calls on the semiotics of G. Aichele. Every attempt to close down the meaning of a text merely results in further commentary. The unending process of expansion and deferment of meaning can be arrested, however, by the canon's closure. Canonization proper involves first identifying the accepted text, then fixing the text's wording. But these activities are *extrinsic* to the text: "Beides sind extrinsische Vorgänge, liegen nicht im Text selbst, sondern werden an den Text herangetragen." Closing the canon naturally involves the work of a community, those for whom the meaning of the text is a concern, and what they attain thereby is "[eine autoritative] Begrenzung des Sinns" which frames the region within which the text's meaning may be sought. "So wird die interpretatorische Kreativität angeregt und zugleich begrenzt." Thus the extrinsic act of canonization creates a metalinguistic frame within which intertextual play occurs, enabling interpretation within a boundary. The framework metaphor ("Rahmen") includes encapsulates pair of pivotal concepts, play area ("Spielraum") and border ("Grenze"). One speaks to the *function* of canon (its "Funktionstheorie"), which is to terminate the endless process of commentary becoming scripture requiring further commentary, while the other addresses the *meaning* of canon (its "Bedeutungstheorie"), the sense readers make of scripture once it becomes a closed, "selbstreferentielles System."¹⁷

The proposal for canonical-intertextual reading enlists other theoreticians, but their incorporation by Steins need not detain us. Does Aichele help solve the putative confusion in Childs? In fact I think he exacerbates it. Had his definition of canon been taken on board without modification, the resulting program would have been almost the polar opposite of Childs'.¹⁸ Aichele holds that "the demand for commentary that is provoked in the written story is endless. The concept of canon arises from the need to end this endless demand by completing the uncompleteable story. The canonizing of a text is the final and greatest attempt to overcome utterly and even to eliminate the physical dimension of the text."¹⁹ On this view

17. Ibid., 15, summarizing Aichele, *Sign*, 127–139.

18. Aichele's semiotics leads to a more radical sense of canon than Steins', as evidenced by the former's more thoroughly Kristevan sense of the word intertextuality (ibid., 14), which marginalizes the canon as a normative collection of texts. Aichele's classification of theology as a subset of ideology (15) calls into question the very affirmation of the biblical canon as a distinct and normative collection of literature.

19. Ibid., 127. On eliminating the "body" of the biblical text see Boyarin, *Eye*; idem, *Intertextuality*; idem,

canon (2b) has a merely accidental relation to canon (2a). Aichele sees the canonical process as inevitably centrifugal, whereas for Childs it is centripetal. The process is intrinsic to the product.

In Steins' case the disagreement with Childs is less stark. In chapter one I noted the influence of Lohfink (in that "man mit mehr rechnen muß als nur einer Reihe von in sich selbständigen Büchern"). As Steins himself puts it in an essay on Chronicles and the closing of the Hebrew canon, "Daß 'Kanonisierung' nicht nur 'Auswahl und Zusammenstellung autoritativer Schriften' bedeutet, sondern sich 'im Text' niederschlägt..., wird in der Regel nicht genügend beachtet."²⁰ But it is difficult to emphasize a move toward canonization within the biblical tradition and at the same to insist that canonization proper is an extrinsic, after-the-fact decision. This is a big part of the reason Childs keeps Steins' (2a) and (2b) together. We can refine the contrast by comparing what Childs and Steins make of the "midrashic" technique of the Chronicler. Is Steins' emphasis on an extrinsic canonization counterbalanced by an awareness of thick, inner-biblical processes?

MIDRASH AND THE CHRONICLER

In "Torabindung und Kanonabschluß" (1996) Steins favors of an internal aspect of canon formation. "Kanonisierung ist nicht nur ein äußerlich deklarativer Akt, mit dem Auswahl und Anordnung der normativen Schriften festgelegt werden; sie hat—wie die neuere Kanonforschung herausgearbeitet hat—auch im Text selbst einen Niederschlag gefunden."²¹ There is an ambivalence here that will become more pronounced in *Bindung*; canonization is partly an external act, if not wholly so. For the time being Steins heralds Childs as an ally in emphasizing the canonical shaping at work in the text.²² Specific to Chronicles, Steins argues

Radical and esp. the perceptive critique in Dawson, *Figural Reading*.

20. Steins, *Torabindung*, 213–256, 250n150.

21. *Ibid.*, 213. I will focus on this essay, but cf. the far more comprehensive study the year before: Steins, *Abschlussphänomen*.

22. A footnote claims an allegiance that will become problematic within three years: "Der 'kanonische Prozeß' ('canonical process') als je neue Aneignung und Aktualisierung der biblischen Traditionen ist zu unterscheiden von der 'Kanonisierung,' mit der dieser innerbiblische Prozeß beendet wird. Zum 'kanonischen Prozeß' als entscheidendem Faktor der 'Schriftwerdung' vgl. B.S. Childs, Introduction (1979)

that, as with earlier tradents except on a much larger scale, the Chronicler attempted “einer Zusammenführung und Fokussierung verschiedener Traditionsstränge.”²³ But if at first this statement seems compatible with Childs’ treatment of Chronicles in *IOTS*, a handful of parallel judgments indicate a slight departure.

For Steins the Chronicler synthesizes “der disparaten Traditionen der älteren kanonischen Bücher.”²⁴ Similarly, the formula “law, prophets, and other writings,” first found in Sirach, indicates that the third grouping (in some contrast to the first two) is “eine Sammlung formal und inhaltlich disparater Werke.”²⁵ The observation that the writings are in a greater state of flux than the law and prophets receives special comment:

Ist man durch die Einsichten in den Formierungsprozeß der ersten beiden Kanonteilte darauf aufmerksam geworden, daß der Kanon von inner her wächst und Abschlußphänomene im Text selbst zu finden sind, sich Kanonbildung also nicht in einem äußeren deklarativen Akt vollzieht, dann drängt sich die Frage nach einem analogen Vorgang für den dritten Teil auf. Für diesen Kanonteil stellt sich das Abschlußproblem zudem in besonderer Weise: Wie sollte eine derart disparate Sammlung abgeschlossen werden?²⁶

His own answer is that the Chronicler attempts to draw the disparate writings together, and so begins to close down the endless-seeming proliferation of commentary. It is a recapitulation and summary of the history of Israel held in both previous mini-canons, particularly the law. Chronicles focuses and clarifies what it means to be Israel in light of Torah. “Das letzte Buch des dritten Teils bindet so diesen Teil an die beiden vorangehenden zurück und eröffnet eine torazentrierte Gesamtsicht des dreiteiligen Kanons.”²⁷

To retroject terminology from 1999, the *function* of Chronicles is part of canonization proper—the arresting of the growth of the tradition. But Chronicles came to be interior to the canon. Why then is the mechanism it enacts *extrinsic*? The reason seems to be that the tradi-

77–79” (Steins, *Torabindung*, 216n14). The essay anticipates other themes pursued in 1999. It is “[m]ethodisch wichtig” to maintain distinctions between the historical emergence of the canon and “*der Herausbildung einer Kanontheorie*,” between the fact that a group collected the canon and the subsequent reception of the same, and between a stabilized selection and ordering of scripture and the fixing of the text’s form (Ibid., 247, my emphasis).

23. Ibid., 246.

24. Ibid., 246.

25. Ibid., 247.

26. Ibid., 250.

27. Ibid., 251.

tion to which it refers is “disparate.” The Chronicler overcomes something centrifugal by fiat. Within the closed canon one observes a jostling, a will to subdue the more basic momentum towards disunity. So today the *meaning* of Chronicles is apprehended within the borders it helped frame, but its inertia toward still more commentary is what excites the reader’s play in the resulting “selbstreferentielles System.” The canonical metatext provides for the growth of ever new text-text relations.

The contrast with Childs is subtle but basic. For Childs in *IOTS*, the Chronicler adapts the tradition using a kind of “midrashic method,”²⁸ adjusting and realigning his diverse tradition. But

the Chronicler bears witness to the continuity of the obedient response within the history of Israel. Because God did not change his will, demanding one thing of his people earlier and something different later, there emerged a common profile of the faithful within Israel. There is a family resemblance in their praise and thanksgiving, in prayers and laments which extends throughout all ages. The Chronicler shaped his material to highlight the continuity within the community of faith.²⁹

Seemingly, Aichele among others leads Steins to emphasize what texts bury;³⁰ Childs affirms instead an intrinsic continuity in scripture on the basis of its extra-textual referent. Childs cannot help agreeing that the Chronicler’s material has “disparate parts,” or that he labors to “reconcile the differences.”³¹ There is much to say about how the tradition is transformed, expanded, harmonized, omitted, and above all shaped. But a deeper insight fires Childs’ literary and historic perception “that canon-consciousness lay deep within the formation of the literature.”³² He writes, “At times the process of harmonization is quite unconscious and appears as almost a reflex from a concept of canon.” And: “It is important to notice in the process of harmonization that the Chronicler did not for a moment feel himself at liberty to change his

28. *IOTS*, 654.

29. *IOTS*, 655.

30. Aichele, *Sign*, 129: “canon functions in the same way that genre does, burying the incoherence of the text and reinforcing belief that a complete message has been received.” But as Eagleton, *Theory*, 69, cautions, frequently “the plurality and open-endedness of the process of reading are permissible because they presuppose a certain kind of closed unity which always remains in place: the unity of the reading subject, which is violated and transgressed only to be returned more fully to itself.”

31. *IOTS*, 648.

32. *BTONT*, 70–71.

text at will, as commentators have tended to imply. In fact, such an assumption is totally foreign to a sense of canon." He exercised "creativity only within certain boundaries."³³ His harmonization stemmed from an "aim to establish an inner harmony of all his sources."³⁴ Likewise his supplementation of the material shares "a canonical concern that the full extent of the normative tradition be represented"—"these expansions reflect a critical, theological process."³⁵ So too with typology. "The Chronicler used the method to draw out elements of *ontological* continuity within Israel's history."³⁶ In shaping the historical material paradigmatically, "the Chronicler's attempt to document the correspondence between action and effect is an essential part of his concept of God's revelation through the prophets which is contained in a body of authoritative scripture."³⁷ By searching out "a family resemblance"³⁸ in this tradent's community of faith, Childs finally aligns himself with the theological judgment of Chronicler—he steps into the canon (4) of Steins' parsing. Because "the Chronicler speaks to the ontological question and faithfully testifies to the unchanging reality of the One God,"³⁹ God becomes the tradition's center of gravity. As scripture's true referent and scope, he brings its message into focus without obscuring its polyvalence.

Near the top we saw that the function of canon for Childs ultimately "lies in its affirmation that the authoritative norm lies in the literature itself as it has been treasured, transmitted and transformed—of course *in constant relation to its object to which it bears witness*."⁴⁰ This get at why, broadly speaking, the Chronicler's "midrashic" activity is a point of agreement between Steins and Childs, but its programmatic, hermeneutical or theological significance is not. It is only by moving through the literal sense to a level beyond the textual that Childs can address the unity and diversity of scripture in terms other than "der gemeinsame Nenner der

33. *IOTS*, 648.

34. *IOTS*, 649.

35. *IOTS*, 650.

36. *IOTS*, 651, my emphasis.

37. *IOTS*, 653.

38. *IOTS*, 655.

39. *IOTS*, 655.

40. *BTONT*, 71, my emphasis.

verschiedenen Stimmen.”⁴¹ This is the thrust of his ubiquitous appeal to the Bible’s “scope,” “res,” “Sache,” “witness,” and so on. In the end even Barton begins to mark the difference: “When Childs talks of the ‘final form’ of the text he does not mean the text as a unified aesthetic object, but (Barth-like) as the communication of the word of God... The question is not: what does the final form mean as a literary unity?, but: what word of God is communicated through this passage?”⁴²

ISAIAH IS DEICTIC, NOT MIDRASHIC

Chapter five will look at why Childs moves away from the language of “midrash” between *IOTS* and *Isaiah*. The point I wish to illustrate now is that Childs’ interpretation of what he will prefer to call “canonical shaping” does not change over his career even though his terminology for the phenomenon shifts. The process behind the final form, like the finished product itself, is chiefly about pointing or witnessing. It has more to do with text-*res* relations than text-text relations.

Childs make a major reaffirmation of the argument for canonical shaping in his last major exegetical work on the Old Testament. “Retrospective Reading” (1996), a dense and important expression of Childs’ career thesis, anticipates the argument of the *Isaiah* commentary (2001) and is cited there more than any other of Childs’ works. The essay concerns not just the misapplication of “midrash” to inner biblical exegesis by modern scholars, but an “entire projection of textual expansion” which goes by other names as well.⁴³ As an alternative, in *Isaiah* Childs detects a consciousness “already deeply embedded in the earlier tradition” (I. L. Seeligmann).⁴⁴ In addition, he observes, “Prophetic authority is related to the function of the biblical text. The text is the tradent of authority in establishing a link with specific

41. Steins, *Bindung*, 73. When Steins says the “interpretatorisch relevante Bezugspunkt ist der Text” (95), he introduces strictures on the *sensus literalis* which the canonical approach cannot abide. Childs, *Critique*, 176 thinks Steins collapses text and commentary. Instead, but equally problematic for Childs’ approach, Steins collapses text and referent.

42. Barton, *Canonical Approaches*, 201.

43. Childs, *Retrospective Reading*, 370.

44. *Ibid.*, 373, cf. 362.

prophetic figures.”⁴⁵ The text itself is figurative or intertextual, and in its formation it acquired and “continues to exert a coercion” on readers.⁴⁶ That the literature of the Hebrew Bible was configured around persons (Isaiah, David, Solomon, Moses) can be ignored, and often has been ignored. But in this case “it is not the Bible that is being interpreted.” Put differently, “the concept of final form is closely connected with the issue of readership.”⁴⁷ There are of course readers who do not identify with the community of faith in ancient Israel. Then again, there are those who understand themselves to be included in the future generations of Israel, for whom her scriptures form a lasting testament.⁴⁸

Whatever else one might wish to say about the Isaiah commentary itself, the work stands in remarkable continuity with Childs’ earlier ventures. It forms a coda to the arguments that culminated in *IOTS*, and yet it seriously dates some of the criticism of that book, which often focused on Childs’ treatment of the prophet Isaiah. In 2001 one finds the same acceptance of the critically discovered layers, a similar effort to press beyond entrenched factions to the left and right, and an unshaken conviction that the many hands involved in shaping the book leave a product better characterized as “accumulated experience” than as colliding intentionalities or voices.⁴⁹ Perhaps the single biggest change from 1979 to 2001 is that an interest in the textualization of oral tradition, and even with the “unity” of the book, had overtaken the field.⁵⁰

As in the discussion of Chronicles in 1979, in *Isaiah*, midrash, or if not quite that something roughly like it, is an acknowledged dynamic in the shaping of the tradition. Yet the

45. Ibid., 375. For Childs, unlike Barr, the *sensus literalis* of biblical prophecy still holds good even though in the critical era text and prophet have drifted apart.

46. Ibid., 376.

47. Ibid., 377.

48. What kind of reader is involved could make a world of difference to what gets interpreted, and who. For a recent New Testament perspective see Bockmuehl, *Seeing*.

49. *Isaiah*, 228, cf. 3.

50. This is particularly true of Third Isaiah. For instance, see Steck, *Tritojesaja*, as well as the criticism of Steck in Lau, *Schriftgelehrte Prophetie*. An important precursor of this trend is Barth, *Jesaja-Worte*, esp. 305–309. Childs himself is most energized by Beuken and appears to have learned Dutch in order to read Beuken’s four volume commentary on Isaiah 40–66 (on Isaiah 33, it is suggested, Beuken rivals Gunkel [*Isaiah*, 245]; see Childs’ index for bibliography, including articles in translation).

function of inner-biblical citation in Third Isaiah is largely *deictic*, not midrashic. Whatever *schriftgelehrte Prophetie* we see is not exclusively or even primarily oriented to the textual. Instead, it testifies to “an encounter with actual historical realities, albeit seen in the light of the divine. This dimension dare not be flattened simply into a type of learned scribal activity dealing exclusively with literary texts.”⁵¹ Intentional intertextuality in Third Isaiah “is deictic—that is, pointing, identifying—rather than midrashic.”⁵² Childs’ interpretation of the evidence of redactional activity accommodates his emphasis on scripture’s *res*, *Sache*, or subject matter. Canonical shaping is central to the coercive force Isaiah acquires; its text becomes the indispensable form in which its message pressures the church and in each generation facilitates new, textually mediated encounters with the one true God.

III. CANONICAL INTERTEXTUALITY AND FIGURAL READING

Intertextuality in Steins’ proposal for *kanonisch-intertextuelle Lektüre* is a surrogate for “sehr enge traditionelle” means of connecting biblical texts such as “Analogie,” “Exempel,” “Typologie” and “Überbietung,” to which one should not revert without serious methodological reflection on the hermeneutics of the canon.⁵³ Like the call for a sophisticated theory, this displacement of figuration by intertextuality may go back to Lohfink. In the same place where the demand for theory is said to be pressing Lohfink writes, “Wie eine entsprechende theoretische Hermeneutik aussehen würde, wäre erst Schritt für Schritt zu erarbeiten. Ich kenne keine vorhandenen Theorien, die diesem Ansatz entsprechen und zugleich auf exegetischer Erfahrung aufrufen würden. Im Endeffekt hatte wohl auch die Theorie vom mehrfachen Schriftsinn nicht genügend Atem.”⁵⁴ These are almost off-hand remarks, and neither Lohfink nor Steins say why intertextuality must be an alternative to multiple senses in the canon, or why the traditional strategy for configuring scriptural unity has insufficient breath.⁵⁵

51. *Isaiah*, 462.

52. *Isaiah*, 445, cf. 442, 479.

53. Steins, *Bindung*, 128.

54. Lohfink, *Eine Bibel*, 80.

55. But cf. Dohmen, *Vielfachen Schriftsinn*, 16–26, 29–30, 59, 61, 66–67. Note that Steins, then as Dohmen’s

In his response to *Bindung* Childs tries to distinguish two types of intertextuality, midrashic and allegorical. “The differences between the two interpretive approaches greatly affect how one understands the role of intertextuality within the Bible. My aim is to argue that much exegetical and theological confusion arises when the distinction between the two approaches is not recognized.”⁵⁶ He refers briefly to Jewish scholarship focused the way midrash has “a highly developed understanding of intertextual referentiality,”⁵⁷ and then contends that Christian intertextuality, as a subset of allegory, traditionally depends upon a quite divergent understanding of biblical reference:

midrash and allegory, in spite of large areas of overlap, are two very distinct and different interpretive strategies, reflecting very different hermeneutical understandings of how intertextuality functions. While midrash works at discerning meaning through the interaction of two written texts, allegory—I am using the term in its broadest sense—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. Christian exegetical use of intertextuality moves along a trajectory between promise and fulfillment within a larger christological structure.⁵⁸

Steins’ work on Genesis 22, according to Childs, and similarly the exegesis of a British advocate of canonical interpretation, Walter Moberly,⁵⁹ fails to account for the unique way intertextuality operates in a Christian setting. It is not that allegory is superior to midrash, but that allegory, and under it a restricted aspect of the figurative technique called intertextuality, has been more central in Christian theology for good reason.

This is not the place to unpack differences in Jewish and Christian figuration on Childs’ understanding—for that see chapters five and six, respectively—although we can recall that his 2001 commentary on Isaiah leaves room for an affirmation of proto-midrash in the post-exilic period while also claiming that intertextual reference in Third Isaiah is deictic, pointing to another level beyond the textual, rather than midrashic. Perhaps the prophetic book’s shaping provides a warrant for both techniques. In the more limited intra-Christian

assistant, compiled the bibliography.

56. Childs, *Critique*, 183.

57. *Ibid.*, 181.

58. *Ibid.*, 182–183.

59. Ironically, Moberly is the person Steins criticizes for reverting to “enge traditionelle” categories, above. Cf. Moberly, *Akedah*; *idem*, *Key and more recently idem*, *Bible, Theology, Faith*.

debate about figuration, if that is what it is, it is useful to turn once again to Frei. Why is his, in the critique of intertextuality that contests Steins' proposal in the first instance and then Moberly's related work on the Akedah, the third and final name adduced of persons having "moved in a direction which for Christian theology can only end in confusion"?⁶⁰

In his final essay (2005) Childs endorses a modification to Frei's thesis in *Eclipse*. For Neil MacDonald, Frei's characterization of the literal sense in pre-critical exegesis is correct, but his description of its transformation under the pressure of the Enlightenment is better described as an epistemic shift than a change in the way biblical narrative is read. Formerly basic beliefs became non-basic beliefs in the critical era.⁶¹ But Childs' depiction of the literal sense and its attenuation after the Reformation period aligns very closely with Frei's, and *Eclipse* augurs the recovery of figural extensions of the literal sense that Childs will incline to more and more throughout the latter half of his career. In addition to Childs' remarks at the 1969 Barth colloquium, compare Frei's statement from 1974:

the confusion of history-likeness (literal meaning) and history (ostensive reference), and the *hermeneutical reduction of the former to an aspect of the latter*, meant that one lacked the distinctive category and the appropriate interpretive procedure for understanding what one had actually recognized: the high significance of the literal, narrative shape of the stories for their meaning. And so, one might add, it has by and large remained ever since.⁶²

with Childs' statement from 1972:

I am convinced that when the Reformers spoke of the literal sense of the Biblical text as normative (*sensus literalis*) they had in mind the canonical sense and not a hypothetical projection of what scholars thought originally happened.⁶³

and from 1977:

The impact of the new approach which drove a wedge between the biblical text and its reference brought an immediate and profound effect on the interpretation of the *sensus literalis*. Among the Reformers the identity of the literal and historical sense had been assumed and the terms *sensus literalis* and *sensus historicus* were often interchanged. In the new approach the identity of the terms was also continued, but the historical sense now

60. Childs, Critique, 184.

61. It was a change "from a 'faith seeking understanding' paradigm to what may be termed a 'faith requiring justification' one" (MacDonald, Illocutionary, 324). The piece is referenced in Childs, Speech-act, 384. I myself am not persuaded that MacDonald's analysis of *Eclipse* does justice to the problem, or that his emendation works as a simple overlay.

62. Frei, *Eclipse*, 12, my emphasis.

63. Childs, OT Scripture of the Church, 721.

determined its content. The historical sense was construed as being the *original* meaning of the text as it emerged in its pristine situation.⁶⁴

as well as from 2000:

The distinction between the so-called literal sense and the figurative/allegorical cannot correctly be defined in terms of historicity... Rather, the heart of the problem of allegory turns on the nature of referentiality of the biblical text.⁶⁵

Here again we come to the heart of the matter for Childs, and there is considerable overlap with Frei's critique of meaning-as-reference, or the restriction of literal meaning to ostensive reference. Frei's analysis also underpins the figural proposals of Frei and Childs alike. To quote *Eclipse* again, "As the realistic narrative reading of the biblical stories broke down, literal or verbal and historical meaning were severed and literal and figural interpretation, hitherto naturally affiliated procedures, also came apart. Figural reading had been literalism extended to the whole story *or* the unitary canon containing it. But now figural sense came to be something like the opposite of literal sense."⁶⁶ It seems to me that the "or" between story and canon permits figuration to be taken in two directions. Its renewal can be stipulated either on the narrative shape of the Christian Bible, which with a few additions and qualifications is Frei's preference, or, by importing a more historical view of shaping and a somewhat different understanding of biblical reference, on scripture's canonical shape. In both cases the literal and the figural become natural allies again.

What differences exist between these two related sorts of figural reading in the critical or post-critical age? Three, which I will state briefly with the help of J. D. Dawson's impressive analysis of Boyarin, Auerbach, Frei and Origen in 2002, are of special importance. An initial difference between Childs and Frei turns on the relationship of the Testaments. For Childs the relationship between Old and New is irreducibly dialectical, in historical and intertextual respects, but "Frei frames the relationship between the two testaments using the comprehensive category of story rather than meaning. The image, appropriate to narrative, is linear rather than vertical."⁶⁷ Second, closely related, Christian appropriation of the literal sense is distin-

64. Childs, *Sensus Literalis*, 89.

65. Childs, *Allegory*, 6–7.

66. Frei, *Eclipse*, 6–7, my emphasis, cf. 2.

67. Dawson, *Figural Reading*, 164.

guished from the foundational place of the *peshat* in Jewish midrash for both Childs and Frei, though on dissimilar grounds.⁶⁸ For Frei, instead of narrowly concentrating on individual words, the literal sense in Christian theology is caught up into a wider narratological or storied universe.⁶⁹ In that context the gospel's literal sense fitly renders Jesus Christ while yet preserving His unique identity. For Childs, Jewish exposition in midrash centers on text-text relations, whereas Christian biblical theology needs text-*res* relations. Canon has a historical, horizontal dimension (canonical shaping in terms of the process and the ecclesial function of its product, the final form), but the vertical dimension is paramount.⁷⁰ Third, Childs parts company with Frei on whether or not figuration is ultimately to be distinguished from allegory. Because of a close reliance on Auerbach's account of figural reading, Frei perceives allegory as "a fundamental threat to the form of figural interpretation he wants to advance."⁷¹ Though "history" is a proximate concern to Frei, this move is a holdover from the desire to protect history which was prevalent in the short-lived movement to recover figural reading in the mid-twentieth century. Childs on the other hand develops a proposal for figural reading that rejects this strained distinction and in the end is happy to live with the consequences—"call it allegory" he concedes in 2004.⁷² When Frei says of the *sensus literalis* that "the *descriptive* function of language and its conceptual adequacy are shown forth precisely in the kind of story that does not refer beyond itself for its meaning, as allegory does, the kind of story in which the 'signified,' the identity of the protagonist, is enacted by the signifier, the narrative sequence itself,"⁷³ Childs simply cannot agree. In precisely this sense there remains a purpose for Christian allegory.

68. Born in Breslau to Jewish parents, Frei (1922–1988) was at first educated in Germany but then sent in 1935 to a Quaker school in England, where he became an Anglican. In 1938 he was joined in exile by his parents, now in America, where he completed his education (Higton, *Public Theology*, 16–17).

69. Dawson, *Figural Reading*, 171–172. Cf. Frei, *Types*, 123–124 and idem, *Literal*, 73–74.

70. Despite its emphasis on the Christian story, Childs' appeal to a rule of faith is not to be identified with Frei's sense of an overarching narrative. Yet more like Frei, the purpose of figuration for Childs is to catch up the reader in a textually mediated mystery of Christ. See chapter six.

71. Dawson, *Figural Reading*, 186, cf. 183–183. Cf. Frei, *Theology*, 168–169; cf. also Auerbach, *Figura* and idem, *Mimesis*.

72. *Struggle*, x. This decision is informed by research into allegory's deployment in historic Christianity.

73. Frei, *Theology*, 112, cited Dawson, *Figural Reading*, 172.

The peace Childs makes with allegory will be explored more fully in chapter six. It is necessary first, in the remainder of part two, to say more about the inner logic of scripture's textual authority. I close with a pair of suggestions in the meanwhile—one about literal biblical reference, and another about Christian figural reading.

Chapter two showed that Karl Barth is, however problematically, a middle term between Childs and Frei. It would be impossible here to settle the question of where Barth comes down on literal reference—on Childs' side, or Frei's, or neither. Yet in an essay dedicated to Frei, George Hunsinger would appear to suggest that Childs comes closer to Barth's conception on this score. "In his actual exegetical or hermeneutical practice, Barth sought to be guided by the *sensus literalis* in the sense that he did not find the meaning of the text in a subject matter accessible independently of the text. His reading of scripture led him to assume a fittingness in the relationship between signifier and signified, that is, between textual depiction and intratextual as well as extratextual subject matter. However, intratextuality was, for Barth, never an end in itself, but was rather the bearer of extratextual semantic force. Intratextuality without extratextuality would merely aestheticize the subject matter."⁷⁴ On this understanding Barth presses beyond literalism and expressivism, by means of analogy, such that scripture's reference is truthful, extratextual, and a matter of exegesis. God is utterly different than us, and yet mysteriously, the text's witness to the divine referent is somehow not other than the meaning of the biblical sentence itself.

Lastly, a crucial point of contact between Childs and Frei is scripture's capacity to order the lives of its readers, or in Frei's language, to "render" its addressee: "Through the coincidence *or even identity* between a world being depicted and its reality being rendered to the reader (always under the form of depiction), the reader or hearer in turn becomes part of that depicted reality and thus has to take a personal or life stance toward it."⁷⁵ Childs does not think that we can make the same identification of subjects within the text's compass—historical, vertical, doctrinal, applicative—that Calvin made. (In fact he critiques Calvin for defining

74. Hunsinger, *Beyond Literalism*, 221n8.

75. Frei, *Eclipse*, 24, my emphasis.

the *sensus literalis* too broadly, as will be seen.) But he agrees that the biblical text, in its received shape, is an instrument without which Christian faith languishes. The two testament canon properly rules the life of the church. With similar reasoning Seitz, who writes of figuration and the eclipse of biblical prophecy,⁷⁶ emphasizes the antique notion of *providence*. If the Bible addresses or even renders history ordered by a providential hand, its readership may in the end require some brand of figuration. In his words, “The challenge of our day is how to see in Jesus’ death and raising actions truly in accordance with the scriptures of Israel. For that, we shall need to return to typological and figural senses once more keenly available in the church’s handling of the ‘literal sense,’ before such a sense was conflated with the ‘historical sense.’”⁷⁷

76. Seitz, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics*, 75.

77. Seitz, *Figured Out*, 47.

CHAPTER 4 FORM—FINAL FORM: CANON AFTER GUNKEL

Ursprünglich haben die ältesten [Gattungen] ... eine ganz bestimmte Stelle im israelitischen Volksleben besessen, von dem sei einen wichtigen Teil darstellen, und eben deshalb, weil sie nicht auf dem Papier, sondern im Leben bestanden haben, sind auch ihre ältesten Einheiten so kurz gewesen, entsprechend der geringen Aufnahmefähigkeit der alten Hörer.
—Hermann Gunkel

Beginning in the pre-exilic period, but increasing in significance in the post-exilic era, a force was unleashed by Israel's religious use of her traditions which exerted an influence on the shaping of the literature... Israel defined itself in terms of a book! The canon formed the decisive Sitz im Leben for the Jewish community's life, thus blurring the sociological evidence most sought after by the modern historian.
—Brevard Childs

Now for something completely different. Frei makes a useful point of comparison with Childs because of their proximity on the hope for the renewal of Christian figural reading and on the instrumentality of scripture's final, textual form—though with significant differences on both counts. Childs and Gunkel agree on neither, and Gunkel provides an especially dramatic counterpoint on the dispensability of the canonical text. In keeping with our focus on the religious significance assigned to the Bible's shaping and development, such as the midrashic activity of the Chronicler or *schriftgelehrte Prophetie* in Isaiah (problems Frei simply does not touch), and yet equally in contrast to recent trends appreciating the textualization of biblical traditions, Gunkel believes the genres of the Old Testament have their provenance “nicht auf dem Papier, sondern im Leben.”¹ Juxtapose the view of Childs, who consciously *inverts* Gunkel's method, contradicting the usual form critical account in form critical terms: the canon itself became the setting for the life of the people, the community of faith.² The decisive

1. RGG², 3:1679.

2. IOTS, 78, cf. 61–62. I am aware that Gunkel ought not be identified with the “form criticism” or “tradition criticism” of his successors. On these terminological difficulties see Blum, *Formgeschichte*, 32–33, esp. 33n2, and 37n15; Berger, *Formgeschichte*, 19–27. Also see the epilogue to this chapter.

question from Childs' perspective is whether or not the biblical literature is more than an artifact of Israel's religious history. Does it transcend the circumstances behind its creation and provide the *Sitz* for a community's life of faith? But then the opposition between Gunkel and Childs should not be overdrawn. As Childs remarks, "In one sense, I have simply extended the insights of the form critical method which called for an exact description of the material's literary genre."³ This use of form criticism to talk about the final form speaks of adjustment within a discipline, reform from the inside. As I will argue below, Childs has actualized more than one of Gunkel's impulses, including especially the privileging of Israel's life which conventionally or traditionally has been bound up with scripture. A residual memory of the canon's function in Christian discourse pervades Gunkel's work. More native to his idiom, one could also speak of the historical workings of providence. So despite appearances Gunkel and Childs share a little theological common ground, if not enough to establish a truce.

Childs seeks to turn critical biblical scholarship upside down (or right-side up, depending). For the simple reason that Gunkel typifies and informs this tradition his work repays consideration here. After first setting out his "religion" in the context of his depreciation of the assembling of biblical literature (the canonical process), I will take a retrospective glance at the fate of the project he believed would one day supplant biblical theology. Then an epilogue will paint a backdrop for the turn toward canon after Gunkel. Primarily Childs' *IOTS* is in view, though it is fitting to include the tradition-historical theology of Gerhard von Rad.

I. HERMANN GUNKEL'S RELIGION

"Much of nineteenth-century biblical criticism was not an adventure in impiety but turned on assumptions about the nature of revelation and its (tenuous) relationship to the canon (as a literarily shaped and coherent theological product)."⁴ This observation suits Gunkel eminently. Piety is of supreme importance to him, and in this he stands with both feet

3. Childs, *Response to Reviewers*, 52.

4. Seitz, *Figured Out*, 28–29.

firmly planted in the nineteenth century. He is also a believer in providence and revelation, though of a highly naturalistic order (his criticism of supernaturalistic exegesis is sharp). It is common to treat Gunkel's methodological innovations as if they had no connection to his religion, but unsurprisingly, his method and personal commitments are closely intertwined, and possibly inseparable. Often enough religious conviction appears to drive his method and not the reverse. Consider as a prime example Gunkel's appraisal of the formation of biblical literature in the Old Testament.

ON THE FORMATION OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE

For Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932) the literary history of Israel falls into three general stages: the pre-literary age of folk-tales (through ca. 750); the literary age which culminates in the great literary personalities (“die großen Schriftstellerpersönlichkeiten,” ca. 750–540); and subsequently the epigones.⁵ Israel's literary history consists in the history of genres (*Gattungen*), several instances of which “haben eine ähnliche oder dieselbe Geschichte erlebt.”⁶ Simple, short, “pure” genres were originally situated in the lives of the people. They existed “nicht auf dem Papier, sondern im Leben,” and were attached to highly specific situations. At this primitive stage the Israelite had developed neither a strong sense of his individuality nor yet much ability to comprehend long units of narration.⁷ Eventually, however, a strong impulse to record creative achievements arose in Israel, and thus “literature” in the proper sense was born. This facilitated the development of longer units, such as the Joseph saga. “Without a doubt, this drift towards length indicates that the times had grown more literary.”⁸ At the same time collections of smaller units were compiled. The noteworthy persons here are “die großen

5. Klatt, *Gunkel*, 180; cf. *RGG*², 3:1679.

6. *RGG*², 3:1678–1679. The first edition of the entry contains many of the same statements, but in less compressed form. See *RGG*¹, 1:1193.

7. Cf. here “Israel's Literary History,” Gunkel, *Water*, 34: “Just as we see the development of our children's minds in the gradually increasing amount that they can take in at one time, so we can trace one feature of the growth of civilization in the gradual increase of the literary units in Israel.” The essay originally appeared as “Die Grundprobleme der israelitischen Literaturgeschichte,” *Deutsche Literaturzeitung* 27 (1906): 1797–1800, 1861–1866, was reprinted in *Reden und Aufsätze*, 29–38, and also appears in English translation in *What Remains of the Old Testament and Other Essays*, 150–186.

8. Gunkel, *Water*, 35.

Schriftsteller, die sich der altertümlichen Gattungen bemächtigen,” but who also through the mixing and transformation of older genres achieved “höchst individuelle Worte.”⁹ The author of Job and above all the great literary prophets deserve to be named in this context. Ultimately the “Erforschung dieser großen Schriftsteller ist die Krone der Literaturgeschichte Israels.”¹⁰ Thereafter decay settled in. The third and final age belongs to the epigones, who “counterfeit the masters [*die Meister nachahmen*].”¹¹ In this period styles and genres are still being mixed, though more than before, and collections are being extended, but the crowning spirit has departed. (In another place Gunkel calls this development “the tragedy of Israelite literature.”¹²) At long last “die Sammlung der Sammlungen, der Kanon, entsteht.”¹³

Within this arc of achievement and then decline are several smaller peaks and valleys. The advance of writing technology wrests an oracle or story from life itself, depositing it on paper. As compositional skill increased, longer and longer narratives could be compiled, sometimes with pleasing results. Occasionally an individual author stepped forward to make his creative spirit felt. So although the road to the final form is beset by ineptitude, complications in detail set Gunkel apart from the sheer atavist. His belief in progress is as strong as his love of the original.

As an outworking of this, in methodological formulations Gunkel is driven to two perspectives that resist integration. On the one hand, he emphatically affirms the full history of tradition, stating in his seminal *Schöpfung und Chaos* (1895, ET 2006): “I hold it to be methodologically objectionable to investigate only the beginning of a thing and to ignore the subsequent, often more important and more valuable, history of the same.”¹⁴ This is the first of

9. RGG², 3:1679.

10. RGG², 3:1679.

11. RGG², 3:1679.

12. Gunkel, *Water*, 36. The full quotation parallels the the RGG article well: “Finally we come to the tragedy of Israelite literature. The spirit loses power. The genres are exhausted; imitations begin to abound. Redactions take the place of original creations. Hebrew ceases to be the living language of the people. By this time the collections are grouped together into larger collections. Finally, the canon took shape.”

13. RGG², 3:1679.

14. Gunkel, *Creation and Chaos*, xxxix = vi. (Henceforth I will give the page numbers for *Schöpfung und Chaos*, and later, the German original of the Genesis commentary, after the = sign.)

his “controlling principles.” His inquiry goes well beyond a sourcing of biblical material in its putative Babylonian birthplace. Instead, he writes, “I have also explained the particular ways by which these materials were taken into Israel and re-formed.” Hence

the creation narrative, although of Babylonian origin, nevertheless first gained its particular meaning in Israel. Thus, I believe myself to be protected against misunderstanding, as if perhaps by proving that Israel did not lie outside the realm of world culture, I deny the particularity of Israelite religion and, in turn, lead to the destruction of the belief that in this history God has revealed himself in a special way.¹⁵

Is Israel’s religion truly unique in the ANE, or is Gunkel merely paying his dues to a conservative orthodoxy? Undoubtedly the latter element is present, but Gunkel’s personal piety rests on a genuine if awkward conviction about the revelatory value of the Old Testament. Further, while he is most interested in the state of a tale just after Israel adapted it, his first principle still requires him to trace the growth of Israel’s tradition throughout its entirety history.

A second principle finds clear expression in *Creation and Chaos* too. Contending with the view that the history of a thing can be more important than its origin is the idea that as material changes hands its original significance is forgotten, or willfully suppressed. In a word, it is the problem of *darkening*. Genesis 1, for instance, is “a faded myth.”¹⁶ The struggle of Marduk against Tiâmat was transformed, to be sure, but a polytheistic ring from the original still comes through.¹⁷ Similarly within Israel, later generations lose touch with a story’s vital meaning in earlier times.

It is in the very nature of oral tradition, when passing oh-so-tenaciously from generation to generation, that it is subjected to certain fluctuations. Such omissions, additions, displacements, which later generations have imposed on the ancient materials, are revealed in the present codification of the tradition. They are revealed by the fact that the continuity of the narrative, which formerly had been uninterrupted, currently exhibits some obscurities or peculiarities! Or they are revealed by the fact that certain features, features which had a proper meaning at the time of their origins, are nether intelligible from the present context nor are they able to be considered as ‘generally’ intelligible. They are, therefore, viewed as strangely brief and incomprehensible! *Just as the age of a painting may be recognized by the*

15. Ibid., xl = vi.

16. Ibid., 80 = 117.

17. Gunkel wonders here about the superiority of Genesis 1 over the Marduk myth: “do *we* have the right to value Genesis 1 totally differently than we value any other ancient myth? ... Might even the Judaistic-supernaturalistic piety understanding of God which is assumed in Genesis 1 appear to our piety not to be the highest thing? Notwithstanding that, it does continue to exist! In Genesis 1 we are able to discover again the God in whom *we* believe! All other cosmogonies are, to us, only interesting antiquities” (ibid., 80 = 118).

degree of "darkening" which presently characterizes it, so too is the antiquity of the tradition recognized by such "darkenings." In any examination of a tradition this "darkening" has to be brought into play. The ultimate object of the investigation, however, is to reconstruct the original context and to indicate the basis of its alteration, i.e., to write the history of the tradition!¹⁸

This principle can be summarized as follows. Because the history of tradition as it has been preserved shows evidence of darkening, the historian must restore single traditions to their original vibrancy. Unlike the art restorationist, however, "the present codification of the tradition" (the unhappy state of the canon) puts some serious reconstruction work at the historian's feet. Many units with aesthetic integrity are encased in later, larger blocks. Or to extend Gunkel's metaphor slightly, the first small images grew dim naturally with the passing of time but were disfigured further by incompetent artists who puttied them into a rough mural.

One principle leads Gunkel to investigate positive developments in traditions; the other urges an inquiry that runs *against* time, that seeks actively to unwork it. Supposing these two concerns are not mutually exclusive, and quite possibly they are not, the tension in method calls for resolution in a set of decisions about where one finds the stuff of tradition intact—if not in the final form, then trapped within or lurking beneath—and how. Ostensibly Gunkel adjudicates the tension with "history," but on closer inspection religious and cultural values play a vital part in his decision-making process. In what follows the particulars of this truism will be shown in Gunkel's position on the collection and development of the prophetic literature, the Pentateuch, and the Psalter. Along the way it will be possible to get a sense of one take on the religious significance of canon formation.

THE PROPHETS

Gunkel's negative evaluation of canonization proper sounds out loudest with the prophets. For him these great men attest the triumph of individual personality over the style-bound custom that dominated the ancient world. "Here in Israel something characteristic took place that was unknown elsewhere in the Near East: the individual came to the fore.

18. Ibid., 163–164 = 256, my emphasis. I have corrected the translation at one point. The translator rightly terms this "a classic statement of traditio-historical methodology" (xxxiv).

Powerful personalities arose, grasped by the storms of the age, trembling with passion, who, touched by the deity in secret hours, attained the sublime courage to proclaim the thoughts that they—they completely alone—perceived within themselves.”¹⁹ In order to fully appreciate the individuality of the prophets, it is necessary to get a picture of the styles and genres they used, to restore prophetic discourse to its original life setting.

The prophets were not originally writers but speakers. Anyone who thinks of ink and paper while reading their writings is in error from the outset. “Hear!” is the way they begin their works, not “Read!” Above all, however, if contemporary readers wish to understand the prophets, they must *entirely forget that the writings were collected in a sacred book centuries after the prophets’ work. The contemporary reader must not read their words as portions of the Bible* but must attempt to place them in the context of the life of the people of Israel in which they were first spoken.²⁰

Gunkel then obeys his first principle, sketching the development of prophecy. The earliest prophets, such as Elijah or Elisha, did not write at all. Later figures including Isaiah and Amos did not write at first, but “these men increasingly resorted to writing [because] times had changed.”²¹ Gradually fragments were assembled, by the prophets or their students, though no thought was given to the possible long-term significance of such “primitive collections”: “they thought only of momentary results and not at all of later generations. They were convinced that their prophecies were not related to a distant future but that they would soon be fulfilled.”²² Mixed as these collections were with anonymous oracles, and guided only by a concern for the immediate, one can understand how for Gunkel the textualization of prophecy obscured both the prophet—Isaiah the man—and the original setting (*Sitz*) of his speech. “Not until Ezekiel are things different: this man, accustomed as priest and jurist to scrupulous order, and convinced that his prophecies about Israel would be fulfilled only after centuries,

19. Gunkel, *Water*, 86. On the emergence of the prophetic personality see here also 118–119, 128–130. This essay first appeared as “Die Propheten als Schriftsteller und Dichter,” in *Die Propheten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1923) 34–70. An earlier English translation is found in David L. Peterson, ed., *Prophecy in Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) 22–73.

20. *Ibid.*, 87, my emphasis.

21. *Ibid.*, 89.

22. *Ibid.*, 90.

wrote what was the *first book* of prophecy.”²³ Generally speaking, however, Gunkel feels we must reckon with “the deplorable condition in which our prophetic books are found.”²⁴

THE PENTATEUCH

A comparable overview of pentateuchal literary history can be found in the lengthy introduction to Gunkel's Genesis commentary (1901, ET 1997).²⁵ As in *Creation and Chaos* he affirms the biblical material's full history, starting outside Israel. The foreign origin of a legend must be observed, yet it can be even more important to attend “to what Israel made of it, or to the history it underwent in Israel.”²⁶ In *Genesis* too the history of Israel's religion is not always a tale of progress. Darkening, compounded by the changing spirits of later times, occurs as legends and sagas are handed along. This circumstance alone mandates research into a story's original setting. Legends can be appreciated even in their present state, yet “only one who holds them up to the light of their original understanding can perceive their brilliant colors. To him, they appear as small glittering and shimmering works of art.”²⁷ So again there is an ambivalence about the growth of the tradition: pre-literary jewels have to a considerable extent been ruined, or at least buried under the text, yet tracing the historical development of a textualized tradition is part of the biblical critic's task.

Gunkel's notion of cultural progress, governed almost entirely by the metaphor of a child's development into mature adulthood, complicates matters further. Early masterpieces are short, for instance, because early Israelites lacked the mental powers to compose or consume longer narratives. Yet even as, facilitated by the advent of writing, cognition improved, the people tended to lose their grasp of tradition. “We often have the feeling that we are, indeed, in a position to reproduce the attitudes of the old legends to a degree, but that the cur-

23. Ibid., 91, my emphasis. See now Seitz, *On Letting a Text*, reprinted in Seitz, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics*.

24. Gunkel, *Water*, 91. Eventually the prophetic spirit departed. Gunkel, *Creation and Chaos*, writes of the “author of Daniel,” that “undistinguished successor who venerates the old even when he does not understand it” in a manner “typical of the decadent spirit of his time [*für den Geist der Epigononzeit*].” Though an author, the “man is no prophet” (213–214 = 335).

25. For another account of Gunkel on the Pentateuch's literary history cf. Nicholson, *Pentateuch*, 41–43.

26. Gunkel, *Genesis*, lviii = lxviii.

27. Ibid., xlii = xlix.

rent narrators did not correctly perceive these attitudes.”²⁸ Gunkel speaks as an adult with full, scientific knowledge. He speaks as an individual, a “man” who appreciates when *Männer* (though in Genesis not yet *Einzelpersönlichkeiten*) rise above the undifferentiated primal collective.²⁹ He speaks as an aesthete with the sensibilities to know when the standard achieved is “relatively closer to modern art.”³⁰ But he also speaks as one who yearns for a lost spirit of childhood.³¹ “We join them”—the adults recounting Israel’s old stories, but the children above all—“and listen along.”³²

Weirdly, almost as often as he mentions the culturally underdeveloped but bright-eyed children of Israel Gunkel refers to “our children.” Typically the direction of analogy runs from present to past. “Like our children,” for example, the ancients were content to hear the same stories over and over.³³ Or:

The child looks wide-eyed at the world and asks, “Why?” The answer it gives itself and which initially satisfies it may be very childish, very incorrect, and yet, if it is a spirited child, captivating and touching, even for adults. Ancient peoples also raise such questions and answer them as well as they can. These questions are also usually the same we ask ourselves and seek to answer in our scientific [*wissenschaftlichen*] disciplines. What we find here, then, are the beginnings of human knowledge, of course only minor beginnings, but as beginnings still worthy of respect. At the same time, however, they are especially touching and charming to us, for in these answers ancient Israel expressed its most intimate attitudes, clothing them in the colorful garment of poetry.³⁴

“We” is to Israel as parent to child. The analogy can reverse temporal direction, too. At one point Gunkel remarks that “our peasants [*unsern Bauern*]” reflect the ancient situation still today.³⁵ Gunkel’s paternalism ranges from the ancient people (*Volk*) of Israel to his own *Volk*.

28. Gunkel, *Genesis*, lvii = lxvii.

29. At the earliest times narrators were faithful to the tale because “ancients, quite in contrast to moderns, do not need to exercise their personalities by altering and innovating” (*ibid.*, lvi = lxv). The view aligns with his position, contra Wellhausen, that Genesis 1 is not a free construction of the author.

30. *Ibid.*, xliv = li. The Joseph cycle, which merits the distinction “novella,” is his parade example.

31. Werner Klatt’s admirable biography of Gunkel relates a telling anecdote told by H.-J. Kraus. According to Kraus, during Gunkel’s last Christmas dinner with students at Halle, in 1931, Gunkel said “er habe sein ganzes Leben nach seinem verlorenen Kinderglauben gesucht” (Klatt, *Gunkel*, 99n51).

32. Gunkel, *Genesis*, xxvii = xxxi.

33. *Ibid.*, xxix = xxxiv: “the ancient period was satisfied with very minor creations which hardly filled a quarter hour. When the account had ended then, the imagination of the hearer is sated and his powers of comprehension are exhausted. At most, we may imagine that when the story ends, the hearers, like our children, may have wanted the same account once more.” Cf. Gunkel, *Water*, 12, 34.

34. Gunkel, *Genesis*, xviii = xx.

35. *Ibid.*, xxxvii = xliii.

In this mode he appeals to the “evangelical church and its commissioned representatives” to handle their new awareness of Genesis’ legendary character with tact. “Genesis reports many things that contradict our advanced knowledge.”³⁶ Distressing as it may be “for the child who cannot yet distinguish between reality and poetry if one tells him that his beautiful narratives are ‘not true,’” the news should not be hidden. Anyway, a childish comportment “would be unseemly for a modern theologian,” and it would make true, “historical understanding of Genesis impossible. This awareness has already become common among the historically trained such that it cannot be suppressed. It will surely—it is inevitable—reach our people [*unser Volk*]. We are concerned, however, that it be offered to them in the proper spirit.”³⁷

THE PSALTER

Gunkel’s zeal for poetry finds a natural expression in his study of the Psalter.³⁸ It contains remarkable declarations of thanksgiving and praise, which though known elsewhere in the ANE come to unique expression Israel.³⁹ As in Genesis, some psalms reflect Israel’s gradual turn from myth to legend. Prophetic influence can also be seen. “The heart of the pious Israelite thrills when he thinks of the time that is to come.”⁴⁰ Finally, the law is in evidence, though its arrival is not a welcome development. Luckily, “[i]t was only very rarely and

36. Ibid., ix; German, x. Unlike William Robertson Smith a few decades before, in a different setting, the orthodoxy Gunkel countered was more in line with Wellhausen than not. He stood at some remove from the “Babel-Bibel” controversy (Berlin, January 1902), which had a different tenor than the circumstances surrounding Smith’s dismissal from Aberdeen in 1881, though no doubt the ethos leading up to it hangs somewhere in the background. See Klatt, *Gunkel*, 99–103, 70–74.

37. Gunkel, *Genesis*, xi = xii–xiii, cf. xxvi = xxx. I have modified Biddle’s translation, which renders “unser Volk” as “the people.”

38. Gunkel wrote poetry, and it is not by accident that he makes poetry central to true religious feeling. Klatt gives examples, including this lament for the forgotten book 4 Ezra. “Ich fand dies alte Buch, im Schutt vergraben,” it begins. “Die Herzen, die es einst geliebet haben,” their ashes are scattered to the winds of history. Gunkel praises the book’s “Menschheit,” thinks on the profound “Volkes Schmerz” that inspired it, and concludes with a plea, addressed to the apocryphal book, to whisper to human hearts once more: “Nun hebe wieder an die alte Weise, / Und wo du Herzen findest, rede leise.” Klatt, *Gunkel*, 38–39.

39. Gunkel, *Water*, 137: “The Israelite hymn has borne the fairest of blossoms. The Babylonian and Egyptian hymns consist mainly of a lifeless enumeration of divine attributes. Even some of the hymns in the Bible are trite enough, but there are many majestic hymns that throb with power and life.” This essay first appeared in *Die Christliche Welt* 36 (1922), serially (nos. 1, 2, 5, 6, 7).

40. Ibid., 139.

not till a late period that enthusiasm for the Law found its voice in the hymns,”⁴¹ though on the other hand late stages saw a turn from corporate worship to personal devotion. Psalms contain the entire range of Israel’s life.

At times one hears the pleas “of a people that refused at all costs to bow to the fate that providence had laid upon it” and simply asked “Why?”⁴² At others, one senses that the mantle of the prophets themselves has been put on. In the Psalter at large, “Israelite piety thus oscillates between two extremes: ... the lament of the people and the hope of the prophets.”⁴³ Gunkel comments less positively about the royal psalms. They show an unbecoming “extravagance” and exaggeration in view of their humble setting in the court of a petty king. Still, the type is borrowed from Israelite neighbors, and it improved considerably under Israelite care: “On the whole, judged by our standards, the religion of the court is largely ‘Byzantine’; but when compared with the court songs of all the other ancient kingdoms of the ancient Near East, it is much more moderate and sane.”⁴⁴ Gunkel holds his highest praise for the individual expression attained in some psalms. “The gravest error made by students of the Psalms is that they have completely misunderstood this personal poetry and have taken the living ‘I,’ meaning the poet himself, as a mere figure of speech meaning the people.”⁴⁵ In actual fact, he maintains, it is the religion of the individual that undergirds the psalter and infuses the communal religion there with its life. “These personal songs are more precious to us than the songs of public worship. We have to excise and omit a great deal from the songs of public worship before we can use them for our own needs. Many of these personal songs—though not all—we can make our own as they stand. They are ‘the Psalter within the Psalter.’”⁴⁶ At times a psalm even “transcends itself.” In the penitent’s prayer for a pure heart, Psalm 51:10, “the idea

41. Ibid., 140.

42. Ibid., 142.

43. Ibid., 144–145.

44. Ibid., 148.

45. Ibid., 149. Mowinckel, *Psalms*, 1:46, counters this point.

46. Gunkel, *Water*, 150.

emerges that goodness in humanity must be the work of God. This is the culmination of the religion of the Psalms.”⁴⁷

So today the Psalter serves us best where the expression of religion and piety is highest. Unlike Genesis the most admirable phase is fairly late. In the very last period, however, the individualist spirit yielded to impurity and calcification. “Especially in the later period, when the poetic genres became more and more literary, a great deal of mixture took place and the structure became more complicated... Ultimately, *naive religion was invaded by a rational reflection that finally destroyed it*. That is what we have in Psalm 119 and in the noncanonical *Psalms of Solomon*.”⁴⁸ What all this implies about the canonical Psalter’s final form is clear enough. Gunkel concludes,

On the one hand, it is utterly impossible for us to use the entire Psalter in Christian worship, although earlier times may have so used it. The modern mind has found in it so much that is alien and even repellent that we have long been compelled to make selections for use in church and school and home. On the other hand, we should be careful not to go too far in this direction. We must remember that the Psalter is not a contemporary book and therefore cannot possibly voice modern thoughts and feelings... Whoever earnestly studies these poems will not fail to find many passages that give perfect expression to true religion, and generations still to come will humbly bend the knee on this holy ground and learn from the Israelite psalmists how to pray.⁴⁹

As with the Pentateuch and the prophetic literature, the principle of selection is whatever inspires “true religion.” This is how one discerns the canon within the canon.

GUNKEL’S TACIT CANON

Religion, conservative by nature, is particularly conservative in worship, according to Gunkel. “Practices are much more tenacious than concepts.” Thus the cult is prone to keeping practices alive which dimly reflect their original significance. “In many cases, we too, whose worship withstood a powerful purification in the Reformation and again in Rationalism, do not, or only partially, understand the original meaning of what we see and hear in our churches.” This comment is revealing if enigmatic. What does true worship consist in for Gunkel?

47. Ibid., 157.

48. Ibid., 161, my emphasis.

49. Ibid., 161–162.

The beginnings of an answer can be read indirectly off the ancient situation. There too a purification of understanding takes place in some etiological legends. Gunkel's explanation gives the child-adult trope another turn as well: "Ancient Israel considered the origin of many such cultic practices. Although adults, deadened by familiarity, no longer note the unusual and incomprehensible, they will be stirred from their rest by the children's questions. If children see their father performing all manner of unusual practices at the Passover feast, and—this is expressly indicated (cf. Exod 12:26; 13:14)—ask, 'What does that mean?' one should tell them the Passover story."⁵⁰ In like manner legends were developed to explain religious customs, ancient landmarks and sites of worship (e.g., Genesis 19:1, 16:7, 28:10, 32:33). Etiology marks the beginning of historiography, which is central to the purification of dead religion. "Wir haben in diesen Sagen *die Anfänge der Religionsgeschichte*."⁵¹

True science and true religion are thus two sides of the same coin. On one side the concepts of God encapsulated in the legends of Genesis are "naive." On the other, this analysis is offered in a spirit of "piety and love."⁵² The fusion of these perspectives is evidenced in the way Gunkel professes, in the scholarly third person, belief in transcendent providence: "We believe God works in the world as the quiet, hidden, basis of all things. Sometimes, his efficacy can almost be apprehended in particularly momentous and impressive events and persons. We sense his reign in the wondrous interrelationship of all things. But he never appears to us as an active agent alongside others, but always as the ultimate cause of all." Of course the God of Genesis often appears as a physical presence. He is encountered not as the prophets encounter him, "in ecstasy," but in physical speech and action. Presented with such crude views "we hesitate to believe them."⁵³ But then Israel stands out among her neighbors in the ancient Near East. Whereas other religions remained polytheistic, Israel, despite having polytheism just beneath the surface of its official narrative, inclined to monotheism almost from the beginning. And Israel rapidly progressed toward more elevated, fitting conceptions of providence,

50. Gunkel, *Genesis*, xx = xxiii.

51. *Ibid.*, xxi = xxiv, my emphasis.

52. *Ibid.*, xi = xii. The word here is "Pietät" rather than "Frömmigkeit."

53. *Ibid.*, x = xi.

toward a doctrine “we” would be much less reluctant to affirm. “Thus, through many intermediate states, Genesis moves from a crass mythology to a belief in providence very attractive to us moderns.”⁵⁴ In this and other respects “Genesis reflects the struggle higher religion fought for Israel’s soul.”⁵⁵

The purification in concepts of God is a clear marker of E being later than J, for example. Neither J nor E attains the distinction of literary personality (*Schriftstellerpersönlichkeit*), or even of intentional personality. They are mere “Sammlern.” The sheer “variety [of material adapted] demonstrates that the legends of E, and even more so of J, do not bear the characteristic of a specific period, let alone of an individual personality, but that the collectors essentially took them as they found them.”⁵⁶ In a sense these schools are the first epigones; they “are not masters but servants of their material.”⁵⁷ But there is more to the story. J and E also exhibit “fidelity.” “They infused the legends with their spirit.” From the “unified diction” which they impart to their collections we sense a “spiritualization of the legend material” that contributes to a “higher religious and ethical superiority” when contrasted with the “other ancient peoples”: “Thus we may imagine the collectors, towering above their people [*Volk*], with the intention of elevating them by their ideals through the collection of legends in a great work.”⁵⁸ Small, bright lights from the pre-literary stage have darkened but nonetheless shine through the work of these collectors. They are perhaps kindred with the precocious children who ask what Passover means, and through them higher religion wins a battle.

By all rights P, who clearly does bear the characteristic of a specific period, ought to come off even better. J and E “only loosely heaped up the received building stones; P, however, erected a unified structure according to his tastes.”⁵⁹ But P is seriously downgraded in

54. Ibid., lix = lxix.

55. Ibid., lxi = lxxi.

56. Ibid., lxxi = lxxxii–lxxxiii.

57. Ibid., lxxiii = lxxxv.

58. Ibid., lxxiii–lxxiv = lxxxv. “So dürfen wir uns die Sammler denken, als ihr Volk weit überragend, mit der Absicht, es durch die Sammlung der Sagen in einem großen Werke zu den Idealen emporzuheben, die ihnen selber vorschwebten.”

59. Ibid., lxxxii = xcvi.

Gunkel's total calculation. Why? P appears to descend from the stunted father administering Passover rites to his children. P's "is the spirit of an orthodoxy ambivalent to history."⁶⁰ He "has the tone of *prosaic learning*, indeed, often in the style of legal documents." And he is "painfully precise and exemplarily orderly, but he, like many other scholars, was not gifted with a feeling for poetry."⁶¹ He is far too fond of structure. "This order-loving man encased the colorful legends of the ancient period in his gray schemata." At his touch the legends of old "lost all their poetic fragrance."⁶² What is lost, in the final equation, is genuine personal piety. P's poetic failure, concomitantly a failure to understand the historical nature of his material, stems from a religious failure. Hence this "author's religion is characterized by the fact that he says almost nothing about the personal piety of the fathers [*die persönliche Frömmigkeit der Väter*]... The religion he knows consists of regulation of practices."⁶³ J and E clung to "vital legend" as best they could, but by P's time, Gunkel reasons, "a massive spiritual revolution must have occurred in the meanwhile, a revolution that created something entirely new in the place of the old folk tradition recorded in the legends."⁶⁴ This had its perks. "P's concept of God is higher, more developed than in the ancient legends. Nevertheless, P stands far below these ancients who, although they did not yet know the 'ecclesiology' of Jerusalem, knew what piety is."⁶⁵

So too in "our churches" Gunkel feels called to the double task of purging ignorance and preserving or restoring the youthful piety it masks. (This dynamic mirrors the two-part thrust of his methodology.) Rationalism and the Reformation each play a part in the necessary

60. Ibid., lxxxii = xcvi.

61. Ibid., lxxx = xciii, my emphasis.

62. Ibid., lxxxi = xciv, cf. lxxiv = lxxxvi.

63. Ibid., lxxxii = xcv.

64. Ibid., lxxxiv = xcvii. For Gunkel the change must have been provoked by the exile. See lxxxiv = xcvi: P is credited with "the beginnings of 'world history'" but criticized for falsifying it. Gunkel then contrasts the "piety of the patriarchs" with the (less desirable) "piety of the Babylonian Exile."

65. Ibid., lxxxiii = xcvi. Gunkel thinks P's history of the turn to a higher concept of God is "childish," however (lxxxii = xcv): "Nor may we fail to mention that this viewpoint of P—that Yahweh first revealed himself very generally as 'God,' then somewhat more specifically as *El shaddai*, and only at the end by his proper name—is still very childish. The actual history of religion [*Geschichte der Religion*] does not begin with the general and develop toward the concrete, but, to the contrary, it begins with the most concrete and only slowly and gradually do people learn to comprehend the abstract."

purifications, but since religious practice breeds tenacious habits, the best hope for worship may be to move praxis in a more conceptual direction. In short, “a vital, truly historical understand of the history of Israel’s religion” is indispensable for Gunkel,⁶⁶ and it could well be that the cultural project which strives for this understanding has become nothing less than true religion itself. The closing remarks of Gunkel’s introduction to Genesis illustrate this possibility. “Israel produced great religious reformers who created a comprehensive unity in religious spirit from the dispersed traditions of their people. But it did not produce a Homer. This is fortunate for our scholarship,” and thus, “because there was no great poetic whole and the passages were left in an essentially unfused state, we are able to discern the history of the whole process.”⁶⁷ Genesis lacks formal and poetic unity, and yet it rivals “the greatest creations of the human spirit.” It participates in the “inner unity that unifies all the variety” of other great creations, such as cathedrals, the state, or *Faust*. These are of course human creations. “One will be unable, however, to prevent the pious observer who has reached this conclusion from recognizing this unity in the variety of the history of Israel’s religion as the providence of God who once spoke childishly to children and then maturely to adults [*zu Männern männlich*].”⁶⁸ Thus Gunkel, with this bizarre fusion of 1 Corinthians 13 and turn of the century German protestant liberalism, stands ready as one of the prophets of old for the service of his people and his God.

There is a vast divide running through the canon for Gunkel: a darkening of sagas removed from life and collected on paper, a massive revolution in religion between J/E and P, an invasion of rationalism between the spirit of individual poets and the epigones who praised the law, a deplorable textual tangle that separates the fiery prophets from the books that wrongly carry their names. Proper piety needs to jettison the false adulthood of Israelite legalism, and to rediscover the childlike, pre-textual, naive but pure religion of the ancients. Thus the canon must be unmade *for the sake of religion*. But then the brave youth of the ancients

66. Ibid., lxxx = xciii.

67. Ibid., lxxxvi = xcix.

68. Ibid., lxxxvi = c.

and the passion of the first reformers also has to be combined with Gunkel's advanced, scientific learning, and this compels him to refashion the canon, or at least its spiritual equivalent, in his own day. Unreconciled with his indifference to the final form is his thoroughgoing preference for Israelite religion over all other religions of the ancient Near East. Almost without exception Israel's reworking of ANE material is "much more moderate and sane." But then what if the modern biblical critic is not one of the tradition's master distillers? Or, what happens when the wheels fall off the cultural/religious project in which the unity of Israel, cathedral domes, Goethe, humanity's collective spirit, and the state, can all be earnestly invoked in the same breath? Gunkel's profound ambivalence to canon has been noticed in the literature once or twice before, yet it is not widely recognized (at least not in English). I will therefore conclude this section by developing the point in a little detail.

Gunkel was adamant that *Religionsgeschichte* did not mean the history of all religion, but of the *biblical* religion. He strove against the "Schranken des Kanons" maintained by church dogma, to be sure. And he wanted to rescue pseudepigraphal books (such as 4 Esra) from disrepute. If one could bring a wider history into daylight one could at last conceive of "die gesamte Geschichte der israelitisch-jüdisch-urchristlichen Religion als Einheit." Yet Gunkel was anxious when some pushed further than he intended: "zugleich aber tat man im Geiste Tür und Tor auf, um alles Ausländische, woraus sich irgend etwas für das Verständnis der Bibel ergäbe, mit Freuden einzulassen: auch dies in starkem Gegensatz gegen die Vergangenheit, die gegen das Nicht-Biblische vielfach gleichgültig oder gar voreingenommen gewesen war."⁶⁹ The conceptual unity offered in history not a unity of world religion; rather the unity sought is of the "Israelite-Jewish-Christian" religious trajectory. The point is made with perfect clarity in 1922. "Wenn wir also damals 'Religionsgeschichte' auf unser Banner schrieben, so dachten wir nicht an eine 'Geschichte der Religionen,' sondern an eine Geschichte der *biblischen* Religion."⁷⁰

69. Gunkel, *Christliche Welt*, 153–154.

70. Gunkel, *Richtungen*, 66; cited in Klatt, *Gunkel*, 27 (cf. all of 26–28).

Hence the first methodological principle in *Creation and Chaos*, that the full history of a thing must be pursued because subsequent developments can be as or more important than origins, has a strong proviso in it. Gunkel may feel the need “to be protected against misunderstanding” given the way he challenges the traditional dogmas; yet he certainly does not “deny the particularity of Israelite religion” and does, in his own way, support “the belief that *in this history* God has *revealed* himself in a special way.”⁷¹ Klatt describes the situation forcefully. “Die babylonische Religion erscheint in *Schöpfung und Chaos* nur in einer negativen Beleuchtung, und Gott scheint mit Israel doch eine besondere Geschichte gehabt zu haben.” He also rightly discerns that, although Gunkel would seem to affirm truth in all religion, “liegt hier ein Problem, für dessen Lösung ... Gunkel auch in den folgenden Jahren und Jahrzehnten nicht genügend systematische Kraft besaß.”⁷²

By removing a vital function of the canon to history Gunkel only exacerbates the problem of the biblical tradition's unity. A more traditional doctrine of providence would of course affirm God's activity in the whole of human history, but *Creation and Chaos* insists on a more radical theology in a history-of-religions mode. “Theologisch gesehen, fordert Gunkel hier eine religionsgeschichtlich ausgerichtete Theologie, die Offenbarung Gottes nicht versteht als ein isoliertes Handeln Gottes an einem bestimmten Volk oder einzelnen Personen in diesem Volk, sondern die das Handeln Gottes in der gesamten Menschheitsgeschichte als Offenbarung, d. h. die Menschheitsgeschichte als Offenbarungsgeschichte begreift.”⁷³ Were there torches of light in Babylon and Egypt? Yes. And yet the brightest lights of the ANE burn in Israel, and are picked up, somehow or other, in Christianity.⁷⁴ The history attested in the Christian canon, though it must be reordered, and though it continues beyond the established borders into apocryphal texts, is the one history into which all other ancient history runs. To use Klatt's word, Gunkel copes with the disconnect between canonical and ostensive history

71. Gunkel, *Creation and Chaos*, xl = vi, my emphasis.

72. Klatt, *Gunkel*, 77.

73. *Ibid.*, 80.

74. Gunkel was not particularly clear about the relation of Israel to the Church, or to Judeo-Christian culture in the West. Klatt contends that Gunkel's approach to Christ amounts to a flight to mysticism (*ibid.*, 99).

by setting history on a “gradient” (*Gefälle*) that slopes toward canon.⁷⁵ Gunkel never arrives at the final form, of course, since for him the spirits which it attests live in history, not on paper.

But this move raises a troubling question:

Indem Gunkel eine ... literaturgeschichtliche und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung der Heiligen Schrift fordert mit dem Ziel einer geschichtlichen Darstellung, ist einmal der Gefahr gewehrt, daß durch die kritische Analyse der Kanon von innen her aufgelöst und eine Einheit der biblischen Bücher nicht mehr auszumachen ist, sondern nur noch eine Vielfalt von Quellen und religiösen Anschauungen. *Die Einheit der Heiligen Schrift wird zurückgeführt auf die hinter ihr liegende Geschichte.* Damit kommt aber nun ... die Frage in Sicht, worin diese Geschichte ihre Einheit hat, m. a. W. es wird die Frage nach dem Gefälle dieser Geschichte virulent.⁷⁶

Where indeed does the history behind the biblical text find its unity? How does one know which history, or whose, is canonical? And anyhow, what of the subsequent history in which the “paper” exercised its influence over later generations? Is this not also, for a text and its people, a kind of life?

II. ERSATZ BIBLICAL THEOLOGY? RELIGIOUS HISTORY IN FOUR EDITIONS

As for the issue discussed in chapter two, the relationship of the Christian Bible’s two testaments, for Gunkel “kommt die gesamtbiblische theologische Problematik hier überhaupt nicht in Sicht.”⁷⁷ In point of fact he believed that biblical history of religions would take the place of the thing called biblical theology. This did not transpire. In this section, as a way of tracing the afterlife of this aspect of Gunkel’s project, I will drill down through four editions of a single article as it appears across the four editions of the reference work *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (*RGG*), in 1909, 1927, 1957 and 1998.⁷⁸ When Gunkel had it, in the second edition, it bore the title “Biblische Theologie und biblische Religionsgeschichte, I. des

75. Ibid., 80: “Betrachtet man das ‘Gefälle’ der Geschichte nur recht, so fällt die Unvergleichbarkeit der Offenbarung Gottes im Volke Israel mit etwa in Babylonien oder Ägypten, so sehr auch dort wahre Gotteserkenntnis vorhanden gewesen ist, erst recht sinnfällig ins Auge.”

76. Ibid., 189, my emphasis.

77. Ibid., 192.

78. These are the publication dates only of the four volumes in question.

AT." So the question is, in almost a century of Old Testament scholarship, how has the relationship between these two undertakings shifted?

We may begin with Gunkel. In 1927 he writes of the inability of the traditional, dogmatically ordered biblical theology to bring the "lebendige, aus dem Herzen kommende Religion" of the Old Testament to expression. Among the "großen religiösen Personen" the prophets above all have been neglected, not through the fault of the researchers themselves but due to a flaw in the very nature of the old approach. The dogma of inspiration flattened the collected biblical material, shoehorning it into a unified systematic account which good scholarship has increasingly shown to be incompatible with the history of biblical religion. "Die Erscheinung, die unser Geschlecht erlebt hat, wonach die B. Th. durch die 'Religionsgeschichte Israels' ersetzt wird, erklärt sich also daraus, daß an Stelle der Inspirationslehre jetzt der Geist der Geschichtsforschung zu treten beginnt."⁷⁹ Gunkel predicts that study of the history of Israelite religion will replace biblical theology in the foreseeable future, and he believes that the term "Religionsgeschichte," despite occasional misuse, encompasses far more appropriately the outlook of biblical research. He concludes by washing his hands of a challenge raised for dogmatic theology: "In welchem Sinne auch bei dieser religionsgeschichtlichen Betrachtung der biblischen Religionen von Offenbarung zu reden ist, wird die Dogmatik zu handeln haben."⁸⁰

Accordingly, the tasks of biblical research are oriented to religion instead of literature. OT *Bibelinwissenschaft* is obligated to discover the meaning of the collected scriptures ("der in der Bibel gesammelten Schriften"). Because the present text includes errata, a preliminary task is basic text-criticism. Second, scholars must compare, evaluate and array the biblical material. This, in a word, is the domain of "Bibelkritik." Third, the terminal aim of biblical scholarship is to write "eine Geschichte des Volkes Israel auf allen seinen Lebensäußerungen."⁸¹ Israel's his-

79. RGG², 1:1090–1091. Childs actually quotes the last sentence in *BTONT*, 6. His translation: "The recently experienced phenomenon of Biblical Theology's being replaced by the history of Israelite religion is to be explained from the fact that the spirit of historical investigation has now taken the place of a traditional doctrine of inspiration."

80. RGG², 1:1091.

81. RGG², 1:1073.

tory can be further divided into history of culture, or of politics, but ultimately, one should aspire to history of religion. “Seine höchste Aufgabe findet der Forscher sodann in einer Geschichte der Religion und Sittlichkeit Israels, dem Ersatz der früheren ‘Biblischen Theologie.’” But again, for Gunkel it is not just any history, but the “biblische Religionsgeschichte” which must replace biblical theology. The history of religion centers the Old Testament.⁸² A further but peripheral task involves the “Schrifttum Israels.” This has been treated as literary-history, often in the genre of Introduction, though the history of the various literary genres might, Gunkel suggests, be a more fruitful approach in future. Yet Israel’s religious life—life as opposed to literature—remains the proper focal point.

In the first edition of *RGG* (1909), for which Gunkel’s editorial input was preeminent,⁸³ Bruno Baentsch wrote the equivalent article. It got filed under “Bibelwissenschaft: I. AT, D. Biblische Theologie,”⁸⁴ and it might as well have been written by Gunkel. The “großen religiösen Persönlichkeiten” of the OT are “die eigentlichen Träger der israelitischen Religion.”⁸⁵ The old biblical theology is criticized (better to speak of Israelite religious history), dogma’s exclusion of apocryphal and pseudepigraphical texts lamented, revelation set right as a gradual historical process, systematics ruled out of bounds.

Nur so gewinnen wir ein wirklich geschichtliches und lebendiges Verständnis von den einzelnen religiös-sittlichen Anschauungen und Ideen, die uns immer als Glieder eines geistigen Organismus entgegentreten, wie von den einzelnen Perioden des religiösen Lebens in Israel und der Entwicklung der israelitischen Religion überhaupt. Darum ist an die Stelle der “Biblischen Theologie” mit Recht die “Religionsgeschichte Israel” getreten.⁸⁶

Religious history is even named the “Krone” of all OT sub-specialties. Baentsch had died in 1908, and Gunkel borrows (or possibly plagiarizes) some of the article’s verbiage in the second

82. *RGG*², 1:1074. “Alle andern alttestamentlichen Disziplinen sollen dieser Aufgabe dienen: eine Forderung, die aus der Natur des AT, in dem die Religion der eigentliche Mittelpunkt ist, ebenso hervorgeht, wie sie zugleich dem Bedürfnis des Glaubens entspricht.”

83. For an overview of Gunkel’s involvement in *RGG*¹ and *RGG*², see Klatt, *Gunkel*, 87–90. The suggestion there is that Gunkel’s reputation was less secure during work on the first edition.

84. *RGG*¹, 1:1194–1197. Childs interacts with Baentsch’s work on Exodus (1903) in 1974, where it tends to represent the standard critical view. Later Childs remarks: “Baentsch’s companion volume to Gunkel’s *Genesis* has long provided a solid, if uninspiring, handling of the technical problems of the Hebrew text” (Childs, *OT Books*, 39).

85. *RGG*¹, 1:1195.

86. *RGG*¹, 1:1196.

edition. Apart from the addition of a few distinctives, Gunkel's most important change was in amending the title to reflect how biblical theology was not really the subject matter, that the history of Israelite religion was being championed as its surrogate.

Three decades on, in *RGG*³ (1957), Gunkel's title was kept verbatim, but the content of the entry was entirely rewritten by Johannes Hempel. The piece reflects a new awareness that *biblische Theologie* had not in fact died, and that it did not easily coexist with *biblische Religionsgeschichte*. In Hempel's view "hat der Umschwung der theologischen Lage seit 1918, insonderheit die Betonung der Verwurzelung der ganzen Schrift in der Offenbarung des *einen* Gottes in Jesus Christus (W. Vischer) und die Erkenntnis der Unmöglichkeit, Wahrheitsfragen durch rein geschichtliche Forschung zu lösen, zur Forderung einer Neubelebung der B.Th. neben der Religionsgeschichte geführt."⁸⁷ The copulative between theology and the history of religion stayed intact, but a new generation of confessing Christians in Germany had powerfully challenged the historicist hegemony. Their offensive made Gunkel's prognostication about the fate of biblical theology appear much less inevitable.

By the fourth edition (1998), "Biblische Theologie" is a distinct entry again, as in 1909, but for the first time in the history of *RGG* it is discussed as a viable topic in its own right. Bernd Janowski, whose contribution addresses exegetical (rather than "Fundamentaltheologisch") aspects of the pursuit, acknowledges an as yet "ungeklärte Nebeneinander von (religions-)hist. Methodik und normativem Anspruch."⁸⁸ The history he details speaks to tortuous developments in the field after Gunkel. Continuing in the historicist spirit, some began to emphasize *commonalities* in the tradition to counteract the stress on differences (Eichrodt, Köhler). Others sought to meet somewhere between OT theology and religious history (König, Sellin, Fohrer). Only with von Rad did a bona fide "Neuorientierung der Disziplin" commence. His OT Theology cast "die Frage nach der Korrelation von Offenbarung und Gesch. zu ihrem hermeneutischen Prinzip" in a fresh light.⁸⁹ Even though the relationship

87. *RGG*³, 1:1256. See further Hempel, AT und Religionsgeschichte.

88. *RGG*⁴, 1:1548.

89. *RGG*⁴, 1:1547.

between history of religions and biblical theology remains uncertain, Janowski can speak of the Christian (not necessarily Jewish) concern for the unity of scripture, the pertinence of “*Geltung* (Verbindlichkeit der Schrift)” over against “*Genese* (Entstehung der Überlieferungsvielfalt),” the significance of normative disciplines as such—all in a way unthinkable in Gunkel’s time, and for that matter in Hempel’s. Of the several tasks enumerated for biblical theology, one is of particular note at present:

Der Entwurf einer BTh hat von der Existenz und der Anerkennung eines aus den beiden Testamenten bestehenden bibl. Kanons auszugehen. Inwieweit für eine gesamtbibl. Theol. das Faktum des Kanons relevant ist, ergibt sich aus der Tatsache, daß ein theol. bestimmtes Verhältnis beider Testamente zueinander schon für die Entstehung des christl. Kanons vorauszusetzen ist... In diesem Vorgang wird deutlich, daß das NT sich von seiner eigenen Schrifthermeneutik her gar nicht als von der Lektüre des AT unabhängiger Kanon, der additiv neben das bereits abgeschlossene AT gestellt wurde, versteht, sondern zusammen mit jenem ersten Teil—dem später und aufgrund dieses Vorganges so genannten “AT”—die *eine zweigeteilte christl. Bibel* sein will.⁹⁰

Such an intricate affirmation of the potential unity of the entire Christian Bible, made in terms of its finished character and its historical development, is an index of just how bewildering and complex the historical and theological problem of the canon has become since Gunkel. Whether this way of thinking has any promise for the future is naturally a matter of debate.⁹¹ Janowski, for one, finds grounds for hope.

III. EPILOGUE: CANON AFTER GUNKEL

After Gunkel the form critical method won surprisingly broad support. Gunkel’s sweeping religious-historical aesthetic was quickly left behind, however, and as E. Blum explains, methodologically *Formgeschichte* underwent a “narrowing, which was to mark the disciplinary discourse for generations.”⁹² Dibelius and Bultmann may have been aware of the

90. RGG⁴, 1:1548, my emphasis. In English translation see further Janowski, *One God*.

91. Against Childs’ biblical theology, a comparably important attempt (if not quite as unique) from the history of religions side would have been Albertz’s in 1992. His much discussed history was translated from German to English with similar dispatch, and it was heralded as the hoped-for replacement of biblical theology, though of course the “gesamtbiblische theologische Problematik” does not come within its purview.

92. Blum, *Formgeschichte*, 37.

initial departure—certainly Gunkel was—but it was easily forgotten.⁹³ Albrecht Alt, for example, more strongly emphasizes the pre-literary oral context, and he strives to tighten up the methodological sloppiness of previous efforts. He wants to uncover the “real origins of Israelite law” and feels that the newer form- or genre-critical approach “has not yet been applied as consistently as it ought to be.”⁹⁴ So Gunkel’s sometimes vague appeal to *Gattungen* gave way to “a downright ‘mandatory’ relationship between ‘form or genre’ and ‘content.’”⁹⁵ Thus “vor allem” Alt seeks out the “ältesten und reinsten Ausprägungen nach Form und Inhalt.”⁹⁶ One distinctive of Gunkel’s approach that becomes muted here is the later textual history of a tradition. Another, which fades almost as a consequence, is the tacit concern for canon. Alt notes a “contradiction between the fragmentary state of the literary material and the unity demanded by the theory [of canon],” but he merely problematizes the older literary-critical handling of the issue.⁹⁷ He is thus relatively subdued on the question of the triumph of Israelite religion over rival cultures in the ANE.⁹⁸ Compared with Gunkel, in the search for the tradition’s “Wurzeln im Leben” Alt operates with a far more detached interest in the roots themselves.

In a later day Klaus Koch comments on the theological significance of form criticism.

The apology that follows sits atop a section entitled “Kanon und biblische Literaturgeschichte.”

Up to this point my task has been to enquire into the principles of form-critical research, but now I shall try to tackle paths which have been so far little frequented. It concerns what we might call the keystone to the construction of form-critical exegesis, the theological consequences. Most Old and New Testament scholars working from a form-critical standpoint do not consider the points which I now put forward, and as a rule no one appears to be interested in them. However, the longer I work with form criticism, the more I

93. Ibid., 36, citing Bultmann, *Synoptischen Tradition*, 4.

94. Alt, *Origins*, 86 = Alt, *Ursprünge*, 284–285.

95. Blum, *Formgeschichte*, 41. Buss, *Form Criticism*, 404, feels Alt represents an extreme position.

96. Alt, *Ursprünge*, 285 = Alt, *Origins*, 88.

97. Ibid., 81 = Alt, *Ursprünge*, 278–279.

98. On the other hand, casuistic law originally had an extra-Israelite provenance (now Canaanite rather than Babylonian) involving “secular justice” in a single tribe; apodictic law, however, was a creation *unique to Israel*, “a sacral action involving the whole nation” of confederated tribes (Alt, *Origins*, 125 = 324). The “clash” between secular and sacred “is typical of the whole history of Israel, which manifested for centuries a tension that is essentially due to the encounter of a young people newly come to nationhood and an ancient and alien culture” (131 = 331). But this is a far cry from the “struggle higher religion fought for Israel’s soul.”

feel that these additional (and perhaps final!) problems can no longer be evaded, even though *few people other than Gunkel* have touched on them.⁹⁹

Koch realizes that Gunkel is just inconsistent on the canon's literary history. "On one side he dismisses the late period as the time of the epigones, and on the other he emphasises the theological importance of the post-biblical writings of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha." Yet he "never lost sight of the fact that the Old Testament was not simply a compendium of Israelite national literature."¹⁰⁰ This points to a larger hermeneutical (and dogmatic) issue which requires further thought.

We must ask not only the reason for such an exhaustive investigation of individual units but quite simply the motive behind any interpretation of the sacred writings [*die schlichte Frage nach dem Ziel der Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift überhaupt*]. Is an interpreter's work finished with his study of the individual text? Is it enough, as is often said today, to extract the kerygma from biblical pericopes? Or must the interpreter seek further for a relation between the individual passages and the books, between the Old and New Testaments and the Bible as a whole?¹⁰¹

That was in 1964. At that time Koch believes that "a literary history along the lines of the one planned by Gunkel is urgently needed, if form criticism is to have any point at all," and from where he sits he can see a few promising steps by the likes of Noth, von Rad, Rendtorff and Lohfink.¹⁰² From the present perspective, however, Koch's most important insight is that Gunkel's work, through a deep antinomy, raises the canon question in a way the subsequent methodological discussion largely forgot. And apart from Klatt,¹⁰³ very few others have made the connection.

CHILDS AFTER GUNKEL

Of course Childs, who reviewed Klatt's work on Gunkel the year it appeared (1969),¹⁰⁴ did take up the canon question. His sights were aimed at a bigger target than Gunkel—indeed,

99. Koch, *Growth*, 100 = Koch, *Formgeschichte?*, 110, my emphasis.

100. *Ibid.*, 102–103 = 113–114.

101. *Ibid.*, 104–105 = 116.

102. *Ibid.*, 105 = 116.

103. Klatt makes a few salient criticisms of Koch's discussion here: Klatt, *Gunkel*, 190. Yet Klatt credits Koch for introducing him to the problem that he eventually took up in his dissertation (7). Koch did not guide the dissertation, but the foreword to *Growth* thanks a Mr. Klatt for assisting with proofs and the index.

104. Childs, Review of Klatt. His comments are brief but favorable: "Seldom has this reviewer read a more informative and thoroughly enjoyable book" (508).

they were aimed at historical critical method as such—but he worked out his critique from within especially the form critical tradition associated with Gunkel. This is not to say that Gunkel would inevitably have agreed with Childs that “the concept of canon was a corollary of inspiration,” or that the canon “set the boundaries within which God’s voice was heard.”¹⁰⁵ Rather, the point is that for Gunkel inspiration did have a corollary, if less obviously associated with its erstwhile companion, revelation, and it entailed distinct boundaries on the arena within which God’s voice was heard. Revelation did occur, after a fashion. And yet like Koch, Childs’ protest four decades later, in 2005, rings true: “to suggest with some that the theological importance of the canon has recently been overemphasized is a gross misunderstanding. The opposite is nearer the truth.”¹⁰⁶ The canon’s historic purpose has proved enormously difficult to comprehend in the wake of the atomizing done by source and form critical investigations, and more recently, the mortgaging of canonical boundaries (internal and external) to tradition-historical processes. The surprising thing about Gunkel’s work in hindsight is how such borders, despite an internal conflict between religious atavism and the progressive reforms of higher religion, stay vaguely intact.

To those familiar only with the portrait of Childs given in the literature, it may be just as surprising to learn of the extent to which Childs’ understanding of the canonical process accepts the messiness of the final form, in line with a state of affairs Gunkel emphasizes. In *IOTS* Childs hopes “to enter into a post-critical era.”¹⁰⁷ But post-critical does not mean post-historical. “The term canon has both a historical and a theological dimension.”¹⁰⁸ Childs deals with these two dimensions in a dialectical fashion, treating them as separate but intimately

105. Childs, *Speech-act*, 381. I choose the article not quite at random. It is Childs’ last, and it shows clearly that an interest in the “form” and “function” of scripture never leaves him (cf. 384–385).

106. *Ibid.*, 380.

107. *IOTS*, 16.

108. *IOTS*, 58. The literary history in ancient Israel was broader, the canonical history narrower. “The former process resulted in innumerable forces such as laws of saga, the use of inherited literary patterns of prose and poetry, the social setting of diverse institutions, the changing scribal techniques etc., whereas the latter process was much more closely defined by those forces which affected the literature’s evaluation, transmission, and usage. Although non-religious factors (political, social, and economic) certainly entered into the canonical process, these were subordinated to the religious usage of the literature by its function within the community” (61).

related processes in the canon's development. For him any effort to patch the tattered authority of the canon without addressing the historical problematics is rejected as a "theological construct" because the "recognition of the complex history of the growth of the Old Testament literature did more than anything else to bring about the collapse of the older dogmatic understanding of the canon."¹⁰⁹ Thus history has to be ingredient in the theological dimension of canon Childs wants at long last to address. And history teaches that the older dogmatic understandings were inadequate. "For theological reasons the biblical texts were often shaped in such a way that the original poetic forms were lost, or *a unified narrative badly shattered*. The canonical approach is concerned to understand the nature of the theological shape of the literature rather than to recover an original literary or aesthetic unity."¹¹⁰ Something very like Gunkel's aesthetic in *Genesis* is implicitly affirmed—though Childs does not speak of "darkening," often the original setting of a tradition has been "blurred"—and in this Childs' instincts are quite unlike those of Auerbach, or under his tutelage, Frei. (Alter is just beyond the horizon.) The unity of the final form is emphatically *not* an aesthetic unity in *IOTS*, or for that matter anywhere else in Childs' corpus.

One begins to sense how much Childs' early immersion in form criticism affects his formulation of a canonical approach.

Why should one stage in the process be accorded special status? Were not the earlier levels of the text once regarded as canonical as well, and why should they not continue to be so regarded within the exegetical enterprise? Is not the history which one recovers in the growth of a text an important index for studying Israel's development of a self-understanding, and thus the very object of Old Testament theology? Having been trained in the form-critical method, I feel the force of these questions and am aware of the value of the approach.¹¹¹

On what basis then can a critically informed scholar speak of the integrity of the final form? "The reason for insisting on the final form of scripture lies in the peculiar relationship between the text and the people of God which is constitutive of the canon."¹¹² This is both a

109. *IOTS*, 60.

110. *IOTS*, 74, my emphasis.

111. *IOTS*, 75. Cf. the more traditional use of form criticism in, e.g., *Memory*, 34, 46.

112. *IOTS*, 75, cf. 41.

theological and a historical judgment (and, we might add, though the history behind the text is Childs' primary focus in 1979, it is not the only kind of history that counts: there is also the history of scripture's *Wirkung*). The peculiar relationship between God's text and God's people begins well within the biblical period, Childs argues, and the series of decisions made in that formative period were meant to be come binding on future generations of Israel. Childs says his "Introduction attempts to offer a different model *for* the discipline from that currently represented. It seeks to describe the *form and function* of the Hebrew Bible in its role as sacred scripture for Israel."¹¹³ There really should be no doubt that Childs writes as a *Fachmann* in an established tradition, for that tradition.

But if Childs does not feature in the histories of form criticism (Buss hardly mentions his work, and virtually never after 1970), it may be due to the fact that he turns it on its head. "Beginning in the pre-exilic period, but increasing in significance in the post-exilic era, a force was unleashed by Israel's religious use of her traditions which exerted an influence on the shaping of the literature... Israel defined itself in terms of a book! The canon formed the decisive *Sitz im Leben* for the Jewish community's life, thus blurring the sociological evidence most sought after by the modern historian."¹¹⁴ Paper, contra Gunkel, was accorded religious significance. The textualization of the tradition did not create a barrier to life, but rather placed a text at the very heart of true religion in Israel.

To bring Frei's *Eclipse* back into the mix, faced with a choice between canon and "true" history, Gunkel made the wrong choice. "Scripture bears witness to God's activity in history on Israel's behalf, but history *per se* is not a medium of revelation which is commensurate with canon."¹¹⁵ Gunkel was right to a point. Unlike the Reformers, in the post-Enlightenment era it became impossible "to *assume* the coherence of text and historical reference" and "the biblical interpreter was forced either to be critical, anti-critical, or postcritical, but the pre-critical option has been forever lost."¹¹⁶ Gunkel has no difficulty extending the biblical history right

113. *IOTS*, 16, my emphasis.

114. *IOTS*, 78, cf. 61–62.

115. *IOTS*, 76.

116. Childs, *Vitringa*, 98.

into his own historical moment. But as Childs reads the history of the discipline, by the nineteenth century “scholars who pursued historical criticism of the Old Testament no longer found a significant place for the canon. Conversely, those scholars who sought to retain a concept of canon were unable to find a significant role for historical criticism. This is the polarity which lies at the centre of the problem of evaluating the nature of Old Testament Introduction.”¹¹⁷ Just so in the scholarly venture “to describe the development of the Hebrew literature and to trace the earlier and later stages of this history ... there always remains an enormous hiatus between the description of the critically reconstructed literature and the actual canonical text which has been received and used as authoritative scripture by the community.”¹¹⁸ Or as I have argued above, such a hiatus exists within Gunkel’s very own reading of the history of biblical literature, and to a considerable degree it confounds his methodological formulations. The poles of biblical and real history have come apart, though in a strange way for Gunkel they are still in the same orbit.

It would be a long time after Gunkel until the study of biblical forms (genres) troubled with scripture’s final form again. By then so many other factors will have changed that one could well ask whether the approaches have all that much else in common.

CHILDS AFTER VON RAD

A great deal has been made of the relationship of Childs’ work to von Rad’s. There is at least one dissertation on the topic exclusively.¹¹⁹ In published literature lines of continuity and discontinuity have been developed by a variety of scholars. Oeming’s study of 1985 draws out some implications. Steins puts forward a comparison focused on Genesis 22.¹²⁰ Some have suggested that the new interest in canon properly begins with von Rad. Rendtorff makes this

117. *IOTS*, 45. Gunkel had no love for the genre Introduction, but the history of it that Childs tells here has wider implications.

118. *IOTS*, 40.

119. Hartzfeld, *Two Methodologies*. Von Rad’s “method” is preferred (210). This work suffers from a weakness common to all studies of Childs in the 1980s and early 1990s, namely, that one of the most important pieces of “data” (*BTONT*) was not available. It also buys into an overly restricted definition of “canon” (20, 108n48).

120. Steins, *Bindung*, 5, 122–125, 175.

move distinctly, as was seen in chapter one. Janowski asserts that he achieved a “Neuorientierung der Disziplin” (above)—undoubtedly true—and in a recent volume he edited on the hermeneutics of canon, J. Barthel speaks of the “kanonhermeneutische Debatte seit Gerhard von Rad.”¹²¹ Others have been less quick to subsume Childs’ work under that trajectory. Nicholson, for instance, points to the following classic statement of von Rad’s, part of which Childs cites in *IOTS*:

The Hexateuch in its present form arose by means of redactors who heard the peculiar testimony of faith of each document and considered it binding. There is no doubt that the present Hexateuch in its final form makes great demands on the understanding of every reader. Many ages, many men, many traditions and theologies, have constructed this massive work. Only the one who does not look superficially at the Hexateuch but reads it with a knowledge of its deep dimension will arrive at true understanding. Such a one will know that revelations and religious experiences of many ages are speaking from it. *For no stage in this work’s long period of growth is really obsolete; something of each phase has been conserved and passed on as enduring until the Hexateuch attained its final form.*¹²²

Thus ends Nicholson’s survey of pentateuchal research in the twentieth century, which decides against Childs that “[t]o concentrate upon the final stage is to foreshorten what was a long process of reflection, debate, and not infrequently controversy in the history of the community of faith.”¹²³ This betrays an imprecise understanding of what is actually claimed in *IOTS*, yet it represents another common judgment—that in essential respects Childs does not improve upon von Rad, and may actually take a step backwards. In Britain, a more appreciative and nuanced discussion of Childs with an eye to von Rad may be found in the writings of Moberly.¹²⁴

Childs himself has a bit to say about von Rad (one of his “unforgettable teachers”). Of the passage just cited, for instance, he quickly admits that von Rad is right about the “layering of tradition” in Genesis, but he criticizes him for a failure “to reckon seriously with full implications of the canonical process on the traditioning process.”¹²⁵ (Incidentally, that the charge

121. Barthel, *Kanonhermeneutische Debatte*. He qualifies this somewhat—see below.

122. Von Rad, *Genesis [ET¹]*, 27 = von Rad, *Genesis*⁵, 19–20. The italicized line (in translation) is cited in *IOTS*, 157. Childs reviewed two editions of the translation, in 1962 and 1974.

123. Nicholson, *Pentateuch*, 268. This take on the canonical approach has been influenced by Barr; cf. Childs’ response in *Struggle*, 320–321.

124. E.g., Moberly, *Bible, Theology, Faith*, 1 and passim.

125. *IOTS*, 157.

has at least some justice is immediately seen in von Rad's preference for the term *Hexateuch*. It is odd that Nicholson can conclude a book about the Pentateuch with a remark suggesting the very designation of five books is wrong, or has proximate importance.) One could go so far as to say that a major component of *IOTS* is its running critique of von Rad's (among others') understanding of the canonical significance of actualization (= *Vergegenwärtigung*),¹²⁶ in place of which Childs defends a once-and-for-all actualization in the final form:

it is constitutive of the canon to seek to transmit the tradition in such a way as to prevent its being moored in the past. Actualization ... is built into the structure of the text itself... The usual critical method of biblical exegesis is, first, to seek to restore an original historical setting by stripping away those very elements which constitute the canonical shape. Little wonder that once the biblical text has been secure anchored in the historical past by "decanonizing" it, the interpreter has difficulty applying it to the modern religious context.¹²⁷

An indirect but extensive confirmation of this point may reside in a study conducted under Childs' guidance at Yale in the late 1970s. J. Groves' *Actualization and Interpretation in the Old Testament* gives a thorough account and critique of actualization in von Rad's work, and at several turns one senses the hand of the supervisor.¹²⁸ Outside *IOTS*, Childs' next most important title here is probably "Gerhard von Rad in American Dress" (1986), which commends Groves' analysis and argues that many of the complexities of von Rad's method and theology have been lost in translation. This helps explain the way his work "has been accommodated to the ideology of American theological liberalism," but then there is "a flaw in von Rad's theology which has functioned in both [sic] American, British, and European theology to blur the Christological center of his theology."¹²⁹ Von Rad rightly holds to this center; he does not recognize the extent or interpretive significance of the transformation that took place later in Israel's life in the textualization of its tradition.

Especially following *BTONT*, a further aspect of Childs' critique of tradition history has been carried forward in numerous publications by Seitz. He mounts an argument about

126. Childs, *Memory*, 81.

127. *IOTS*, 79.

128. Yale dissertation of 1979, published in 1987 as Groves, *Actualization* (see esp. 103–163).

129. Childs, Von Rad, 85.

the nature of Christian scripture in its received, two testament form which calls for a retention of the canonical border between Old and New. One title captures the problem with von Rad's work from this perspective especially well: "Two Testaments and the Failure of One Tradition-History."¹³⁰ It also gets at why Childs and Seitz differentiate the canonical approach from those following von Rad who take up tradition history as a way of uniting the testaments.¹³¹

More recently Seitz has turned his attention to a study of the hermeneutics of biblical prophecy.¹³² It contains a careful reading of a passage in the sixth edition of von Rad's Genesis commentary, revised just before his death in 1971. Von Rad considers F. Rosenzweig's suggestion that R, the final redactor of the Pentateuch, should stand for Rabbenu, "our master." The OT theologian is drawn to this Jewish affirmation of a composite final form, with a depth dimension intact, yet he pushes back by insisting that for Christian readers Jesus Christ is the true master.¹³³ Seitz concludes:

It was unnecessary, and indeed somewhat confusing, for von Rad to speak about Jesus Christ in contrast to some other sort of "master." Indeed, one could just as easily say that the access Jesus Christ gives those outside Israel, in the Christian church, is an access to "our master" as reflected in the final form of the text, seen now from the perspective of the post-Easter faith. There need be no theological distinguishing of Jesus Christ as the bringer of the Old Testament to the Gentile Christian church and the Old Testament in its final literary form. Indeed, this form preserves a composite character constrained within the final literary shape. The New Testament's hearing of the Old occurs with reference, therefore, not to a critically delineated tradition-history, but to the Old Testament's final form, a form which Rosenzweig sought to honor when he spoke of the final form of Genesis as bequeathed to us—Jew and Gentile—by Rabbenu (our Master).¹³⁴

The way this analysis tacks about von Rad's late attraction to the final form recalls the course plotted by Childs in 1979, 1986 and elsewhere. Christ is affirmed in the Old Testament's literal sense, a deliverance independent of what the New Testament makes of the Old (by its discrete

130. In Seitz, *Figured Out*, 35–47. Cf. also "The Historical-Critical Endeavor as Theology: The Legacy of Gerhard von Rad," in Seitz, *Word*, 28–40.

131. H. Gese, P. Stuhlmacher and H. Hübner are recurring examples. (R. Hays is indicted with similar charges.) In incipient form see Childs, *Biblische Theologie*, 23, and cf. *BTONT*, 70–79.

132. A piece offered at the Heidelberg symposium for von Rad, Seitz, *Prophecy and Tradition-History*, now contributes to a more comprehensive argument in Seitz, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics* (2007). Childs had just read a draft of this book when I interviewed him in Cambridge, 5 April 2006. He enthused that it was the best work on von Rad he had seen in the English-speaking world.

133. Rad, Genesis [ET²], 42–43. Moberly, *Bible, Theology, Faith*, 143 discusses the same passage, as does Barton, *Canon*, 41; cf. Steins, *Bindung*, 21n48.

134. Seitz, *Prophecy and Tradition-History*, 44–45 = idem, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics*, 177.

witness, in Childs' language). Von Rad rightly perceives the scope of the Old Testament witness but misunderstands the way in which that witness is handed to the church. In prophetic terms, it is not the case that "Israel's history with God thrusts forward violently into the future," from Old to New.¹³⁵ What the church receives from Israel, in material form, is not different from Jewish scripture, although of course the ways in which church and synagogue appropriate (or are appropriated by) the scriptures of Israel are very different indeed. As Seitz puts it in another context, "It remains meaningful that the terms 'Old Testament' and 'Tanak' are *both* postbiblical terms. Both require a commitment to a subsequent theological literature. Neither goes straightforwardly back to the scriptures of Israel without argument and defense."¹³⁶ We will take up Childs' own wrestling with like questions in the next chapter; for now, note how Seitz's, which is very close to it, declines to follow the *gesamtbiblische* recipe cooked up by von Rad.

In conclusion, two points need to be emphasized about von Rad's bearing on Childs' canonical proposal. First, to the banal observation that Childs' theological approach to scripture has a good deal more in common with von Rad's than Gunkel's, caution warns against making too direct an identification. In a limited way Nicholson and Seitz speak together against Rendtorff's anachronism of transferring insights about canonical, final form exegesis from Childs to von Rad. To be sure, there are anticipations of Childs' theology in von Rad's, but one wants to be sure about exactly what these are, and to leave room for departure and/or innovation on the part of the latter. Barthel's decision to track the "kanonhermeneutische Debatte" from von Rad is at best misleading.¹³⁷ Childs' approach hopes to turn Gunkel upside

135. Rad, *OT Theology*, 2:332, cited Childs, Von Rad, 83. For Seitz's discussion the recurring phrase "violently thrusting forward" see Seitz, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics*, 21, 50–51, 73, 98, 111, 117, 248.

136. Seitz, *Figured Out*, 43.

137. Barthel, *Kanonhermeneutische Debatte*, 3: "wenn von Rad selbst das hermeneutische Problem des Kanons in seiner *Theologie des Alten Testaments* nicht eigens reflektiert hat und deshalb nur bedingt als Referenz für eine kanonische Theologie in Anspruch genommen werden kann, liegt eine solche Reflexion doch im Gefälle einer gesamtbiblischen Theologie." This quite rightly rejects Rendtorff's transference of canon from Childs to von Rad, and I am appreciative of von Rad's *gesamtbiblische* precedent, but *BTONT* aims to break with his model exactly at the point where one decides how to move from OT to NT, a step von Rad never fully took. Moreover, it was Childs and not von Rad who did most to bring canon to the attention of the German debate (chapter one).

down, and in profound ways it would invert basic commitments of von Rad as well—not least to a unifying tradition-historical trajectory. As the introduction to *IOTS* states,

Having experienced the demise of the Biblical Theology movement in America, the dissolution of the broad European consensus in which I was trained, and a widespread confusion regarding theological reflection in general, I began to realize that there was something fundamentally wrong with the foundations of the biblical discipline. It was not a question of improving on a source analysis, of discovering some unrecognized new genre, or of bringing a redactional layer into sharper focus. Rather, the crucial issue turned on one's whole concept of the study of the Bible itself. I am now convinced that the relation between the historical critical study of the Bible and its theological use as religious literature within a community of faith and practice needs to be completely rethought. Minor adjustments are not only inadequate, but also conceal the extent of the dry rot.¹³⁸

Childs goes clear back to the foundations of form critical research, and beyond. In the same decade in which Koch scratches his head and wonders if anybody else in the guild remembers the *Ziel* of the exposition of Holy Scripture as such, Childs begins to rethink completely how academic study of the form and function of biblical texts relates to its received form and its ongoing function in actual, living communities of faith and practice. Koch suggests that tradition history is ready made for theological application, and obviously there are those today who subscribe to a derivative model. Childs is not one of them. Part of my purpose in studying Gunkel in this chapter is to illustrate the radical extent of Childs' counter-proposal.

Second, following from this, the critique nonetheless comes from within a recognized tradition. Another way to say this is that Childs was not so critical of von Rad while at Heidelberg and Basel. If, as he says at the Barth colloquium in 1969, he experienced a change of heart after returning to America (from where he saw the dissolution of the broad European consensus he knew), to some degree he must also have broken ranks with that “biblical phalanx” from his student days. Childs recalls hearing von Rad's famous 1952 lecture on typology. “I was sitting somewhere near Barth, and it seemed to me that there were some of the most glorious lectures I'd ever heard—so crystal clear and all. When he finished, Barth turned around in a half-sleepy way to the person behind him and said, ‘Ich habe ihn gar nicht verstanden,’ which seemed to me appalling, and I felt like saying, ‘Herr Professor, I can explain it all to you.’” Yet reconsidering Barth meant reconsidering von Rad, too: “in the years that have

138. *IOTS*, 15.

passed, the more I read over that article, the more I wonder, perhaps Barth didn't understand it because it wasn't quite as clear as I had thought."¹³⁹ Like von Rad, Childs will think hard about typology (chapter six); but from no later than *Crisis* he consciously pulls away from von Rad, in how he approaches figuration and in a host of other respects.

This is not to say that Childs' broke with his training altogether. The point is rather that he comes to seek *reform*. This shift can be seen in the way Childs' early work on form modulates into a concern to describe the final form. Surely there are echos of von Rad in Childs' form critical study of 1962. It speaks of the actualization of cultic tradition in a way that will become problematic: "The great acts of the tradition are not removed in past time, but recharged with energy they become again a present event."¹⁴⁰ Similarly, the relative weight of oral tradition (as against its textualized afterlife) is greater than it will be before long: "How can one accurately trace the development of a term in a living oral tradition solely on the basis of chance occurrences on the literary level?"¹⁴¹ And Childs quotes von Rad, with approval, to this effect: "If we want to go a step farther, instead of working with proof texts, it is necessary to throw light on the specific cultic tradition which lies behind the single statements and to arrange them from the point of view of the history of the tradition."¹⁴² But then other statements in 1962, seen from a post-*IOTS* vantage, presage a very new application of form criticism. "The role of actualization underwent a process of transformation."¹⁴³ At many points an old tradition inherited from the cult is given "new meaning," a "new role" in a "new context." In one case "[a]n expansion of the form away from its cultic origin" emerges.¹⁴⁴ In another, Childs rejects an interpretation that posits an adaptation of a hymn (Psalm 77) *for* a cultic fes-

139. Childs, *Barth as Interpreter*, 30. The lecture in question is Rad, *Typologische*. One of Childs' very first articles comes somewhat closer to von Rad here (Childs, *Prophecy and Fulfillment*, esp. 262).

140. Childs, *Memory*, 63. It is a word study, too: Childs will take Barr's criticism to heart in future work. *Memory* also comes up for criticism in Groves, *Actualization*.

141. Childs, *Memory*, 34.

142. Von Rad, *Gerechtigkeit*, 238, cited in translation in Childs, *Memory*, 34n1. The essay was shortly translated in full as von Rad, *Righteousness* (there 256).

143. Childs, *Memory*, 76.

144. *Ibid.*, 44. A more chastened appreciation of the way von Rad explores the change in function of traditional language across its history can be seen as late as 1987: Childs, *Death and Dying*.

tival. One could almost speak of a general loosening of texts from their origins. Childs also insists “that there are no avenues to the history of which the Bible speaks except through the Scripture’s own testimony to these events.”¹⁴⁵ And even more obviously counter to an understanding current in Gunkel’s time: “Redemptive history is not merely a reflection of Israel’s piety—a *Glaubensgeschichte*.”¹⁴⁶ Or finally, “biblical events have the dynamic characteristic of refusing to be relegated to the past. The quality of this reality did not remain static, but emerged with *new form and content* because it identified itself with the changing historical situations of later Israel.”¹⁴⁷ One begins to appreciate why E. Gerstenberger, who revisited Childs’ early form critical work in preparation for remarks at a memorial session in his honor, concludes that durable threads of continuity run right back to the beginning of Childs’ publishing career.¹⁴⁸

All this raises the question of continuity and change in Childs’ work. There are two major turns, in my judgment, the first of which has just been outlined. Somewhere in the late 1960s Childs reorients his study of biblical forms toward the final form. This entails taking steps away from von Rad and the tradition-historical school at large. Extensions and refinements notwithstanding, the (two testament) canon question remains determinative from *Biblical Theology in Crisis*.¹⁴⁹ The second turn, enclosed within the first, concerns what Childs calls the “mystery of Israel.” It is to that which we now give our attention.

145. Childs, *Memory*, 88.

146. *Ibid.*, 89.

147. *Ibid.*, 88, my emphasis.

148. SBL San Diego, 18 November 2007.

149. Seitz, *Theological Interpretation*, 59 correctly finds several defining features of the canonical approach in place by 1970. See the introduction.

CHAPTER 5 CANON AND MIDRASH: CONFRONTING THE “MYSTERY OF ISRAEL”

Old is to New Testament not as Tanak is to Talmud. Instead, the concept of a literary canon, based on a covenantal relationship, is extended to a secondary, literarily distinctive deposit whose formation and rationale is developed on analogy to the first, with a new covenantal relationship at its heart. The testaments are, of course, different, and they bear witness to the one subject matter of them both, in different ways. ‘Tanak to Talmud’ may actually be more akin to what Gese means by ‘tradition-history,’ strictly speaking.

—Christopher Seitz

By 1967 Childs’ waning confidence in orality’s prioritization over textuality in tradition-historical research leads him to reconsider the status of midrash. Gunkel felt it was “to Wellhausen’s undying credit” to have exposed the “character” of P,¹ and he almost certainly would have agreed that Wellhausen got the true measure of the Chronicler as well, whose midrashic activity confirms his as the age of the scribes. Midrash, Wellhausen concludes,

is the consequence of the conservation of all the relics of antiquity, a wholly peculiar artificial reawakening of dry bones, especially by literary means, as is shown by the preference for lists of names and numbers. Like ivy it overspreads the dead trunk with extraneous life, blending old and new in a strange combination. It is a high estimate of tradition [*Hochschätzung der Überlieferung*] that leads to its being thus modernised; but in the process it is twisted and perverted, and set off with foreign accretions in the most arbitrary way... Within this sphere, wherein all Judaism moves, Chronicles also has had its rise. Thus whether one says Chronicles or Midrash of the Book of Kings is on the whole a matter of perfect indifference; they are children of the same mother, and indistinguishable in spirit and language, while on the other hand the portions which have been retained verbatim from the canonical Book of Kings at once betray themselves in both respects.²

Childs’ last major form critical study (in the traditional sense), *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis*, evaluates diverse biblical accounts of the invasion of 701, including three in II Kings 18–19 (A, B¹, B²) and the Chronicler’s harmonization of these traditions in II Chronicles 32. Childs finds that Wellhausen’s characterization of the latter “has wrought much havoc,”³ and he gives an

1. Gunkel, *Genesis*, lxxx = xciii.

2. Wellhausen and Smith, *History of Israel*, 227 = idem, *Geschichte Israels*, 223.

3. *Assyrian*, 107n4. The passage stayed with Childs. He mentions it in 1996 (Childs, *Retrospective Reading*,

alternative account of what he is content to call “the midrash of the Chronicler” on Kings.⁴ Not unlike B², Chronicles presents an idealized piety. Hezekiah is “a model of faith in God.”⁵ But the designation “legend” does not adequately describe the later portrait because the text does not rework *oral* tradition:

A basic characteristic of the account is its dependence upon *written* sources. This is not to suggest that the Chronicler's only source was Kings... Rather, the point being argued is that the compiler of II Chron. 32 had the Kings account available to him as a written source. The thesis of an alleged reference to temple records, which were independent of the book of Kings in its Dtr. redaction does not do justice to the Chronicler's text. This dependence on a written source at once distinguishes the Chronicler's account from those of Kings. Both B¹ and B² were dependent on *oral* tradition which they then reworked in different ways.⁶

This distinction is what makes it appropriate to speak of midrash in the Chronicler's case. “By midrash we mean a specific form of literature which is the product of an exegetical activity by a circle of scholars interpreting a sacred text. Essential to the midrash is an attempt to elucidate a written source.”⁷ It would not be wrong to speak of *Schriftgelehrten*, but the sphere and spirit of their activity must not be distorted. Are they really epigones? At stake is the quality and religious/theological significance of their exegetical activity.

Very shortly Childs will combine this emphasis on the textualization of oral tradition with a dogmatic point about the authoritative form in which scripture functions: he will speak of scripture's textual authority. All the work that follows *Assyrian* reinforces the historical and incipiently theological analysis there. As he writes in 1990, “If in early Israel the transmission and actualization of Israel's sacred tradition occurred in the context of the cult, increasingly 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.”⁸ This historical observation always remains part of the bedrock of Childs' ruled, canonical approach.

370) along with a few of Wellhausen's latter-day manifestations.

4. *Assyrian*, 121.

5. *Assyrian*, 106.

6. *Assyrian*, 106, my emphasis.

7. *Assyrian*, 107.

8. Childs, *Generation*, 360.

Early in its development, however, Childs’ work toward a restoration of canon was more closely allied with midrash (so called) than it would be in time. Footnoted in 1967 is I. L. Seeligmann’s seminal “Voraussetzungen der Midraschexegese”, from which Childs will borrow the term *Kanonbewußtsein* for the “canon conscious” exegesis inside scripture found in Chronicles and elsewhere. Childs adapts the concept for his own purposes, eventually pursuing its outworking across the entire canon of Jewish scripture, but at first it is not clear that there will be any substantial departure from Seeligmann. In 1972 Childs defends “a form-critical understanding of midrash” and argues on that basis for significant parallels between the Tannaite and Old Testament periods.⁹ He adjudicates the newer work on midrash first cited in 1967—S. Sandmel fails to distinguish the direct literary dependency of parallels from material that simply shares an oral tradition (e.g., Gen 12 and 20), and so casts too broad a net for midrash; A. G. Wright, on the other hand, defines midrash so narrowly that he cannot connect a description of its known form with its function, which was to “actualize” a canonical text in a new situation (ideally text will also exegete the present)—evidently agreeing with Seeligmann, against Sandmel and Wright, that to study inner-biblical midrash is

to trace the forces which were exerted on the interpretation of the Bible by what has aptly been described as “the consciousness of canon.” Whereas Gunkel and his school felt that such institutions as cult in early Israel were the dominant sources for the tradition-building process, it is becoming increasingly clear that the formation of a sense of authoritative Scripture unleashed another set of forces which then tended to operate according to laws quite distinct from those at work in the development of oral tradition. The study of the development of midrash should be significant in attempting to describe the nature and impact of these new factors on the composition of the Bible.¹⁰

Again, “midrash is, above all, an interpretation of a canonical *text* within the context and for the religious purposes of a community.”¹¹ And in fact Seeligmann and Childs share in the mid-twentieth century consensus about the fundamental difference of oral as versus textual

9. Childs, *Midrash*, 52. He concludes, “Although the early biblical parallels to full-blown rabbinic midrash are often only remotely connected, there is enough similarity between the two to speak of proto-midrashic forms within the Old Testament” (58). Still, Childs is leery of finding midrash too early in the Old Testament. The year before he criticizes the “tendency among some scholars to project the midrashic method back into the pre-exilic period without adequate discrimination” (Childs, *Psalm Titles*, 149).

10. Childs, *Midrash*, 53.

11. *Ibid.*, 49. Chronicles’ relationship to Kings is plied as a test case for both Sandmel and Wright.

stages of biblical tradition,¹² even when the language of a “set of forces” that was “unleashed” by Israel’s late use of scripture distinctly anticipates Childs’ mature formulations.

In addition to the hegemony of form critical assumptions, a second important variable shifts rapidly in the 1970s. Wellhausen’s disparagement of midrash, as ivy over a dead tree, will shortly cease to be the default view among critical OT scholars. In *Crisis* Childs assumes that “a midrashic approach ... is foreign to the present critical age,”¹³ and in 1971, in another significant interaction with Seeligmann, thinks that “[o]bviously there can be no direct adaptation of the midrashic method.”¹⁴ He is interested in the hermeneutical implications of inner biblical exegesis, wants to defend it against the likes of Wellhausen,¹⁵ but he does not imagine that critical scholars could propose a revival of the paradigm. From 1972, however, James Sanders would make the positive value of midrash in Christian exegesis of the Old Testament contested territory for Childs.¹⁶

Once the possibility is suggested it will remain true for Childs that there can be no direct application of midrash today, in the modified sense that the method *ought* not be employed in Christian exegesis. This chapter will show that Sanders helps prompt a shift emphasis in Childs’ terminology, from midrash to “canonical shaping” (and from criticism to approach),¹⁷ but this is not the turn in Childs’ understanding of the “mystery of Israel” to which I alluded at the close of the previous chapter. Much like von Rad or Gese, Sanders’ proposal is typically handled as part of an in-house debate about the nature of Christian scripture. In point of fact, already in 1971 Childs believes his study of midrash points to an *alternative* to

12. E.g., Genesis 12, 20 and 26 remain at an oral stage: Seeligmann, *Midraschexegese*, 153. The consensus was seriously challenged by Thompson, *Historicity* and especially Van Seters, *Abraham*, in 1974 and 1975.

13. *Crisis*, 117.

14. Childs, *Psalm Titles*, 149.

15. *Ibid.*, 149: “midrashic—or proto-midrashic—exegesis is not some post-biblical ‘Jewish distortion,’ but part of the biblical tradition itself, and must be taken seriously as such.” As in *Assyrian*, the call is to a fair and neutral description: “Categories such as annal, legend, midrash should carry no theological bias, whether positive or negative” (124).

16. Sanders, *Torah and Canon*, followed by *idem*, *Adaptable*.

17. In fact “canonical shape” occurs early, too, in *Exodus*, and at least once in *Crisis*: “Historically Judaism was the bearer of the Old Testament traditions and the instrument through which the traditions received their first canonical shape” (121). This is an indication that the terminological adjustment away from “midrash” in the 1970s does not reflect a substantive change in Childs’ position.

the tradition-historical school with respect to the relationship of OT and NT: “midrashic interpretation offers a pattern of exegesis which differs fundamentally from the prophecy-fulfilment pattern exploited by von Rad and others. A theological analogy is directed not primarily to the typological unfolding of a future-orientated tradition, but rather to the exploring of an area which has been staked out by means of a sacred text. History has retained its importance, but in the transformed state of being canonical history.”¹⁸ Like Gunkel, if to a lesser extent, von Rad does not reckon with the full significance of the tradition’s movement away from cultic contexts to its scriptural, i.e. textual, context. It is simply that after Sanders, designating this insight as “midrash” becomes problematic.

Moreover, as *Crisis* labors to articulate the year before, Childs aims to provide a better foundation for Jewish-Christian dialogue than tradition history, one that maintains both Christian and Jewish distinctives, or at least holds them in tension. By recognizing that the OT has more than a Christian faith context, the Christian exegete “is made aware of the fact that the Old Testament does not ‘naturally’ unfold into the New Testament. It does not lean toward the New Testament, but the Christian interpretation within its new context is fully dependent on the radically new element in Jesus Christ.” That Jewish interpretation often goes in a different direction reminds Christians of the extent to which the Old is transformed by the New, and yet the need for “dialogue with Judaism in relation to a common text” confronts the church with “the mystery of Israel.”¹⁹ But still the “offense” of the New Testament, which “lays claim to the Scriptures of Israel and hears in them testimony to the rejected Messiah of God,”²⁰ remains vital to Christian hope in the Triune God. Right from the beginning, then, Childs’ study of midrash in the Old Testament countenances the possibility that Israel’s history and its scriptures do not “thrust violently forward” into the New. Regarding Jewish scripture, another set of post-biblical literature now seems every bit as likely a development.

18. Childs, *Psalm Titles*, 150.

19. *Crisis*, 122.

20. *Crisis*, 218. Note that sheerly as a matter of historical description in 1970, the church “employed different exegetical skills” than the synagogue in that “allegory and typology replaced midrash” (106). But now see the developments described below, in chapter six.

All these basic points—the re-prioritization of textual over oral transmission in the formation of Jewish scripture, a consequently higher regard for midrash (proper or in incipient form) than had been the case among critical OT scholars for most of the twentieth century, the radical and transformative newness of God's self-revelation in Christ attested in the NT—all remain stable commitments in Childs' work from 1970 onwards. After turning form criticism upside down, the next biggest shift in Childs' thought has to do with just how the form and function of the New is unlike the Old, worked out vis-à-vis Judaism's ongoing claim to Israel's scriptures. The way Seitz puts it in 2001 is very close to where Childs ends up:

Old is to New Testament not as Tanak is to Talmud. Instead, the concept of a literary canon, based on a covenantal relationship, is extended to a secondary, literarily distinctive deposit whose formation and rationale is developed on analogy to the first, with a new covenantal relationship at its heart. The testaments are, of course, different, and they bear witness to the one subject matter of them both, in different ways. 'Tanak to Talmud' may actually be more akin to what Gese means by 'tradition-history,' strictly speaking.²¹

The crucial question is what limits obtain, if any, on the analogy between the formation and rationale of New upon Old. For a time Childs remains open to the idea that the NT is a kind of (proto-)midrash on the OT, granting that it will sometimes make moves very unlike midrash proper.²² But this changes dramatically somewhere in the mid-1980s. To pose the turn as starkly possible, an assumption Childs makes easily in 1970—"the New Testament's reading of one Old Testament passage through the perspective of another text ... is a typical midrashic technique"²³—stands in dramatic contrast to this statement from 1988: "Das Neue Testament ist kein Midrasch zum Alten Testament!"²⁴ The primary burden of this chapter is to account for the reversal. Since the decision is controversial, I will air a number of possible objections before continuing.

21. Seitz, *Figured Out*, 43.

22. E.g., Moses' slaying of an Egyptian in Exodus 2 is read in Acts 7 as a "pattern of unbelief." Moses becomes a type of the rejected Christ, a negative analogy "that would be unthinkable for the midrash" (*Crisis*, 175, cf. 168–171).

23. *Crisis*, 116.

24. Childs, *Biblische Theologie*, 22.

I. QUESTION: WHY SHOULD CHILDS DECIDE FOR CANON OVER MIDRASH?

Despite some superficial similarities between Sanders and Childs, it is proper to distinguish “canonical criticism” from a “canonical approach” already on the basis of the way each defines the relationship of the Christian Bible’s two testaments. Sanders: “Canonical criticism, for the Christian, sees the Bible in terms of Scripture, not primarily in terms of testaments.” The attendant view that “Scripture has its proper *Sitz im Leben* in the believing communities which are today’s heirs of those who formed and shaped it in antiquity” allows scripture to have a place in the church, which allied with the paradigm seen through comparative midrash provides for the dynamic adaptation of tradition to changing social circumstances.²⁵ This of course is a far cry from Childs’ position that “a force was unleashed by Israel’s religious use of her traditions which exerted an influence on the shaping of the literature” with the result that “canon formed the decisive *Sitz im Leben* for the Jewish community’s life.”²⁶ The community is located in the book, not the reverse.

Childs concludes a late (2005) critique of Sanders’ hermeneutics this way: “I would further argue that the role of Jewish midrash which is central to Sanders’ hermeneutical proposal is incompatible with the New Testament’s understanding of the authoritative function of the Old Testament, which has been continually transformed by the Spirit into the law of Christ.”²⁷ This is an extraordinarily complex claim, and one likely to provoke disagreement. On Childs’ definition of canon, as established testament rather than as flexible scripture, why should he decide for the rule of canon over and against midrash, especially when something like proto-midrash can be seen in the formation of Hebrew scripture itself?

25. Sanders, *Canon and Community*, 69.

26. *IOTS*, 78, cf. *BTONT*, 70–71.

27. Childs, *Reflections on an Era*, 34.

OBJECTION 1

Childs does not make a reasonable decision at all but changes his mind at whim. Barr states, "I have spoken as if canonical criticism [sic] is one united position, but of course it is not: it is more like a current of opinions running in roughly the same direction and containing certain recognizable elements of agreement as well as many differences."²⁸ Barr is not drawing a contrast between the proposals of Childs as versus Sanders; rather, Childs on his own is incoherent. For instance:

The *Introduction*, discussing the titles or superscriptions of the Psalms, says that these remove the Psalms from their older cultic context; ... they move the emphasis to the inner life of the Psalmist and give an access to his emotional life. 'Far from tying these hymns to the ancient past, they have been contemporized and individualized for every generation of suffering and persecuted Israel.' But Childs himself had published, a decade earlier, an excellent study on these same titles... But this very fine article contains very little, in its more technical and detailed analysis, that can be said to foreshadow or justify the interpretation offered in the *Introduction*.²⁹

One should not bother too much with the tension between canon and midrash because, Barr would suggest, Childs simply drops midrash in later work without any discernible rationale.

OBJECTION 2

Further, canon is a poor controlling concept because it is too loose a term. "The endless repetition of the word 'canon' in canonical criticism is not accident, but necessity: for, as seen from without, the continual reuse of this word is necessary in order to hold together sets of arguments which would otherwise fall apart."³⁰ Frankly, midrash would not likely serve any better in this respect since its usage, too, is beset with imprecision. Probably we ought to be searching for another hermeneutical paradigm altogether. (Barr, along with Barton, recommends "criticism"—see chapter six.)

28. Barr, *Holy Scripture*, 152–153.

29. *Ibid.*, 155–156, citing *IOTS*, 521 and Childs, *Psalm Titles*.

30. Barr, *Holy Scripture*, 147.

OBJECTION 3

Alternately, we should disallow canon in Childs’ sense because midrash, or the flexibility inherent in scriptural tradition, is the operative paradigm. Sanders’ theology of canon is to be preferred because there is no consciousness of canon deep within the formation of the literature. As Sanders and Lee McDonald have it, “With such a long delay in the church’s use of the term ‘canon’ to describe a closed body of Christian scriptures, one may well ask why there was an emergence of ‘canon consciousness’ in the church of the fourth century C.E. and little evidence of it before?”³¹ Or in Eugene Ulrich’s words, being clear about the meaning of canon is important, but “the definition of canon is a relatively minor matter. Much more important, interesting, and ripe for analysis is the canonical process—the historical development by which the oral and written literature of Israel, Judaism, and the early church was handed on, revised, and transformed into the scriptures that we have received, as well as the processes and criteria by which the various decisions were made.”³² A “consciousness of canon” is coterminous with the first appearance of the word “canon,” well into the Common Era, and the fluid state of affairs it belies constitutes the proper locus of attention, scholarly or religious.

OBJECTION 4

Even if one accepts something like Childs’ notion of canon, it is an error to speak of a “transformed” Old Testament because of the theological imperative for Jewish-Christian dialogue that arises from a Christian affirmation of Jewish scripture in its canon. “It is of crucial significance that the church maintained Israel’s Bible unchanged,” insists Rendtorff.³³ And in this the church ought to perceive “an essential element of continuity between the Old and the New Testaments.”³⁴ There are ways of reading both testaments as a unity, but it is imperative to avoid making the OT a *Christuszeugnis* on its own, which is what Childs’ position entails.

31. McDonald and Sanders, eds., *Canon Debate*, 13, my emphasis. Childs borrows *Kanonbewußtsein* from I. L. Seeligmann but is responsible for bringing it into wider usage, especially in English.

32. Ulrich, *Canon*, 33, cf. 31.

33. Rendtorff, *CHB*, 749.

34. *Ibid.*, 755.

Instead of affirming a testament “continually transformed by the Spirit into the law of Christ,” far better to strive “niemals Aussagen über das Alte Testament zu machen, die von einem Juden nicht nachvollzogen werden könnten.”³⁵

Advocating the history of Israelite religion rather than OT theology, R. Albertz take the point further. “Je mehr es die Theologie des Alten Testaments zu ihrem Anliegen macht, das Alte Testament in bezug auf das Neue auszulegen, um so mehr gerät sie in Gefahr, es christlich zu vereinnahmen... Die Theologie des Alten Testaments trägt somit den Keim des Antijudaismus in sich.” The tendency is latent in Eichrodt or von Rad. “Die Einsicht von B.S. Childs ist wohl unausweichlich: Die Theologie des Alten Testaments ist ‘essentially a Christian discipline’ und darum konfessionell begrenzt. Das macht sie ungeeignet für den christlich-jüdischen Dialog.”³⁶

OBJECTION 5

To identify midrash as Jewish will, for Childs, entail an embrace of allegory/typology as a comparable but distinctly Christian intertextual reading strategy. Allegory and not midrash is how the church addresses the unity of its two testaments. But allowing this, how can Childs be sure he knows the difference between allegory and midrash, and thus know what it is he banishes from Christian exegesis? For example, Childs faults Moberly for identifying Moriah with Jerusalem, a move made by Jewish readers.³⁷ To this Moberly queries in a private correspondence, “Is the identification really (substantively) ‘midrashic,’ apart from the fact that it was most fully articulated in classic rabbinic midrash? I think not, for my argument ... is *not* proposing a particular strategy of reading through the interaction of particular texts, ... [but] only that [the identification with Jerusalem] is conveyed implicitly in a pregnantly allusive kind of way (‘let the reader understand,’ ‘if you have ears to hear then hear’) rather than explicitly.”³⁸ In other words, Philo knew the value of allegory too: will it not be the case

35. Rendtorff, Rezension Childs, 368.

36. Albertz, Religionsgeschichte, 13, citing *OTTCC*, 7.

37. Childs, Critique, 183. Cf. Moberly, *Bible, Theology, Faith*, 108–116, 177–183, 225–230.

38. Moberly continues, “I find your point about the intrinsic logic of midrash and figuration interesting and

that the line between Jewish and Christian reading is fuzzy, even allowing for rudimentary and binding differences between committed Jewish and Christian readers of the Tanak or Old Testament?

SED CONTRA

Some of these objections are more easily addressed than others. I have already spoken at length to shortcomings in Barr’s reading of Childs (objection 1). It is hard to imagine how he fails to see the overlap between Childs’ early work on midrash, in 1971 and 1972, with the arguments that culminate in 1979, and this chapter already gives ample evidence for the way proto-midrash or canonical shaping is consistently interpreted by Childs as a partial warrant for breaking with the tradition-historical school represented by von Rad (more will be adduced before the end, too).

Objection 3 overlooks Childs’ argument from midrash for its own reasons, authorizing a pseudo-von Radian approach which often is not in the least concerned with problems arising from the shape of a two testament Bible. There may be good historical rebuttals to the dominant English-language moratorium on “canon” in the biblical period. As Chapman points out, “Scholars who maintain that ‘canon’ only properly refers to a situation in which a scriptural collection has obtained absolute literary boundaries are inevitably forced to concede at some later point in their argument that the biblical canon has never really been completely ‘closed’ in an absolute sense... when did the canon finally meet with universal approval and absolute consistency? The answer is: never.”³⁹ But the striking thing about the canon debate, as argued in chapter one, is how the German-language context remains open to concerns Childs labors to address, and thus his argument from midrash, for canonical shaping, has won more than a few adherents. That is, a sound retort to objection 3 could simply be: how then do you

suggestive, and I will need to think about it. But whether or not it is right, it is figuration much more than midrash that my handling of the text embodies.” Personal letter from Moberly and Childs (11 August 2003). Unfortunately Childs’ reply does not address this issue. My thanks go to Professor Moberly for supplying a copy of this correspondence, and for permission to cite it.

39. Chapman, Canon Debate, 14.

propose to explain the material conditions for a Christian affirmation of the Triune God? As we shall see with Barr in the next chapter, Childs is not the only Old Testament scholar for whom having a good answer to that question matters. This is not, of course, to deny the history of religions perspective that could declare itself unwilling to affirm dogma, and that would have an alternative logic by which to account for historic Christian belief. But that is not the question Childs raises. (Further, even from a strictly historical perspective one might doubt how fully belief in the Trinity can be explained in terms of scripture *without* a testament.⁴⁰)

Also, contra those for objections 1 or 3 who affirm a version of 2, doubting the viability of *canon* as a cipher for an entire, ruled approach to Christian scripture, it is notable that at least one Jewish scholar had made *midrash* into a comparable umbrella term. Midrash, writes Jacob Neusner, “stands for at least three specific things, as well as a great many things in general.”⁴¹ It is a book: “a compilation of biblical exegeses, amplifications, and compositions, as in Midrash Rabbah.” It is an activity: the “explaining or applying the meaning of a biblical verse (or group of verses).” It is “*hermeneutics* of a particular kind”: “people use the word *midrash* to mean the reading of one thing in terms of some other. This usage is so general as to defy concrete application.”⁴² Mindful of these difficulties, Neusner opts not to use the term at all, or only very rarely, in *Midrash in Context* (1983). But if the impression given is that a word spread thin loses its meaning, this is in fact not the case here, as Neusner’s title corroborates. “Since we are able to use the same word for three things, and since, moreover, the same word is made to serve by others for many more things, I shall generally avoid the word *midrash*. *But I shall always mean it.*”⁴³ For all its overexposure and potential for misunderstanding, midrash retains enough semantic force that Neusner makes it his defining category. The parallel to Childs is obvious: Childs’ employment of canon is as Neusner’s of midrash. On the specific issue of controlling terms it is as if Childs and Neusner are opposite sides of a swivel mirror—

40. See Seitz’s forthcoming book chapter, “The Rule of Faith, Hermeneutics, and the Character of Christian Scripture: The Rule or Canon of Faith in the Period of the Ante-Nicene Fathers.”

41. Neusner, *Midrash*, xvi.

42. *Ibid.*, xvi.

43. *Ibid.*, xvii, my emphasis. In fact the three things named here are different again to the three cited above; he refers now to a sub-taxonomy within midrash as rabbinic book.

one is concave, the other convex. The difference is whether the focal point is in front of or behind the glass.

Objections 4 and 5 are more difficult because they come from persons alive to the indispensability of canon in biblical exposition. They move us into a more robustly theological debate about just how the church affirms Jewish scripture in its confession of the biblical witness, and we will require the remainder of this chapter, and much of the next, to sort out the issues that arise at this point for Childs. To anticipate, Childs' considered position, subsequent to the decisive shift in his thinking about midrash which I will tease out before the end, includes an assumption very like one found throughout his work, and which many Christian exegetes would wish to affirm. It is this: "Wenn irgendeine biblische Auslegung ihre Sichtweise nicht mehr auf den biblischen Text selbst gründen kann, sondern nur auf spätere Traditionen, dann ist dies ein Zeichen einer ernsthaften Schwäche, sowohl im Judentum als auch im Christentum."⁴⁴ Canon as a theological force obtains in modern Judaism and Christianity, and indeed is a thing learned by the church from the synagogue in the first instance. The rub is that Jewish and Christian traditions hearken back to the plain sense (*peshat*, *sensus literalis*) of a common body of scripture. The peculiar challenge for Christian faith is how to hear in Israel's testament to its God the One who in time raises Jesus Christ from the dead.

The two sections that follow will take up the question raised in this section with an eye to known objections. Section two will contextualize the early lesson Childs draws from inner biblical midrash, describing two roads Childs associates with midrash that from the beginning he refuses to travel. Section three explores Childs' reconsideration of midrash in the mid-1980s, including how this pushes him toward a distinctly Christian affirmation of allegory in a canonical framework. I will conclude by pointing to some implications of this move for Jewish-Christian dialogue on the basis of the shared scriptures of Israel.

44. Childs, *Jüdischen Kanons*, 281. Some Jewish scholars would seem to agree. Leiman, *Canonization*, 14: "To an observant Jew in the 20th century, not only the Hebrew Scriptures, but the Mishnah, Talmud and halakhic codes are also canonical in that they are authoritative and serve to guide him in his daily behavior... The canonicity of the Hebrew Scripture, however, differed in kind from the canonicity of extra-biblical literature."

II. TWO ROADS NOT TAKEN

This section will look at what Childs' gleans from Seeligmann, and then differentiate two types of "modern midrash" Childs rejects from 1970. One is represented by Benno Jacob, the other by James Sanders. An epilogue will set forth a possible intersection between inner biblical exegesis and tradition history. But first, to set the stage, we can let Childs explain the arc of his investment in the study of midrash.

In regard to the subject of midrash, let me just repeat my own experience in the field. When I returned to America in 1954, I got a teaching job in Wisconsin at a little E&R Seminary, Mission House. After a couple of years there, I started reading midrashic texts with the local Jewish rabbi. Then in 1958, when I was called to Yale, one of the requirements was that I teach a course on Judaism, about which I knew little. So I audited Judah Goldin's seminar for four years. He was reading the *Mechilta* on Exodus and it was very exciting since I had started writing my own Exodus commentary. Golden was a major influence and I realized that I had to train myself in a whole new field. (In his class he only wrote Hebrew on the blackboard in the form of the cursive script.) So I enrolled two summers in NYC Jewish Theolog Seminary to learn Modern Hebrew and this prepared me for a sabbatical to Israel in 1963–4. I worked terribly hard to gain written and spoken Hebrew but was only partially successful. I even had private instructions in reading midrash and listened to many Hebrew classes with at best only a partial understanding. Then I began to realize that I would need a decade more work if I continued down this track. I began to reconsider. When I was at the Jewish Seminary, my roommate was Jacob (Jack) Neusner. We had many talks, but his major interest at that time was trying to relate historical criticism to traditional Jewish learnings.

After I returned from Israel, I decided that I would not pursue my study of midrash actively. Actually Goldin's influence remained important for me, but by the time Jacob Neusner's book appeared [*Midrash in Context*], I was already well out of the field. Several factors seemed to support my vocational decision. I soon discovered that Jewish scholars differed widely among themselves. Goldin and Neusner were always at odds. Neusner's understanding of the relation of *halacha* to *haggadah* was the reverse of Goldin and most of the field. I learned from Alter's work but thought he knew little of OT scholarship.

I also found that the Christian scholars who were focused on midrash were not very compatible. W. D. Davies was without theological interest. E. P. Sanders had a dubious interpretation of Paul, although it was widely accepted in NT circles (Neusner was unimpressed). Then the interest in the Dead Sea Scrolls exploded (e.g. Stendahl etc), and I did not want to go down that route.

So I only returned briefly to the subject when, for example, in my ZAW article of 2003, I thought that W. Moberly's understanding of intertextuality was inadequate and referred him to some of the leading Jewish scholars.⁴⁵

45. Personal correspondence with Childs (21 November 2006). (The letter also states: "Although I remain friends of James Sanders our understanding of the field differs widely.") To this compare NTCI, xv: "two summers at the Jewish Theological Seminary, four years of attending Judah Goldin's midrash seminars,

For about a decade, Childs undertook to become a fully competent scholar of midrash, and though he abandons the pursuit, he retains a deep appreciation for traditional Jewish exegesis. As he states in the preface to *Exodus*, during the long period of writing “I have gone through many different stages in my own thinking. Somewhere *en route* I discovered that Calvin and Drusius, Rashi and Ibn Ezra, belong among the giants. I have tried to show why these great expositors—the term ‘pre-critical’ is both naïve and arrogant—need to be heard in concert with Wellhausen and Gunkel.”⁴⁶ The time and energy he spends studying traditional Jewish exegesis tapers off in the latter half of his career, judging by the contents of his output, and comes to be supplanted by a more rigorous study of Christian foundations in patristic, medieval and reformation exegesis. Undoubtedly, however, luminaries from both sets of traditional exegetes keep their seats among the “giants,” in Childs’ estimation.

ISAAC L. SEELIGMANN FOR MIDRASH AND KANONBEWUSSTSEIN

Childs met Seeligmann in Jerusalem in 1963, and he first cites “Voraussetzungen der Midraschexegese” (1953) after returning to Yale from that sabbatical. The essay, as has been suggested,⁴⁷ is a singularly important antecedent to Childs’ argument for canonical shaping through *IOTS* (and by extension *NTCI*, *Isaiah*, and *Corpus*), but Childs’ early interaction with it already realigns its thesis in view of other considerations. To show how Childs makes it his own, it is appropriate to first set out the argument of Seeligmann’s essay, in which the word *Kanonbewußtsein* appears exactly once.

Seeligmann wants to explore the prehistory of midrash within the Bible. More specifically, he focuses on the transition from biblical thinking into midrash (“der Übergang des biblischen Denkens in das des Midrasch”). In fact there is a double goal, “das Verhältnis darlegen zwischen den Ursprüngen der Midraschexegese und der biblischen Literatur und dadurch

and a year at the Hebrew University studying midrash gave me a rich background in Jewish studies.”

46. *Exodus*, x.

47. Above, and cf. Sheppard, *Criticism*, 863–864.

einen Beitrag liefern zum besseren Verständnis von beiden.”⁴⁸ The preliminary remarks culminate in a summary of the transition that will be described:

Wie erwähnen zuerst die ausserordentliche Geschmeidigkeit von Erzählung und literarischem Motiv in der Bibel, dazu das Spielelement des semitischen bzw. hebräischen Geistes, sodann eine ausgeprägte Neigung sich Gedanken und Vorstellungen, die einer fremden Umgebung oder anderen Zeit entstammen, durch Umgestaltung der eigenen Atmosphäre bzw. Epoche anzupassen, und schliesslich das Aufkommen eines Kanonbewusstseins: der wandelbare Strom der Überlieferung gerinnt und wird zum heiligen Wort; speziell der Begriff Thorah wird beladen mit einem Inhalt, der Interpretation geradezu herausfordert.⁴⁹

The changeable currents of tradition in transmission coagulate and become Holy Scripture. What starts as a free-for-all thickens gradually as a sense of the tradition's authority takes hold, until at last interpretation breaks away from the text completely, becoming commentary in its own right. The gradation is somewhat artificial, Seeligmann acknowledges; it is not always possible to separate each stage from the next. But it has heuristic value, he insists, and it undergirds the four-part structure of his discussion.

Stage one shows great fluidity (e.g., the three variants of the ancestress in danger). Conscious wordplay does sometimes occur at this level, such as in Psalm 8:5–6 and Job 7:17–18,⁵⁰ but it is marked by the freedom which an existing theme, characteristically in *oral* tradition, can be taken up and altered for a different purpose. Stage two, Seeligmann finds, has two sub-classes of “associative meanings.” One encompasses “die Doppelsinn des Wortes, Gleichklang und Wortspiel,”⁵¹ in which emerges a new concern to explore the full range of a word's meaning. Considerable play is still possible.⁵² The other sub-class concerns proverbs, where clauses can be combined in different contexts with very different results.⁵³ Stage three, adapta-

48. Seeligmann, *Midraschexegeese*, 150–151.

49. *Ibid.*, 152.

50. *Ibid.*, 153, 156.

51. *Ibid.*, 157.

52. In Amos 8:2, for example, “Amos sieht Obst קץ und das genügt dazu, bei ihm die Vorstellung des Endes קץ aufsteigen zu lassen” (*ibid.*, 157–158). Overall there is “das Bewusstsein von der Mehrdeutigkeit der Worte” (159) that anticipates typical maneuvers in rabbinic exegesis, such as the אל תקרי formula. Cf. Fishbane, *Garments*, esp. “Extra-biblical Exegesis: The Sense of Not Reading in Rabbinic Midrash,” 19–32.

53. Proverbs 13:1 reads, “A wise son loves the discipline of his father, but a scoffer לא שמע נערה does not listen to rebuke.” In 13:8 by contrast, “Wealth is a ransom for a man's life, but the poor לא שמע נערה does not hear threats.” Seeligmann, *Midraschexegeese*, 163–164. The same proverb is used in divergent ways in canonical proximate contexts.

tion, is a “völlig anderer Art” because it adds “ein Element der Bewusstheit in die Vorgänge”—a consciousness of the processes.⁵⁴ “Ein späteres Geschlecht begnügt sich nicht mit der Übernahme des alten Wortes, sondern ändert den Sinn—seltener auch den Wortlaut—desselben, um es den Denken und Fühlen einer neuen Zeit an zu passen.”⁵⁵ For example, Sirach 50:26–27 (37–38) directs the language of Deuteronomy 32:21 to a contemporary referent. The foolish nation called “no people” in Deuteronomy is specified as the foolish nations in Shechem. Seeligmann calls this an instance of “proper actualizing midrash” and cites rabbinic parallels. The point is that Jewish exegesis “wurzelt im Midrasch und das Ziel des Midrasch ist, den Bibeltext zu aktualisieren, d.h. zu zeigen, dass das alte Bibelwort sich bezieht auf geschichtliche Ereignisse in der Zeit des Erklärers.”⁵⁶ Finally, stage four is when true commentary comes into its own. All the interpretive ventures and tendencies discussed before this initiate exegesis, “aber noch nicht als Auslegung im eigentlichen Sinne gelten können. Das Spielelement färbt die Motivabwandlung, das Zitat wird durch Adaptation transponiert, doch betreffen all’ diese Erscheinungen eine sich noch im Fluss befindliche, nicht ‘geronnene,’ zum Abschluss gekommene Literatur.”⁵⁷ Torah become an entire complex, not just isolated instructions, in which Jews immersed themselves (Sirach 24:20, cf. Proverbs 18:7). Those responsible for the New Testament searched the prophets for deeper and deeper meaning. The psalms, through the addition of psalm titles, came to be read as aggadah.⁵⁸ Importantly, the interest here is “nicht der äussere Prozess der Kanonisierung, sondern der Wandel im Bewusstsein, der dem alten Wort eine neue Bedeutung und Autorität beilegt.”⁵⁹

Seeligmann suggests in closing that midrash sits atop a paradox. The presuppositions (*Voraussetzungen*) which underlie it are heterogeneous. Even after midrash becomes a distinct

54. Ibid., 167.

55. Ibid., 168, my emphasis.

56. Ibid., 170. The burden to actualize scripture becomes particularly heavy in historical periods of crisis. In addition to Seeligmann’s example, the targum of Pseudo-Jonathan identifies “no people” with the Babylonians. This draws attention to the fact that what might be called adaptation does not always align texts with contemporary referents. In Pseudo-Jonathan the *past* event of Babylonian captivity is in view.

57. Ibid., 176.

58. Ibid., 176–180.

59. Ibid., 176, my emphasis.

rabbinic genre, it retains its characteristic flexibility in verbal play and actualization. "Einerseits will er einen abgeschlossenen Text erklären, der eben in dieser Gestalt die höchste Autorität besitzt, andererseits ist er bestrebt denselben ... offenzuhalten, vor Versteinerung zu behüten und mit immer neuen Leben zu erfüllen—für jede neue Situation und für jeden neuen Tag!"⁶⁰ A conflict thus arises between Seeligmann's two stated goals, to understand the biblical literature and to illuminate its relationship to later midrashic exegesis, or in short, between the dynamics of canon and midrash.

In this way Seeligmann adumbrates the two main positions in subsequent Christian debate over the hermeneutical significance of canon, both Sanders' talk of stability and adaptability (and midrash) on the one hand, as well as Childs' articulation of the abiding significance of the decisions made by canon conscious tradents and redactors on the other. But lest midrash be seen as yet another area in which Childs, by leaving the term behind after Sanders picks it up, substantively changes his views, it is worth explicating where and when Childs parts company with Seeligmann's analysis of the formation of biblical literature. The short answer is: exactly where and when he parts with form criticism's analysis. Seeligmann is well versed in the critical views of his day and shares in much of the critical consensus that dominated in the mid-twentieth century. So again, the contentious point for Childs has to do with the adaptation or actualization of remote tradition.⁶¹ By way of illustration, consider the late addition of superscriptions to some psalms.

PSALM TITLES: SEELIGMANN VERSUS CHILDS

Seeligmann finds a deep tension between the individual and communal consciousness in the way individual psalms are brought into the life of a community. Psalm 30, he says, can be understood in no other way except as the praise of an individual who has recovered from illness—something the tradents' historical consciousness was strong enough to preserve

60. Ibid., 181.

61. Childs mostly engages von Rad on *Vergegenwärtigung*, but although Seeligmann derives *Adaptation* from S. Schechter, the concepts occupy much of the same conceptual space.

intact. By affixing in the title a reference to the dedication of the temple, however, the psalm has been related to a historical moment in the life of Israel, and so this bit of interpretation must have been done by the generation that rebuilt the temple after the Babylonian exile. Psalm 30, then, is a prime example of “adaptive exegesis” (stage three) in the psalms in which “Midrasch liest und deutet [eine] Äusserung eines Individuums als das Zeugnis der Gemeinschaft von Israel.”⁶² But note that this is the work of and for a *single* generation.

At first glance Childs’ 1971 study “Psalm Titles and Midrashic Exegesis” upholds with the fluid–solid trajectory toward canon that Seeligmann describes. A preparatory form critical analysis of psalms in narrative settings finds that some psalms, such as Exodus 15 or Jonah 2, were easily incorporated into narrative frameworks. Others caused more “friction” and were less easily integrated.⁶³ The function of Isaiah 38:9 is noteworthy because “[t]he poem is no longer regarded simply as a ‘song’ or ‘word.’ Again, Hezekiah is not the speaker, but the author.”⁶⁴ “No attempt has been made to work the poem into the narrative of vv. 1–6. Rather, the poem is retained apart from the narrative and provided with a title as a literary piece by an author which was composed at a specific time in the historical past.”⁶⁵ In fact Isaiah 38 is the only example outside the Psalter of a psalm title with the same form as the Davidic ascriptions, Childs’ main focus. It “reflects a stage in the transmission of poetic tradition in which its literary fixation as an independent composition made it difficult to incorporate within a larger narrative setting. Nevertheless, the need to supply a setting resulted in the use of a stereotyped form of the superscription which offered the minimum information of author and historical referent.”⁶⁶ Tradents at this stage could not adapt the psalm with the freedom that was exercised in an earlier period. On this basis Childs argues for the lateness of the additions. The Chronicler did not use the technique of superscriptions, so “it seems logical to set a *terminus a quo* after the Chronicler.” And “a *terminus ad quem* for the formation of the titles is provided

62. Ibid., 172.

63. Childs, Psalm Titles, 139.

64. Ibid., 141.

65. Ibid., 142.

66. Ibid., 142.

by the Qumran Psalm scroll.” Therefore, “the titles are an extremely late post-exilic phenomenon.”⁶⁷

But something changes fundamentally in this process for Childs, something Seeligmann does not quite register. “The titles represent an early reflection on how the Psalms as a collection of sacred literature were understood. The titles established a secondary setting which became normative for the canonical tradition.”⁶⁸ Childs restricts his form-critical study to psalms attached to the life of David (esp. Pss. 50–60, 68), making a direct comparison on Psalm 30 impossible, but Childs turns out to be far less committed to the the individual–communal dynamic Seeligmann employs to explain that superscription. Instead of positing a moment of historical crisis underlying the adaptation, Childs focuses on the literary/exegetical dynamic at work. He uses Sanders’ work on the Qumran Psalms Scroll to claim that the psalm titles are not historical memories “but are the result of an exegetical activity which derived its material from within the text itself.”⁶⁹ For instance, the superscription on Psalm 60 seems aware of David in 2 Samuel 8 *and* of Joab in 1 Kings 11. “By introducing Joab into the passage drawn from II Samuel, the author of the title appears to be drawing attention to his other source which supplies the missing link for the Psalm. Once again a Psalm title reflects considerable study of Scripture which goes much beyond noticing obvious allusions.”⁷⁰ More important than whatever crisis or event might have provoked an author to pen a superscription are the “signs ... of scholarly study of the Psalms in relation to other Old Testament passages.”⁷¹ This is indeed the age of the *Schriftgelehrten*, and their exegetical activity changes the course of tradition permanently. Sharpening the contrast, Seeligmann sees that Psalm 30 has been attached to a contemporary event, but for Childs the Davidic superscriptions affiliate psalms with a wider body of scripture.

67. Ibid., 148.

68. Ibid., 137.

69. Ibid., 143.

70. Ibid., 147.

71. Ibid., 148.

This is not to say that Childs ignores "history," or biblical reference. Rather, he emphasizes an historic transformation, of various traditions into an affiliated textual corpus, with long-lasting historical consequences. For "the titles functioned in a way completely different from the 'pesher type' midrash of Qumran, and they lack any concern to actualize past traditions by means of superscription. Again, the titles which relate to David's life do not serve to legitimate any later religious institutions, which is a characteristic tendency of midrashim from Pharisaic circles." All this intends (or manages despite itself) to convey a new way of reading scripture, too. "By placing a Psalm within the setting of a particular historical incident in the life of David, the reader was suddenly given access to previously unknown information. David's inner life was now unlocked to the reader, who was allowed to hear his intimate thoughts and reflections. It therefore seems most probable that the formation of the titles stemmed from a pietistic circle of Jews whose interest was particularly focussed on the nurture of the spiritual life."⁷² This descriptive observation, of which Barr approves in 1983, is also clearly packed with contemporary theological implications.

As Childs puts it in 1972, "One way to reinterpret a text is to reshape it within a new composition. Another equally effective way is to change the context from that in which the text originally functioned. The text itself is not altered, but a new framework is provided which assigns to it a new role. The classic illustration of this second approach is to be found in the superscriptions of certain psalms." Thus begins a section entitled "Establishment of a New Context."⁷³ If a tradition is placed in a different form, its function will also change. Rather than reading psalms in the context of the cultus (Mowinckel), a precedent is established for attending to the textualized, canonical context. "Psalms which originally functioned within a cultic role for the community have been secondarily given a specific historical setting in the life of an individual. Lying at the base of this process of 'historization' is the conviction that Scripture can best be interpreted by Scripture (*Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*), which is a corol-

72. Ibid., 149.

73. Childs, *Midrash*, 57.

lary derived from a consciousness of canon.”⁷⁴ The terminology stems from Seeligmann, but it is now being deployed for different, decidedly canonical ends.

ROAD ONE—BENNO JACOB'S MODERN MIDRASH

A recurring section in *Exodus*, called “Old Testament Context,” which as Childs tells us in the introduction “forms the heart of the commentary,” “attempts to deal seriously with the text in its final form, which is its canonical shape, while at the same time recognizing and profiting by the variety of historical forces which were at work in producing it. In my judgment, the failure of most critical commentaries to deal with the final shape of the text without falling into modern midrash is a major deficiency.”⁷⁵ One would be forgiven for thinking that by “modern midrash” Childs means the midrash-allied hermeneutics of Sanders, whose *Torah and Canon* he had recently criticized in a review. In fact this is not the kind of midrash Childs rejects in his *Exodus* commentary. Rather, in 1974 it is a *conservative* instrument for the harmonization of tensions and contradictions kicked up by historical critical research. The commentators who come up most frequently in this connection are Umberto Cassuto and Benno Jacob.⁷⁶ I will now look briefly at Childs' interaction with the latter.

In 1999 Childs wrote an appreciation of Jacob, hoping to draw attention to “the enduring and genuine contributions of this largely forgotten scholar.”⁷⁷ Childs says he learned of Jacob from von Rad in Heidelberg, but that he later had great difficulty locating Jacob's commentary on Genesis, even at Yale.

Soon I discovered that among my colleagues in the academic guild the name of Benno Jacob was virtually unknown. Then in 1963 I spent a sabbatical leave in Jerusalem and

74. *Ibid.*, 57. A related article from 1976, *Modern Study of Psalms*, continues to push hard against traditional form criticism—“the function of a secondary setting often seems to be more significant for exegesis than a fixation with an alleged original *Sitz*” (378)—with reference to Seeligmann: “the concept of a normative scripture unleashed a new set of forces which were different in kind from those influencing the development of the oral tradition in the pre-exilic period” (382). Psalms have been “loosened from their original cultic context” and have been given a “different function” in their canonical form (383). (Seeligmann is not the only important input; Hertzberg, *Nachgeschichte*, from 1936, also surfaces frequently.) For a late (2005) use of “canon consciousness” see Childs, *Reflections on an Era*, 32.

75. *Exodus*, xiv.

76. For good examples see *Exodus*, 364 and 614, respectively.

77. Childs, *Benno Jacob*, 275.

learned that in Israel Jacob was far from unknown. Some of the older scholars, such as Professor Isaac Leo Seeligmann, had known Jacob personally, and Seeligmann regaled me with interesting stories concerning this remarkable scholar. I had gone to Jerusalem to work on an Exodus commentary and to my delight and amazement I learned that the Hebrew University possessed a rare microfilm copy of an unpublished commentary on the book of Exodus by Jacob. Seeligmann recounted that when Jacob was expelled from German in 1938, he departed with the manuscript of his Exodus commentary clutched in his arms, undoubtedly regarding it as his most precious possession. When I returned home from Israel in 1964, the librarian of the Hebrew University generously provided me with a microfilm of the Exodus commentary. I had it photocopied, bound in four large volumes, and deposited in the Yale library as a rediscovered treasure.⁷⁸

Jacob seems to be a good illustration of the problem that arises for biblical interpreters in the critical age.⁷⁹ His effort to destroy the documentary hypothesis explains “why his work has largely been ignored by modern biblical scholars.”⁸⁰ It prevents him from “[engaging] in a mutually fruitful dialogue on the larger critical issues,” and it stayed with nineteenth century interlocutors which the critical discussion had long since surpassed. Yet for Childs other “aspects of his work remain highly impressive and uniquely worthy of careful scrutiny.”⁸¹ He tries to illustrate this with Jacob’s Genesis commentary in 1999, though Childs’ own landmark work on Exodus is the best place to get a sense of the extent of his regard for Jacob, who is referenced nearly as often as Gressmann or Noth.

Illustrations could well be given of the insight about Exodus Childs gains from Jacob, but in keeping with the concern to understand what Childs does and does not make of midrash, the following shows simply what Childs typically means by “modern midrash” in 1974, and why he does not follow suit.

In recent years there have been several attempts to solve the literary problems within Ex. 16 by denying the presence of sources. Benno Jacob ... begins with a sharp polemic against critics who have “cut up the chapter without understanding its intention.” But when Jacob offers his own alternative solution it very much resembles a modern midrash. He attempts to avoid the difficulties in the sequence of vv.1–12 by assuming a speech of

78. Ibid., 273. Cf. “The Life and Works of Benno Jacob” by his son W. Jacob, in Jacob, *Exodus*, xv–xxxiii, who also translated the commentary for English publication in 1992. The German original was finally published in 1997.

79. Again, it forces readers “to be critical, anti-critical, or postcritical, but the pre-critical option has been forever lost” (Childs, *Vitranga*, 98).

80. Childs, Benno Jacob, 274.

81. Ibid., 275. One remark stands out in light of the fact that Childs never joined the digital revolution (he worked on a typewriter): “Long before intertextuality had become a modern fad generated by computer print-outs, Jacob listened for every possible resonance within the entire canon” (276).

Moses before v.4. He interprets the verb in v.11 as a pluperfect which he assigns to a period prior to v.4. Finally, he suggests that the faulty Hebrew syntax in v.8 is intentional in order to demonstrate that indeed Moses is not a good speaker and requires Aaron's help!⁸²

It is surprising to see just how long this sense of midrashic hermeneutics, as a coping strategy for those who reject the documentary hypothesis, lasts in Childs' work. The same understanding predominates in *IOTS* as well as *Exodus*. For example, concerning the canonical shaping of Ezra-Nehemiah, "two pitfalls" must be avoided:

The one approach—call it modern midrashic—would rule out *a priori* the possibility of any accidental factors at work and would evaluate the present composition consistently on the same level of intentionality throughout. The weakness of this approach is its inability to deal with the historical dimensions of the canonical process which established a *scale of intentionality*... The other extreme of the spectrum, which is characteristic of the dominant historical critical method, seeks to establish a historical sequence as normative and thus disregards any theological intent which would override the concerns of the modern historian.⁸³

Still in 1979, tradition history can be an opposite category to midrash. Wellhausen cast a very long shadow, and for some time it must have seemed improbable that midrash could ever be allied with the cause of liberal scholarship. That changed for Childs, however, over the course of the so-called canon debate.

ROAD TWO—JAMES SANDER'S MODERN MIDRASH

In 2005 Childs laments that Sanders became the spokes-person for the majority position on canon's hermeneutical (in)significance in English,⁸⁴ and G. T. Sheppard's 1992 summary of the different ways midrash, understood as inner biblical exegesis, had been accommodated in work on canon, identifies a line that was increasingly drawn. Sanders and M. Fishbane (see the epilogue, below) place an emphasis on "continuity between the prebiblical interpretation of the normative traditions and the later postbiblical interpretations of scripture in Judaism and Christianity," whereas "Childs, Rendtorff and Sheppard have emphasized elements of discontinuity between the prescriptural functions of ancient traditions and the new roles they play within 'the canonical context' of Jewish and Christian Bibles."⁸⁵ How true this

82. *Exodus*, 275.

83. *IOTS*, 630, my emphasis. On intentionality, see the conclusion of chapter one.

84. Childs, *Reflections on an Era*, 36.

85. Sheppard, *Criticism*, 863. His most important contribution to the study of "canon conscious" redaction is

remains for Rendtorff is difficult to say, but for Childs and those who followed him more closely, a new understanding of midrash fell in place alongside an established distinction between the canonical approach and tradition history. Childs resists Sanders’ hermeneutics from the start, all the while crediting his insight about the canonical function of Deuteronomy at the close of the Pentateuch,⁸⁶ and yet only later identifies Sanders with “Jewish midrash.” In 2005 he does not challenge Sander’s assessment, that early Judaism “developed the techniques of midrash by which to exploit the fluidity of its sacred text in order to reinterpret them into new forms for regenerating its life,” but contends that this paradigm “is incompatible with the New Testament’s understanding of the authoritative function of the Old Testament, which has been continually transformed by the Spirit into the law of Christ.”⁸⁷ Sanders eventually represents another variety of “modern midrash”—almost the opposite of Jacob’s—and a second road which Childs never takes.

Although Childs is highly complimentary when he reviews *Torah and Canon* in 1973, he lodges a telling objection. “Sanders and I seem to differ,” he writes, “in the theological stance which one adopts when interpreting the significance of the historical factors shaping the canon.” Sanders’ interest lies in “the *hermeneutics* of that generation which gave the canon its basic shape. In the *process* by which the ancient Hebrews shaped their tradition, we are given a key how to transform our own tradition in the light of changing situations. It is at this point that I strongly differ in theological approach.” In contrast, “I believe that the witness of the Old Testament lies in the historical shape which the Jews gave their Scriptures, and not in the historical processes which gave them a shape.”⁸⁸ It seems significant, therefore, that the phrase “final form” first occurs in 1974.⁸⁹ A form critical study of midrash—e.g., of Chronicles’ use of Kings, or of the late addition of psalm titles—entails canon in the sense of a *final*

Sheppard, *Wisdom*.

86. *IOTS*, 131.

87. Childs, *Reflections on an Era*, 34.

88. Childs, *Review of Sanders*, 90, Childs’ emphasis.

89. *Exodus*, xiv: “the historical development which lay behind the final form” seems a rather wordy, though more precise, circumlocution for what just two years prior was simply glossed as midrash. (Searchable electronic versions of many of Childs’ titles, including 1970 and 1974, are available online.)

literary deposit. That becomes the form in which it functions in the community of faith. Later in that commentary we find him committing to the “challenge to hear the Old Testament as God’s word in a concrete and *definite form* for one’s own age.” The church’s different use of scripture from generation to generation “only demonstrates the function of the canon. Scripture is different in kind from the church’s reflection upon it.”⁹⁰

Another bit of shorthand for this distinction will surface before long: we are not, Childs insists, prophets and apostles. The late post-Exilic transformation of Old Testament tradition, put into relief by Sanders and Seeligmann in their own ways, remains binding in the Christian church, where a New Testament witness was fashioned on analogy with that first authoritative corpus.

EPILOGUE: INNER BIBLICAL EXEGESIS AND TRADITION (HISTORY)

Another scholar whose analysis of psalm titles in the 1970s led to to a much more comprehensive project was Michael Fishbane.⁹¹ His classic study of inner biblical exegesis, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (1985), remains unsurpassed in quality and extent, and it would be impossible to do full justice to it here. Comments from Childs’ review of the book serve as a fitting epilogue to the above discussion, however, because they neatly recapitulate themes I have been at pains to trace. After praising Fishbane for excellent research, Childs makes a trio of queries. The first upholds the textualization of oral tradition as *the* turning point in the formation of biblical literature, a point made as early as 1967.

My first query is whether Fishbane has blurred the sharpness of the break which occurred in Israel when the traditions were transmitted in written form. In my judgment, Fishbane has been led astray at the outset by taking over the terminology and historical patterns of the traditio-historical critics, for example, in his use of D. Knight’s distinction between *traditio* and *traditum*. Admittedly this vocabulary is useful for understanding and describing the early oral stages of Israel’s development, but to extend these traditio-historical patterns into the later period of Israel’s history, even when slightly modified, misconstrues the very new dynamic which resulted from textualization and which Fishbane has so brilliantly analyzed. The actualization of the Exodus traditions by Deuteronomy which von Rad, for example, studied reflects a very different process from the proto-midrashic, inner-bib-

90. *Exodus*, 438, my emphasis.

91. Fishbane, *Torah and Tradition*. Significantly, it appears in a collection of essays dedicated to theology and tradition history: Knight, ed., *Tradition*.

lical exegesis of texts of the exilic and post-exilic periods.⁹²

Midrash or proto-midrash comes into play once actualization becomes an *exegetical* procedure and not before. Israel defined itself in terms of a book, thereby altering the context for interpretation permanently. Second, with reference to Sandmel,⁹³ Childs claims that it is anachronistic to find biblical exegesis too early. "My query to Fishbane is whether he has also tended to project inner-biblical exegesis of texts back to an early stage of Israel's development in which its traditions were largely unwritten and were actualized in a variety of different ways which cannot be encompassed under the rubric of inner-biblical exegesis."⁹⁴ Related to the first point, Childs seems to want to protect the other main phase of the tradition, in which considerable flexibility in adaptation is possible. There is an appreciable and important difference between the use of tradition in Second Isaiah and Third Isaiah, Childs says. Finally, he turns to the hermeneutical implications.

The third query is not a criticism, but a recognition that Fishbane has raised some important hermeneutical issues whose theological implications have not as yet been fully explored. In the past, historical criticism of the OT as practiced by Christians has frequently disparaged Jewish midrashic exegesis as a rabbinic distortion which has no genuine place in the Hebrew Bible, but appears just on the outer perimeter as a sign of decay. One recalls Wellhausen's derogatory characterization of midrash in his famous chapter on Chronicles. Fishbane has mounted an impressive case for the deep roots of an interpretive process which reflects the strongest possible analogies with later post-biblical Jewish exegesis. What are the theological implications of Fishbane's work for the modern debate over Scripture and tradition within an ecumenical context?⁹⁵

Fishbane's study could advance religious dialogue between Protestant and Catholic, and between Christian and Jewish belief. For Childs the first common denominator is the result of Israel's textualized tradition, canonical scripture in its final form. Theological disagreements would have to be arbitrated on whether they "auf den biblischen Text selbst gründen kann"; when "spätere Traditionen" are the only justification to be found for an article of faith, then we have an "ernsthaften Schwäche, sowohl im Judentum als auch im Christentum." But what if the status of tradition as such is the point of contention? If Seeligmann correctly identifies the

92. Childs, Review of Fishbane, 512.

93. Sandmel, Haggada. Recall the critique of this in 1972: Childs, Midrash, 48–50.

94. Childs, Review of Fishbane, 513.

95. Ibid., 513.

paradox of tradition within the biblical literature, where and how should one seek a resolution? We turn now to Childs' reconsideration of this perennial question.

III. THE "MYSTERY OF ISRAEL" RECONSIDERED

IOTS "seeks to describe the form and function of the Hebrew Bible in its role as sacred scripture for Israel."⁹⁶ In defining historical and theological facets of his key term canon, Childs maintains, contra Sanders, that the category "witness" is far more central than the biblical tradents' self-understanding. "Because the process of forming the scriptures came to an end, canon marked off a fixed body of writings as normative for the community rather than attributing authority to the process itself. When Israel later reinterpreted its scriptures to address its changing needs, it did so in the form of the targum, that is to say, commentary, which was set apart sharply from the received sacred text of scripture."⁹⁷ Childs then adduces the following warrant for a study of the canonical process:

Seeligmann has described a process of interpretation within scripture which he correctly derived from a consciousness of canon (*Kanonbewusstsein*). This process involved the skilful use of literary techniques, word-plays, and proto-midrashic exegesis which emerged during the final stages of the formation of the canon and continued to be developed and to flower during the post-biblical period. Although such exegetical activity grew out of a concept of the canon as an established body of sacred writings, it is a *derivative phenomenon which does not represent the constitutive force lying behind the actual canonical process*. Rather, the decisive force at work in the formation of the canon emerged in the transmission of a divine word in such a form as to lay authoritative claim upon the successive generations.⁹⁸

Historically speaking, commentary and text do of course break apart. But the theological crux is whether or not exegesis is "derivative" of scripture, and how one knows. As has been seen, Seeligmann is rather more ambivalent about canon getting the upper hand on the exegetical activity (midrash). For Childs the "constitutive force" which was unleashed in Israel's late, religious use of its tradition leads inexorably toward canon. Ever after text and commentary are wholly distinct. Childs accommodates the untidiness of literary-historical processes by sepa-

96. *IOTS*, 16.

97. *IOTS*, 59, cf. 101, 370.

98. *IOTS*, 60, my emphasis.

rating *literary* and *canonical* histories into two related but non-identical processes, and this enables him to address the theological function of canon as a binding and closed body of literature before every last detail is locked in place. On the basis of the bond between church and synagogue which this establishes, Childs argues for the MT as the vehicle for the recovery of the canonical text in the church, not the LXX,⁹⁹ and even “for the priority of the Jewish tripartite division—normative is now too strong a word—when dealing with the Hebrew Bible for the same theological reasons which have been outlined before, namely to confirm the role of the Jews as tradents of the canonical tradition.”¹⁰⁰ Jews and Christians read their common scriptures in different contexts—for Jews tradition is “now codified in the midrashim, Mishnah, and Talmuds,” and Christians bring “the gospel of Jesus Christ found in the New Testament”—but the difference “does not sever the common link with the scriptures of Israel.”¹⁰¹

Summing up, canon identifies an historical development which well pre-dates the advent of Christ, though in literary terms the authoritative tradition is in a certain degree of flux. As canon, Israel’s scripture was (and is) received by the church from the hands of the Jews. According to its testimony early Christians articulated their encounter with the risen Lord. But the processes which eventually led to subsequent bodies of literature, to a split between Tanak and Old Testament, do not obliterate the profound historical and theological reality that connects synagogue and church. “The notion that the ‘real’ Old Testament is purely ‘Hebrew’ in character and was later distorted by Judaism is a legacy of Wellhausen which cannot be sustained either from a historical or theological perspective.”¹⁰² Neither does the construct of a single tradition history (Gese, through von Rad), which because of the prominence of the LXX in the NT must cut ties with the parallel Hebrew canon, square with the way

99. *IOTS*, 100–103.

100. *IOTS*, 667. Childs of course recognizes that Christian orderings of OT books vary, and that early Christians disregarded the tripartite version. But they “chose an order from among the variety of options which best supported the Christian claim of a different understanding of the Old in terms of the New”—i.e., they did not redact a new OT to suit their purposes.

101. *IOTS*, 666.

102. *IOTS*, 668.

authoritative tradition changed as oral became textual tradition in the post-exilic period.¹⁰³ This historical and theological link between church and synagogue in terms of a shared canon despite literary differences is, in short, the mystery of Israel.

Yet after setting variations on Wellhausen's separation between Israel and Judaism to one side, and on von Rad's to another, Childs considers a "problem of relating the Hebrew Bible to the Christian Old Testament which arises from the side of Judaism."¹⁰⁴ The issue is raised in a well-known article by L. B. Wolfenson (1924).¹⁰⁵ Wolfenson wants to separate two distinct meanings of canon, according to Childs. One is the usual "classic collection of religious writings and is synonymous in Judaism with the term Bible." The other "denotes a norm of recognized regulations for faith and practice. Wolfenson denies that the whole Hebrew canon ever had such a normative role for Judaism in this second sense of canon. Only the Torah was considered normative, that is to say, legally and morally binding, and by the term Torah was included the interpretation of the Mishnah and Gemara as well."¹⁰⁶ Childs finds reason to doubt if this is historically plausible. There is also a "theological problem": "if Wolfenson's description of the Jewish attitude towards the canon is correct even for later, post-Talmudic Judaism then he has indeed focused on a basic theological difference toward the use of the Bible which distinguishes Judaism from Christianity." Again, if correct, Wolfenson would signal major "elements of discontinuity between the two faiths."¹⁰⁷ Addressing the issue is important but beyond the scope of *IOTS*, Childs concludes.

As a matter of fact *IOTS* is built upon the assumption that Wolfenson is wrong. In response to reviewers Childs writes,

The New Testament writers took over various hermeneutical techniques current in the Judaism of the Hellenistic period (midrash, pesher). Of course, midrash focuses on one specific passage at a time—one looks in vain for broad topical summaries—but the assumption undergirding the method is that of a fixed and closed corpus of Sacred Scriptures which constituted a unity. All the various hermeneutical rules which were later articulated by the sages assumed a fixed canon. The freedom of the Jewish homilist in actualizing his

103. *IOTS*, 669.

104. *IOTS*, 669.

105. Wolfenson, Ruth.

106. *IOTS*, 670.

107. *IOTS*, 670.

texts does not undercut the concept of an established, authoritative text, but rather proves just the opposite.¹⁰⁸

Is “the assumption undergirding the method” really of a closed canon? How can such a free operation testify to a fixed unity? Childs begins to sound like he protests too much. But note that he accepts and affirms the place of midrash in the NT. Within a few short years he will quietly issue a retraction: the NT is no midrash on the OT. When exactly, and above all, why?

In *NCCI* Childs observes that it has become common to characterize the NT’s use of the OT as midrashic. Of course, the NT shares “many of the formal conventions of Jewish exegesis” at that time. “Nevertheless, I have a growing conviction that the use of the term ‘midrash’ can be very misleading.”¹⁰⁹ As with tradition history, though not in the same way, the decisive point turns on a distinction between oral and textual tradition. “Crucial to Jewish midrash is a particular hermeneutical understanding of the biblical text which implied not only a closed corpus of canonical literature, but a dogmatic construal of the written text’s relation to Jewish oral tradition.” A heightened sensitivity to Oral Torah’s weight in Jewish theology begins to make midrash *constitutively* Jewish. The formal technique factors into the formation of the NT, and it remains an ally in the theological concern to take the textual authority of scripture seriously, but an awareness of what midrash is introduces a serious disanalogy. “Jewish midrash is, therefore, text-oriented in a very different manner from that of early Christianity.”¹¹⁰

Childs does not say if or how Judaism is like or unlike Christianity in separating text from commentary, but he is adamant that there is a “qualitative difference between apostolic tradition and subsequent church tradition which the canon sought to establish.”¹¹¹ Further, in an excursus on NT text criticism, Childs points out many differences between the development of OT and NT literature despite the more recent trend to see a generally similar situation, of a gradual move from great fluidity to increasing stability, and these differences

108. Childs, *A Response* [Mays], 203.

109. *NCCI*, 491.

110. *NCCI*, 491.

111. *NCCI*, 522.

impinge on the emerging historical and theological separation of church and synagogue. "There are some important differences between the development of the Hebrew text within the Jewish synagogue and the Greek New Testament text within the Christian church."¹¹² The early church sat more loosely to the Hebrew text than did the early synagogue, and in Christendom no universally official text ever emerged on par with the MT text tradition. That the church was willing to translate the NT "resulted in a different dynamic of textual transmission from that of the Hebrew text." And in terms of the canonical process, "the understanding of the process was not identical. For the Christian church canonization was derivative of christology. The New Testament scriptures gained their unique authority in their role as the apostolic and prophetic witness to Christ's death and resurrection which was also uniquely tied to the one specific period of his earthly life."¹¹³ Jewish interpretation was Torah-centric, whereas Christian interpretation was christocentric. Extrapolating slightly, insofar as the latter entails a certain approach to the scriptures of Israel, one can appreciate how in the course of his five-year venture into NT scholarship Childs moves away from the language of midrash and the OT, and toward the language of a christologically transformed Old Testament.

So what if Wolfenson was on to something after all? What if Judaism focused not exclusively on the narrower textual Torah, but equally or even primarily on Oral Torah? The historical shift from oral to textual tradition which Childs develops out of a form critical perspective, with an eye to the subsequent and ongoing theological function of scripture, is not the same thing as the Jewish articulation, solidified in the rabbinic period, of an oral tradition reaching back to Moses. But if one had an eye to canon in that religious context, as opposed to its Christian setting, might not the sparse historical evidence be read very differently, with a fundamentally different understanding of canon? It seems quite possible that Seeligmann was doing more with tradition history in the early 1950s than giving a neutral, religiously disinterested account of the historical origins of Jewish midrash.

112. *NTCI*, 526.

113. *NTCI*, 526.

JACOB NEUSNER’S ALWAYS-OPEN CANON

The 1983 book *Midrash in Context* raised this challenge in a forceful way for Childs. A look at Neusner’s thesis quickly shows why. “Exegesis is not Torah. But books of exegeses became part of Torah. How come? Is the category ‘canon’ ever relevant to Judaism?”¹¹⁴ Based on a taxonomy of rabbinic texts from 200–600 CE, including case studies of Mishnah, Talmud and Midrashim, Neusner concludes that the relationship of Talmud to Mishnah is formally identical to the relationship compilations of exegeses (the Midrashim) have to scripture. The Mishnah, therefore, becomes part of Torah. “Receiving the Mishnah meant setting it into relationship with the ancient Scriptures. Let me now, in a single sentence, report what they did. The sages totally reformed the meaning of the word *Torah*, thereby, in the literary framework, *reopening the canon of Judaism*, and, in the theological setting, redefining the meaning and limits of revelation.”¹¹⁵ The reform had palpable results. In literary terms, it created the Talmud. In theological terms it brought about “Judaism as we know it: a living and enduring faith of everyday encounter with God through Torah and its holy way of life.”¹¹⁶

The “measure of *midrash*”¹¹⁷ Neusner seeks goes beyond Seeligmann’s paradox at the end of the biblical period in historical and theological respects, centering on the post-biblical revisioning of canon as such. For Neusner, the exegetical activity called midrash changes in kind when rabbinic sages reform Torah. “As we know full well, Israelite thinkers—whether lawyers and philosophers, like the heirs of the Mishnah in the Talmuds, or visionaries and prophets, like the Essenes at Qumran, or messianists and evangelists, like the members of the school of Matthew—routinely read one thing in relationship to something else, old Scripture in the setting of fresh concerns and sure knowledge of new truth.”¹¹⁸ Midrash proper does not introduce a new technique. Neither is it in essence technique—in Seeligmann’s words, associa-

114. Neusner, *Midrash*, xiv.

115. *Ibid.*, 11, my emphasis.

116. *Ibid.*, 12.

117. *Ibid.*, 110.

118. *Ibid.*, 49–50.

tive exegesis or crisis-provoked adaptation. "What captures our attention is not the techniques of exegesis but, in particular, the place and purpose assigned to the larger labor of exegesis."¹¹⁹ Neusner defends a change in consciousness of another order: midrash does not inhere in the paradoxical closing of the text it opens; rather, "the heart of the matter [is] the standing of the sage."¹²⁰ When a rabbi gave an opinion on a verse, what was the status of his judgment? His view was clearly seen as authoritative, but at the same time his view would have been easy to distinguish from the ancient words of scripture. "Did the distinction between media make a difference?"¹²¹ There are only two options, Neusner decides. "Either there is *torah* [revelation] which is not part of the Torah, the canon of revelation. Or there is no such thing as a canon at all." For: "The entire thrust of the exegetical process is to link upon a *single plane of authority and reliability* what a rabbi now says with what the (written) Torah said, or what the Tosefta says with what the (written) Torah said."¹²² His simple conclusion could not be more contrary to Childs' view. "Interpretation and what was interpreted, exegesis and text, belonged together. In so vivid a world of divine address, what place was there for the conception of canon? There was none."¹²³ Neusner even goes so far as to call the rabbi "the word of God ... made flesh. And out of the union of man and Torah, producing the rabbi as Torah incarnate, was born Judaism, the faith of Torah: the ever-present revelation, the always-open canon."¹²⁴

Neusner does allow that traditional Christianity had an entirely different orientation to sacred scripture. "The contrast to the standing for Jerome's biblical commentaries" jumps out in view of his conclusions, he writes. "Jerome treated books of the canon; his commentaries were not canonical. The earliest *midrash* compilations spoke not for an individual but for the collectivity of the sages; they demanded and gained a place with the canon of rabbinical writings, thus entering the Torah. The difference is fundamental."¹²⁵ If Neusner correctly

119. Ibid., 50.

120. Ibid., 127.

121. Ibid., 126.

122. Ibid., 135, my emphasis.

123. Ibid., 136.

124. Ibid., 137.

125. Ibid., xv.

describes the standing of the Jewish sage, Childs would have to occupy Jerome’s space in order to maintain the distinction between scriptural text and commentary. He would almost have to claim a Christian canon without analogy to the Jewish understanding.

A “RECHT STARKEN ANGRIFF”

Childs confronted the implications of Neusner’s position in January 1985 at a Bern symposium on “Biblische Theologie und jüdische Auslegung des Tanach.” A translation of Childs’ paper appears alongside other conference proceedings in the volume *Mitte der Schrift*. He begins with an address to his “Christian colleagues,” and he ends with a call to serious dialogue between Jews and Christians over their common scriptures, albeit from a distinctly Christian point of view. Most remarks in the first half of the essay appear to be aimed at Christian scholars—those invested in Old Testament theology of some stripe—but they serve double duty, setting the stage for a deep contrast Childs draws between Jewish and Christian exegesis. First, it is a category error to extract theological justification for textual freedom from Jesus’ or Paul’s use of the Old Testament. When P. Stuhlmacher or U. Luz attempts to draw a direct analogy between modern exegesis and the New Testament’s use of the Old, they overlook the essential function of the *Christian* canon (throughout Childs almost never invokes canon without the modifier “Christian”). Its function is to sharply distinguish “dem ersten apostolischen Zeugnis und jeder folgenden kirchlichen Tradition.”¹²⁶ As he insists here and elsewhere, “I am neither Jesus Christ nor an apostle.” Text is distinct from commentary. Second, the two-testament Christian canon provokes some form of dialectic. Canon functions as a normative witness in the prophetic and apostolic form which was built and has been received. It is a closed unity (“eine abgeschlossene Einheit”).¹²⁷ Consequently, searches for an original sense do not do justice to the theological task. Neither do quests for a “Mitte der Schrift,” whether thematic (e.g., covenant) or developmental (e.g., prophecy and fulfillment in tradition history). Rather, beginning with an affirmation of the formal arena of Christian

126. Childs, *Jüdischen Kanons*, 270.

127. *Ibid.*, 274.

scripture, a unitive canon requires a dialectic on at least two planes, one historical and another intertextual. Third, the theological foundation for an affirmation of Christian canon is christological. OT theology is a Christian discipline *in essence*, subsidiary but integral to the broader Christian theological enterprise.¹²⁸ Characteristically, all Old Testament theologies assume a relationship of some kind between Christ and the history of Israel. Though this is talked about in different ways—“sei es ein Wesen, ein Kerygma oder eine historische Entwicklungslinie, die oft durch ein philosophisches System (Idealismus, Existentialismus, Ontologie) mitbestimmt sind”—it inevitably confirms a basic Christian standpoint; far better when such undertones are made explicit from the start. This is an obvious departure from Judaism: “Für das Christentum, *um* [sic] *Unterschied zum Judentum*, wurzelt der Kanon in der Christologie.”¹²⁹ Fourth, the priority of the literal sense in Christian exegesis is presupposed. The OT must be allowed to speak on its own terms rather than too quickly identifying its *Christuszeugnis* with Christ. The *sensus literalis* also cuts against modern schemes of salvation history as well as medieval and modern allegorizing.¹³⁰

A point implicit in *NCCI* becomes quite explicit here. Now *canon* is inseparable from *christology*, and thus canon's relation to Judaism is a more troubling and more open question than *IOTS* would lead one to expect. It is not by chance, Childs remarks with newfound conviction, that Jewish scholars are little interested in biblical theology. Religious adoption of Hebrew scriptures by Jews happens in a different way, it seems, a way that does not require the dialectics of biblical theology.¹³¹

Admitting his limitation as a Christian scholar in trying to describe characteristics of Jewish exegesis, Childs nevertheless attempts a few summary points in the latter part of his Bern essay. “Erstens werden die Hebräischen Schriften nicht als geschlossene Grösse verstanden und auch nicht als in einer dialektischen Beziehung zur späten rabbinischen Tradi-

128. *Ibid.*, 274.

129. *Ibid.*, 271, my emphasis.

130. *Ibid.*, 280, cf. 269.

131. *Ibid.*, 275. A dramatic and well-known statement of this is of course Levenson, *Not Interested*, though not all Jewish scholars agree with him.

tion stehend, sondern es gibt eher eine ungebrochene Kontinuität zwischen Schrift und Tradition, die zu einem verschiedenen Verständnis von Schrift-Autorität führt."¹³² Three clauses in this first point are exact opposites of the distinctives of Christian biblical theology Childs has just defended. The scriptures are not a closed unit, they are not in a dialectical relationship to later tradition; text and commentary stand in continuity. Secondly, he continues, "bewirkt das jüdische Verständnis der Rolle der *mündlichen Tradition als eines massgeblichen Kommentars zur schriftlichen Tradition* eine sehr unterschiedliche Dynamik gegenüber der des Christentums (*in Gestalt des Midrasch*)."¹³³ On the face of it, this is a near reversal on his position from 1967, that midrash obtains only after the oral tradition becomes a textual tradition. However, it needs to be emphasized that the theological dynamic Oral Torah introduces in a Jewish interpretive context is by no means identical with a form critical study of biblical tradition in historical development. Third and finally, the core of the Bible for Judaism is Torah rather than Christ.¹³⁴

Only after these remarks have been made are we told what precipitates them. "Meine Position, der Gegenstand der biblischen Disziplinen seien die kanonischen Schriften der jüdischen Synagoge, gesehen aus der Perspektive christlicher Theologie, hat kürzlich einen recht starken Angriff durch *Jacob Neusners* neuestes Werk *Midrash in Context* hinnehmen müssen."¹³⁵ The book opens up a new phase in the discussion of the Bern conference theme, he suggests. Without too much modification Childs may still be able to say, as he does in 1980, that with midrash "the assumption undergirding the method is that of a fixed and closed corpus of Sacred Scriptures which constituted a unity." But he has had to rethink entirely the bounds of scripture's authority in Jewish faith. Is the corpus closed? Is it textual?

That said, Childs lodges a pair of reservations about Neusner's thesis. First, the traditional history of midrash traces lines of continuity into earlier eras, including the biblical period. Neusner, however, has proposed something as revolutionary as Wellhausen's inversion of

132. Childs, *Jüdischen Kanons*, 275.

133. *Ibid.*, 275, my emphasis.

134. *Ibid.*, 276.

135. *Ibid.*, 276.

Pentateuchal sources, turning the accepted line of development upside down. Childs feels Gunkel's criticism of Wellhausen applies to Neusner. "Muss man nicht deutlicher unterscheiden zwischen der Entstehungszeit der Stoffe und der Zeit ihrer endgültigen literarischen Fixierung?"¹³⁶ Second, even granting that the rabbinic situation is as Neusner describes it, was canon not an important category in Judaism nearer the turn of the eras? Was not a distinction drawn with books that "tarnished the hands"? "Die Idee eines Kanons, d.h. einer begrenzten Sammlung autoritativer Schriften, ist nicht einfach eine christliche, sondern auch eine jüdische, auch wenn ihr Inhalt und ihre Rolle recht verschieden aussahen."¹³⁷ And in fact Neusner does talk of the sages *reopening* a closed canon, though he has considerably less interest in the hermeneutical significance of *Kanonbewußtsein* among late post-exilic tradents.

The upshot is that Childs becomes more explicit about the confessionally Christian foundation of his proposed approach to scripture. From the mid-1980s he struggles to express the witness of the Old Testament not just as scripture, but more acutely as *Christian* scripture, even as *Christuszeugnis*. And yet working hard to preserve the theological tie Jews and Christians have in a common scripture, considerable differences notwithstanding, Childs strongly opposes two possibilities. On the Christian side, there is the Marcionite temptation to dissolve any connection with the Old Testament. On the Jewish side, there is the danger of completely relativizing the distinctive authority of the Hebrew Scriptures through "spätere rabbinische Tradition." "Beides führt dazu, die Möglichkeit eines ernsthaften theologischen Dialogs zwischen Juden und Christen auf der Grundlage einer gemeinsamen Schrift zu untergraben."¹³⁸ In the end, however, contra Rendtorff, for Childs it will not be possible to restrict Christian discourse on the OT to claims that will be "verständlich und akzeptabel" to Jews. This is so even though, for historical and especially for theological reasons, Childs refuses to simply christianize the witness of Jewish scripture to the God of Israel.¹³⁹

136. Ibid., 278. This seems to advocate a form critical approach to midrash proper, much as Childs briefly attempted with inner biblical midrash in the early 1970s.

137. Ibid., 279.

138. Ibid., 279.

139. Ibid., 280.

The adjustment is essentially in place in *OTTCC*, which incorporates a brief summary of the Bern paper.¹⁴⁰ As in *IOTS*, the ongoing life of the synagogue furnishes Childs’ strongest theological argument for a Hebrew rather than a Greek Old Testament: “the theological issue of how Christians relate to Jewish scriptures cannot be decided biblicistically by an appeal to New Testament practice, but must be addressed theologically.”¹⁴¹ Only a minor point is of additional note here. In one place “midrash” is said to be an irrelevant category because the text in question is not interpreting another text.¹⁴² It seems Childs does not rescind the form critical distinction between oral and textual tradition which reaches back to 1967. Midrash remains text-centric, even if as a Jewish approach to scripture it admits an oral tradition without parallel in Christianity. Childs’ mid-career reconsideration of midrash, prompted especially by Neusner, pertains more to the hermeneutical and theological measure of midrash than to the historic profile of (proto-)midrash as an exegetical technique.

“THE CHURCH’S ONGOING SEARCH FOR THE CHRISTIAN BIBLE”

Without “Die Bedeutung des Jüdischen Kanons in der Alttestamentlichen Theologie” for background, it is easy to misunderstand a number of Childs’ later statements about the peculiarly Christian challenges of biblical theology. For example, the second section of *BTONT*, “A Search for a New Approach,” begins with a chapter titled “The Problem of the Christian Bible.”¹⁴³ It is a revision of a piece that appeared in German four years earlier, preserving a number of near-verbatim parallels. Each text suggests that the problem of the Christian canon must be addressed by “the church’s ongoing *search* for the Christian Bible.”¹⁴⁴ Childs is concerned to show why Sundberg’s argument for an open canon in the first century CE is unsustainable (in part because of a *Kanonbewußtsein*¹⁴⁵), and to explore the theological

140. *OTTCC*, 7–8. Neusner’s book is not cited. Neither is the Bern paper, though several direct parallels show that some version of that essay lies behind *OTTCC* here, or is anticipated by it.

141. *OTTCC*, 10.

142. *OTTCC*, 193.

143. *BTONT*, 55–69.

144. *BTONT*, 67; Childs, *Biblische Theologie*, 27; emphasis original in each.

145. *Ibid.*, 14.

problem raised by the fact of the Septuagint's prevalence in the New Testament. His answers, in four interrelated theses, reflect his deepened sense of the "mystery of Israel."

First, in contrast to Judaism, the church's "basic stance towards its canon was shaped by its christology."¹⁴⁶ *BTONT* summarizes what this entails, including how Sundberg fails to recognize the difference, but "Biblische Theologie" gives a fuller explanation that makes the relation to the argument in "Jüdischen Kanons" more obvious. The early church saw in the Jewish holy scriptures not just historical background, but a living witness to Jesus Christ. Later the New Testament was juxtaposed with the Old, and while the three-part ordering of the Tanak was relativized somewhat, giving higher priority to the prophets, it is highly significant that the Old Testament was preserved as a witness in its own right.¹⁴⁷ An important consequence is that the New Testament concept of fulfillment does not suppose "einfache Kontinuität."¹⁴⁸ A complex dialectic is introduced. Similarly, a single tradition-history does violence to the shape of a two testament canon.¹⁴⁹ In short, as in the Bern piece, making canon about christology signals imperatives for Christian exegesis which set it apart from Judaism: discontinuity in the tradition, at least in some measure; a sharp distinction between the prophetic/apostolic eras and all subsequent eras; a dialectic arising from a two testaments canon; the *Christuszeugnis* of the Old Testament.¹⁵⁰

Second, the New Testament is different in kind from later rabbinic traditions, and therefore, so is the entire Christian canon. The evangelists' confrontation with Christ as the resurrected Lord produced a different dynamic altogether. "Das Neue Testament is kein Midrasch zum Alten Testament."¹⁵¹ The power driving the New derives not from the Old, but

146. *BTONT*, 64.

147. Childs, *Biblische Theologie*, 21.

148. *Ibid.*, 21.

149. *Ibid.*, 22, cf. *BTONT*, 76. See now Seitz, *Figured Out*, 35–47.

150. Concerning "dialectic," Childs explains: "The fact that one at times falls back on the problematic term 'dialectic' is merely a sign that there is not comprehensive philosophical or hermeneutical system available which can adequately resolve with one proposal the whole range of problems arising from the historical critical method" (*BTONT*, 99).

151. Childs, *Biblische Theologie*, 22. This line has a parallel in *BTONT*: "Nor can one rightly envision the New Testament as a midrashic extension of the Hebrew scriptures which stands in closest analogy to rabbinic and Qumran exegesis. The canonical continuity established by the shape of the Christian Bible is of a

from the new encounter with Christ. Still, it must not be overlooked that New speaks with the words of the Old. "Die Identität Jesu wird mit der Begrifflichkeit des Alten Testaments gänzlich verständlich gemacht. Doch wurde die Kontinuität der einen umfassenden Erlösung Gottes *ausschließlich vom Standpunkt des Neuen Testaments aus entdeckt* und allein von ihm aus die Brücke zum Alten Bund geschlagen."¹⁵² The one-time arrival of Christ in history divides Christianity from the continuity sought by rabbinic sages. Yet the shape of the Christian canon also makes "radical discontinuity" inadequate. That two different testaments testify to the one will of God requires a "kunstvolle Dialektik" in biblical theology. "Die sorgfältige Beachtung des christlichen Kanons führt zu einem theologischen Nachdenken über beide Testamente, das sich weder mit Kategorien einer ungebrochenen Kontinuität noch mit denen einer radikalen Diskontinuität zufrieden gibt; und nur die theologische Reflexion, die beide Kategorien freimütig gebraucht, stimmt mit der einen christologischen Mitte überein."¹⁵³ Thus scripture's "Mitte" in Christ emerges out of the complex dialectic evoked by a two testament canon.¹⁵⁴ This dynamic in turn feeds into the dialectic of biblical witness and its subject matter (*res*), which is Christ.

Third, the christological *Sachkritik* required by the Christian Bible in no way unravels the integrity of the Old Testament as a witness to Christ in its own right.¹⁵⁵ Harmonizing the witnesses is therefore not an option. But neither can the *Christuszeugnis* of the Old Testament be avoided. "Der moderne Christ liest das Alte Testament genau wie die Urkirche als Hinweis auf Jesus Christus. Das Alte Testament ist Teil der Schrift der Kirche, weil es Zeugnis für den einen Herrn ablegt."¹⁵⁶ Obviously this distinguishes Christian from Jewish exegesis, but para-

different order" (76).

152. Childs, *Biblische Theologie*, 22, my emphasis. In a sense, he adds, Bultmann was right that the Old Testament witnesses to its failure; he overlooked the fact, though, that for the evangelists this was a witness to Christ (cf. *BTONT*, 77).

153. *Ibid.*, 22.

154. Cf. *BTONT*, 25, which reiterates the skepticism about Jewish biblical theology earlier expressed in *OTTCC* and "Jüdischen Kanons."

155. Childs, *Biblische Theologie*, 25 addresses problems arising "aus dem kanonischen Rang des Alten Testaments als eines unabhängigen Zeugnisses Jesu Christi in eigenem Recht."

156. *Ibid.*, 24. Hence we have "Israel's confessional witness" (*BTONT*, 100).

doxically it ties the church indelibly to the literal sense of Jewish scripture. Just how the Old Testament is to be a *Christuszeugnis* is an enormous problem, as Childs well knows. "Allerdings bleibt es schwer bestimmbar, was es bedeutet, im Alten Testament einen Hinweis auf Christus zu finden, und das Ringen mit diesem Problem führt ins Herz der Biblischen Theologie."¹⁵⁷

The fourth thesis concerns the scope of the Bible in relationship to scripture and tradition.¹⁵⁸ Facing the problem of multiple Christian Bibles, Childs finds that "two different principles appear to have been at work in the history of the church."¹⁵⁹ One was the criterion of apostolicity. Jerome's insistence on the Hebrew scriptures is the Old Testament equivalent of this. He rightly saw "the theological argument that the Jews ... were the proper tradents of this tradition."¹⁶⁰ The other criterion was "catholicity ... which was expressed in an *unbroken continuity* of sacred tradition."¹⁶¹ The larger canon of the Vulgate is evidence of this principle. Childs acknowledges that the question of the canon's scope has not been settled to this day, and he grants that each side (now Protestant, Roman Catholic) has strengths and limitations, which is why he ultimately speaks of "the church's ongoing *search* for the Christian Bible." But it is also conspicuous that a completely "unbroken continuity" between text and tradition is not a Christian option. I quote from the German because of an important phrase that disappears in *BTONT*:

Die Gefahr der katholischen Position, in reichlichem Maß in der Kirchengeschichte veranschaulicht, lag natürlich in der Drohung, das Wort Gottes—oft im Namen der Frömmigkeit—zum Gefangenen der kirchlichen Traditionen zu machen. Läuft nicht letztlich eine Berufung auf die Tradition an sich, ohne daß der vom Inhalt des biblischen Zeugnisses ausgeübte kritische Maßstab berücksichtigt würde, dem einzigartigen christlichen Verständnis des Kanons, *das es vom jüdischen unterscheidet*, zuwider?¹⁶²

157. *Ibid.*, 24.

158. Compare *ibid.*, 25–26 with *BTONT*, 64–66.

159. *BTONT*, 64; Childs, *Biblische Theologie*, 25.

160. *BTONT*, 65. Cf. Childs, *Biblische Theologie*, 26. Jerome is not discussed, but: "Ein ebenso wichtiges Argument war der theologische Anlaß zur Solidarität mit den Juden, den auserwählten Tradenten dieser Tradition." In both places, Romans 9:5 is referenced. Romans 1:4 is added in *BTONT*.

161. *BTONT*, 65, my emphasis.

162. Childs, *Biblische Theologie*, 26. Compare *BTONT*, 67: "However, the danger of the Catholic position which emerged in the course of the church's history lay in the temptation to render the Word captive to more easily adaptable human traditions, often in the name of piety. Any appeal solely to tradition or praxis

The italicized line demonstrates how the Christian position at which Childs arrives has yet again been sharpened by the mysterious like and unlike of church and synagogue. Broken continuity is an imperative for Christian biblical theology, in contrast to Jewish exposition of the scriptures of Israel. Christ and not Torah became incarnate.

Let me summarize Childs' position by 1988. (1) Christology drove the church's "basic stance towards its canon." (2) We know this because the stance of the apostles to the Old Testament is different in kind to the stance of rabbinic sages to Tanak. Old and New have been juxtaposed, not brought into alignment. A dialectic results. (3) Yet because the church did not impose a christological redaction on the Old Testament, but received a form of it from the hands of the Jews, the dialectic does not sever the link between church and synagogue, but rather is *founded* on it. Like the early church, the modern church receives the OT as a witness to Christ according to its literal sense, and yet the ongoing life of the synagogue remains a strong theological argument for preferring the Hebrew Old Testament to the Greek. (4) But again, the scope of the canon is very much at issue. Canon does not require a resolution of the debate, but it does present one imperative to all interested parties: scripture is distinct from commentary. Its textual authority is ineluctable. Indeed, it may even fall to the church to pressure the synagogue on this point.¹⁶³ Scripture governs tradition, not the reverse.

WHITHER THE MYSTERY?

In 1996 Childs gives his fullest and most careful definition of midrash, complete with a reprise on Seeligmann (who argued that the roots of adaptive midrash in the late biblical peri-

apart from the critical norm exercised by the content of the biblical witness eventually runs counter to the essence of a Christian theology of canon."

163. Childs, *Critique*, 177: "Judaism distinguished sharply between text and commentary. Christianity continued this position in setting apart apostolic witness (text) from later church tradition. To retain this distinction both synagogue and church assigned a unique value to the text's plain or literal sense." On the other hand, Sheppard, *Criticism*, emphasizes that historic Christianity and Judaism took fundamentally different approaches to a common scriptural heritage. Midrash was formative in rabbinic Judaism, but Christians tended to prioritize "a nonmidrashic, 'plain' or 'literal sense'" (864).

od “assumed a quasi-stable biblical text which established fixed parameters”¹⁶⁴). The definition occurs in a discussion of the misapplication of midrash, especially in Wellhausen’s mode.¹⁶⁵

The concept of midrash had its origins within the specific historical context of rabbinic Judaism during the Tannaite and post-Tannaite periods. In the early 19th century Jewish scholars such as Zunz and Geiger found the warrant for this approach to interpretation already present in the late books of the Hebrew Bible, especially in Chronicles, but the technical use of the term is rabbinic in origin. The midrashic approach to exegesis worked with a variety of assumptions. It assumed a *largely stable text* of the Hebrew Scriptures which formed a coherent corpus of authoritative writings. The written text was complimented by a body of *equally authoritative oral tradition*. Scripture thus provided an inexhaustible resource for the interpreter to draw from the text religious wisdom for the continuing instruction of the community in Torah. Tensions which arose in the text were to be resolved with the help of oral tradition by a form of *intertextuality* in which one passage illuminated another according to a pattern of holistic reading. In sum, the midrashic method worked within carefully articulated restraints which were grounded in certain religious precepts of orthodox Judaism and which had been shaped by careful philological and contextual rules.¹⁶⁶

By emphasizing constraints and parameters on historic Jewish midrash, Childs also implicitly guards against misapplications by modern liberal Christians. But the *Schriftgelehrte* intertextuality seen in OT prophets (e.g., Third Isaiah) yet attests the authoritative “function of the biblical text. 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.”¹⁶⁷ It is simply that this authority functions differently in church and synagogue. Intertextuality (a species of figuration) will thus also be a different animal in Jewish exegesis. And yet a warrant for intertextual reading derives from the shape of the prophetic literature. “A prophetic text is specific and concrete, yet its imagery continues to reverberate within the tradition. It continues to exert a coercion on future generations of recipients and gives evidence of its force in the way in which a text is actualized to remain highly existential even in changing historical contexts.” An “echoing effect arises from a widespread conviction that the authority of a single text extends to the larger story and partakes in the selfsame reality.” This exegetical activity was

164. Childs, *Retrospective Reading*, 362.

165. The use of “midrash” in Clements, *Isaiah*, is “an unfortunate aberration akin to Wellhausen’s characterization of the Chronicler’s distortion of the book of Kings” (Childs, *Retrospective Reading*, 370). It smacks of “naïve supernaturalism or arid [*sic*] historical rationalism” (371). In 1967 Childs had of course covered much of the same ground as Clements in 1980.

166. *Ibid.*, 369–370, my emphasis. Cf. *OTTCC*, 213.

167. *Ibid.*, 375.

extended or retrojected in the formation of biblical prophecy, though in either case the “intertextuality rests on the same the inner logic of Scripture’s textual authority.”¹⁶⁸

We have seen how Childs criticizes Christian reliance on the hermeneutics of “Jewish midrash” (Sanders, Steins, Moberly, Frei). It should now be clearer why this is felt to be “incompatible with the New Testament’s understanding of the authoritative function of the Old Testament.” As Childs will emphasize in his Isaiah commentary in a few years, inner biblical exegesis is deictic, not midrashic.¹⁶⁹ That is, for the church OT intertextuality points not primarily to other OT texts, or to Torah; it points to God and Christ. Childs early study of midrash, combined with his research for *NTCI*, and catalyzed by an encounter with Neusner’s provocative *Midrash in Context*, leads Childs to revise his understanding of “midrash” so as to leave space for both Jewish and Christian understandings of the ongoing religious function of OT intertextuality, but also (even by retaining the designation OT) to mount a case for the fittingness of Israel’s *Christuszeugnis* in Christian confession. The Old Testament has been and is “continually transformed by the Spirit into the law of Christ.”

For an explanation of this conclusion in 2005 we were referred to an article in 2003 in which we are told why “it is not by chance that rabbinic Judaism interprets its Scriptures by means of midrash while Christianity has always found the form of allegory most compatible along with its traditional figurative subdivisions.” As Childs explains,

the major point to make is that midrash and allegory, in spite of large areas of overlap, are two very distinct and different interpretive strategies, reflecting very different hermeneutical understandings of how intertextuality functions. While midrash works at discerning meaning through the interaction of two written texts, allegory—I am using the term in its broadest sense—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. Christian exegetical use of intertextuality moves along a trajectory between promise and fulfillment within a larger christological structure.¹⁷⁰

In fact one has to look back much further in Childs’ corpus to get a sense of what he means by this. Belief in the advent of God the Son in the God of Israel’s providentially ordered time pushes him to adopt allegory rather than midrash. This is a gradual realization. The “mystery

168. *Ibid.*, 376.

169. *Isaiah*, 442, 445, 462, 479. See chapter three, above.

170. Childs, *Critique*, 182–183.

of Israel” seen already in 1970¹⁷¹ thickens considerably for Childs through the 1980s as he gears up to write his magnum opus. In response to Rendtorff’s affronted review of it he writes, “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.”¹⁷² Thus the phrase “mystery of Israel” surfaces again in the Isaiah commentary of 2001,¹⁷³ and the concept is integral to Childs’ subsequent struggle alongside the church to understand Isaiah as Christian scripture, in 2004.

This is the context in which Childs’ remarks on figuration and biblical intertextuality have to be understood. When Steins, for example, says the “interpretatorisch relevante Bezugspunkt ist der Text,”¹⁷⁴ he steps in a direction that Childs associates with midrash, and therefore cannot follow. The Jewish technique has a number of formal characteristics. For one, “it focuses on the surface irregularities as signaling a tension to be overcome in reaching a new coherent understanding.” For another, it “is an exegesis of biblical verses, not of books, which means that each verse is in principle connected to the most distant text as much as to its adjacent neighbor.” It “remains concrete in its focus in moving between two texts rather than in seeking a hidden semantic level below or above the written corpus.” In Jewish reading this may be appropriate and justifiable. After all, “proto-midrashic techniques had already appeared in the post-exilic biblical period and provided a biblical warrant for seeing a strong element of continuity between the earlier and later periods.”¹⁷⁵ But as a figural technique,

171. *Crisis*, 122.

172. Childs, *Witness to Christ?*, 64. Cf. Childs, *On Reclaiming*, 13: the canonical approach “initially agrees with the Enlightenment in affirming that the Old Testament should be understood in its own right. Nevertheless, it interprets this move in a very different manner. The Old Testament is to be understood in its own right because it has its own Jewish voice, which was never altered by the coming of Jesus Christ.” The mystery has more to do with a regard for Israel present than Israel past, although both considerations come into play.

173. *Isaiah*, 59, 326. For a discussion of these and related passages, see the next chapter.

174. Steins, *Bindung*, 73. Although I am not entirely convinced Childs has the measure of Steins (see chapters one and three), Steins official focus on the text in 1999 is quite explicit. I am even less sure the criticism, insofar as it applies to Steins, can be transposed to Moberly. See his remarks under Objection 5, above.

175. Childs, *Critique*, 182. And: “Midrash as Oral Torah is a program of preserving the old by making it constantly new.”

midrashic intertextuality is insufficiently christological on Childs’ reading. Bound to the literal sense, Christian allegory “finds meaning by moving to another level beyond the textual.”

CONCLUSION: HIGHEST COMMON DENOMINATOR JEWISH-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

James Kugel has recently expressed gratitude for Childs’ theologically minded work, and initially he is well-disposed toward the canonical approach.¹⁷⁶ But Kugel asserts that “Childs does not go far enough” in defending the final form over its earlier stages.¹⁷⁷ Describing the transformation of biblical literature that transpired late in the biblical period does not sufficiently account for the status of scripture as such. For Kugel “it was not principally the rearranging and interpolating done by editors that turned these ancient writings into Scripture, but the whole tradition of interpretation that emerged toward the end of the biblical period.” The emphasis on canon is selective (it smacks of the “Protestant allegiance to the Bible alone”), and it underplays the traditional rules of interpretation which in a sense also became “canonical”: “It does not seem to realize that the earliest ‘community of believers’ canonized not only the text but their own peculiar way of reading and interpreting it.”¹⁷⁸

Unfortunately, Kugel overlooks the full implications of canon for a ruled, Christian approach to scripture, visible in hindsight no later than 1969 (symptomatically, he neglects Childs’ work after 1979, and he leaves the secondary literature with Barton in 1984). More importantly, however, he raises the issue of scripture and tradition from the perspective of Jewish faith steeped in critical biblical scholarship. In contrast to the Protestant affection for *sola scriptura*, Kugel sees that the “situation in Judaism is quite the opposite.”¹⁷⁹ Traditional interpretation was codified alongside the Torah as Oral Torah. “Although these two bodies of writings were, and are, said to be of equal authority, in practice, the Oral Torah always

176. Kugel, *Guide*, v, lists Childs’ name at the top of a list of former teachers and colleagues whom he wished to thank, along with Frank Cross and Isadore Twersky of Harvard. Kugel also stood up at the small memorial session for Childs in Vienna (International SBL, 25 July 2007) to offer remembrances and to praise “that wonderful piece on the literal sense” (i.e., 1977).

177. *Ibid.*, 768n36 (the footnote numbering is off by one; this is note 35 in the body of the text, page 678).

178. *Ibid.*, 679.

179. *Ibid.*, 679.

wins.”¹⁸⁰ And this is what makes traditional Jewish belief fundamentally irreconcilable with critical biblical scholarship, since the latter expunges traditional interpretation from the text's original meaning. Kugel's solution to this impasse as an observant Jew and former Starr professor of Hebrew at Harvard may or may not satisfy. (Of course the same goes for Childs' solution, in the end.) But the point to underscore here is that Kugel pushes Childs to go *further* than he thinks he does. My thesis in this chapter is that he goes a good deal further, starting precisely when he canvases the New Testament's witness to Christ en route to his biblical theology of 1992. What are the implications of this turn for Jewish-Christian dialogue in global, academic, intra- and inter-confessional settings?

In a way not necessarily incompatible with Kugel's position, Childs opts for highest common denominator Jewish-Christian dialogue. As I said at the start of this section (chapter three), the inner logic of scripture's textual authority has an outer logic for Childs as well—or better, a broader inner logic. Childs spends the back half of his career charting a more overtly Christian response to the challenge to faith posed by critical scholarship, and one should have to think twice before striking this route—in this day perhaps truly the road less travelled—from the map. Rendtorff voices a keenly felt objection (is not the *Christuszeugnis* mutually exclusive of the “mystery of Israel”?), but he exhibits a sad failure of ecumenical imagination at this point. And if affirming the Christian witness of the OT is somehow constitutive of historic Christian faith, the latter-day plea for *Religionsgeschichte* by Albertz, inter alia, would actually make Jewish-Christian dialogue impossible by definition, denying the second class its historical and theological foundation and so its right to exist.

Perhaps Jews and Christians should pressure one another in their readings of the Bible on the basis of their mutual and competing claims to inherit its testimony. “Reflections on an Era” closes by applauding the German canon debate for its focus on the central relationship of the testaments and the implications for Jewish-Christian dialogue, yet the piece voices “strong disagreement” over two issues. One, theological compromise with criticism is not an option.

180. Ibid., 680.

To strike the right balance between the "theological reading" of the Bible as a "witness to God's divine revelation in Jesus Christ," and "a historical critical reconstruction of the biblical text," both aspects are required. Scripture is a "human, fully time-conditioned" witness, *and* "the Holy Spirit unlocks its truthful message to its hearers in the mystery of faith."¹⁸¹ Two, soft ecumenism must be avoided. "The gospel is neither simply an extension of the old covenant, nor is it merely a commentary on the Jewish Scriptures, but it is an explosion of God's good news. The theological paradox is that the radically new has already been testified to by the Old (cf. Mk. 1:12; Heb 1:1)." What is more, "there remains a dark side of the New Testament's witness": "all Israel will be saved" (cf. Rom. 9–11), but "hardening has come on part of Israel." Israel *will* be saved, though not "by religious pluralism or ecumenical inclusivity, but by a divine eschatological event."¹⁸² As Childs summarizes elsewhere,

A major point to emphasize is that 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 *hesed* 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.¹⁸³

It goes without saying that this is a decidedly Christian take on the relationship of church and synagogue (and possibly a discernibly Protestant one, too). Maybe one should not expect less.

181. Childs, *Reflections on an Era*, 44.

182. *Ibid.*, 45. Cf. also *Struggle*, 306–308.

183. Childs, *Witness to Christ?*, 63–64, cf. *idem*, *Toward Recovering*, 25–26.

PART III **THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST**

CHAPTER 6 CRITICISM AND THE RULE: TWO MEASURES OF ALLEGORY

Where there is no critical interpretation of Scripture, there will be a mystical or rhetorical one. If words have more than one meaning, they may have any meaning. Instead of being a rule of life or faith, Scripture becomes the expression of the ever-changing aspect of religious opinions.

—Benjamin Jowett

Without a form of allegory that at least allows for analogy, the biblical text can only be an object of archaeological interest.

—Frances Young

Allegory furnishes a way of talking about biblical reference. Of course in the modern period the method has been roundly criticized and rejected. Did it not allow pre-critical interpreters to impose a dogmatic overlay on the true, real or plain meaning of scripture? For a classic expression of this concern one would be pressed to find a stronger representative than Benjamin Jowett, who was troubled by the way scripture could be made to mean anything. Like the wind-vane on the belfry, it turns wherever the winds of dogma blow. Counteracting this, in 1860 Jowett appeals to scripture's "plain and obvious meaning," to its "one sense": "For many remains of the mystical interpretation exist among ourselves; it is not the early fathers only who have read the Bible crosswise, or deciphered it as a book of symbols." It does not matter if the departure from the plain sense is slight. Frankly, any foray into the "mystical and allegorical" is treacherous. "A little more or a little less of the method does not make the difference between certainty and uncertainty in the interpretation of Scripture. In whatever degree it is practised it is equally capable of being reduced to any rule; it is the interpreter's fancy, and it is likely to be not less but more dangerous and extravagant when it adds to the charm of authority from its use in past ages."¹ Adherence to the one true meaning of a biblical text, critically arbitrated, is the best and indeed the only safeguard.

1. Jowett, *Interpretation*, 369.

Rules and creeds, whether Catholic or Protestant, unitarian, binitarian or trinitarian, are forever overriding, *overruling*, the one sense of scripture. No rule is better than any other in this respect—except (of course) the rule of common sense. For Jowett this does not destroy the Bible's privileged and authoritative status, as one might suppose, but actually restores its occluded power. "When interpreted like any other book, by the same rules of evidence and the same canons of criticism, the Bible will still remain unlike any other book; its beauty will be freshly seen, as of a picture which is restored after many ages to its original state; it will create a new interest and make for itself a new kind of authority by the life which is in it."² To get there, however, one must banish the figurative methods which sponsor established rules and canons. "Where there is no critical interpretation of Scripture, there will be a mystical or rhetorical one. If words have more than one meaning, they may have any meaning. Instead of being a rule of life or faith, Scripture becomes the expression of the ever-changing aspect of religious opinions."³ Applicative steps may follow criticism, and should, but only on the condition that they build upon the bedrock of honest, reasonable inquiry which truth demands. Critical interpretation rules allegorical or figural interpretation out of bounds because the latter contrives meanings and referents foreign to scripture's native voice.

Jowett also believed that allegory was on the decline. "The mystical explanations of Origen or Philo were not seen to be mystical; the reasonings of Aquinas and Calvin were not supposed to go beyond the letter of the text." Yet in a new day these revered interpretations "are no longer tenable." (The proof is that those who uphold them resort to apologetic.) They "belong to a way of thinking and speaking which was once diffused over the world, but had now passed away."⁴ Surely in just a little time multi-level readings of the Bible would be nothing more than a faint memory.

By the late twentieth century that outcome began to look much less inevitable. In 1981 Andrew Louth delivered a paper in defense of allegory, even at Oxford.⁵ At the end of that

2. Ibid., 375.

3. Ibid., 372.

4. Ibid., 419.

5. See now "Return to Allegory" in Louth, *Mystery*.

decade Louth's colleague James Barr concluded that allegory had not only not been expelled from the canons of criticism, but in fact was alive and well in critical biblical scholarship. Moreover, for Barr this was not altogether lamentable. Then Childs, who discovered Louth's call slightly later than Barr, began to consider its implications from another point of view. Although Barr and Childs arrive at contrary understandings of allegory's bearing on the interpretation of scripture, in the end both will disagree with Jowett that allegory had outlived its time. Thus in this chapter, in order to refine the contrast between two almost perfect contemporaries, I will look at two modern-day measures of allegory, one by a thing called criticism, another by the rule or canon of faith. To anticipate, my thesis will be that in each case, for Barr and for Childs, allegory has rules.

As a point of departure, it will be helpful to introduce a simple definition of allegory. Allegory, for Childs and Barr in different ways, means locating the true meaning of scripture at another level than the level of the text. For Childs' part, in the previous chapter we saw that he affirms Christian allegory (as opposed to Jewish midrash) for the way it moves biblical interpretation to a "level beyond the textual." This is not an entirely new idea to him in 2003. As we saw in chapter two, at the Yale colloquium for Barth in 1969 he draws a very similar conclusion: "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."⁶ So to claim that the Old Testament is a witness to Christ, which Childs does in 1992, he finds himself having to rethink the modern ban on allegory. The dialectic involved in expositing Christian scripture as a witness to the one God could well *require* allegory, or something very like it.

Barr does not actually think Childs' approach moves beyond the text and in criticizing "canon criticism" for this he reveals how important it is in his own program. Childs is literalistic because he makes the text a closed system, "an intellectual ghetto separated from all other truth by the walls of relevance."⁷ This is fatal since theology "comes into existence *only when*

6. Childs, *Barth as Interpreter*, 56.

7. Barr, *Holy Scripture*, 168.

one moves out of the plane of the text itself and begins to ask about the extrinsic realities to which the text refers." For Barr "no step in the actual operation of canonical criticism can be described as genuinely theological. It does not attempt to wrestle with the question of *truth*."⁸ And truth, for reasons I will develop below, requires that biblical interpretation move away from the text to some other level of meaning. Barr may share more with Jowett at this point than with Childs, but it is intriguing that Barr and Childs both move toward an affirmation of allegory later in their careers, that in qualified senses they accept this traditional term, and that differences between them here correspond to the ways they understand the Bible and the realities to which it refers.

In the first section I will look at Barr, and in the second, at Childs. Then in a final section I will contrast the way their approaches to the OT as Christian scripture impact their doctrines of the Trinity, which correlate directly to their views on the nature of biblical reference. Before proceeding, a few more introductory remarks about literature are in order.

A LONG CHAIN OF DISAGREEMENTS: PROFESSORS BARR AND CHILDS

The best-known exchange between Barr and Childs turns out to be fairly one-sided. Subsequent to reviewing *IOTS*, which permanently altered his opinion of Childs' project, Barr took a different look back at Childs' piece in the 1977 Festschrift for Walther Zimmerli (both had contributed essays). "The Sensus Literalis of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem" became the occasion for Barr's "Jowett and the Reading of the Bible 'Like Any Other Book'" (1982), in which he challenged Childs' emphasis on historicism in appraising biblical criticism. Jowett was not really a *historical* critic as alleged, although he was indeed a critic, and a (liberal) theologian. This prominent case does not fit Childs' description of criticism and thus casts doubt on his wider diagnosis. In fact, Jowett offers a salutary alternative vision to the distorting one cast by Childs. Childs never directly responded, however. Barr resumed the offensive in "The Literal, the Allegorical, and Modern Biblical Scholarship" (1989), quoting some of

8. Ibid., 102, my emphasis (though the emphasis on *truth* is original).

the same offending lines that he had in 1982 and widening his counter-analysis of the literal sense in biblical scholarship to include allegorical and theological senses, which on his read are far more integral to biblical criticism than typically held. Two issues later, *JSOT* featured Childs' brief, six page response (1990). Barr replied twice more. In 1993 he wrote of Wilhelm Vischer, whose name emerged as yet another "link in the (seemingly endless) chain of disagreements between the writer and Professor Childs,"⁹ arguing this time that Vischer operated not in an allegorical mode, but in a literal-historical mode (or quasi-historical—Vischer seems not to have been very *critical* on Barr's reading). Finally, "Allegory and Historicism" appeared in 1996, in which Barr again took Childs to task for his devaluation of the Enlightenment and his attendant failure to come to terms with the theological challenge posed by truly critical biblical scholarship.

Childs did address this front of Barr's attack on other occasions, such as in a few pages of *OTTCC* and in his review of Barr's *Holy Scripture*. Inferences can also be drawn about the *Festschrift* items each wrote in honor of the other. Barr sketched what he supposed to be the theologian's case *against* biblical theology,¹⁰ whereas Childs wrote of an almost forgotten era whose biblical scholars, despite their reputation for polemics, achieved a surprisingly broad "interconfessional and international range" of engagement, possible in part because of a shared language (Latin), but also, significantly, because of a shared commitment to the literal sense.¹¹ Multi-level readings of scripture were permissible in the seventeenth century but clearly to be distinguished from scripture's plain sense. Consensus was destroyed by loss of this in the rise of historical criticism, not enabled by it.¹² Given the paucity of direct rebuttal, however, it appears that Childs largely turned away from the long chain of disagreements with

9. Barr, Vischer, 38.

10. Barr, *Against Biblical Theology*.

11. Childs, *Seventeenth Century*, 326; cf. 333: "the literal sense was considered by all to have the greatest authority and not to be abused when moving to a different level of interpretation."

12. *Ibid.*, 333: "Few would wish to deprecate the enormous gains in understanding which emerged from the new historical methods. Yet perhaps one of its greatest ill effects was that it initially nourished and exacerbated the disharmony between Catholics and Protestants which has only recently begun to heal." Contrast Barr, *Bibelkritik*, 37–38, or *Holy Scripture*, 150.

Barr to spend his energy on other pursuits.¹³ Barr sought twice to discount the story told in “*Sensus Literalis*,” an anticipatory stand-in for the thesis across *IOTS* and one that required less digging to undermine,¹⁴ and he got a single public reply. He probed that response twice again, but the improbable provocation with which his fourth rebuke closed—“What else did I say?”—finally went unanswered.

Perhaps because of Childs’ silence, which is even more conspicuous following *Concept*, Paul Noble once attempted to referee. “The *Sensus Literalis*: Jowett, Childs, and Barr” (1993) surveys the debate up to that stage,¹⁵ examines Jowett again, and sides by and large with Childs. Noble points to precarious foundations underlying Barr’s treatment of Jowett and then argues positively that Childs’ focus on Jowett’s interest in the original meaning, as one index of how history somehow acquired prominence in the critical era, is justifiable. Barr introduces an important qualification or two, but “interpreting the Bible ‘like any other book’ was a rubric that had strong anti-canonical, pro-original connotations.”¹⁶

I do not intend to re-open the question of Jowett’s significance for trends in biblical scholarship, except insofar as it is a link in the chain under consideration. I do wish to revisit this Childs/Barr exchange, however, for two main reasons. First, it acts as a coda to the first chapters of this thesis. I hope to sharpen the theological and hermeneutical contrasts between these scholars, both giants in their time. Second, Barr serves well to introduce, largely by inversion, Childs’ thought on the *sensus literalis*, allegory, the rule of faith, the value of traditional exegesis in contemporary scholarship and theology—all of which I gloss as Childs’

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13. It is worth pointing out that Childs always remembered some of Barr’s contributions favorably. For instance, after reviewing *Semantics* in 1961 (where he expresses appreciation and “frequent disagreement” [377]), he invariably affirms the core of that book’s critique. Childs’ criticism of Moberly for the fallacy of “totality transfer” in 2003 is a dramatic instance of this, and it is not an isolated one.
 14. Barr, *Allegory*, 109–110: “I make no pretense of having done the extensive study of past exegesis that Childs has done. I only say that, at various points where I have made soundings, my impression has been a very different one.” Barr’s obstinate refusal to credit Childs’ wide reading is bewildering. Has Childs really “forfeited the right to instruct us about history”?
 15. Barr acknowledged the piece in 1996 but seems not to have been affected by its argument, unless it prompted him to declare Mark Brett’s *earlier* account “the best discussion published” (*Concept*, 392).
 16. Noble, *Sensus Literalis*, 7. Barr’s argument about Jowett has been invoked recently by Barton, *Nature*, 40, 69–71, who unfortunately shows no awareness of Noble’s challenge.

sourcing of the tradition. In this Noble offers a better reading of Childs than does Barr, but he too overlooks the full, programmatic significance of traditional discourse for Childs.

Finally, a word of caution. The danger of terminological slippage between Barr and Childs can be severe. I have already argued that Barr is not a reliable guide to Childs' thought in general—frequently because Barr operates with narrower definitions, e.g. of canon (a list of books) or of history (the truth about what really happened)—and this is no less true when they conflict over traditional categories like spirit and letter. I fully agree with Noble “that Barr has largely missed the point that Childs is making” in 1977,¹⁷ as with his identification of the reason for Barr's misunderstanding of Childs on the *sensus literalis*. After comparing Barr and Childs on of creation in Genesis, Noble summarizes,

Barr is here using “literal” in a quite different sense from Childs. Childs' use of “literal,” when characterizing critical studies, affirms that Gen. 2 f. was interpreted as evidence for a positivity behind the text. But whether, when interpreted literally in *this* sense, it informed one of specific (purported) facts about a historical Adam and Eve—i.e. whether it is also “literal” in Barr's sense—or whether it is a witness to general truths about man's creaturely status—i.e. is “allegorical” in Barr's sense—is a different question entirely.¹⁸

Thus in what follows I will not trouble much with Barr's complaints against Childs but will concentrate instead on each scholar's distinct understanding of letter in relation to spirit. Barr has set himself as Childs' foil on things literal and allegorical, and so we will explore further contrasts between them before attempting a fuller articulation of why and how Childs sources the Christian tradition.

I. BARR AND THE (ALLEGORICAL) NATURE OF BIBLICAL CRITICISM

If a statement equivalent to Childs' seminal “Sensus Literalis” exists for Barr, it would almost certainly be his “Bibelkritik als theologische Aufklärung,” an essay presented in 1981 at a Vienna conference on the Enlightenment's theological legacy. In it the impact of the then-recent *IOTS* is muted but palpable. One senses that Barr is still swimming in the wake of that argument but that he has found his bearings and plotted a course. He sets forth a bracing revi-

17. Noble, *Sensus Literalis*, 9, cf. 12.

18. *Ibid.*, 13.

sion of biblical criticism which, as a theology of biblical authority, must have been honed as an alternative to the one associated with canon. "Bibelkritik" grounds what he will eventually say about the canonical approach in 1983 and beyond. Themes in the essay recall Barr's earlier work, too, but have been marshalled to a new, clearer purpose. At its core, Barr now claims, criticism is not a method, nor a mode of historical inquiry, but rather a world-view in its own right: biblical criticism is "auch eine Weltanschauung, die in genau demselben vielseitigen Verhältnis zur Philosophie, zur Literaturanalyse, und besonders zur Geschichte der Theologie steht."¹⁹ *Freedom* is its most essential characteristic; its most important task, to liberate God's people from dogmatic systems that threaten powerfully to imprison their minds.

John Barton, in a recent book dedicated to Barr's memory, signals the importance of "Bibelkritik" by citing the essay as one of two core stimuli to his own thinking over decades (the other is *Holy Scripture*). *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* dovetails again and again with themes discussed below, even as Barton's earlier work echos Barr at many points. Since Barr's foundations remain my primary concern I will reference *Nature* only as necessary. Yet its title, adapted for the present section heading, serves well as an epithet for the Barr/Barton counter-offensive. I choose it aware that Barton selects for a similar purpose *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, a collected volume with a name parallel though not quite identical to Childs' title essay.²⁰ Barton's declaration that "[t]here is a battle going on at the moment between those who believe that biblical criticism is too much in the grip of a secular and skeptical spirit and those who think it has still not managed to escape the hand of ecclesiastical and religious authority" is a touch dramatic, and his report on the munitions of theological exegetes lacks nuance,²¹ yet he succeeds in underlining and extending the line Barr begins to draw in the sand in 1981. For Barton as for Barr, the stakes of war are nothing less than religious and intellectual freedom.

19. Barr, *Bibelkritik*, 30.

20. Childs, *On Reclaiming*, cf. Barton, *Nature*, 142.

21. *Ibid.*, 185. For an extensive review see Moberly, *Biblical Criticism*. Moberly finds much to commend, but he observes "that Barton, despite his professed concern not to distort the case for 'theological reading,' has in fact patently distorted it. For some reason, when he comes to theological issues, Barton loses both the nuance and the irenic spirit of the preceding discussion" (76).

The hallmarks of Barr's proposal, then, are as follows. It begins with a semantic shift. Rather than the typical designation "historical-critical method," current among its advocates and opponents, the older designation "biblical criticism" is much to be preferred. Advocates should welcome the shift as a move to territory less vulnerable to the sniping of those who resist. Yet not so much a retreat from the embattled term "history," it recognizes the properly basic characteristics of biblical criticism, especially "Literaturverständnis."²² (Hence the allergy to Introduction—the genre focuses too exclusively on historical matters which, although possessing real importance, are ancillary to the critical enterprise.) Theology is a basic ingredient as well, of which the essence, again, is freedom. Barr struggles a bit to identify the theological heritage of criticism, vacillating from Luther's reformation ideals, where a congruence with Paul is considered, to the Renaissance, where Aristotle or John Dryden might be named, to the Enlightenment, when critical ideals first blossomed.²³ Yet there can be no doubt that criticism is a theological category. Barr explains,

Kritik ist kein neutraler Begriff, auch keine Methode, auch kein Forschungsbereich wie die Einleitungswissenschaft. Die Idee Kritik verweist auf die Freiheit. Sie ist keine Methode, sondern die Freiheit, die Ergebnisse der Methode anzunehmen. Man kann sogenannte "moderne Methoden" anwenden, ohne im geringsten vom Geiste der Kritik berührt zu werden. Kritik bedeutet die Bereitschaft, nicht nur Methoden anzuwenden, sondern ihnen zu folgen, wohin immer sie führen mögen. Auf die Bibel angewandt, bedeutet das besonders: die Freiheit, zu exegetischen Ergebnissen zu kommen, die von der früheren theologischen Exegese abweichen. In diesem Sinne ist die Kritik ein Kind der Aufklärung; aber zugleich auch ein Kind der Reformation, denn die Theologie der Reformation war in diesem Sinne ausgesprochen "kritisch." Die theologische Tradition war nicht mehr imstande, die Möglichkeiten der Interpretation vollkommen zu bestimmen.²⁴

Barr thus asserts Christian grounds for an ideal that long predates freedom's secular pedigree, that has first-order consequences for any understanding of the Bible's place in religious discourse, and that impacts directly (positively, though often by negation) on the well-being of believing communities.

22. Barr, *Bibelkritik*, 31. Or in Barton's formulation of 1984: genre competence.

23. *Ibid.*, see 33, 32 and 34, respectively.

24. *Ibid.*, 32. To say one can wield critical tools without having the critical spirit is likely a dig at Childs, and it may contextualize Barr's intransigent use of the phrase "canon criticism" over and against Childs' express preference for "canonical approach."

Then again, there is clearly something pivotal about post-traditional scholarship. Barr's title already indicates the centrality of the Enlightenment in his critical paradigm. As he worries in his review of *IOTS*, Childs seems not to see that "critical study" makes "a quite *decisive* difference to our understanding of scripture."²⁵ Over time Barr only becomes more adamant about our need to hearken the sea change. As in "Bibelkritik," so in 1999 one finds the belief that criticism emerged to counterbalance the weight of tradition, a burden which threatens to overwhelm scripture's essential meaning to this very day.

Theological interpretation is already there in the mind of the student before any exegetical courses are undertaken. Theology has priority. It comes from the religious tradition and is inculcated *as the essential meaning of scripture* before any academic exegesis is done. Exegesis therefore does not work by *initiating*, in the absence of theology, a move which should eventually lead to some sort of theological interpretation. On the contrary, it operates as a *critical* force, questioning the theology that is already there, asking whether it really has a biblical basis, enriching it with new information and perspectives.²⁶

Against pre-critical retrenchment on the one hand (Childs on Barr's read), and post-critical revolt on the other (Brueggemann), Barr insists that a critical paradigm remains the best option. In the history of ideas, the Enlightenment first secured a vantage from which to evaluate scriptural truth—to interrogate what we might now call theological exegesis—and the hard lesson taught in that Age has not yet been learned, let alone surpassed.

So we can see a certain ambivalence about the tradition. Barr's model claims kinship with the greatest successes of the American experiment. It also wants to own classic theological texts like Galatians 5. Since tension can arise between secular and religious warrants, Barr seems to recognize that Joseph II's edict of religious tolerance in 1781 supplies one of his best precedents, an event of religious moment with a firm setting in the Age of Enlightenment. Yet

25. Barr, Childs' Introduction, 17, original emphasis. Cf. *Concept*, 553, where Barr has Childs compete with Walter Brueggemann for the obviously undesirable "prize" title "greater hater of the Enlightenment." It is awarded to Brueggemann on a technicality.

26. Barr, *Concept*, 79, original emphasis. For an early rendition of the same theme, see Barr, *Old and New*, 170. As an aside, Barton's allegation in 1984 that "canon criticism" is parasitic, that without criticism proper it would cease to exist appears to be internally inconsistent. (For Barr, too, biblical theology "depends for its existence upon that with which it is contrasted": *Concept*, 5.) Is the watchdog criticism any less dependent on the intruders whom he warns with his bark? Without a collar and an estate, even a pit-bull is just a stray. As Barton puts it, "One of the most basic functions of criticism is to criticize, not the Bible itself, but people's understanding of the Bible. And one aspect of this is by showing that texts do not mean what they have commonly been taken to mean" (*Nature*, 102). Without misunderstanding, criticism, or at least one of its most basic functions, would cease to exist.

if it ever comes to a serious contest between the the received religious understanding of a text and that text's native meaning—which happens only rarely, Barr assures us, criticism as a rule having upheld traditional beliefs in practice—but when such a conflict arises, the critical impulse plays trump. Every conceivable secular investigation of the Bible should be welcomed as potentially enriching—but again, such openness is manifestly for the health *of the church*.²⁷ The energy Barr spends thinking about the good of faith communities, especially (as a minister ordained in the Church of Scotland) Christian ones, points to an unfeigned theological motivation to his theory, and to a conflicted one.

AMBIGUITIES

To better appreciate the distance that opens between Barr and Childs after *IOTS*, it is worth teasing out some of the ambiguities arising from Barr's dual commitment to the church and the academy.

THE CHURCH'S BOOK?

Barr's first interaction with *IOTS* carries the not entirely ironic title "The Bible as a Document of Believing Communities." The companion keynote to Gerhard Ebeling's "The Bible as a Document of the University," it was delivered at the University of Chicago in 1979. In it Barr should more or less be taken at face value when writing, "The effectiveness of the Bible as a document of the believing community is related to the extent to which the study of it is shared by the believing community with the academic world."²⁸ From one perspective the Bible *is* the church's book, he concedes—except the only way to keep the book is by giving it away. As we have just seen, Barr reflects on how the church's misuse of scripture hinders its life so that he can commend its health. But he is also aware that Ebeling's title captures the spirit of his argument better than the one he was (presumably) assigned.²⁹ "It was a major aspect of

27. One good example of this concern at work is a surprisingly long discussion of criticism's practical use to preachers (*Old and New*, 188–200). Similarly, cf. *Holy Scripture*, 92.

28. Barr, *Believing Communities*, 36–37.

29. Barr cites Ebeling, whom he reads as collateral support for his own thesis, repeatedly in the chain of

the Protestant Reformation that it sought to liberate scripture from its bondage to traditional doctrine; and this was a correct insight. But of course, as manifold experience has shown, Protestantism is fully as capable as was medieval Catholicism of imprisoning the variety of the biblical message within a rigid doctrinal system."³⁰ Because of this very present danger, the church must forego any exclusive right to scripture and acknowledge its need for competent academic input. Short of this, "the Bible *will be imprisoned* in the categories of the present religious community and *will cease* to have *any* new message to deliver."³¹ Barr himself once saw that this extreme result does not follow necessarily from the church's claim to a privileged relationship with her scriptures.³² But henceforth for Barr, the church must find by losing.

Elsewhere the implication is even more overt. "Mit dem Auftreten der Bibelkritik war also eine Verlagerung der Kriterien für die Richtigkeit einer Exegese eingetreten. Denn die Antworten auf kritische Fragen erforderten als Maßstab nicht mehr die kirchliche Lehre, sondern die Forschung."³³ Once criticism came of age, the rules of arbitration changed for good. The Bible is the church's book, but not.

THE WORD OF GOD?

An extension of this paradoxical view falls under the rough heading "Word of God," which includes aspects of inspiration and revelation. Barr's position invites comparison with Jowett's, with whom I shall begin.³⁴ Jowett makes two distinctions about inspiration, word

disagreements he forges with Childs: *Bibelkritik*, 32; *Literal, Allegorical*, 7; *Allegory*, 108. But then again so does Childs: *Barr's Understanding*, 4 (for a gauge of Childs' views on the relationship of church to academy see: Search). Cf. also Barton, *Nature*, 121.

30. Barr, *Believing Communities*, 36.

31. *Ibid.*, 37, my emphasis. The deduction is spurious.

32. In a slightly earlier essay on a similar theme (Barr, *Biblical Study?*, originally his inaugural lecture as Oriel Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture at Oxford, 26 May 1977) he greets the 20th century separation of biblical studies from the domain of theology but concludes modestly: "Theological study of the Bible does take place in the context of the church; but that is not the only context it has" (29). He rejects only the extreme views that would either rule out theological conviction in interpretation, or non-theological conviction. The new emphasis in 1979 recalls *Concept*, in which Barr wants a *mandatory* separation of disciplines (see chapter two).

33. Barr, *Bibelkritik*, 33–34.

34. Barr says Jowett is wrong about some things (e.g., Barr, *Jowett and Reading*, 38–39), but also holds Jowett up as the prime example of a non-historicist critic. Cf. Barr, *Jowett and Original*. What follows should justify a limited comparison.

with a thousand faces. First, sound ideas about inspiration must derive from scripture. “There is no other source to which we can turn for information; and we have no right to assume some imaginary doctrine of inspiration like the infallibility of the Roman Catholic Church.” Seen as a whole, the book itself attests considerable diversity, even outright contradiction. A doctrine of inspiration must therefore comprehend “imperfect or opposite aspects of the truth as in the book of Job or Ecclesiastes,” and “inaccuracies.”³⁵ How do all these divergences hold together? “A principle of progressive revelation admits them all.”³⁶ Other, *a priori* or supernaturalistic doctrines mute scripture’s testimony. Worse, they are culpably blind to its internal discrepancies. Second, “any true doctrine of inspiration must conform to all well-ascertained facts of history or of science. The same fact cannot be true and untrue.” From science we know that many supposed facts in scripture, such as those pertaining to the formation of the world, are false. It would be foolhardy to pit biblical “truth” against scientific truth. Rather, “[a]s the idea of nature enlarges, the idea of revelation also enlarges; it was a temporary misunderstanding which severed them.”³⁷ Just so with enlightened historical results. These “cannot be barred by the dates or narrative of Scripture; neither should they be made to wind round into agreement with them. Again, the idea of inspiration must expand and take them in.”³⁸ In short, the combined investigation of scripture and the natural universe requires a dynamic, expansive doctrine of inspiration.

Barr agrees on both points with little qualification. First, approaches to scripture must on no account be *deductive*, he argues in 1983. They cannot work top down from a theory of inspiration. An *inductive* approach, on the other hand, rightly observes how little the Bible actually says about its authority, and it notes the diversity of content that inherently resists systematization. In this way, attention to the Bible guards against all forms of presuppositionalism, including that confused manifestation of it, “canon criticism.”³⁹ As for progressive revela-

35. Jowett, *Interpretation*, 347.

36. *Ibid.*, 348.

37. *Ibid.*, 348.

38. *Ibid.*, 350.

39. Barr, *Holy Scripture*, 22, 112, 166.

tion, there is a sense in which one can appreciate how the words of man to or about God became the words of God to man, but this concession is set firmly in a historical (sequential, horizontal) trajectory—"the primary direction of movement is *not from God to man, but from earlier to later*."⁴⁰ The most obvious departure from Jowett is in Barr's abandoning, rather than merely expanding, dogmatic categories like revelation. As Barr writes already in 1966, "revelation ... introduces as a controlling theological concept one the function of which is quite out of harmony with the problems existing in the biblical situation." Belief in revelation might once have been excusable, but not in the critical age: "when modern theologians like Barth tried both to rehabilitate biblical authority in the Church and to do this on the basis of a controlling centrality of the concept of revelation, understandable as it was on the basis of older custom..., they were introducing a damaging contradiction."⁴¹ Indeed, for Barr there are few better illustrations of theology's diminution of biblical realities.

Second, the critically enlightened do not shy from untruth in scripture. At the heart of Barr's argument that modern scholars have not in fact been driven by a commitment to the literal sense is the premise that the literal sense is sometimes, perhaps often, false: "biblical criticism, taken in a broad sense, showed that the Bible, or some significant elements within it, was not literally true."⁴² Critics have been "allegorical" in that they have continued to seek the truth of scripture *at some level*, that is, at a level different from the literal sense. Note that it is the *failure* of the text at the literal level that thrusts the pursuit of truth into an "allegorical" mode. Why adhere to the literal sense when the Bible is "literally" false at so many points? This would make the text a ghetto—and it makes moving "out of the plane of the text" an imperative. In all this Barr is not at all unlike Jowett on his own reading: "Jowett was a critic in the sense that the diversity of the Bible, and the *diversity and indirectness of its relation to fact*

40. Barr, *Believing Communities*, 29, my emphasis. For a discussion of this quote's context, see the the introduction to section two, below.

41. Barr, *Old and New*, 90.

42. Barr, *Literal, Allegorical*, 8.

and to theological truth, were obvious to him from the beginning.”⁴³ Is Barr speaking for Jowett, or for himself?

IN COMPANY WITH THE AUTHOR: OR, IN PURSUIT OF THE MINDS OF MEN

Along with making truth non-literal, Barr sometimes appeals to the situation of “men in biblical times” who did not have a Bible as we do. The Protestant principle of *sola scriptura* has a kind of logic but is actually a troubling anachronism given what we now know about the transmission of biblical tradition. Unlike many in the guild Barr’s response to this knowledge does not focus on the literary strata, or on the process itself; instead it invests exclusively in those “men” of but without the Bible. Criticism teaches that *they* broker biblical authority, not the text. “It no longer makes sense to speak of the authority of the Bible as if it meant the authority of the written documents, quite apart from the persons and lives that lie behind them.”⁴⁴ Biblical books are conduits of authority, but incidentally, not essentially. “Christianity as a faith is not directed in the first place towards a book, but towards the persons within and behind that book... The church is founded ‘upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets’ (Eph. 2:20), not upon the foundation of the books named after them.”⁴⁵ In so saying, of course, Barr could hardly take a stance more directly opposite Childs.⁴⁶

Now why Barr sets and makes a choice between the literal and the personal is difficult to say. I doubt that in drawing the contrast this starkly Barr shares in the romanticism of Jowett, who declared famously, “The true use of interpretation is to get rid of interpretation,

43. Barr, *Jowett and Reading*, 31, my emphasis. Again, “Biblical criticism ... was preoccupied not with discovering the history or the origins but with evaluating the character of the truth expressed in the Bible” (37).

44. Barr, *Holy Scripture*, 47; cf. Barr, *Believing Communities*, 38–39.

45. Barr, *Holy Scripture*, 48, my emphasis. Of the italicized line Kugel, *Guide*, 698, comments: “This statement would be true if, in place of ‘Christianity,’ one were to substitute the words ‘Liberal Protestantism.’”

46. Childs warns against easy identification with prophet or apostle. For a representative example see *OTTCC*, 137 (cf. *Crisis*, 130, *Struggle*, 312, and numerous places in between), and see Seitz, *Not Prophets*. As for Eph. 2:20, the nagging critical question is, who actually wrote the epistle? If not Paul, what could it mean to direct our attention to the “mind” purporting to be him? Contrast the analysis in *NTCI*, 311–328, esp. 323, 326, 328.

and leave us alone in company with the author.”⁴⁷ Barr must have appreciated why getting rid of interpretation sounds naive in our time, and he will have had a distinct matrix of personal and cultural reasons for siding with biblical persons over and against biblical texts. One does wonder how he knows he has made the correct choice when faced with the non-identity of text and truth, and of text and person, but regardless, the initial point is simply that he makes it. Even if he prefers to call this “plain sense” exegesis, as Barton will, the curious result is that Barr leverages a response to the literal sense’s displacement (thereby providing yet another confirmation of Frei’s thesis in *Eclipse*). Although one misses Jowett’s pathos, by traveling the old liberal path to biblical men Barr keeps company with Jowett and others (e.g., Gunkel) who dispense with the text for the sake of biblical religion. Jowett’s thinks “Scripture has one meaning—the meaning which it had to the mind of the prophet or evangelist.”⁴⁸ While Barr is neither warm nor cold toward Jowett’s notion of the “one sense,”⁴⁹ he agrees entirely on the location of a text’s meaning, namely, in the *mind* of the author. Recall from chapter two, for example, that Barr believes “pan-biblical” theology is fated because “theology exists only in the minds of persons.”⁵⁰

Prophetic in this regard is an early statement of Barr’s on the relationship of scripture and theology. I quote from *The Semantics of Biblical Language*:

No doubt there will always be some use of biblical language in theology, and I would not suggest it should be otherwise. But surely the most sound a reliable use will be that in which ample and unambiguous evidence from usage leads us to suppose that we use a word in a way that adequately conveys a deliberate and conscious purpose of communication performed in the sentences spoken or written by the men of the Bible.⁵¹

Here already is Barr’s approach to scripture *in nuce*. Biblical language bears theological meaning in semantic or wider literary units—not at the level of individual words or syntax—because of its relationship to the generative theological mind. There are many differences

47. Jowett, *Interpretation*, 384.

48. *Ibid.*, 378.

49. Barr, *Jowett and Reading*, 35–36; cf. Barr, *Jowett and Original*, 343.

50. Barr, *Concept*, 214, cf. 4.

51. Barr, *Semantics*, 281.

between Barr and Jowett, naturally, but they are quite alike in their singular focus on the minds of biblical authors as the absolute control on biblical interpretation.

To illustrate, we can sketch a rough parallel between “On the Interpretation of Scripture” and *The Semantics of Biblical Language*. Jowett protests the freighting of biblical Greek with later theological developments. Acts 16 cannot by itself support the practice of mandatory infant baptism. The odd occurrence of *επισκοπος* is no warrant for the Episcopacy.⁵² To borrow Barr’s words, “The effect that disturbed him was a semantic one... Words of the Bible then came to be read as if the meanings of these same words, as they were used within later, theologically defined, usage, were the meanings within the Bible itself.”⁵³ Barr’s own argument in *Semantics* is similar because, by challenging a facile identification of language and thought, it debunks an erroneous method of supporting theological systems. Linguistic evidence must not be strained beyond what may reasonably be supposed to have given rise to the expression, and this appeal to best linguistic practice is like the call to read the Bible “like any other book.” As a matter of fact Barr will criticize Jowett for failing to keep to his ideal. Jowett upholds the one sense to oppose many senses, yet he generates spiritual-philosophical readings in which the ties to scripture are just as dubious. “He was a critic in the sense that the meaning of scripture, as he believed, was very different from what traditional interpretations had maintained, and also in the sense that the relation between scripture and truth was not a constant but a variable one.” At other times he was “remarkably traditional.” The “weakness lay above all in the failure to produce a convincing picture of what St Paul—or any other biblical writer—may probably have thought. This weakness derives ... from a lack of historical perspective, and, above all, from the domination of a philosophical set of interests.” Jowett rejected traditional interpretation, but he held to the idea of “the Bible as a special world” which, as “[t]wentieth-century biblical theology” has shown, can be taken in very traditional directions.⁵⁴ Jowett, Barr seems to say, was not fastidious enough about reading the Bible like any other book.

52. Jowett, *Interpretation*, 360.

53. Barr, *Jowett and Original*, 434. Very like Barr and Barton, with Jowett the “emphasis again was not basically historical: it was semantic and literary.”

54. *Ibid.*, 437. Cf. Jowett, *Interpretation*, 419, 421, 416.

ALLEGORY AS A MATTER OF SEMANTICS

Barr's 1989 essay "The Literal, the Allegorical, and Modern Biblical Scholarship" got a trial run in the conclusion of *The Bible in the Modern World* (1973), absent the suggestion that modern scholarship is furtively allegorical. Actually, the chapter "Word and Meaning, Letter and Spirit" tends to come down in favor of the literal over the allegorical, the very reverse of 1989. Source critics, for instance, in discovering J, E, D and P, "broke through the screen of ancient harmonizing and allegorizing interpretations."⁵⁵ Irrational people wrongly keep these old unifying strategies alive. "Literality, then, is only in part a fundamentalist characteristic; it is also an ingredient in critical scholarship."⁵⁶ Then again, seeds of Barr's creative redefinition of allegory in 1989 are also present. One concerns referentiality. "The normal use of 'literal' is referential in scope... Allegory is also referential in scope; the difference is that the referent is other than that suggested by the direct sense of the language, being in fact known only by an indirect process working from hints and hidden signals in the language."⁵⁷ Allegory, Barr sees, has to do with indirect rather than direct reference. Another concerns the relation to linguistic signals. The relationship of letter and spirit is highly complex because allegory often "coexists with a very minute interest in the detailed verbal form of the text."⁵⁸ It is not always easy to differentiate the interests of allegorical and critical exegesis.

Another common thread running through Barr's remarks on the letter and the spirit in 1973 and 1989 is the imperative to know the mind of writers.⁵⁹ Intentionality get priority (it is the critical mode), though here again there is some overlap with allegory.

The verbal form of the text is being used as evidence from which the mind and circumstances of the writers and traditionists is reconstructed. Considerations which may be valid for any purely referential use of the Bible may now be reversed, or may become entirely irrelevant. The question is not whether Jesus walked on water, but why the Gospel tradition depicted him as walking on water...

When we look at things in this way, we immediately see that the verbal form of the text as-

55. Barr, *Modern World*, 170. The book was reissued in 1990.

56. *Ibid.*, 171.

57. *Ibid.*, 171–172.

58. *Ibid.*, 173.

59. *Ibid.*, 61–62.

sumes much greater positivity and importance. Even on the referential level it had, as we have seen, much more positive importance than is usually supposed... But on the intentional level, working towards the minds of the tradition and of the writers, its positive importance is even greater... [For] we can be sure that we have no clues for the discovery of [a writer's] theology and his character as a writer other than these very patterns of verbal behaviour...

This fact in turn is a main reason for the technical concern of biblical scholarship with the details of language, illustrated in the grammars of Hebrew and Greek, the concordances, the dictionaries, the monographs discussing patterns of parallelism and verse-structure, the word counts, and so on. *The detailed verbal evidence is the route to the mind of the writer.*⁶⁰

Barr's intentionalism shares with allegorical-referential reading an acute interest in the detailed verbal form of the text, and this in a greater measure than is common in historical-referential reading. Still more, intentionalism and allegorism agree on the *indirectness* of the path from text to referent. In Barr's words, "we today in general do not move directly from biblical texts to external referents, but from biblical texts to the theological intentions of the writers and only from there indirectly to external referents. Thus the modern interpretative pattern is seldom or never a direct referential relation between the text and the entities referred to."⁶¹ Formally, then, Barr's move from *text to mind* parallels the allegorist's move from *letter to spirit*.

Barr does not draw attention to this parallel in 1973, if he sees it. But in the chain of essays he writes contradicting Childs' 1977 claim that modern scholarship works with a "total commitment to the literal sense,"⁶² it is a simple matter of re-connecting dots in his earlier work for Barr to claim that, insofar as literal and allegorical suit the modern situation (they may not very well), the essence of biblical scholarship aligns better with allegory. Thus in 1989 the modern scholar is allegorical in his pursuit of a theological meaning. He is only rarely pre-occupied with historical reference, with what really happened. Taking creation as an example, it would be hard to know what such a thing could even mean.

What he wants to get at is the *theology*, the ideas and mind of the writers. The question is not: what exactly happened; but what was in their mind, what theology did they have, that led them to express their ideas about creation... The precisions, the details, the literality of the story are supremely important, because they provide the hints and clues which lead us

60. Ibid., 173–174, my emphasis.

61. Ibid., 175.

62. Childs, *Sensus Literalis*, 88.

to this theology. But it's the theology, in the last resort, that explains the story and makes sense out of it. That's how the scholar works.

But as soon as we put it this way, we see that the operation of the scholar is, in terms of the older formulas, closer to allegorical exegesis than to literal or historical.⁶³

It should be sufficiently obvious that "allegory" here is not primarily a negative label with which to brand biblical theologians like, say, von Rad. As Barr comes to define it, allegory in modern scholarship encompasses all his own exegetical ideals.⁶⁴

Barr's allegory is not medieval allegory. (Nor is it Childs' allegory, as will be seen.) It does operate, however, on the conviction that the letter, because false, or often false, is ingredient in criticism only insofar as it points to truth *at another level*. We are in fact dealing with a multi-level reading of scripture. To repeat, the analogy is this: literal meaning is to spiritual meaning (the traditional view) as semantics to the author's mind (Barr's intentionalist view). The twist in Barr's case is that the letter, as a conduit of theological truth, fails.

WHEN THE PLAIN SENSE CEASES TO BE OBVIOUS

In *Modern World* Barr notices that the revival of concern for biblical authority in the post-war period, associated chiefly with the name Karl Barth and sometimes involving dubious efforts to revive typological methods, had entered a state of decline. The turn is welcomed. "We may perhaps hope," he writes, "that more people will come to experience the Bible as literature, partly because the pressure for a 'theological' reading of the Bible will begin to fade as memories of the older cultural state die away."⁶⁵ This is not unlike Jowett's confidence that "a way of thinking and speaking which was once diffused over the world" has "passed away," and like Jowett on the future of allegory, Barr's hopes for the demise of confessing, theological exegesis have proven misplaced. The reversal of tides can with some certainty be dated to the publication of *IOTS* in 1979, at least for Barr personally if not for a wider audience, which

63. Barr, *Literal, Allegorical*, 12.

64. His conditions for allegory suggest as much: "All valid understanding of a passage as having allegorical features must depend on contextual considerations within the linguistic semantics, the literary context, the cultural background and the historical setting. These are exactly what the tradition of modern scholarship has provided" (*ibid.*, 16, cf. 13–15).

65. Barr, *Modern World*, 61.

seems also to have precipitated Barr's invocation of allegory a decade later. I want now to suggest a reason why the coincidence is no accident.

Like Jowett, Barr and Barton uphold "plain sense" interpretation. Barr pursues "a probable understanding based on the plain sense of the texts as they stand."⁶⁶ And Barton, drawing on Barr's work, has made an extensive defense of the concept in biblical criticism.⁶⁷ Barr and Barton also relativize literal sense interpretation: it must not upstage the plain sense. Barton makes the point more emphatically than Barr, although it is implicit in Barr's work. "Critical inquiry does often involve taking the biblical text literally, but not taking it to be literally true," writes Barton in 2007.⁶⁸ Plain is a better designation than literal because, among other reasons, "plain sense" is more recoverable from "counterintuitive" use by theological readers (Kathryn Greene-McCreight as well as Childs) for a usage more in line with "what the average reader will understand by the term."⁶⁹ In like manner Barr, in the wake of *IOTS*, paints the retention of the *sensus literalis* in a critical era with the stripes of obsolescence.

We approach a telling departure from Jowett, however, who defends the "plain and obvious meaning" of scripture.⁷⁰ It is true that puts some distance between the plain sense and a literal *application* of scripture, which either has been or would be injurious to society at large. He denigrates "literal and servile habits of mind."⁷¹ But nowhere does Jowett set plain

66. Barr, *Holy Scripture*, 66–67. Elsewhere he claims, with more than a hint of disparagement, that in so doing he is more faithful to the canonical final form than Childs. He is the true practitioner of the canonical approach! In his reading of Genesis 2–3, for example, he claims to be "following present fashion and taking a 'canonical' approach, giving full value to the 'final text'"—except that in his hands it "results in a more surprising and *untraditional* interpretation than canonical approaches are commonly expected to do" (Barr, *Eden*, 59, my emphasis, cf. 19). The book is an outstanding example of Barr's theory in practice. It also part of another chain of disagreements, with Moberly this time, the initial link of which is Moberly, Serpent? For a full history of this debate see its final installment: Moberly, *Interpreters?*

67. Barton, *Nature*, esp. 69–116.

68. *Ibid.*, 95.

69. *Ibid.*, 101.

70. Jowett, *Interpretation*, 369. Cf. 340–341: "Educated persons are beginning to ask, not what Scripture may be made to mean, but what it does. And it is no exaggeration to say that he who in the present state of knowledge will confine himself to the plain meaning of words and the study of their context may know more of the original spirit and intention of the authors of the New Testament than all the controversial writers of former ages put together."

71. *Ibid.*, 426. Instead of the literal mindset "of Oriental nations" there is "a more enlightened use of Scripture" in "Christian missions" by the Christian "teacher ... more ... penetrated with the universal spirit of Scripture."

sense interpretation over and against literal sense interpretation, understood technically and on some analogy with its historic cast. Neither does he divorce “plain” and “obvious.” To the contrary, he uses the words synonymously. Barton, on the other hand, writes with equal confidence: “Plain,’ after all, does not mean ‘obvious.’”⁷² Granting for the sake of argument that “plain” is not “literal,” why should “plain” also not be “obvious”?

One difficulty in preferring common sense definitions of plain and literal is that the answer to this question is not at all self-evident.⁷³ Another is that, to the extent that the plain sense encompasses a true sense of scripture that people do *not* perceive, it includes a *secret* sense. Fundamentalists do not perceive the real meaning Barr and Barton are after. Neither, it would seem, do widely read, critically trained people like Childs. For Barr, the change in tone and emphasis from 1973 to 1989 may come down to whether or not he feels he is losing ground in the war for sound, semantically controlled exegesis. After Childs’ *Introduction*, pressure for a confessing, theological reading of scripture must have appeared to be on the rise again; the older cultural state associated with Barth was not dying away; dogma was again threatening to take away our freedom and so (in Barton’s language) to carry us back into bondage in Egypt. The more obscure one’s own position becomes, the more like allegory it must feel. In this way Barr’s theological end for semantics may be doubly allegorical, counter-intuitive (depending on whose intuition gets sampled), or esoteric. His incentives for identifying criticism and allegory include at least two basic perceptions: the literal sense is corrupt, and too many people are (willfully) ignorant of that fact. In the final analysis Barr’s attachment to an elite, secret sense of scripture may be what makes his method profoundly allegorical.

72. Barton, *Nature*, 111.

73. Against the efforts of Childs (“Sensus Literalis”) and Greene-McCreight (*Ad Litteram*) to develop an understanding of *sensus literalis* in dialogue with its varied historical deployment—and Barton accepts the historical judgments of both—Barton thinks it better to work from the pragmatic notion, with a rather vaguer provenance, of “what we would call literal reading” (100). This has two important consequences. First, it blocks an appreciation of what Childs and others mean by the literal sense. Second, since the use of “literal” by Origin, Augustine or the Reformers is equally counterintuitive to “us,” it creates a pretty serious obstacle to Barton’s argument that criticism stands in continuity with critics of every age. His discussion of ancient biblical criticism (*Nature*, 130–135) does not see the full extent of this difficulty, i.e., that for Calvin and Luther the literal sense of the Old Testament was Christ, but that today the same conclusion is by no means plain and obvious. Cf. Preus, *Shadow*, 23–25 (on Augustine), 67–71 (Nicholas of Lyra), 184–199 (Luther).

and aesthetic pattern, extended throughout the Bible and the world by the typological and allegorical style of interpretation; but it was not supposed that anyone would savour this myth and pattern as a purely aesthetic experience.”⁷⁶ Undoubtedly the pre-modern unity of the cosmos has dissolved, but Barr means much more than this. For him the dissolution is necessary, inevitable. Any effort to reconstitute the unity—that of the universe under scripture—would be a grave mistake.

Barr's eventual claim that allegory lives on in criticism should not be seen as a softening of his anti-traditionalism. “Traditionally,” he writes, “theology was primarily a referential form of study” (node A). Theology “sought to understand the entities like God and man, the events like creation and redemption. Its emphasis in using the biblical text was correspondingly referential: its interest lies in *that to which the text refers, that of which it speaks*. In modern times this point of view receives its most towering restatement in the Barthian theology.” For Barr this order has passed away, permanently. But again, why? First, “the work of theologians is increasingly dependent on, and concerned with, the apex B of our triangle, the question of intention, the search for understanding of the mind of the writers.” Here we encounter “one of the great differences in modern theological practice: even when theology is very definitely based on the Bible, it does not proceed from biblical texts straight to the entities referred to; rather, it proceeds indirectly, and adumbrates its referential interpretation only *after* consideration of the mind and purpose of the writers.”⁷⁷ Barr even takes the appeal to a biblical/Hebrew mentality as evidence that a watershed has occurred: that habit signals “a drastic shift of emphasis from the referential use of language to the mentality from which it issued, from point A of our triangle to point B.”⁷⁸

One could call this shift the death of providence. Once upon a time “the Bible was traditionally tied up with a whole view of the world as God's world; and through this it furnished a worldview, a total orientation for life.” Symptoms of the present crisis include the “demand

76. Ibid., 62.

77. Ibid., 91, original emphasis.

78. Ibid., 92.

for biblical theologies, and other kindred approaches, and the whole modern reassertion of biblical authority.” But the old order has died. It *must* die. The triangle is not to be reconstituted. For “in fact the attempt to reassert biblical authority in modern times is a nostalgia for the good old days.”⁷⁹ Today, then, in the modern world, “can anything *rational* be said about the status of the Bible in the church?” One can only hope, because hope is the last remaining option. The alternatives are “either that we abandon the whole concept of any special status of the Bible and admit that it no longer matters very much; or that we continue to affirm for it the sort of special status that it used to have, but do so in an essentially irrational way.”⁸⁰ The second is not an option, obviously. (Leave Barth in peace.) The first course, on the other hand, remains open to Barr, should hope ever falter. How far does he go down this road?

I have said that allegory has rules. By this I mean at least three different kinds of rules. One would affirm dogmatic rules in the form of church creeds and confessions. Jowett, Barr and Barton reject this emphatically.⁸¹ Another would affirm a rule of common sense, or reason. Barton, Barr and Jowett all embrace some version of this (hence for Barr the Bible is not the church’s book, except in surrender to the university). A third would affirm scripture itself as a rule of life and faith. As seen at the beginning, this is Jowett’s firm preference. Barr makes another significant departure from Jowett at this point, however; thinking of “the Bible as a special world” is a mistake confirmed by the theology of the confessing church and the biblical theology movement which ensued. Mercifully Jowett was not dogmatic, but he was inconsistent and uncaring, and he left himself open to the return of dogma.

In other words, truthful reference in the interpretation of scripture is much less direct for Barr than for Jowett. (Is it by chance that one vouches for allegory while the other does not?) To put it in terms of Barr’s triangle, only one part of one node is disqualified from modern discourse. Reference (A) is admissible—it is actually theologically requisite—but *direct*

79. Ibid., 110. On this reading Childs is *nostalgic*. For my case against this assessment see Driver, *Later Childs*.

80. Barr, *Modern World*, 111, original emphasis.

81. “Except in extremely conservative circles, however, people would now be unwilling to think that these creeds and confessions, however worthy of respect, are the right hermeneutical keys and dispose of the complexities of the Bible into a clear pattern of truth” (ibid., 158, cf. 86).

reference is not welcome, either as an overlay of philosophical interests, or of church dogmatics. That I quote *Semantics* shows just how far back this conviction lies. Karl Barth, writes Barr in 1961, has generally encouraged “the interpretations of linguistic phenomena which I have criticized [and which] are attempts to make such phenomena not ‘merely’ words or linguistic mechanisms but to make them ‘point to’ something beyond their linguistic function”:

The language Barth uses about “pointing to” and about “immanent linguistic context” and so on is purely philosophical-theological and entirely distorting when referred to units of a language system... All such units have a “pointing” or semantic function; *they have no further function beyond this*; but what Barth means by “pointing to” is something beyond the normal semantic function of linguistic units; he is therefore certainly referring to something other than such units, or he is making nonsense of them.⁸²

Sense and nonsense is very much at issue. If the one non-negotiable rule for biblical interpretation is that one must never overstep the bounds of what was probably in the mind of an author, then allegory in traditional dress must also go, for the same reason that Barthian reference must go. Each makes folly of semantics. Anything that distorts the linguistic evidence for patterns of verbal behavior in time is in danger of being “used as an instrument in the imperialism of dogmatic method toward biblical exegesis.”⁸³

II. CHILDS' PROPOSAL FOR MULTI-LEVEL READINGS OF SCRIPTURE

Canon provides no hermeneutical guidance, no *rule* for exegesis, according to Barr in 1983. “The essential hermeneutical guide did not come from within the canon, but from without, from the priorities of the various directions that the religion might take and did take.”⁸⁴ Scripture and religion developed in parallel yet did not necessarily have anything to do with one another. Scripture could change while religion remained constant, or religion's structures could alter but leave the literary deposits of older traditions untouched. “Thus the canonical text of scripture is not a faithful index of the religious changes which affected its own development... And, most importantly of all, ... the essential hermeneutical guides, which deter-

82. Barr, *Semantics*, 277, my emphasis.

83. *Ibid.*, 278.

84. Barr, *Holy Scripture*, 98, cf. 67.

mined the modes in which scripture might be understood, did not lie within the canon at all but outside it, in the religion.”⁸⁵ The disconnect between scripture and religion was unaffected by the closing of the canon, and all essential hermeneutical guidelines remain outside the text to the present day.

In reporting this as a defeater for the canonical approach, Barr sweeps subtle and unmissable aspects of Childs’ argument under the rug. To take a subtle example first, Childs also posits a track parallel to but not identical with the literary history. Since for Childs and Barr this invisible history explains the relationship of scripture to religion, it is regrettable that instead of interacting with Childs’ very different account Barr merely offers a rival interpretation of scripture alongside religion. There is a far more glaring oversight in *Holy Scripture*, too. Barr feels imprecision in Childs’ use of “canon” is his first mistake, so he defines three different senses of canon in Childs’ work: canon 1 (a list of books), canon 2 (the final form) and canon 3 (the authority principle). Reviewing *Holy Scripture* Childs writes that “the level of misunderstanding” is “disturbing”: “It is troubling when an author scarcely recognizes his own profile in another’s mirror.” Childs sees that *none* of these three definitions of canon get at “the major phenomenon for which the term is used,” namely, the process of canonical shaping.⁸⁶ This is indeed alarming. How can Barr have overlooked this ubiquitous fourth use of canon in *IOTS*?

“Bibelkritik” outlines Barr’s alternative approach, but “Believing Communities” shows the workings of his screed against Childs more clearly than anything else. So far as I can tell it is the only place Barr countenances Childs’ argument for canonical shaping in the Old Testament. Barr rejects the joining of scripture and canon. “Contrary to some recent opinion, the category ‘canon’ is not essential to the category ‘scripture.’”⁸⁷ This aligns well with later comments: “Scripture is essential, but canon is not.”⁸⁸ But contrary to the assertion in 1983 that the

85. Ibid., 95.

86. Childs, Review of *Holy Scripture*, 67.

87. Barr, *Believing Communities*, 33. A little later *IOTS* is cited directly.

88. Barr, *Holy Scripture*, 63. He continues, “Canon is a derivative, a secondary or tertiary, concept, of great interest but not of the highest theological importance.” This begs the question, however.

authority of canon (3) has nothing intrinsic to do with canons 1 and 2, at this earlier time Barr identifies yet another sort of canon. He writes,

the Bible is not a mere collection of varying and contrary opinions that happened to be held. Rather, it is a graded and selected presentation... It is not just tradition as it happened to be, but tradition shaped and edited in such a way as to present *to* the believing community an adequate and necessary presentation of that tradition, as the older community wanted it to be known to the later community. In this sense it is a sort of canonical tradition. From this point of view the older idea, that scripture was something that came from God through his own appointed and inspired representatives and was given as an address *to* the community, was not so wrong after all.⁸⁹

Conservatives set entirely too much weight on this perspective for Barr's taste, but it finds at least some justification. Scripture, as it was collected, shaped and edited, accrued real authority that was intended to guide subsequent generations. In some acceptable sense of the word, scriptural tradition became canonical. Still, a little further down he writes, "If ... we take the word 'canon' in another sense, as *the standard or basis for the life of the community and its interpretation of its written sources*, then this is a function provided, within in the early community, *not* by a list of accepted books but by the essential religious structure, by the fundamental faith of the believing community."⁹⁰ Here we can see a split opening up between what Barr will soon call canon 3 and canon 1. "That structure of faith [canon 3] remains after scripture is in existence, and theological interpretation of scripture works with this structure, arranging and ordering the biblical materials in relation to it. Thus the principal 'canon' of theological interpretation in this sense is not the canon of scripture [canon 1?] but something more like the *regula fidei*."⁹¹ But this forecloses on a basic question: just what is the relation of canon (*regula*) to scripture?

On the surface Barr actually accepts Childs' interpretation of the evidence for canonical shaping—at times "Believing Communities" sounds like a paraphrase of *IOTS*, as we have just seen. Barr never refutes this by reasoned argument. Rather, he quietly rejects the notion of the canon *as* a rule by subordinating it to an externalist account of biblical authority. Barr's denial (canon ≠ rule) crystallizes almost at the moment he glimpses the theological implica-

89. Barr, *Believing Communities*, 29, original emphasis.

90. *Ibid.*, 34, my emphasis.

91. *Ibid.*, 34.

tions of Childs' proposal (canon \approx rule). Thus at the root of Barr's case against canon we seem to have the raw assertion of a different rule, a rule with no intrinsic relation to the canon of scripture.

To understand what it means for Childs to move toward allegory, it is imperative to see the positive work he attempts by invoking the canon or rule of faith. It is not nearly so blunt an instrument as Barr would lead one to expect. Also in his response to *Holy Scripture*, Childs explains why his use of canon should not be dumped into a tributary of Reformation orthodoxy, now channeled by Barth:

my understanding of canon was offered as a major criticism of late seventeenth and eighteenth century Reformed orthodoxy which tended to place the authority of a divinely inspired book apart from its reception in the community through the work of the Spirit. By defining canon as those sacred writings which were received, treasured, and shaped by a community of faith, I proposed a very different dynamic from that, say, of Charles Hodge, but one which was akin to the early Church Fathers' view of a rule-of-faith. In my opinion, the discussion ... is thus skewed from the start.⁹²

Similarly, in *OTTCC* Childs feels that Barr misses the mark because of definitions: Barr posits a "simple, common-sense" hiatus between revelation and reason and then rejects revelation as untenable, where as Childs accepts the term revelation, for lack of a better one, as "an inadequate shorthand expression which seeks to encompass an enormous range of activities related to God's relation to his people."⁹³ The word has been overburdened in its past usage. Yet its continued use finds a warrant in the way the literature was transformed in the biblical period. Revelation for Childs "is not set in an appositional relationship to tradition, reason or experience. Indeed one of the central goals of emphasizing the role of the canon is to stress the horizontal dimension of the reception, collection and ordering of the experiences of the divine by a community of faith. A canonical approach would be equally critical of a stance which stressed only the vertical dimension of divine truth, as if word and tradition were always in tension,"⁹⁴ although a vertical dimension, understood here as reflection on the divine referent,

92. Childs, *Review of Holy Scripture*, 67.

93. *OTTCC*, 22.

94. *OTTCC*, 23. Childs makes remarkably little use of terms like revelation and inspiration, preferring canon. But see now the important discussion in Chapman, *Reclaiming Inspiration*.

propels Childs beyond merely social explanations. The Bible has a human form, and yet as such it is inseparable from the divine address it carries, which must not be domesticated.

In sum, when Barr says “the principal ‘canon’ of theological interpretation ... is not the canon of scripture but something more like the *regula fidei*,” he denies from the outset the transfer between *regula* and κανών—at a crucial stage in church history, prior to the fixing of the NT, they are translational equivalents—which Childs employs to get scripture and normative theology back under the same umbrella. This is a large part of the advantage to Childs in selecting the cipher “canon,” and it is in place remarkably early (1970). For him it became increasingly evident that the process (canon 4) by which an earlier generation gave all later generations the final form of scripture (canon 2) had everything to do with the Bible’s authority (canon 3). Contra the intuitions of not a few biblical scholars, canon as list (1) on this understanding turns out to be canon’s least important aspect.

I will unpack Childs’ sense of the rule of faith at the end of this section, and in the third, concluding section I will take the contrast between Childs and Barr to their respective biblical theological reflections on trinitarian dogma. Meanwhile, my purpose in this section is to outline the way Childs’ work handles the compunction to hear the literal sense of the OT as Jewish scripture and at the same time to hear the OT as a witness to Christ, which for him involves a turn from midrash (chapter five) to allegory. Later in his career Childs undertook an earnest study of allegory in historic Christian exegesis and developed alongside it a similarly earnest proposal for the recovery of allegory in the modern world.

CALL IT ALLEGORY

The preface to *Struggle* attests Childs’ increased regard for allegory. Upon the completion of his Isaiah commentary he felt he had not done justice to the history of that book’s interpretation. *Struggle* is an effort to close that gap. After working on the project for several months he “discovered a major hermeneutical problem that increasingly cried out for attention. One component of exegesis common to all the Church Fathers has been the application of figurative meanings—call it allegory.” Thus Childs “became convinced that unless one could

gain a new understanding of allegory, the enterprise of recovering a usable exegetical Christian tradition was doomed from the outset. To put it bluntly: for better or worse, allegory is constitutive of patristic interpretation. But then how is one to proceed when starting at the beginning of the twenty-first century?"⁹⁵ Addressing this question emerges as a major task in *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture*.

Childs delivered an earlier version of these remarks in April 2000 at the University of St Andrews, in an unpublished paper entitled "Allegory and Typology within Biblical Interpretation." Much of this made its way either into the preface of *Struggle* (above) or into the book's chapter on Origen, and its articulation of the basic problem is identical.⁹⁶ The paper highlights the centrality of figuration to the problems Childs addresses, and it serves as a benchmark for his "new understanding of allegory." Childs distinguishes his work from the vulnerable revival of typology in the post-war period, over which "Barr pronounced an obituary,"⁹⁷ and aligns himself instead with advances in the study of typology made by Catholic theologians and patristic specialists. In this newer research he summarizes "several lines of consensus," though his comments read every bit as much as an articulation of his hermeneutical ideals.

There are four points. First, the distinction between allegory and typology is a recent invention without roots in the tradition. Distinctions were made and can still be appreciated, but the relationship is more subtle. Allegory is not necessarily fanciful or arbitrary. Instead—here Childs, following Louth, speaks more programmatically—"the function of allegory is related to the *struggle to understand the mystery of Christ*. It is a way of relating the whole of Scripture to that mystery."⁹⁸ Second, a "distinction between the so-called literal sense and the

95. *Struggle*, x.

96. "Had the Christian church simply been led astray during all these years [of Isaiah's use] and stumbled in darkness without any serious theological guidance from this book? Is there no coercion from the text of Sacred Scripture providing true instruction? I had long since rejected the modern historical critical consensus that nothing of any real exegetical significance had occurred prior to the 19th century, but then what kind of light was earlier present? How did and does Scripture actually function for a community of faith and practice?" (Childs, *Allegory*, 1–2).

97. *Ibid.*, 5. This critique of the modern differentiation of typology from allegory (by Goppelt, Daniélou, Lampe and Woollcombe, Hanson, and others) in 1966 is about where Barr's contribution to the modern appreciation of allegory ends for Childs. Barr's articles of 1989, 1993 and 1996 are not discussed.

98. *Ibid.*, 6, my emphasis. Childs cites Louth, *Mystery*, 119, 121. See the discussion of *Struggle*, below.

figurative/allegorical cannot correctly be defined in terms of historicity... Rather, the heart of the problem of allegory turns on the nature of referentiality of the biblical text.”⁹⁹ Origen, for example, saw that multiple senses means multiple referents. Third, allegory has a context. “The appeal to allegory is not a device by which to avoid difficulties in the text, as often suggested, or to allow unbridled use of human imagination. Rather, its use functions within a rule of faith (its *theoria* in Greek terminology) as the language of faith seeks to penetrate into the mystery of Christ’s presence.” It is “a means of appropriation” by which “the Holy Spirit continued to address each new generation.”¹⁰⁰ Finally, the old contrast between Antiochene and Alexandrian exegesis has needed reevaluation. The Antiochenes were not literalists per se, much less historicists. They “resisted a type of allegory that destroyed textual coherence, that is to say, which distorted the overarching framework (its *theoria*) and thus failed to grasp its true subject matter, its *hypothesis*.”¹⁰¹ At each point the incidence of distinctive Childsian vocabulary (“struggle,” “referentiality,” “context,” “rule of faith,” “generation,” “mystery,” “framework,” and “subject matter”) reveals an overlap of his description of the ancient situation with the thrust of allegory under canonical hermeneutics.

This is not to suggest a straightforward identification of Childs with traditional allegory. Far from it. The bulk of “Allegory” interacts with Origen’s spiritual exegesis, a world “strange and even bizzare [sic],” yet with much to teach modern exegetes. Three lessons are drawn: first, for Origen scripture is “a living and continuous vehicle of divine revelation,” one which, in contrast to the Enlightenment legacy, supposes that the text can “transcend its single historical context”; second, Origen keeps the literal sense and the spiritual sense in tension; and third, Origen’s figuration is vertical as well as horizontal—“Scripture, as it were, provides a keyboard for each new hearer to play and to receive new variations on the one unified story of God in Christ to be rendered in liturgy, private devotions, music, and art.”¹⁰² Childs then concludes: “I strongly feel that there is a family resemblance in the responses of the Church in

99. Childs, *Allegory*, 6–7.

100. *Ibid.*, 7.

101. *Ibid.*, 7.

102. *Ibid.*, 13.

spite of the enormous diversity with the Christian exegetical tradition. Obviously much hard work still needs to be done, not least in recovering the richness in the use of the Bible often forgotten.”¹⁰³ In the case of Isaiah, fortunately, he lived to see some of this work through.

The most basic point is that Childs comes to agree wholeheartedly with Frances Young, whom he cites twice to this effect: “Without a form of allegory that at least allows for analogy, the biblical text can only be an object of archaeological interest.”¹⁰⁴ He is content to call it allegory because of the mistaken mid-twentieth century compromise between history and typology, and because this is often what the Christian tradition called its figurative extension of the literal sense. Under the next four sub-headings I will trace the way allegory, or figural reading, becomes incorporated into Childs’ approach.

OTTCC: “A HISTORICALLY REFERENTIAL READING IS THEOLOGICALLY INADEQUATE”

Little in *OTTCC* would lead one to expect a revival of figuration in Childs’ later work. For the most part, allegory and typology surface in discussions of the shape of the text itself—Moses is a type, David is a type—or as characterizations of traditional readings.¹⁰⁵ However, there is newfound clarity about how different the dynamics of midrash are when contrasted with the christologically centered function of scripture in the church: “much of the confusion in the history of Old Testament theology derives from the reluctance to recognize that it is a Christian enterprise.”¹⁰⁶ Also, the book shows an openness to variety in the biblical text’s contemporary appropriation, which is a natural extension of *IOTS*’s argument that the Old Testament became a self-actualizing document. “The canonical process thus built in a dimension of flexibility which encourages constantly fresh ways of actualizing the material.” Canon “provides a warrant for applying a similar element of flexibility in its modern actualization which is consonant with its shape.”¹⁰⁷ An illustration latent with such figural possibilities surfaces in

103. *Ibid.*, 14.

104. Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 3, cited Childs, *Allegory*, 13 and *Struggle*, 68.

105. *OTTCC*, 111, 117, 120, 212. At one point, a moralistic reading is said to sponsor “fanciful allegory” (196).

106. *OTTCC*, 8.

107. *OTTCC*, 13.

a discussion of the theological role of priesthood. The final form subordinates the underlying pre-history of priesthood and instead

the post-exilic form of the Israelite priesthood has been made normative. The canonical shape reflects a variety of moves by which to render its witness, such as schematizing, idealizing and typologizing the tradition. For this reason an interpretation which is directly dependent on a historically referential reading is theological inadequate. It reorders the text diachronically and in so doing misses the Old Testament's unique message.¹⁰⁸

To paraphrase, sometimes letter contains figure; types and other actualizing tropes have been built into the literal sense. Hence a sensitive theological exposition would have to make something of them (a strict "historically referential reading is theological inadequate"). All on its own, the literal sense of scripture pressures theological readers to consider a figural sense. Rather than allegory or typology, however, the most common figurative concept deployed in *OTTCC* is "intertextuality," which will prove too imprecise.

BARTHIAN REFERENCE REVISITED

In 1989 Childs revised his 1969 lecture on Barth for another occasion at Yale.¹⁰⁹ It too is unpublished. Though the revisions are fairly significant, the recollections and personal tone still come through, especially in the first quarter of the lecture. Childs clearly continued his reading of the *Church Dogmatics* in the intervening years. Some of the most basic points of agreement between Childs and Barth—the Bible's reference, its living voice—remain:

Barth continually reminds the exegete that the primary task is to penetrate to the *Sache*—to its subject matter. The witness of Scripture points beyond the text to its object, and therefore exegesis can never rest content with talking about the "Deuteronomic view of covenant," or of "Paul's concept of faith." Rather the goal is to move from the witness to its content—to talk about covenant, and faith, and love—the reality itself. Of course, *once exegesis has understood that it is not an antiquarian exercise, but a struggle with the truth of the Christian faith*, then preaching is no insurmountable problem. There is no impassible, ugly ditch separating the ancients from the present, but the temporal walls separating the first century from the 20th are collapsed by the power of the proclaimed Gospel.¹¹⁰

108. *OTTCC*, 153, cf. 130.

109. Atop the manuscript Childs has written "Lecture at YDS 1969, revised 1989 (unpublished)." It was delivered at the Beecher Lectures in 1990–1991. Childs was one of four Divinity faculty who filled in for Leander Keck, who had originally been scheduled but who suffered a car accident and had to postpone for a year (see <http://www.library.yale.edu/div/beecher.html>, accessed 23 April 2008). On the 1969 lecture see chapter two.

110. Childs, *Barth: Exegete*, 8, my emphasis.

As for the move toward allegory, Barth's exegesis (the small print) does and does not resemble multi-level readings of scripture. On the one hand, Barth commonly assumes "that the text makes one point," a point "not different from the text."¹¹¹ This is why his exegesis often simply retells the story. On the other hand, Barth can seem to work with multiple levels, multiple *contexts* for interpretation. "He often assumed that an incident in the life of Jesus had been retained by the evangelists in a form close to its original occurrence, but that the original narrative had been transmitted within a larger and subsequent narrative framework." Barth was not quite a redaction critic; he did not reconstruct the motives of editors. Instead "he envisioned the larger framework as a transmission of the story within the broader apostolic witness which reflected a deeper grasp of the content of the Gospel. His exegesis of a given passage received its great vitality by allowing, as it were, these two levels of the story—the original level and its larger canonical reflections—to interact with each other." In a sense we do have multi-level reading in Barth. "Moreover, there was a certain compatibility [sic] of his interpretation—a family resemblance—with the whole Christian exegetical tradition. Much as one might react to Augustine's treatment of the Psalter, even when one could not accept much of his detailed exegesis, one still sensed that Augustine was offering a profoundly Christian reflection on some level of the Gospel."¹¹² Seen with hindsight, then, Barth becomes a prototype of the search for a family resemblance in *Struggle*, and an indicator that something—Childs does not yet voice the word allegory—reflects a need to hear the Bible in multiple contexts. Barth takes seriously the challenge of hearing the Hebrew scriptures as an evangelical witness.

Since, as was seen in chapter two, Barthian reference is a crucial point of difference between Childs and Barr, here we can add a note on Childs' solitary response to Barr's revisioning of the literal and the allegorical. Childs cites Origen as an example of the radical difference between historical critical and traditional scholarship.

The biblical text possessed for him different levels of meaning by which divine truth was

111. Ibid., 9.

112. Ibid., 16–17.

reached. These levels stemmed intentionally from the divine author who had so formed Scripture as to provide a multiple entry into the mysteries of the faith. Regardless of which level of the text was being heard, the mode of revelation was *immediate and truthful*. Origen remains a classic example of an exegete who held to a theory of verbal inspiration.

Precisely at the point of referentiality biblical scholars of the Enlightenment broke sharply with the tradition. The biblical text was no longer considered to be a *direct* channel of divine revelation, but rather and foremost a product of human culture... The task of interpretation was, therefore, to employ newly won historical tools to discover the author's meaning by setting him within his age...¹¹³

Barth and Childs, quite in contrast to Barr, retain a sense of the immediate, direct and truthful witness of scripture in Christian life. Barr's use of allegory is therefore, if one takes a long view of the notion's provenance, highly unusual. As Childs sees it in 1990, "Barr is correct when he sees a certain analogy between traditional allegory and the work of some ... post-critical scholars. However, I would argue that the similarity between the two is superficial and is an almost accidental congruence arising from very different assumptions. Any identification obscures the fundamental differences which separate traditional allegory from modern exegesis."¹¹⁴ The issue turns on the directness of biblical reference, the perspicuity of the letter, or the plainness of the plain sense.

BTONT: EXTENDING THROUGH FIGURATION

BTONT addresses "the question of understanding the unity of the Bible's witness to the reality of divine redemption in Jesus Christ."¹¹⁵ The unity of the two testaments does not have to do with threads of continuity in religious development. Nor is it primarily formal. Neither is the Bible a self-contained universe that refers only to itself and not to divine reality. For lack of a better word, Childs falls back on "dialectic" to encompass all the problems with which *gesamtbiblische* theologians must wrestle.¹¹⁶ Yet the unity of Christian scripture is real. "The task of Biblical Theology is therefore not just descriptive, but involves a *Sachkritik* which is

113. Childs, *Barr's Understanding*, 4, my emphasis.

114. *Ibid.*, 8.

115. *BTONT*, 723, cf. 721.

116. *BTONT*, 99.

called forth by the witness to this reality.”¹¹⁷ The very identity of God compels a confrontation with *ontic* as well as noetic dimensions of scripture.

Hermeneutically the issue has often turned on the relation of literal and figural. The Reformers appealed to the literal sense over and against what they saw as excesses in the church’s evocation of the figurative. “However, what was offered as a defense of the truth of the gospel in the sixteenth century took on a different face in the nineteenth.”¹¹⁸ The literal sense came to be limited to one sense closely bound to an investigation of the author. “The result was that the opposite error was committed. If the traditional exegesis had falsely pulled apart the figurative sense from its literal meaning, now only the literal sense of scripture was recognized as legitimate, and this sense was increasingly identified with a historical meaning.”¹¹⁹ Historically the church has needed to strike a balance between attention to the text and to its theological content. Both prove necessary.

The productive epochs in the church’s use of the Bible have occurred when these two dimensions of scripture 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*). However, *when the figurative sense is grounded on the literal and is a faithful rendering of both the content and witness of the written word, there is no theological reason for denying the legitimacy of multiple senses within the ongoing life of the church.*¹²⁰

Figural extensions of the text are permissible, and probably even essential, so long as the letter provides the foundation of the spirit. Figurative meanings must attach.

Still more, Childs advances the canonical approach as a natural home for figural reading in the modern day. Canon, as a rule of faith, bounds interpretation. “It establishes parameters of the apostolic witness within which area there is freedom and flexibility.” This means it admits more than just one sense.

The role of the canon as scripture of the church and vehicle for its actualization through the Spirit is to provide an opening and a check to continually new figurative applications

117. *BTONT*, 721.

118. *BTONT*, 723–724.

119. *BTONT*, 724. Cf. *Struggle*, 64 and also Frei, *Eclipse*.

120. *BTONT*, 724–725.

of its apostolic content as it extends the original meaning to the changing circumstances of the community of faith (cf. Frei, *Eclipse*, 2–16). These figurative applications are not held in isolation from its plain sense, but an extension of the one story of God's purpose in Jesus Christ.¹²¹

Canon is in fact directly related to Christ, "God's true man, who is testified to in both testaments, [and] is the ultimate criterion of truth for both testaments."¹²² This is why the canonical approach is not a form of biblicism. Childs resists mimicry of Paul's interpretation, of the New's use of the Old, on *figural* grounds. He wants to reflect on the entire two testament canon in light of the fullness of God's reality in Christ, but his "reasons are far different from the biblicist attempt to recover the one true interpretation in which the Old Testament's hidden agenda was always Jesus Christ." Childs' reasons involve

the ability of biblical language to resonate in a new and creative fashion when read from the vantage point of a fuller understanding of Christian truth. Such a reading is not intended to threaten the *sensus literalis* of the text, but to extend through figuration a reality which has been only partially heard. It is for this reason that allegory or typology, when properly understood and practised, remains an essential part of Christian interpretation and reflects a different understanding of how biblical reality is rendered than, say, midrash does within Judaism.¹²³

Thus the consummation in *BTONT* of Childs' turn from midrash, coupled with a sharper apprehension of the entire Christian Bible's subject matter as God in Christ, finally produces an affirmation of and return to the ancient technique of figuration—allegory or typology—within a canonically ruled domain. It appears quite suddenly under that name, but then again, its theoretical contours are nothing especially new for Childs.

THE NECESSITY OF MULTIPLE LEVEL INTERPRETATION

In about 1997 Childs produced three versions of an outline for a multiple level approach to the interpretation of scripture, one in response to Rendtorff's review of *BTONT*, one in "Toward Recovering Theological Exegesis"—reprinted in 2000, this is perhaps the best statement overall—and one at a conference sponsored by Scholarly Engagement with Anglican Doctrine (published in 1998). Despite variations in all three, there is much verbatim repe-

121. *BTONT*, 724.

122. *BTONT*, 591.

123. *BTONT*, 87–88. For Childs' take on Richard Hays' more sophisticated attempt to capitalize on the NT's use of the OT, which is resisted as an illegitimate form of allegory, see 84.

tition and so I will quote them interchangeably.¹²⁴ It is notable at the outset that figuration, as in *BTONT*, invariably arises in connection with the problem of the Old Testament's relation to the New. Just so a fourth essay from the 1990s, "On Reclaiming the Bible for Christian Theology," which comments on the two testaments and their one *Sache* without mentioning the need for multi-level readings, nonetheless pleads for a "recovery of the church's exegetical tradition."¹²⁵ This too entails the recovery of at least an appreciation for allegory.

Although Childs would "defend the need for a multilevel reading of Scripture according to different contexts," he does not advocate the simple resuscitation of medieval allegory. "I am not suggesting for a moment that we merely return to a traditional fourfold interpretive scheme of the Middle Ages, which continually dissolved the biblical text into fanciful allegory."¹²⁶ The Reformers were right to criticize these excesses. "Nevertheless, in spite of its shortcomings, traditional medieval exegesis correctly sensed the need for interpreting Scripture in ways that did justice to its rich diversity in addressing different contexts, and in serving a variety of functions when instructing the Church in the ways of God."¹²⁷ The most basic context for Childs is of course the canonical context, though this is by no means the only point of entry. Childs in fact delineates three main "contexts" or "entrances." He lists them in order of more to less familiar, insisting that no principle establishes a fixed order in actual operation: for "the unity of one interpretation is assumed throughout."¹²⁸

(1: *res*₁) The first set of contexts involves the *sensus literalis*. "In order to hear the voice of the Old Testament's witness in its own right, it is essential to interpret each passage within its historical, literary, and canonical context." Prophecy does not equal fulfillment; the biblical witnesses are discrete witnesses. Yet "even when restricting oneself to the to the Hebrew Bible according to its canonical shape, the serious interpreter is still constrained to relate the text's

124. There is also an earlier form of the proposal in *BTONT*, 379–383. This will be discussed in the conclusion.

125. Childs, *On Reclaiming*, 17.

126. Childs, *Christian Bible*, 122.

127. *Ibid.*, 122, cf. another address at the same session, Childs, *Christ the Lord*, 12.

128. Childs, *Christian Bible*, 122.

verbal sense to the theological reality which confronted historical Israel in evoking this witness."¹²⁹ The *sensus literalis* is no *sensus trivialis*.¹³⁰

Far and away the most important statement of Childs' here remains "The Sensus Literalis of Scripture," which among other things argues that historical criticism reduced the *sensus literalis* to the *sensus originalis*. The study even makes allowance for figuration. "Viewed from the context of the canon the literal and the figurative sense of the text are not in stark tension, but serve different functions as a unified text within the community of faith. The literal sense of the text is the indispensable key for the hermeneutical task of actualizing the tradition because in its shaping of the tradition it has critically rendered the material into a form suitable for future accommodation."¹³¹ In the background one can only suppose further conversations with Frei.¹³²

(2: *res*₂) A second point of entry extends the literal/historical without contradicting it. This level "seeks to pursue a relationship of content."

For example, in terms of an understanding of God, it inquires as to what features the two Testaments hold in common respecting the mode, intention and goal of God's manifestations. *A comparison is made, but not just on a conceptual level*. Instead, a theological enterprise is engaged in which neither witness is absorbed by the other, nor are their contents fused. Once again, a theological relationship is pursued both on the level of textual witness and that of the discrete subject matter (*res*) of the two collections.¹³³

It is not clear to me whether *OTTCC* could be classed at this level since, although its structure is more thematic or systematic than *IOTS*,¹³⁴ it confines itself fairly exclusively to the Old Testament's first context. It seems likely that much of Childs' work falls under the pursuit of *res*₁, though far from all of it. Numerous illustrations of *res*₂ and *res*₃ are on offer in part six of *BTONT*, which constitutes about half the tome. We will look at one of these in closing.

129. Childs, *Witness to Christ?*, 61.

130. Childs seems to have coined the latter term. It appears at least twice in his work (Barth: *Exegete*, 20 and *On Reclaiming*, 16; conceptually cf. *Elijah*).

131. Childs, *Sensus Literalis*, 93.

132. See Frei, *Literal*.

133. Childs, *Toward Recovering*, 23, my emphasis.

134. But see *OTTCC*, 15–16.

(3: *res*₃) A third and final avenue to the biblical text reverses direction. Instead of moving from the text to the theological reality, it moves from the reality back to the text. There is a need “for the interpreter to encounter the biblical text from the full knowledge of the subject matter gained from hearing the voices of both Testaments. The interpreter now proceeds in a direction which moves from the reality itself back to the textual witness.”¹³⁵ Here Childs tends to speak of an ongoing “pressure” or “coercion” of scripture, and he names two examples especially. One is trinitarian dogma. The other is the *Christuszeugnis* of the Old Testament.

To clarify, one way in which Childs’ approach is ontic as well as noetic surfaces in the second and third contexts. “The text of Scripture, when infused by the Spirit with the full ontological reality of God, resonates with a fresh voice and evokes from its readers the response of praise and wonder. This voice, which transcends historical origins, calls forth the hymns, liturgy, and art of the Church in ever-changing forms of grateful response.”¹³⁶ Biblical interpretation is ontic by virtue of the fact that it is pneumatic, and this is what it means to claim the Bible as the church’s book. “Its genre is confession, not apologetics; its function is worship, not disputation; its content is eschatology, not time-bound history; and its truth is self-affirming, not analytical demonstration.”¹³⁷ It is in these ecclesial modes that Childs’ recurrent metaphor of scriptural witnesses as voices in a choir, or as notes in the score of a symphony which is replayed in different houses, most fully applies. Thus Childs’ brand of figuration is irreducibly Christian. Moreover, not one of his three entrances to theological interpretation—hearing the literal sense of the Old apart from New, pursuing the one *res* common to Old and New, returning from the subject matter back to the two testaments—makes any sense if the exegete is strictly confined to Tanak, Mikra, or that scholarly construct, Hebrew Bible. As formulated here, each stage depends on the double shape of a canon shared and embraced by diverse communities of a catholic faith.

135. Childs, *Christian Bible*, 124.

136. *Ibid.*, 124–125.

137. *Ibid.*, 125.

WILHELM VISCHER AND THE CHRISTUSZEUGNIS OF THE OT

One of the disagreements Barr has with Childs turns on whether or not Wilhelm Vischer read the OT allegorically or not: to Childs' yes Barr said no.¹³⁸ Stefan Felber, whose 1999 monograph about Wilhelm Vischer (1895–1988) was the first of its kind, finds that Barr is strictly correct. Vischer renounced allegory. Felber adds, however, that it is another question “ob damit Childs wirklich widersprochen ist.”¹³⁹ Childs sees that to speak of *Christuszeugnis* is to speak in a form of allegory, and even though he and Vischer do not classify this move the same way, they appear to be on the same page. In fact they are not quite, though Childs mulled over Vischer's legacy often in the 1990s, and though it is no accident that Felber opens with a block quote from Childs and concludes the central section of his study, “Wilhelm Vischer als Ausleger der Heiligen Schrift,” with a comparison of Vischer and Childs.¹⁴⁰

The title of Vischer's controversial *Das Christuszeugnis des Alten Testaments* neatly captures the apparent link between Vischer and Childs. Of course, Eichrodt and von Rad also maintain that Christ is somehow the subject matter of the Old Testament—each also gets special consideration by Felber¹⁴¹—though it was von Rad who did much to damage Vischer's reception in an early review of *Christuszeugnis*.¹⁴² But if Childs from 1992 begins to invite comparison with Vischer, and if through the 1990s Childs revisits a dispute which would have

138. Childs, OT in Germany, cf. Barr, Vischer, who decides—not unlike his damning verdict on Childs—that Vischer probably did “not have a *method*, but rather a mixture of quite contradictory methods, held together by the fact that they appeared to produce a Reformational Christ. [Porteous said his theology was muddled.] ... He *was* muddled” (53, original emphasis, cf. 50).

139. Felber, *Vischer*, 335, cf. 204.

140. *Ibid.*, 14, 292–304. In the comparison Felber finds a “weitreichenden Konsens” (304) but concedes that a major difference involves whether the NT's hearing of the OT is secondary (Childs) or more direct (Vischer). Childs takes a stronger position against christologizing the OT (that Childs' solution has to do with multiple levels of interpretation arises as if by accident, in the middle of a long citation from *BTONT*). And Childs takes a more *historical* route on Felber's reading: “Vischers alttestamentliche Hermeneutik ist, obwohl er auf historisch-kritische Arbeit nicht verzichtet hat, entschieden einfacher” (302). Childs' reasons for parting company with Vischer are theological as well as historical, however; see below.

141. In total there are six “confrontations” between Vischer and other prominent exegetes; the remaining three are Delitzsch, von Hofmann, and Calvin.

142. Rad, *Christuszeugnis*. Then again, von Rad concludes his lecture on typology by saying that we must speak of a *Christuszeugnis* in the OT after all. See chapter two, and compare Moberly, *Bible, Theology, Faith*, esp. 143: with Vischer, von Rad agrees that “the historical sequence from Israel to Christ may be reversed hermeneutically when it comes to reading Israel's scripture as Christian scripture.”

been more current in his student days,¹⁴³ one should add immediately that, like Eichrodt and von Rad before him, he departs from Vischer in crucial respects. In “a postscript of a personal nature” at the end of his study of the OT in Germany from 1920–1940, Childs writes,

Only after I had completed this essay did it occur to me how much my own attempt to resolve the hermeneutical problems of Old Testament interpretation according to a new canonical approach has been unconsciously influenced by the German struggle of the 30s. Along with many confessing Christians I too felt the full force of the powerful challenge of Barth, Vischer, and Hellbardt for the Old Testament to be heard as a theological witness to Christian Faith. Yet I was also forced to agree with von Rad, Eichrodt, and Zimmerli that Vischer’s solution was seriously flawed and that there must be another alternative between the sharp polarity which he set up between modern historical critical exegesis and a repristination of 16th century Reformation theology.¹⁴⁴

Somewhere in the process of writing *BTONT*, however, Childs came to the realization that his approach sat atop an old controversy about the significance of biblical criticism for Christian theology, acutely felt in OT studies, and furthermore that his own answers put him somewhere *between* Vischer and von Rad. “It would be the height of arrogance and sheer folly to suggest that the canonical approach offers the correct solution, but I would argue that the issues included under the cipher ‘canonical’ raise those basic theological factors, strangely missing in the previous debates, without which no truly theological solution between the church’s Scripture and modernity can ever be reached.”¹⁴⁵ In other words, as he puts it in a reprise essay on “OT in Germany,” today’s context is very different compared to that in Europe between the wars, but “many of the hermeneutical issues that evoked such controversies in the 1920s and 1930s still remain unresolved, and, with the erosion of the post-World War II consensus, have returned with a vengeance.”¹⁴⁶

Thus the outline of multi-level readings that responds to Rendtorff, “Does the Old Testament Witness to Jesus Christ?,” centers on Vischer to affirm part of his vision, and to push back against it. The “recently renewed interest in Biblical Theology”—presumably Childs

143. Note Childs’ discussion of Vischer in 1958, in one of his very first publications: Childs, *Prophecy and Fulfillment*, esp. 270. Vischer is defended for recognizing that both testaments share the same reality in Jesus Christ, but is criticized for the abstract manner in which Christ is discovered in the OT.

144. Childs, *OT in Germany*, 245, cf. Childs, *On Reclaiming*, 4.

145. Childs, *OT in Germany*, 245. It is probable that Childs means to include von Rad in the period of “theological compromise” here.

146. Childs, *On Reclaiming*, 4.

means his own above all—is only “superficially” a “throwback to the Vischer era.”¹⁴⁷ Entry at *res*₁ insists on hearing the OT on its own since “to read back into the story the person of Jesus Christ, as Vischer did, or to interpret the various theophanies as manifestations of the second person of the Trinity, is to distort this witness and to drown out the Old Testament’s own voice.”¹⁴⁸ And “to speak of the *Christuszeugnis* in the sense being proposed is ... far removed from Vischer’s.”¹⁴⁹ But one must in the end speak of the *Christuszeugnis*. Rendtorff’s *Doktorvater* saw this, too, in a limited way.

Von Rad initially agreed with Vischer’s call for a new theological approach, and later in life he freely admitted that Vischer had indeed sounded the alarm, especially in light of the threat from National Socialism after 1933. However, in his review he attacked Vischer as harshly as any of Vischer’s liberal detractors, and concluded that his exegetical approach was quite hopeless. Moreover, it was significant that *von Rad did not really attack him theologically, but from the perspective of the historical-critical method.*¹⁵⁰

Von Rad’s theological compromise with historical-critical method fails, but his instinct about the christological scope of OT exegesis is correct.¹⁵¹ The God of the Old is not different than the God of the New.

On his own account Childs departs from Vischer in two respects: he does not ignore the genuine advances of the critical era (here he stands closer to von Rad), and so he refuses to reprimatinate a bygone era.¹⁵² That said, by returning to multiple senses Childs departs from the Reformers—for almost exactly the same reason he departs from Vischer: it is a mistake to “christianize” the Old Testament’s voice. Calvin dealt with the unity of the testaments by defining the one sense of scripture so broadly that he did not require allegory.¹⁵³ This makes Calvin’s effort to unite the witness of the two testaments unsatisfactory. He is right about “an

147. Childs, *Witness to Christ?*, 57.

148. *Ibid.*, 61.

149. *Ibid.*, 63.

150. Childs, *On Reclaiming*, 2, my emphasis. For Rendtorff’s take on Vischer and von Rad, see *Canon and Theology*, 76–91.

151. See the epilogue to chapter four.

152. I argue elsewhere that Childs is no arcadian. See Driver, *Later Childs*. Somewhat like Barth (cf. Smend, *Nachkritische*) Childs is genuinely post-critical.

153. *Struggle*, 211: “Calvin’s notion of the literal sense is deep enough not to need another textual level to carry a spiritual meaning by means of allegory. Rather, the literal sense is the true and genuine meaning of scripture. In contrast to Luther, Calvin does not related the two aspects of the literal sense in a dialectical fashion between the spiritual and the carnal.” Cf. Childs, *Sensus Literalis*, 87.

overarching unity between the two.” But Childs’ “exegetical caveat is that Calvin’s approach runs the danger of projecting backward into the biblical narrative a meaning that is not derived from the Old Testament. The effect is that he christianizes the Old Testament by a form of psychologizing the unexpressed motivation of its characters.”¹⁵⁴ It is not wrong to engage the Bible at the level of *res*₂ or *res*₃ prior to *res*₁, but it would be a serious error to factor *res*₁ out of the equation. The canonical OT is a pre-Christian witness to Christ.

In sum, Childs’ mature theory blends the traditional—multiple senses of scripture—with the critical—historical criticism teaches a lesson about the *sensus literalis* that offers a corrective to Reformation understandings, even though in the end criticism took the lesson too far. Childs’ late return to Vischer mirrors a broader effort to be informed by past mistakes, not to repeat them, but to work beyond them.

FAMILY RESEMBLANCE: STRUGGLE’S SPIRITUAL READING OF SPIRITUAL READING

The one who reads *Struggle* for instances of modern allegory is bound to come away disappointed. It is much more a modern appreciation of traditional allegory than a modern allegorical reading of Isaiah—though as will be seen in section three Childs proffers a muted multi-level reading of his own in his Isaiah commentary. I will therefore discuss *Struggle* before *Isaiah*. The 2004 book rounds out this discussion of the hermeneutics of allegory on Childs’ understanding. It revisits these in service of “the enterprise of recovering a useable exegetical Christian tradition” in the twenty-first century and is a reading of the tradition reading Isaiah, a search for a “family resemblance” in the church’s accommodation of the prophet.¹⁵⁵ And Childs does find “some basic and constitutive features” in the church’s reception of Isaiah, which he catalogues in a sentence that comes as close as possible to a thesis statement: “the authority of scripture, its literal and spiritual senses, scripture’s two testaments,

154. *Struggle*, 217. Cf. Childs, *Genre of Commentary*, 191.

155. Wittgenstein employed the term *Familienähnlichkeit*, as did Nietzsche, and presumably others in turn before him (Needham, *Polythetic*, 367n1). I do not see that this pedigree has much impact on Childs’ usage. In all likelihood the term is learned from Frei, who seems to have read Wittgenstein in greater depth (e.g., *Eclipse*, 27 and cf. Dawson, *Figural Reading*, 146, 151, 157).

its divine and human authorship, its Christological content, and the dialectical nature of history.”¹⁵⁶ Typically, whether or not an exegete struggles (wrestles) with these six challenges determines whether the exegesis belongs to the family not.

In a way *Struggle* is an exercise in typology of another sort: it drafts a typology of Christian readers. A given profile can either be one of continuity or of breach.¹⁵⁷ Also, though Childs does not abandon the Jewish exegetical tradition,¹⁵⁸ he is preoccupied with the particular challenges arising from the affirmation of a two-part Christian Bible; Christian resources naturally come to the fore. The Jewish voice of Isaiah must be heard, but the driving question here is how to read its testimony to God's work in Christ. Another characteristic of Childs' typology is the way it spans the entire Christian tradition. Although the advent of criticism (the Enlightenment) is undeniably a watershed, its relative importance over against a loose continuity across the Christian exegetical tradition permits Childs to move freely between modern and pre-modern interpreters. No wall blocks a comparison of Hengstenberg or Brueggemann to, say, Origen or Thomas. So it is possible to assess traditional readers from a modern perspective. Jerome is criticized for “historical rationalism”; Thomas conducts “an ontological interpretation” (this phrasing is acknowledged to be anachronistic); Luther was on the brink of recognizing a break in Isaiah between chapters 39 and 40; Calvin overly christianizes the Old Testament.¹⁵⁹ But it is equally possible to do the reverse—to weigh a modern exegete against a traditional perspective. Gerhard von Rad's typology, to take a poignant example, has been compared by some with Theodoret's. For Childs the comparison is suggestive—there is a “family resemblance” between them—even though von Rad appears not to have been directly informed by Theodoret. There are notable differences, however. For example, “Theodoret spoke of the active and supernatural role of the Holy Spirit in illuminating the sacred Word to faithful recipients. Conversely, von Rad spoke of the spirit more in terms of

156. *Struggle*, 322.

157. For an example leading up to *Struggle*, see Childs, Vitranga.

158. In the same year as the Vitranga piece see Childs, Benno Jacob. Cf. idem, *Interpretation in Faith*, 449n26, in 1964, and see my discussion of Childs and Jacob in chapter five.

159. *Struggle*, 97, 160, 193 and 216–217, respectively.

the charismatic dimension of human interpretation seeking to reinterpret the past through fresh and creative applications. In sum, one can only surmise that von Rad might have been aided in his hermeneutical reflections if he had had the occasion to probe deeply into the writing of Theodoret.¹⁶⁰ Von Rad would have done better had he read Theodoret!

By way of such cross-comparison Childs hovers around certain hallmarks of good interpretation. Time and again he touches on the relationship of letter and spirit. Justin sounds mystical notes foreign to the historical, or economic character of the OT, thus threatening the relationship of the testaments and giving rise to a “serious misunderstanding of Judaism.”¹⁶¹ Clement of Alexandria’s faults parallel Justin’s, though he can follow the literal sense more closely.¹⁶² Origen understands that allegory has to do with the nature of reference (so F. Young) and can honor and extend the literal sense without contrivance.¹⁶³ Jerome made a kind of advance by placing letter before spirit, but his extensions are often “arbitrary” and have the effect of “weakening the unity” of OT and NT.¹⁶⁴ John Chrysostom made few hermeneutical advances, yet he models the way allegory can aid preaching when restrained by the proper rules.¹⁶⁵ Cyril of Alexandria, despite a reputation to the contrary, takes an interest in the spiritual sense, and he constructs a “tight morphological fit” between both testaments. He seeks not to impose doctrine on scripture, but to facilitate a fresh hearing of the word of God in the present.¹⁶⁶ Theodore of Mopsuestia is critiqued even more harshly than Jerome for failing to connect OT and NT.¹⁶⁷ Theodoret breaks out of this legacy, however, and manages

160. *Struggle*, 146.

161. *Struggle*, 41.

162. *Struggle*, 59.

163. *Struggle*, 68, 71.

164. *Struggle*, 101, 102. With Jerome Childs hints at the link between a good understanding of eschatology and a limiting view of biblical prophecy. “In contrast with Justin, Irenaeus, and Augustine, Jerome appeared to have little grasp of biblical eschatology” (102). He “may have had far too narrow a view of biblical history, which was lost in his simple correspondence theory of prophecy and fulfillment” (97).

165. *Struggle*, 106.

166. *Struggle*, 124.

167. *Struggle*, 133. To me this is one of the more astonishing biblical theological judgments in *Struggle*. Famous for finding Christ in only four or five psalms, Theodore got himself into trouble. “Because of his concern to avoid the danger of excessively symbolic, figurative interpretation, he fell into an overly literal reading that hindered serious attention to the metaphors and similes of John’s Gospel. Also, he could not fully attain a consistent interpretation of the Old Testament prediction while affirming a genuine

non-arbitrary figurative extensions.¹⁶⁸ Thomas, via Augustine, brings the *res* or coercive pressure of scripture into the foreground. He works with the literal sense, and yet of equal importances is his non-literal mode of interpretation.¹⁶⁹ Nicholas of Lyra lacks an organic link between his two literal senses.¹⁷⁰ Luther changed allegory by means of “dialectic” and, like Thomas, still managed to heed the existential and ontological force of *res*. Calvin majors on the plain sense of scripture, though his is large enough to accommodate a figural dimension.

Echos of these traditional efforts to extend the letter reverberate into the post-Reformation period, to be sure (Vitranga). Generally, though, in the wake of the Enlightenment things fall apart. The christological center cannot hold. Severed from typology, the ontology of scripture becomes increasingly strained. In the modern period generally, the *dissolution of struggle* becomes a serious setback. Despite his failings, von Rad is one of a few important exceptions.¹⁷¹

Childs recognizes that he offers a spiritual reading *of* spiritual reading. This comes through most clearly in his discussion of Cyril.

I am fully aware that this interpretation of the rationale behind the spiritual sense remains an eschatological ideal, and largely unrealized within the Christian church throughout much of its history. Perhaps the most troubling failure of all lies in the persistent attacks on Judaism throughout the centuries, illustrated in a particularly painful form by Cyril. Crucial to the hermeneutical analysis above is the point that the church's spiritual reflection on scripture according to its ontic wholeness falls into the genre of praise, worship, and self-criticism rather than apologetics and polemics. Only in the light of a deeper engagement with the substance of God's will disclosed in scripture will the repentant church be prepared to speak meaningfully on the faith it shares with Judaism.¹⁷²

More precisely what is the rationale? Cyril shows this too, despite his anti-Semitism. He “comes to the text from a *holistic understanding* of the theological substance of Christian scripture”—we could call this *res*₃—and he “then seeks to find further illumination of God's

correspondence between the testaments.” This contradicts a common view of Theodore as a front-runner of things historical critical or ecumenical (for example, see the discussion of Brunert chapter seven).

168. *Struggle*, 137–138.

169. *Struggle*, 148, 159–160, 162, 164. Cf. *BTONT*, 40–42.

170. *Struggle*, 177–178.

171. Like Origen, for example (*Struggle*, 71), Delitzsch struggled (277). Increasingly from the seventeenth and eighteenth century, others did not (cf. 267, 282, 287, 315).

172. *Struggle*, 125.

revelation by *rethinking the subject matter from within* as he intertwines Old and New Testament texts into new configurations”—*res*₂ with some regard for *res*₁. “Lying at the heart of this exegetical procedure is the conviction that scripture is a living Word continually activated by the Spirit to speak to each generation of a faithful church.”¹⁷³ As in the 2000 essay on allegory, Childs’ hermeneutical ideals drive his sourcing of the tradition. The procedure of spiritual reading described here belongs to Childs every bit as much as to Cyril of Alexandria.

DEFINING ALLEGORY

We can close with a word about how Childs defines allegory in *Struggle*. To begin with, Childs accepts Jon Whitman’s definition: “allegory says one thing, and means another.”¹⁷⁴ The core issue lies elsewhere, however. When discussing Luther, Childs negotiates some of the attempts to pin down Luther’s understanding of figuration. Ebeling, following Jülicher, puts it as follows:

Allegorical interpretation is the rendering of a text under the assumption that what it says clearly hides something else which obtains its meaning from somewhere else. The effect is that the actual words and larger units of the text have been replaced more or less completely by a comparative rendering by means of concepts which belong to a foreign sense of the text and derive from an intention independent of its literary composition.¹⁷⁵

But clearly this will not do. “It is one thing to make a literary judgment that allegory says one thing but means something else.” Luther goes this far himself. “It is quite another to suggest that the allegorical rendering is by definition ‘foreign’ to the text.” To say this is to import prejudices foreign to the concept. “In contrast, the Church Fathers measured the truth of the figurative sense not as foreign, but as stemming from the *res* (substance) of the text itself. The source of the figurative was not separated from the text and assigned to an alien ‘from somewhere,’ but rather regarded as a different and true dimension of the selfsame reality.” This time, perhaps in contrast to Cyril, Childs’ reading finds some good support in the secondary literature (see Christine Helmer’s sophisticated exploration of “Luther’s Trinitarian Hermeneutic

173. *Struggle*, 125, my emphasis.

174. Whitman, *Allegory*, 2. Cf. *Struggle*, 66, 183–184.

175. Ebeling, *Evangelienauslegung*, 48, cited as translated in *Struggle*, 184.

and the Old Testament"). Allegory on Ebeling's understanding wrongly suggests "that the literal/historical is the one true interpretation, and the figurative is a substitute and alteration falsely imposed from some other source than the text."¹⁷⁶ Probably for Luther, and certainly for Childs, this is not the case.

And the *res* is Christ. Allegory or figurative reading carries readers from the canonical testaments to the very reality of the triune God. Precisely here Louth's plea for a modern return to allegory resonates most strongly with Childs. "The literal meaning is the fundamental meaning," Louth explains. Through this "allegory is firmly related to the *mystery of Christ*, it is a way of relating the whole of Scripture to that mystery, a way of making a synthetic vision out of the images and events of the Biblical narrative."¹⁷⁷ Naturally, it "does not *prove* anything, but it is not meant to."¹⁷⁸ In Childs' words, the genre is confession, not apologetics; its truth self-affirming, not an analytical demonstration. By the Holy Spirit it provides those inside the community of faith with a means of access to the reality they confess. In short, to move from *res*₁ to *res*₂ to *res*₃ and back again is not an evasion of the text, nor necessarily a warping of the same; ruled rightly, allegory penetrates into the very depths of signification.

CONCLUSION: "A RULE OF FAITH CALLED CANON"¹⁷⁹

A final comment needs to be made about how canon as a rule of faith governs Childs' proposed multi-level reading, at least in theory. If allegory is mystical, how does one know when it verges on fanciful? Is not the danger always that it becomes uncontrolled, unruly? Childs has a very clear answer. Up to now I have avoided the most central plank in canonical figuration, the *regula fidei*. Since it is one of the first traditional concepts to wind up in Childs' proposal (canon \approx rule), it is a good place to end a discussion of Childs' sourcing of the tradition. We end near to where he began. That is, in all versions of multi-level proposals from

176. *Struggle*, 184.

177. Louth, *Mystery*, 121, my emphasis; cf. *Struggle*, 66, 302.

178. *Ibid.*, 121.

179. The phrase comes from Childs, *Response to Reviewers*, 52.

1992 onwards Childs emphasizes the priority of the rule of faith over figuration, and suggests that the rule is a counterpart to the foundational *sensus literalis*. The Bible's "salvific meaning is not esoteric or hidden, but plain and forthright. Careful attention must be paid to its syntax and style. Yet the literal sense is to be balanced by a rule reading—a reading informed by its subject matter and its confessional content."¹⁸⁰ Figural extensions of the literal operate *within* this more basic framework and are never independent of it. This rule enables him to speak of the "unity of one interpretation." It is also why for Childs—in marked contrast to Barr—the secret sense of allegory is an *open* secret.

"In its original sense," writes Childs in 1970, "canon does not simply perform the formal function of separating the books that are authoritative from others that are not, but is the *rule* that delineates the area in which the church hears the word of God."¹⁸¹ The normative dimension of canon remains its most important sense because the exact shape of the canon has always fluctuated. Canon is thus rightly seen as a kind of confession. "In speaking of canon the church testified that the authority of its Scriptures stemmed from God, not from human sanction. Canonicity as the 'rule of faith' was a confession of the divine origin of the gospel that had called the church into being."¹⁸² Here for the first time one sees the close correspondence of canon and rule.

Scalise rightly points to Barth as a source for this idea (see chapter two), but the move to join them also occurs in the context of a discussion of Hans von Campenhausen's *Die Entstehung der christlichen Bibel* (1968), from which Childs appears to have gleaned a preliminary understanding of Irenaeus' interpretive framework.

The one rule and guideline, the only "canon" which Irenaeus explicitly acknowledges, is the "canon of truth," that is to say: the content of the faith itself, which the Church received from Christ, to which she remains faithful, and by which she lives. By this is meant neither a *Summa* of dogmatic propositions nor an unchangeable confessional formula nor even the sacred Scripture as such, however certain it may be that the latter teaches and contains truth.¹⁸³

180. Childs, *Christ the Lord*, 12.

181. *Crisis*, 99, my emphasis.

182. *Crisis*, 105.

183. Campenhausen, *Formation*, 182, cf. 183, 288–290.

Another important source, chased up by Childs following the publication of *Crisis* and undergirding von Campenhausen's analysis, is Bengt Hägglund's "Die Bedeutung der 'regula fidei' als Grundlage theologischer Aussagen" (1958). Childs first discusses the article in 1972, in connection with von Campenhausen.¹⁸⁴ Through the patristic era, Hägglund explains, "Es ist nicht von ungefähr, dass das griechische Wort für 'regula,' κανών, mehr und mehr zu einer festen Bezeichnung für die heilige Schrift wurde. Das ursprüngliche Zeugnis ist nicht nur deshalb 'kanonisch,' weil es mit der Autorität der Propheten und Apostel ausgestattet ist, sondern auch weil es Träger der Offenbarung, Vermittler der Heilswirklichkeit ist."¹⁸⁵ According to von Campenhausen and Hägglund, for Irenaeus and for Tertullian the rule of truth or faith is prior to the Bible, larger than the Bible, and therefore not strictly identical with the Bible, but nonetheless works *only when coupled with the Bible's prophetic and apostolic witness*. In Hägglund's words again, "Die Aufgabe, eine 'fundamentum' der Lehrüberlieferung zu sein, erfüllt die 'regula' nur durch die Vermittlung der heiligen Schrift."¹⁸⁶ It is in this context that Childs' use of Barth-like language of canon as vehicle, witness, transparency to the divine reality begins to make sense.

From the very first time "canon" is proposed as a better context for biblical theology in the critical era, it binds theological reflection on scripture to a living God who, by the prophets and apostles, still speaks to God's people, thus making scripture's textual authority indispensable, but ancillary. The best analogy is the interpretive framework developed in the patristic period. As Tertullian puts it, "It is your faith, says Christ, which has made you whole, not busying yourself with the scriptures."¹⁸⁷ By this Tertullian does *not* mean

that the exegesis of Scripture must be subjected to an external norm, laid down by the Church, but that Scripture is to be read from within the faith with which the believer is already familiar, and that when it is so read scripture [sic] itself simply confirms that faith

184. Childs, *OT Scripture of Church*, 713, cf. 711. The first thing Childs affirm in the ancient church is their confession of canon: "A particular set of writings is judged to contain the church's living tradition—the rule of faith—in which the life of the community is grounded. Our faith is established on the witness of the prophets and apostles..." (713–714).

185. Hägglund, *Die Bedeutung*, 39.

186. *Ibid.*, 39.

187. Praescr. 14.3–4 (CCSL I, II), cited in both Campenhausen, *Formation*, 289 and Hägglund, *Die Bedeutung*, 20.

over and over again. The closest modern counterpart to this definition of the *regula veritatis* is the concept of the “canon within the canon”—but only if this is understood as a “guide” to a right understanding, and not as a critical principle by which to scrutinize the Scripture. The indestructible unity and homogeneity of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is for Tertullian, as for all the Fathers from Irenaeus onwards, the fundamental biblical dogma in their fight against the gnostics. It is a dogma which was not seriously imperilled until the rise of modern historical criticism, and it gave Tertullian, like most of the theologians of the early Church, relatively little trouble.¹⁸⁸

In view of the rise of historical criticism, having gained from it a keen sense of the diversity and historical shape of the biblical material, Childs seeks to recover an ancient understanding of the unity of scripture in its witness to the one true God. It is why for him *κανών* and *regula* are always coextensive, and why biblical theology nonetheless entails a modified kind of *Sachkritik* of the text of *κανών* with an eye to its divine subject matter.

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. “Die Bedeutung” is listed in *IOTS*,¹⁸⁹ footnoted occasionally in articles,¹⁹⁰ referenced in a discussion of Irenaeus in *NCTI*,¹⁹¹ named at the start of a longer discussion of Irenaeus and the rule in *BTONT*,¹⁹² and featured in a chapter on Irenaeus as a biblical theologian (the first) in *Struggle*.¹⁹³ (Finally, the phrase “rule of faith” appears seven times in *Corpus*, and “regula fidei” twice more.¹⁹⁴) Harnack and other nineteenth century church historians tended, mistakenly, to identify the rule of faith with a baptismal rite. In fact it had more to do with the grounding of biblical hermeneutics. According to Hägglund,

Die “regula fidei” ist nicht mit dem Symbol, auch nicht mit einer bestimmten Auslegung dieses Symbols identisch. Der Begriff—der nicht konkret, sondern abstrakt zu fassen ist—bezieht sich auf die ganze Lehre der Kirche, die Lehre die von den Aposteln und Propheten verkündigt worden und in der heiligen Schrift niedergelegt ist. Taufbekenntnis

188. Campenhausen, *Formation*, 290.

189. *IOTS*, 69, cf. 81, 83.

190. E.g., Childs, *Endform*, 246n5.

191. *NCTI*, 28.

192. *BTONT*, 30–32.

193. *Struggle*, 47, cf. 48, 51–53.

194. *Corpus* shows as well as anything the marrying of key concepts from Hägglund and Seeligmann, though neither are named there. One of the tests of canonicity for Paul’s letters was orthodoxy, “the ‘canon of truth/faith’ (*regula veritatis/fidei*),” although “this criterion was not a later *superadditum* imposed in a political struggle for power, as is sometimes argued, but its roots lay deep within the church’s oral tradition preceding its stage of a written Scripture” (23–24).

(als kurze Zusammenfassung des Inhalts der Offenbarung), heilige Schrift, apostolische Überlieferung—alles ist in der “regula fidei” oder “regula veritatis” inbegriffen. Deshalb kann diese “regula” mit der einen oder der anderen Grösse gleichgestellt werden, ohne dass doch beide ganz identisch sind.¹⁹⁵

For Irenaeus, according to Childs, “the rule of faith was a summary of the apostolic faith that was held as central to the church’s confession. It provided the grounds of the church’s faith and worship over against deviant Gnostic speculation. The rule was *not identical with scripture*, but was that sacred apostolic tradition, both in oral and written form, that comprised the church’s story... [It] was a *holistic rendering* of the apostolic faith according to its proper order.”¹⁹⁶ Within the rule Irenaeus is free to employ a variety of interpretive techniques and methods.¹⁹⁷ But the rule is prior.

Hägglund’s study makes a fascinating biblical theological proposal in itself, recommending a return to such a rule in dogmatic and historical theology. The correspondences with Childs’ approach cannot detain us, however. The point for Childs is that *the space between rule and letter establishes the space in which figuration can be tried*. In 1977 we see a hint of this possibility. Figure and letter are “not in stark tension,” although letter is “indispensable.” Other moves are out of bounds—allegory must not disfigure the letter, criticism must not destroy the way that letter has been configured. “In terms of classic Christian theology, the church’s *regula fidei* encompasses both text and tradition in an integral unity as the living Word of God.”¹⁹⁸ In 2004 the point is stronger still. “The canonical shape provides the larger framework of scripture—a rule of faith—within which the interpretive function of exegesis is guided.”¹⁹⁹ In aid of the “multiple textual meanings” that the church increasingly pursued, the “great strength of Irenaeus, in spite of certain ambiguities in his approach, was in providing a rule of faith (*regula fidei*) as a framework for Christian interpretation that empha-

195. Hägglund, *Die Bedeutung*, 3–4.

196. *Struggle*, 47, my emphasis.

197. *Struggle*, 52, cf. 306.

198. Childs, *Sensus Literalis*, 93. Cf. *idem*, *Witness to Christ?*, 60.

199. *Struggle*, 317.

sized the theological content of scripture.”²⁰⁰ Today, I scarcely need to add, the canonical approach hopes to restore this early insight about scripture to the church.

The rule of faith also helps explain why Childs speaks of a framework instead of a method. Rowan Greer, a Yale colleague who wrote on the rule, argues that in the early church all roads lead to Irenaeus because he was the first to work out a *framework* within which to read the scriptures of the Jews. “The quest for a framework of interpretation is a quest not as much for method as for a way of finding coherence between the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian story.”²⁰¹ This, according to Greer, kept one eye on the unity of the Christian story and one eye on the reality of Christ, and Irenaeus called it the rule of faith. “Irenaeus offers a Christian transformation of the Hebrew Scriptures that makes them wholly integral to a Christian Bible.”²⁰² Once established, the framework was not questioned. “The church after Irenaeus accepts his basic platform and remains committed to what we should call theological exegesis by regarding the church’s faith as the key to unlock the meaning of Scripture.”²⁰³ Obviously this left a great many particulars undecided, as controversies over the Trinity or the nature of Christ would shortly demonstrate. The first *method* also came later. Applied within Irenaeus’ basic framework, the method was devised by Origen.²⁰⁴

Seen in this light, Childs spent decades laboring to re-establish an approach to scripture that had been imperilled (von Campenhausen) and inverted (Frei) in the critical era. Only later in his career did he develop the hermeneutical implications of the figural or allegorical method which had traditionally been used within a framework to unite the two testaments in detail. In a sense, then, the move from *IOTS* to *BTONT* follows the move from Irenaeus to Origen—though of course Childs has the benefit of standing this side of Nicea. Significantly, Greer also observes that the function of the rule of faith was largely negative. It said “no” to heresy and, somewhat more positively, established the bounds of faithful interpre-

200. *Struggle*, 303. So with the four gospels and one gospel (Childs, *Christ the Lord*, 5).

201. Kugel and Greer, *Early*, 151.

202. *Ibid.*, 154. Cf. *Struggle*, 53.

203. *Ibid.*, 176.

204. *Ibid.*, 178–179.

tation. However the needfulness of Childs' critique is judged, it is hard to avoid the impression that his "sustained polemic" bears a certain family resemblance to early church controversies. As with the Fathers, however, this does not mean Childs' actual exegesis is parasitic on his opponents, nor that preoccupation with the text is a byproduct of a supposed heterodoxy, nor again that his approach fails to invite further endeavor. Childs saw a diminishment of tacit rules that set a more basic challenge—total overhaul, or short of that, to sound a whistle reminding the field, and Christian exegetes in particular, why certain rules and not others have traditionally been in play.

A final point. In addition to establishing a regulative framework within which the literal sense can be heard, another advantage of the rule of faith is its ability to organize what Childs so often calls a holistic rendering of scripture's witness. While the rule's foundation is quite absolute, it has a degree of abstraction which arises from the flawed human perception of its content and that accommodates the great variety of the biblical material without requiring its harmonization. What can this unity mean? A trend in some of the more recent literature has been to equate the rule of faith with the storied world of scripture or the Christian metanarrative, as if the rule's purpose is "to capture the *narrative* wholeness of Scripture."²⁰⁵ This has rightly been challenged and does not do justice to Childs' understanding of *regula* anymore than biblical narrative (Frei) does to canonical shape.²⁰⁶ Childs does at times speak of the rule in terms of the church's story, perhaps under the tutelage of Greer. But the rule is larger than salvation history. Its purpose as canon is to govern human access to scripture's framework (*theoria*) and true subject matter (*hypothesis*) as well as to testify to dispensations in the divine economy (*oikonomia*, which Childs can interchange with *Heilsgeschichte*). The church's acts of praise and repentance partake in the "ontic wholeness" of scripture which transcends and encloses the church's cognition of economic realities.

205. Blowers, *Regula Fidei*, 220, my emphasis, cf. 202, 205–215.

206. For a wider analysis of the literature and a critique, see MacDonald, *Narrative Identity*. MacDonald remarks suggestively: "With his attention to the shape of the canon, we can justly speak of Irenaeus as the first canonical interpreter" (11). And he quite rightly observes that Blowers' understanding of "the Christ event" is insufficiently narrow.

III. ONTIC AND NOETIC TRINITARIAN DOGMAS: CHILDS VERSUS BARR

In this third and final section I will bring the two measures of allegory discussed in this chapter into dialogue on the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The question is: what impact does each approach to scripture (regardless of whether or not one finally terms it allegory) have on the Christian affirmations Barr and Childs each make of trinitarian dogma? We will take Barr first.

BARR: TRINITARIAN RATHER THAN CHRISTOLOGICAL

Immediately after Barr describes modern, post-war typology as “a bridge which reaches neither side of the river” (1966),²⁰⁷ he considers the function of the two testaments in the work of salvation. He contends that a Christian approach to the Old Testament needs to be “Trinitarian *rather than* Christological.”²⁰⁸ This is not meant to deny that Jesus Christ and the God of Israel are the same God. Indeed, the argument begins with an affirmation that “Christian use of the Old Testament seems to depend on the belief that One God who is the God of Israel is also the God and Father of Jesus Christ. All our use of the Old Testament goes back to this belief.”²⁰⁹ But this is also not an affirmation of a direct path from the Old Testament to Christ, let alone the opposite. In some sense “the God of Israel ... foreknew his Son,” Barr explains. “But there is no actual prediction or prophecy of which we can say that Jesus is the intended content. Our use of the texts should relate to the intended content because it was through the intended content that his purpose was moved forward, even if the intended content does not comprehend that purpose.”²¹⁰ Barr’s intentionalism compels him to voice a strong “not yet” which excludes any talk of the Old yearning for its fulfillment in the New. “This may be prejudiced,” he writes, “but I have always found this language of ‘looking for-

207. Barr, *Old and New*, 132.

208. *Ibid.*, 153, my emphasis.

209. *Ibid.*, 149.

210. *Ibid.*, 153.

ward to,' 'pointing towards' and so on, very unconvincing. It at once leads us into questions of purpose and intention, and purpose and intention cannot really be otherwise expressed than as the purpose and intention of the writers at the time of writing."²¹¹ So then, even though we see that the God of Israel is the Father of Christ our Lord—all language Barr embraces—the mind of the Old Testament is so closely identified with the minds of its human authors that its purpose and intention cannot directly reveal anything about the purpose and intention of the God of Israel, including the purpose of the Father with respect to the One who is Son.

There are difficulties with this view. How does Barr suppose he has access to the purposes of God to begin with? Barr's theological reason for excluding Christ from the "intended content" of the Old Testament is "because it was through the intended content that his purpose was moved forward." Who is "his"? God the Father? In that case what does the Son have to do with the Father's purpose? Do the Father and Son share the same purpose? And just who or what is the passive subject moving the divine purpose forward? The next clause is even more confusing: "it was through the intended content that his purpose was moved forward, *even if the intended content does not comprehend that purpose.*" Is Barr suggesting that the humanly intended content of the Old Testament could get caught up in a purpose it did not in the first instance comprehend? If so, one could begin to doubt the adequacy of a strict intentionalist model. When Barr says interpretation of the Old Testament is trinitarian rather than christological, he emphasizes the (human) lack of the knowledge of Christ before His birth. How then does he connect the testimony of the Old to the one divine work of salvation witnessed to by the New?

Barr amplifies his doctrine of God in terms of "reality" and encounters more problems. The Old Testament touches the real because it records "the reality of God's original contact with Israel." But to what extent is the Old Testament caught up in the reality of Christ which the church now confesses? Barr states:

God was known in Israel. We believe that his work with Israel worked also for the purpose which we see fulfilled in Jesus Christ. But the way he worked for this purpose was by contacts with Israel which were real in themselves. These contacts worked also afterwards

211. Ibid., 152.

through the after-effects in later interpretation of the texts which they produced. But our interest in the original setting of the texts is an interest in the reality of God's original contact with Israel.²¹²

Is Jesus Christ different from the God who was known in Israel? How? Is the Father's purpose fulfilled in Christ different from the work of Christ itself? On what basis would one know? And if the text is a by-product of "situations of actual contact with God,"²¹³ whatever that might mean, why did the text have after-effects in the life of Israel and beyond? Conversely, in view of the text's after-effects, why is "our interest" so obviously limited to the "original setting"? What makes the original setting of the words more real?

Thoughts about the nature of the real in Christianity lead Barr to comment on the *indirect* applicability of the Old Testament to the Christian life. For him, we delude ourselves if we think that the NT is more proximate to reality, more immediately accessible in the life of faith, than the OT.²¹⁴ Both testaments are distant, though the OT is slightly more distant from modern Christians. "There are, indeed, even from a theological point of view, reasons why the Christian's relation to the Old Testament is less direct than his relation to the New. This has to be balanced by his recognition that the achievement of our salvation depends, if we may so put it, on those aspects which to us are less direct as much as on those which are more direct."²¹⁵ If this view mitigates some perceived inter-faith crisis, it does little to explain why the Old and New Testaments should be considered *together* in the work of salvation. True enough, in historical terms the world of the Old established the matrix into which the incarnation supposedly appeared. Yet theologically Barr wants "to suggest a way in which the Old Testament and the humanity which it by its religious-historical aftermath has conditioned are taken up into the incarnation and become a functional agent in atonement through rejection and crucifixion,"²¹⁶ while at the same time insisting that our "direction of thought is from God to Christ, from Father to Son, and not from Christ to God."²¹⁷ In what sense is the Old Testa-

212. Ibid., 155.

213. Ibid., 155.

214. Ibid., 149. Cf. Seitz, *Figured Out*, 4–6.

215. Barr, *Old and New*, 156.

216. Ibid., 159.

217. Ibid., 153–154.

ment a functional agent in the church's knowledge and experience of *Christ's* atonement? Does the functionality of the OT or the humanity in it continue today? Nothing suggests that the noetic-historical sequence, Old to New, should ever be reversed for Barr. But assuming OT sacrifice and redemption have a real integrity apart from the NT, why would a person want to talk of *the work* of salvation in Old and New Testaments, work in the singular, and with a definite article, as in the title of Barr's chapter?

Barr's commitment to intentionalism, to certain limits on the real, to an indirect reading of biblical texts, and at the same time to at least a semblance of unity in the Godhead, informs his thesis "that the growth and development of the tradition is soteriologically functional."²¹⁸ Salvation history could function this way. But if it did, on what basis would one speak of the unity of God, much less of His salvation? Can one say that salvation functions thus and still meaningfully call Christian reading of Jewish scripture trinitarian?

CHILDS' CRITIQUE

The above interrogation is of course my own. Childs addresses Barr's theology in "Old and New Testaments in the Work of Salvation" more tersely. "In my opinion," writes Childs in the Prolegomena to *BTONT*,

Barr has mounted a strong case against the sharp methodological separation of typology and allegory and demonstrated its relation to a peculiar modern theology of divine acts in history. Yet I am far from convinced that Barr's analysis has really touched to the heart of the theological problem related to biblical typology. The issue turns on the nature of the biblical referent and the effort of both the Old Testament and the New Testament authors to extend their experience of God through figuration in order to depict the unity of God's one purpose (cf. especially H. Frei's illuminating discussion in *Eclipse*, 2ff.). Barr's own treatment of the relation of the testaments (*Old and New in Interpretation*, 149ff.), correctly emphasizes the role of the Old Testament as a testimony to the time before Christ's coming, but fails to deal adequately with the theological claim of an ontological as well as soteriological unity of the two testaments, which lies at the heart of the New Testament's application of the Old (cf. John 1.1–5; Col. 1.15–20; Heb. 1.2–3). Barr speaks of his "Trinitarian" approach, but seems to confine himself to the "economic" rather than also to the "immanent" Trinity as well.²¹⁹

218. *Ibid.*, 156. The quote continues, "We do not only have a series of divine acts, the interpretation and presentation of which constitutes the tradition; we have a growth of tradition, the existence of which provides the matrix for the coming divine acts and the impulse for their very occurrence." What does Barr mean that a growing tradition impels the "very occurrence" of divine acts?

219. *BTONT*, 14.

Note again that the relationship between the testaments is a *figural* issue for Childs. Whatever attenuated form of allegory Barr winds up with, however, does not do justice to the *ontological* unity of the testaments. Barr does not grasp “the nature of the biblical referent,” which, as Childs maintains with Origen’s precedent, can legitimately be multiple, and can be fully real in senses not contained by the mind of an author. That is how the OT functioned and functions in the church.

CHILDS: GOD’S REDEMPTIVE WILL FROM THE BEGINNING

In identifying Jesus Christ as the one scope of the Old and New,²²⁰ Childs puts forward a fundamentally different doctrine of the Trinity. He first addresses the OT understanding of God, which of course shows variety and complexity, focusing on God’s name, his covenant with his people, his transcendence (“monotheism” is not wrong but “theologically inert”²²¹), and his passibility. He gives a preliminary nod to the subject matter.

It is not by chance that the early church struggled with the Old Testament when it sought to bear witness to the sheer mystery of the God of Israel who in Jesus Christ “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, and became obedient unto death.” Jesus brought no new *concept* of God, but he demonstrated in action the full extent of God’s redemptive will for the world which was from the beginning.²²²

In contrast to Barr, Childs takes care not to transfer observations about the historical unfolding and development of concepts in time directly to the identity of God Himself, though noetic differences in the biblical reports are duly noted. After a brief look at Jewish understandings of God in the second temple period, Childs turns to the New Testament’s understanding of God’s identity. Here one finds both continuity and discontinuity with the Old. In many cases the original contexts of NT material have been subordinated to the canonical context in the “shape of the whole collection. The result is that the diversity shown between early communities has been relativized and later readers of the New Testament saw tensions more as complementary than as antagonistic.”²²³ As in the OT there are many complications in detail. Some-

220. *BTONT*, 49, 91, 721, 725. On this language see Sheppard, *Scope of Biblical Books*.

221. *BTONT*, 355, cf. now MacDonald, *Deuteronomy*.

222. *BTONT*, 358, my emphasis.

223. *BTONT*, 361.

times the Old seems to be “using” the New, shaping its understanding and idiom, but sometimes the trajectory works in the reverse: “the doctrine of God in the New Testament is frequently developed as a coefficient of christology which strongly affects how the Old Testament was heard and used.”²²⁴ Yet before the canonization of the NT the early church expressed its confession of Christ largely in terms of Israel’s faith, understood through Israel’s scriptures. This was part of its “struggle to understand the relationship between Jesus Christ whom it confessed as Lord, and God who had revealed himself to Israel,” and the same challenge “lay at the heart of the development of Trinitarian theology.”²²⁵ The reality of the church’s confession entailed “serious wrestling” with the witness and content of the Old.

Childs then moves into biblical theological reflection which deals with the historical, discrete forms of the testaments but is not hamstrung by sequence. In older forms of Biblical Theology “it was a fatal mistake ... when dealing with the identity of God to feel that it could reflect on the subject only in terms of its historical sequence. This appeal to the so-called ‘economic Trinity’ would restrict the doctrine of God to the divine workings within a historical trajectory of past, present and future: God, Christ, Spirit.”²²⁶ This does not deny the importance of economic workings (Heb. 1:1) but seeks to preserve necessary conditions in the reasoning by which “the church’s reflection on God found itself inexorably drawn into Trinitarian terminology.”²²⁷ Otherwise it becomes very difficult, if not impossible, to talk about the God of Old and New as a unified being. (This is principally what Childs means when he invokes an “ontological” dimension. Ontology, as Childs defines it in another context, “refers to a mode of speech in relation to a subject matter which disregards or transcends temporal sequence.”²²⁸) And surely it only helps Childs’ case that the tradents, or canonical shapers in his terminology, so often appear to have made sequence a secondary or tertiary concern.

224. *BTONT*, 366.

225. *BTONT*, 368.

226. *BTONT*, 370.

227. *BTONT*, 369.

228. Childs, *Witness to Christ?*, 60.

Having summarized a number of points at the biblical theological level, Childs steps into the arena of trinitarian dogma (*res*₃). God has spoken in many and various ways; however: “The church’s struggle with the Trinity was not a battle *against* the Old Testament, but rather a battle *for* the Old Testament, for the one eternal covenant of God in both unity and diversity.” In historical terms, the church’s initial christological confession eventually lead to a fuller understanding of the Trinity; so, for example, “when the church lost interest in the doctrine of the Trinity during the course of the nineteenth century as if it were idle speculation, its christological focus was also blurred and suffered serious distortion.”²²⁹ Barr does not feature in Childs’ treatment of “The Identity of God,” but the inherent relatedness of christology and trinitarianism is precisely why Barr cannot have an approach to the Old Testament that is “Trinitarian *rather than* Christological.” Even in sheer developmental terms, you do not get one without the other.²³⁰

THE TRINITY AND MULTI-LEVEL READINGS

Childs concludes his discussion of God’s identity with his first defense of “the need for a multiple-level reading of scripture according to differing contexts.”²³¹ This leads to remarks on Vischer, the *sensus literalis*, and other topics we have touched on already. Scripture’s witness is not identical with the reality itself, and therefore (contra Vischer) promise and fulfillment must not be fused. In other words, the ontic leaves space for the noetic.²³² A first level of entry to the text is the literal/historical, the canonical context of Old before New—very roughly, what might probably have existed in the minds of the people who wrote and compiled the scriptures of Israel. A second level of entry extends the first, relativizing sequence. Traditional-

229. *BTONT*, 376.

230. See now Seitz, “The Rule of Faith, Hermeneutics, and the Character of Christian Scripture,” forthcoming.

231. *BTONT*, 379.

232. A parallel discussion of Vischer stipulates a more complex understanding of the relationship of Christ to the OT witness. “On the one hand, it is clear that the witness of the early church proceeded *noetically* first from a knowledge of the resurrected Christ and only then turned back to the Old Testament as a vehicle for its proclamation. On the other hand, the New Testament formulated its witness *ontically* as a fulfillment of a previously announced reality which had been prefigured in the old covenant and only later was fulfilled according to the fulness of time” (*BTONT*, 477, my emphasis, cf. 520–521). Again, for Childs the ontic “disregards or transcends temporal sequence.”

ly called typology, here “[a] comparison is being made, but neither witness is absorbed by the other, nor their contexts fused.” Can one go further? “Is there a level of interpreting the biblical text in which the full-blown reality of God gained from a reading of the entire Bible is used? It is not constitutive to Christian faith to confess that the God revealed in the Old Testament is also the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? Indeed God is known as Father only in the Son.” Why then cannot a knowledge of the Trinity have some place in actual exegesis of OT texts? Is this always an “allegorical trap”?²³³

In partial answer, Childs suggests that the “fact that the Christian church has continued to be drawn back to allegory in a way that is not the case for Judaism, could well be an indication of a genuine search for a level of exegesis which has not been satisfactorily met.”²³⁴

Triunity sets “monotheism” down a new but old path. As Barth has it,

faith in that Word means faith in the One whom this very Judaism with its monotheism rejected as a sinner against its monotheism, a blasphemer against God. This is the gulf which separates Christian monotheism, if we can use the term, from Jewish monotheism and monotheism of every other kind. It is strange but true that confession of the one and only God and denial of Him are to be found exactly conjoined but radically separated in what appears to be the one identical statement that there is only one God.²³⁵

So the mystery of Israel has further iterations within a pursuit of the mystery of Christ. The differences between midrash and allegory are only symptoms of a paradoxical rift. A decision for one “monotheism” or the other would, for Childs, have to be textually mediated and self-authenticating. “There is no objective criterion by which this knowledge [of a living God] can be tested beyond that of the reality of God himself. If the church confesses that the spirit of God opens up the text to a perception of its true reality, it also follows that the Spirit also works in applying the reality of God in its fullness to an understanding of the text. The two movements cannot be separated.”²³⁶ Readers have to be converted to the open secret.

Thus, contra Barr, the Bible is not a book the church keeps only by giving away to a global community of elite readers. Fundamental to Childs’ approach is the church’s receptive

233. *BTONT*, 380.

234. *BTONT*, 381.

235. *CD II/1*, 453–454, cited in *BTONT*, 373.

236. *BTONT*, 382.

posture. “Scripture accrues its proper authority when it is read and celebrated in the community of the church. The Bible is the book of the church, but not in the erroneous sense that it belongs to the church; rather, when received as a divine gift to believers, the Bible becomes a guide for faith and practice.”²³⁷ Allegory is not an acrobatic means of salvaging the text for theological purpose. It is part of a response to God that moves toward deeper understanding of a received text, according to its canonical rule, from faith to faith.

A “MORPHOLOGICAL FIT” IN ISAIAH 53

Let me conclude with an example. For Childs in 1992 the testimony of Isaiah 53 “cannot be correctly heard if this witness is directly identified with the passion of Jesus Christ... Yet to know the will of God in Jesus Christ opens up a profoundly new vista on this prophetic testimony... For those who confess the Lordship of Jesus Christ there is an immediate morphological fit.”²³⁸ In his Isaiah commentary Childs works hard to do justice to the discrete voice of Isaiah, and yet does not hesitate to speak of the divine reality which for him gives rise to this figural or morphological fit. It is worth teasing out how he does this.

Generally speaking, in 2001 Childs restricts his comments to issues pertaining to Isaiah in its own historical context—entry at *res*₁. Occasionally he addresses Isaiah’s message from the context of the larger Christian Bible, and at these points one spots a readiness to speak in terms appropriate to *res*₃ or *res*₂. Moreover, on two such occasions Childs rehearses a turn of phrase used three decades prior, namely, “the mystery of Israel.” The phrase first accompanies a discussion of Isaiah 6. The prophet’s difficult commission involves a “mystery of divine hardening” lodged firmly “with God in the mystery of his inscrutable will.”²³⁹ “How long?” asks Isaiah, but there is no limit. “All of Israel must perish: ‘houses without people.’ ... There is no continuity from the old to the new.” Yet Isaiah himself experiences death and rebirth, outlives total destruction, names his son appropriately (7:3). “Thus the mystery of the remnant contin-

237. Childs, *Cultural Change*, 210.

238. *BTONT*, 382.

239. *Isaiah*, 56.

ues, and these ancient readers saw in the stump that remained standing when felled (cf. 11:1) the hope of the new.”²⁴⁰ Isaiah is one “whose cleansing by fire and whose restoration makes him the paradigm of new things arising from the old.” Mingled with the unbelief of Ahaz “there appears a testimony to the emergence of a faithful remnant, which springs from the ashes of Israel’s destruction, a new creation of God and his Messiah.”²⁴¹ Turning to the New Testament, Childs sees that although the hardening motif is rendered variously, it “is seen as an integral part of the selfsame struggle of God with Israel already witnessed to in the entire Old Testament. The rejection and crucifixion of Jesus was the ultimate climax to a history that extended through Israel’s history (Acts 7). Indeed, the *mystery of Israel remains the death of the old and the rebirth of the new.*”²⁴² If the shift to the present tense signals a deeper claim—not about a perception in Paul or John or Acts, a claim at the conceptual level, but a theological claim of the first order—it derives as nearly as possible from a holistic reading of the Isaianic corpus, the wider prophetic corpus, and the full canonical scriptures of ancient Israel. This for Childs provides the soundest basis for Christian reading of the Old Testament.

Later, confronting the contested servant texts in Isaiah 41:8 and 42:1, Childs insists that their juxtaposition leads to “the obvious implication that *in some way* Israel is the servant who is named in 42:1.”²⁴³ In what way? Childs defers his answer: “the mystery of Israel as the servant remains yet unresolved up to this point in the book.”²⁴⁴ The discussion is resumed after the exposition of Isaiah 53, at which point an excursus is again made for the New Testament witness. Scholarly literature on the problem falls into two camps. “Both sides argue pro and con about the ‘mind of Jesus’ on the issue. Moreover, both sides distinguish between Jesus’ own self-understanding and that voiced by the various witnesses of scripture. Both therefore seeks to ground their positions on a historical-critical reconstruction of the history of tradition.” One camp argues that the Old Testament texts were determinative, the other that New

240. *Isaiah*, 58.

241. *Isaiah*, 59.

242. *Isaiah*, 59, my emphasis.

243. *Isaiah*, 325.

244. *Isaiah*, 326.

Testament understandings were “retrojected back into the Old Testament.”²⁴⁵ In a sense, both sides have a point. Nonetheless, the real function of Isaiah 53 has been obscured. First, “the authority of the biblical witness is not determined by its being anchored in ‘the mind of Jesus.’” Neither is the text a clairvoyant prediction of Christ. Does that make the text’s *Wirkung*, its historic reception in the church, merely a specious, “imaginative construal”?²⁴⁶

Childs argues to the contrary “that the canonical shape of the book of Isaiah shows a suffering servant figure who was not simply viewed as a figure of the past, but assigned a central and continuing theological role in relation to the life of the redeemed community of Israel. Thus, there was a coercion exerted by the biblical text itself, as authoritative scripture, that exercised pressure on the early church in its struggle to understand the suffering and death of Jesus Christ.”²⁴⁷ This is not really the movement of prophecy to fulfillment.²⁴⁸

Rather, an analogy was drawn between the redemptive activity of the Isaianic servant and the passion and death of Jesus Christ. The relation was understood “ontologically,” that is to say, in terms of its substance, its theological reality. To use classic Christian theological terminology, the distinction is between the “economic” Trinity, God’s revelation in the continuum of Israel’s history, and the “immanent” Trinity, the ontological manifestation of the triune deity in its eternity.²⁴⁹

Childs then holds that various New Testament witnesses participate in this understanding. Revelation 13:8 is a prime example—“the lamb slain before the foundation of the world.” Then, lest there be any doubt about whether the mind of an apostle evangelist is his terminus, Childs modulates once again into first-order, biblical theological discourse. “The morphological fit between Isaiah 53 and the passion of Jesus continues to bear testimony to the common subject matter within the one divine economy.” And: “The suffering servant retains its theological significance within the Christian canon because it is inextricably linked in substance

245. *Isaiah*, 421.

246. *Isaiah*, 422. Cf. *Struggle*, 322.

247. *Isaiah*, 422–423.

248. Or not in the first instance: “in a broad sense, Isaiah 53 does *continue* to function as prophecy since the chapter is bracketed within the eschatological framework of an unfolding divine economy” (423, my emphasis, cf. 191–192).

249. *Isaiah*, 423.

with the gospel of Jesus Christ, who is and always has been the ground of God's salvation of Israel and the world."²⁵⁰

To say this is to make a christological *and* a trinitarian judgment, and on Childs' understanding, a judgment in a figural or allegorical mode. As Seitz concludes in another context, "To study the Old Testament, therefore, is not like visiting a museum (however much the historicism in vogue since the late nineteenth century has encouraged such a view). Rather, to open the Old Testament is to encounter the living God!"²⁵¹ If true, if the Bible in the modern world is more than an object of archaeological interest, should one not expect to find the direct transformations of figural practice even in the more technical, academic commentary of Christian expositors?

250. *Isaiah*, 423.

251. Seitz, *Figured Out*, 161. Cf. Dawson, *Figural Reading*, 216, who contends that figural reading, since Origen, is about transformation: "Figural reading in the Christian tradition seeks to express the dynamic process of spiritual transformation in ways that respect the practitioners' commitment to both past and future, both old identity and newly refashioned identity. Imbedded in figural practice is all the drama of discerning the point of existence and identifying one's place in it, figured as a journey from a former mode of existence through various states of transformation toward some ultimate end."

CHAPTER 7 “FOR A GENERATION TO COME”: THE SCOPE OF PSALM 102 IN RECEPTION AND RECENT RESEARCH

“On whatever day I call upon you, hear me quickly.” Peter prayed, Paul prayed, the other apostles prayed, the faithful prayed in those early days, the faithful prayed in the ages that followed, the faithful prayed in the time of the martyrs, the faithful pray in our own time, and the faithful will pray in the day of our descendants.

—Augustine, on Psalm 102:2

In lieu of concluding remarks, which in any event I have offered at numerous turns along the way, I wish to close with a short example.

Psalm 102 has been worked quite heavily of late. In addition to articles and commentaries, the text has been the subject of no less than two monographs, in 1992 and 1996.¹ At present, I restrict myself to the question of the scope of Psalm 102, though even this must be highly selective and abbreviated. The term “scope” of course has resonances within patristic and reformation commentary.² To begin with, however, I use it simply to index perceptions of the compass of the biblical text in time and subject matter. How far does Psalm 102 reach? As per the title, “generation” in verse 19 is my focal point.

I. RECENT CRITICAL DISCUSSION

For the last century, consider a pair of contrasts. About a hundred years ago Hermann Gunkel began to apply the logic of forms to the Psalter. Previous psalms research had stagnated, in his view, because ancient poetry had not yet been set in its proper context: “if someone researching the past wants to obtain the true picture of what happened, that researcher first

1. Brüning, *Mitten im Leben* and Brunert, *Psalm 102*, respectively.

2. See Sheppard, *Scope of Biblical Books* and idem, *Scope of Isaiah*.

has to disregard the context in which the items came to us more or less accidentally. Rather, the researcher's goal is to observe things in the contexts in which they were originally found."³ The problem is especially acute in the canonical Psalter, where principles governing internal arrangement are difficult to come by, if indeed they can be discerned at all.⁴ Israel's literary witnesses come down to us in an intrinsically secondary, artificial context, because their true provenance is "nicht auf dem Papier, sondern im Leben."⁵ For Gunkel this ties into a theory of the rise of cultures, wherein primitive nations such as Israel had not yet attained literary expression conceivable "on paper" in the first instance.⁶ On the whole, psalms had their living context in the cult.

Concerning Psalm 102, however, Gunkel sees a certain distance from the cult. It is classed as an individual complaint song, but as a later and freer instance of the type and at some remove from the oldest rites. As Gunkel's *Auseinandersetzung* with Mowinckel makes clear, this understanding has quite a bit to do with the triumph of the poetic individual. The "I" of the psalmist in the first section (1–12) must on no account be explained as the "I" of the liturgical community supposed to lie behind the second section (13–23).⁷ Again, although the Psalm is one of the best examples Gunkel finds to show that תְּפִלָּה (verses 1, 2, 17) is a terminus technicus for the individual complaint song as a genre, he predicates: "It is only questionable whether the superscription intends the original use of the complaint song or whether it

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3. Gunkel and Begrich, *Introduction*, 3 = *Einleitung*, 4. That the canon is in view is made explicit in the next sentence: "it should be irrelevant initially whether these songs are found inside the canon or outside the canon, or even whether they are found within Israel or outside Israel." But on Gunkel's own "Gefälle" toward Israel, and ultimately toward canon, see chapter four.
 4. See esp. Gunkel and Begrich, *Introduction*, §13, "The Collection of the Psalms."
 5. *RGG*², 3:1679.
 6. "The literary witness of the natural times and environments can be distinguished from those of more developed nations. Those literary witnesses of more developed nations are only conceivable on paper, but these witnesses arise in the real life of persons and have their setting therein. In real life women sing the victory song to those returning, triumphant armies. In real life some of the professional mourners strike up the moving dirge over the one who has passed away" *Ibid.*, 7 = 10.
 7. Compare *Ibid.*, 122–123 (= 173–175) with Mowinckel, *Psalms*, 1:221, 223–227. "Rather," Gunkel explains, "it is quite natural that the pious poet would also consider his own people when he had finished with himself, or that he first speaks of Israel and then himself, or that he mixes the two together" (Gunkel and Begrich, *Introduction*, 123 = 175). It is only a short step from here to what Gunkel feels is the Psalter's enduring value—the creative expression of the pious individual.

characterizes the psalm according to its usage in later worship services where the more original life setting and the later performance type need not correspond.”⁸

As for the scope of Psalm 102, since Gunkel finds prophetic influences at work this derives almost wholly from his estimation of the prophets. “Sometimes,” he explains, “eschatology appears in trace amounts in the complaint song. The singer in Ps 102 comforts himself in the hope *which is already granted to Israel in the present.*”⁹ When a psalmist expresses his faith in future deliverance, we are not to understand the plaintiff as one “gaining comfort and certainty for the present by a deduction based upon YHWH’s assurance for his people in the distant future... Rather, the context is spontaneous and immediate.”¹⁰ Gunkel finds support for this general characterization in Psalm 102:14—“You will rise up and have compassion on Zion, for it is time [עַתָּה] to favor it; the appointed time [מוֹעֵד] has come.”

Thus when Gunkel comments on verse 19—“Let this be recorded for a generation to come, so that a people yet unborn may praise the Lord”—emphasis falls on the salvation “das sicherlich nun bald hereinbrechen wird.”¹¹ A record is made for posterity based on the exuberant conviction that the hour is nigh. The people about to be created [עַם נִבְרָא] are identified with the *next* generation [דֹּר אֲחֵרֵינוּ], for indeed the next generation is also the last.

Fast forward to 1990. In contrast to Gunkel, Odil Steck argues that Psalm 102 instantiates “Fernerwartung”—expectation for the distant future. After advancing a careful reading of time in the Psalm, in which the psalmist in the present (“Redegegegenwart”) perceives God’s permanence and salvation, Steck argues against seeing the Psalm as collective adventism (“kollektive Naherwartung”). Individual and collective threads correlate to the individual’s complaint and the anticipated collective salvation. According to Steck, the Psalm’s argument

8. Nogalski’s translation is in error here (Ibid., 193 = 259). He renders “decken” as “be hidden” without recognizing that the verb is being used reflexively—i.e. “sich decken” means “to correspond” or “to coincide.” I have modified his translation accordingly.

9. Ibid., 192 = 258, my emphasis.

10. Ibid., 270–271 = 353. The quote continues, “The present time grows increasingly gloomy as its particular references approach the gruesome image that the prophets have presented for the days before YHWH’s intervention. When this happens, then far from letting itself be discouraged and oppressed, eschatological faith sees a majestic confirmation of that which it believes. Specifically, it sees an undeniable sign that the last days have begun” (271 = 354).

11. Gunkel, *Psalmen übersetzt*, 437. For what follows see 439–440.

turns on the contrast of a single person in jeopardy of death and the durable God who secures the fate of the sons of His servants (verse 29).

Wenn Jahwe bei der Heilswende Jerusalems dereinst kollektiv so handeln wird, wie V. 18 erwartet, kann er auch in der Zeit davor das jetzige Bitten des Beters um dessen Lebenslänge nicht ungehört lassen... Die an der Gewißheit kollektiver Fernerwartung exemplifizierte Lanzeitigkeit Jahwes (V. 13, 14–23) wird als Gegensatz zum Beterschicksal mit seiner vorzeitigen Todesnähe vorgebracht.¹²

Accordingly, **כִּי** in 14b must be translated “when” rather than “for”—“have compassion on Zion *when* it is time to favor it, *when* the appointed time has come.”¹³

Unlike a great many critics, Gunkel and Steck think Psalm 102's apparent “Uneinheitlichkeit” nevertheless arose from a single conceptual universe.¹⁴ But rather than a certain mixing of genres, Steck sees the confluence of two streams of tradition, late prophecy and late wisdom.¹⁵ Religious-historically, it stems in part from the world of Trito-Isaiah.¹⁶ That the psalmist is aware of prophetic visions of a new heavens and a new earth, but yet probably stands outside the circles that developed the prophetic literature in this direction, may explain why, in line with late wisdom circles, eschatological hope has been deferred from the next to a much later generation.

Verse 19, then. What is written for a future generation is “die Gewißheit dieser künftigen Rettung jetzt, wie sie prophetische genährt in der Gegenwart V. 14ff. ausspricht, damit die Heilempfänger das Widerfahrnis der Heilswende als Erfüllung der Rettungsgewißheit ihrer Vorfahren, die in der Redegegenwart des Psalms leben, wahrnehmen.”¹⁷

12. Steck, Ps 102, 364.

13. The same adjustment would seem to be required in 20a. Hossfeld counters this move in Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalmen 101–150*.

14. For Steck the view is consistent with his position that we should assume biblical texts to be coherent until proven guilty, “despite our impressions to the contrary” (Steck, *Prophetic Books*, 30).

15. Steck, *Streams*, 371: “In Psalm 102 stehen also nicht verschiedene literarische Schichten zusammen, sondern zwei nebeneinander gegebene, traditionelle Sprachfelder—späte Weisheits- und späte prophetische Tradition—tregen in einem einheitlichen Text zusammen.” Psalm 102 is thus unlike Psalms 22 or 69, which do contain primary and secondary individual and collective strata.

16. 102:26f provides a striking intertext for the vision of a new heaven and a new earth, if indeed it is not explicitly drawing on the language of Isaiah 66:22 and 65:9, 17. An allusion to Isaiah 59:19 in 102:16 seems especially probable because of the shared constellation of **אֶת־כְּבוֹדִי + אֶת־שֵׁם יְהוָה + וַיִּירָאוּ**.

17. Steck, Ps 102, 362.

It is doubtful whether this first contrast, “Fernerwartung” vs. “Naherwartung,” has any straightforward correlation to the most obvious contrast between Steck and Gunkel, namely, their point of departure vis-à-vis the final form. Steck represents well the turn from *man* to *text*, yet in the case at hand Gunkel and Steck both accept Psalm 102 as more or less a unit. Their disagreements turn on how to read the intent of its author, and where to locate his notion of eschatology in its historical development. Does Steck admit a broader scope for the Psalm? Perhaps. His psalmist certainly takes a more forward-looking view. But what sort of further associations does the text have? For Gunkel, ancient literature was immature—sometimes childlike, sometimes childish. On balance it bears little analogy for the mature individual reading today, although it does occasionally “transcend itself”: the Psalter, which “is not a contemporary book and therefore cannot possibly voice modern thoughts and feelings,” can sometimes teach the modern man how to pray in a proper spirit of piety.¹⁸ Steck’s contrasting emphasis on the textuality of the Psalm opens up a broader range of affiliation in the ancient context. But at first glance Steck’s reading is equally archaeological. Elsewhere he argues that late prophetic “Fortschreibung” advanced on the conviction of a “surplus value” in the sacred text that invited new readings.¹⁹ If one were so inclined, one could perhaps approach biblical prophecy similarly today without contravening the tradents’ intent. As he hazards once: “within the canon, in the final versions of the prophetic books, material that is not contemporary again becomes contemporary material in a higher sense *for all later generations* who wish to orient themselves toward the Bible.”²⁰ An analogous point is not explicitly drawn with respect to Psalm 102, however.

At this juncture a second contrast can be drawn, between Steck and Brevard Childs. Childs mentions Psalm 102 in 1979.²¹ He then discusses it at more length in an article-length study of the formula “it shall be recorded for a future generation,” a “canonical formula” as he has it, in 1990, the same year Steck’s article appeared. For Childs Psalm 102 attests the way in

18. Gunkel, *Water*, 161; see a fuller discussion of this quote in chapter four.

19. Steck, *Prophetic Books*, 47, 148–190.

20. *Ibid.*, 186; my emphasis.

21. *IOTS*, 518.

which Israel's traditions acquired an enduring significance as scripture. His essay's thesis "is that the process of the canonization of the Hebrew Bible was closely related to the concern to render the sacred tradition in such a way as to serve future generations of Israel as authoritative Scripture."²² This relates immediately to the question "What is the status of the Hebrew canon for the Christian church?"²³ Note the present tense: the scope of verse 19 extends directly to the contemporary debate about the hermeneutical significance of canon. Lest this maneuver be too quickly dismissed as a dogmatic imposition, a look at Childs' reading is in order.

Not just the psalms chapter but all of *IOTS* is written under the same thesis as the essay of 1990. The Introduction explores the various ways biblical material has been transmitted and shaped "in such a way that its authoritative claims be laid upon all successive generations of Israel."²⁴ Childs argues against critical research on the psalms in general because of its doubly negative outcome: increasingly it locked the psalms in their ancient context, a move which had the effect of making "traditional use of the Psalter by the synagogue and church [appear] highly arbitrary and far removed from the original function within ancient Israel."²⁵ His positive argument to the contrary sees a variety of impulses shaping the literature, but also discerns a unifying result: "psalms do not need to be culturally actualized to serve later generations. They are made immediately accessible to the faithful."²⁶ The Psalter, like the rest of the Hebrew Bible, was sown with the seeds of its own continuing actualization.²⁷ Hence a "mod-

22. Childs, *Generation*, 358.

23. *Ibid.*, 357.

24. *IOTS*, 78.

25. *IOTS*, 510.

26. *IOTS*, 521. In the context Childs is discussing psalms ascribed to David, especially through superscriptions, but the point is quite consistent with his overall thesis. Hence he concludes, "The canonical shape of the Psalter assured future generations of Israelites that this book spoke a word of God to each of them in their need. It was not only a record of the past, but a living voice speaking to the present human suffering" (523). Or again, he sees "a *growing consciousness* of the Psalter as sacred scripture" (521). See the discussion of *Kanonbewußtsein* in chapter five.

27. Compare *IOTS*, 79 and *passim*.

ern interpreter” has “a warrant for breaking out of the single, narrowly conceived mode of exegesis which is represented by most modern critical commentaries.”²⁸

In 1990 Childs presumes the same analysis as advanced in *IOTS* but comes at Psalm 102 from an angle more reminiscent of his early form-critical studies. He first covers the semantic range of the word *דָּוָר*. The next step is to identify the stereotyped formulas in which the term typically functioned. This leads to a reiteration of Childs’ most foundational insight:

If in early Israel the transmission and actualization of Israel’s sacred tradition occurred in the context of the cult, increasingly in the late pre-exilic and post-exilic periods Israel’s tradition was given a written form and transmitted by scribal schools... [T]here was a growing tendency toward the textualization of the tradition.²⁹

In a third, exegetical step, verse 19 is taken as the key to the Psalm. “Although the promise was addressed originally to the exilic community, the dimension of the promise had already transcended that generation.”³⁰ Finally, hermeneutical implications are drawn, one of which revisits the challenge critical scholarship made to Scripture’s continuing relevance. “The divine promise is not a coefficient of the past, but a witness recorded for future generations. The concern of the psalm is not ‘traditional,’ that is, simply preserving the past, but rather ‘kerygmatic,’ a bearing of testimony to the enduring power of God’s promise for the future.”³¹ In this manner Childs feels he “follows the Old Testament’s witness beyond itself to its subject matter, who is God, and thus provides a critical basis for genuine theological reflection.”³²

To summarize, despite sharing with Steck an emphasis over against Gunkel on the textuality of biblical traditions, Childs has a unique sense of Psalm 102’s *immediate* applicability. Steck is probably open to an analogical extension of the text into the present, but his analysis of the text in question lacks any proof. What separates Childs and Steck could, in a word, be called the perspicuity of Scripture. The scope of Psalm 102 for Childs includes the long history of traditional interpretation in the church and synagogue and extends right up to the present generation.

28. *IOTS*, 522–523.

29. Childs, *Generation*, 360.

30. *Ibid.*, 361.

31. *Ibid.*, 363.

32. *Ibid.*, 363–364.

II. AUGUSTINE'S INTERPRETATION

Now to the tradition.³³ Augustine is a suitable representative among Christian readers and must suffice at present. Of verse 19 (Latin 101:18) he writes, "At the time of writing [the things written] were not profitable to the people among whom they were written, for their purpose was to foretell the New Covenant among people who were living under the Old."³⁴ Yet the Old Covenant (*Vetus Testamentum*) pertains to one generation, the New to another. In *all* generations God's promise holds for the just. As Augustine's second exposition of Psalm 102 demonstrates beautifully, generations of the righteous in created time (like so many "dried-up leaves ... underfoot") begin with Adam, include Abel, Seth and Enoch, then Noah and his offspring, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the patriarchs, the prophets, and at last Christ himself; and after Christ the apostles, then other saints; "and now today all who are holy are holy in the name of Christ, as will all those be who after us will be saints, even to the world's end. From all these innumerable generations you may pick out all the holy offspring in each, and make of them one generation, and in this *generation of generations*, says the psalm, *your years abide*."³⁵ Why then does Psalm 102 pertain to generations under the New Testament more than to those under the Old? The explanation is exegetical: because it was written for a

33. There are of course special reasons to turn here in a study of Childs, who associates Gunkel's view that the Psalter has nothing immediate to say in our time with Gunkel's underrating of pre-critical exegesis. "One of the major reasons for working seriously in the history of biblical exegesis is to be made aware of many different models of interpretation which have all too frequently been disparaged through ignorance. With all due respect to Gunkel, the truly great expositors for probing the theological heart of the Psalter remain Augustine, Kimchi, Luther, Calvin, the long forgotten Puritans buried in Spurgeon's *Treasury*, the haunting sermons of Donne, and the learned and pious reflections of de Muis, Francke and Geier. Admittedly these commentators run the risk, which is common to all interpretation, of obscuring rather than illuminating the biblical text, but because they stand firmly within the canonical context, one can learn from them how to speak anew the language of faith" (*IOTS*, 523).

34. Augustine, *Expositions 99–120*, 61–62; CCSL, 1438; PL, 1304–1305. "Quando scribebantur haec, non ita proderant eis inter quos scribebantur; scribebantur enim ad prophetandum Novum Testamentum, inter homines qui vivebant ex Vetere Testamento. Sed et illud Vetus Testamentum Deus dederat, et in illa terra promissionis populum suum collocaverat. Sed quoniam *memoriale tuum in generationem et generationem*, non iniquorum est, sed justorum: in una generatione pertinet ad Vetus Testamentum; in alia autem generatione pertinet ad Novum Testamentum."

35. *Ibid.*, 72.

people yet to be created. And who are these? It can only mean those who are in Christ, Augustine explains, the same new creation to whom the apostle refers in 2 Corinthians 5.

Though Augustine clearly wants to work by means of the “plain sense”—*per litteram*³⁶— he is alive to multiple dimensions of the psalm. He does not immediately identify the poor man praying in the first part with Christ, for the man seems at times too poor to be so great and exalted a Lord. Augustine does indeed call the man Christ, but reluctantly: “It is he, yet it is not he.”³⁷ In this manner Christ speaks with and on behalf of his bride, the Church. The two become one flesh, and so they also become “one voice” (*voce una*). Christ is the head, the Church his members, but they speak with the same voice. “Let us listen, then, to the prayer offered by the head and the body, the bridegroom and the bride. Christ and the Church together are one person, but the Word and flesh do not form one nature.”³⁸ Augustine frames it dramatically in his exposition of the previous psalm: “We are Christ!”³⁹ But lest the supplicant in Psalm 102 speak words too base for the head, Augustine qualifies, “I have prefaced my sermon with these remarks so that if you do hear anything of the kind, you may discern in it the sound of the body’s weakness and realize that the head is speaking in the voice of its members.” The invitation is for the Church to enter the psalm through Christ. “Let us listen; and, more than that, let us hear ourselves in these words. If we perceive ourselves to be outside them, let us do our best to be within.”⁴⁰ So the three voices of the Psalms, the “I,” Christ and the Church, are all in fact one voice.

Michael Cameron comments aptly,

Augustine thus awakened his hearers to themselves as subjects of the paschal mystery and participants in its dynamic of charity. Unwittingly, he also gave an intriguing reply to the hermeneutical conundrum created by the modern division between participant and ob-

36. As Cameron, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, explains, “His custom was not to focus on ‘the letter,’ or the literal sense, of the psalm (*solemus non ad litteram atendere*), but to reach ‘through’ the letter, as it were, to search out the mysteries within (*sed per litteram scrutari mysteria*: 131.2)” (291). Cf. Greene-McCreight, *Ad Litteram*.

37. Augustine, *Expositions 99–120*, 47; CCSL, 1426; PL, 1295.

38. *Ibid.*, 47; CCSL, 1427; PL, 1295. “Jam ergo audiamus quid oret caput et corpus, sponsus et sponsa, Christus et ecclesia, utrumque unus: sed Verbum et caro non utrumque unum; Pater et Verbum utrumque unum; Christus et ecclesia utrumque unus.”

39. *Ibid.*, 33.

40. ExP, 48; CCSL, 1427; PL, 1295–1296.

server, subject and object, positing their conjunction not by mere fiat but by uncovering the engine of participation in the structure of redemption itself.⁴¹

Such a mechanism led to a text having multiple senses as a matter of course. If the attendant allegory sounds odd or even perverse on modern ears,⁴² it hardly needs to be said that Augustine has none of the problem with application that we saw in the previous section. The epigraph vividly articulates Augustine's sense of Christ and the Church praying together in all generations, past, present, and to come. For Augustine, and with very few exceptions for Christian readers before the rise of critical method, scripture's scope comprehends the expositor's generation immediately. The seismic crisis of relevance that marks the present age, Childs not excluded, had not yet transpired.

III. REPRISE

In a seventy page survey of the reception history of Psalm 102, Gunild Brunert affords an example of how someone fully engaged with critical research might understand the tradition, and so can help draw together threads from sections one and two in this chapter. Brunert credits Augustine with developing a theological foundation for significant Christian reception of the Psalter, but he adds a serious charge: "Das ändert aber nichts daran, daß er die christliche Tendenz fortgesetzt hat, den jüdischen Psalmen jeden Eigenwert abzuspochen. Er hat sie im Gegenteil verstärkt."⁴³ So whatever relevance issues *Psalmus vox totius Christi*,

41. Cameron, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 293.

42. Taking just one example, Augustine offers a double reading of the psalm's three birds (pelican, owl, sparrow) in three habitats (solitary places, ruined walls, rooftop). In the first instance they represent an aspect of Christ's body. Christian ministers have three tasks in three different locations: one goes to non-Christians, another to the backslidden, another to those near the Church but lukewarm. Then again, the same figures can refer to Christ, who was alone like the pelican in being born of a virgin, who like the owl in the ruins was crucified, and who like a sparrow on the roof was resurrected.

43. Brunert, *Psalm 102*, 27. Brunert cites verse 19 as his only example, but see above. Augustine's comments are driven by intertextual associations with a later generation, yet to be created, which on his logic resonates across the Testaments with apostolic indicators of a new creation. Fiedrowicz, Introduction, 23–24, seems not to mark the difference either. On the other hand, even if this is not what happens at verse 19, other remarks are more egregious. At the Christological reading of the owl among the ruins, for instance, Augustine suggests Christ was crucified "by the Jews' benighted ignorance and in the tottering walls of their ruin" (Augustine, *Expositions 99–120*, 54; CCSL, 1432; PL, 1300: "tanquam in nocte ignorantiae ipsorum, et tanquam in parietinis ruinae ipsorum").

capitis et corporis may solve,⁴⁴ one cannot sidestep the thorny legacy of Christian supersessionism. This, in fact, this is the standard against which Brunert weighs traditional readings. Does a Christian reader accord the Jewish psalm any independent value (*jüdischen Eigenwert*)?⁴⁵ Augustine fails the litmus test. So does virtually everyone else.

Prior to the world wars Brunert names just four exemplars: Theodore of Mopsuestia, Calvin and Hengstenberg in restricted senses, and Delitzsch. Gunkel opens up fresh debate and sets the critical agenda for much of the 20th century, but like Wellhausen and others fails roundly on the Jewish question. To affirm even these few Brunert must perform some precarious acrobatics—for Calvin as for Luther the subject matter, literal sense and scope of the Old Testament actually *is* Christ.⁴⁶ It could be wondered, too, what lasting value there is in Hengstenberg, whose messianic-revelation-historical exegesis has christological accents anyway, or Delitzsch.⁴⁷ Intriguingly, though, Brunert has less trouble with contemporary application than many others, and he does not neglect to draw out the significance of his work on Psalm 102 for the church. She is neither *the* new people of God, nor even *a* new people; rather, alongside Israel she is half of the people of God:

solange Israel glaubt, daß sich die in diesem Buch konzentrierten Hoffnungen in der laufenden Geschichte noch nicht erfüllt haben, daß also Jesus von Nazareth nicht der Heilskönig war, auf den es wartet, so lange sollte die Kirche sensibel genug sein, in den Texten über ihr eigenes Selbstverständnis (vor Israel, vor dem gemeinsamen Gott und vor den Völkern) Formulierungen zu wählen, die die Glaubensentscheidung Israels respektieren und die Würde dieses Volkes nicht verletzen... [Die Kirche] wartet nicht allein auf den Tag, an dem alle Völker mit einer Stimme den Herrn anrufen (*nostra aetate* 4), sondern sie darf darauf vertrauen, daß Israel diesen Tag auch erwartet; sie ist nicht allein auf dem Weg zu Gott, sondern sie geht ihn gemeinsam mit Israel. Das ist die theologische Botschaft des

44. In addition to literature already cited see Cameron, *Totus Christus*; Fiedrowicz, Introduction; Müller and Fiedrowicz, *Enarrationes*.

45. See Brunert, *Psalm 102*, 27, 28–29, 30, 33, 35, 39, 42, 47, 58–60, 62, 63, 293–294, 307.

46. For Brunert, “*Die reformatorische Rückbesinnung auf die Schrift und ihre Betonung des Litteralsinnes* setzt sich bei der Auslegung dieses Psalmes also nur zögernd durch. Erst Calvin nimmt auf der Basis des *sensus literalis* eine historische Deutung vor, während Luther an der allegorischen Interpretation festhält” (*ibid.*, 35, original emphasis).

47. *Ibid.*, 47: “Dem Grundkonsens, der sich bei allen Differenzen im einzelnen in Bezug auf die Notwendigkeit zeitgenössisch-jüdischer Deutung gebildet hatte, versucht sich seit der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts noch einmal eine hier durch Hengstenberg und Delitzsch vertretene Linie entgegenzusetzen. Ihre Versuche, die Ergebnisse der kritischen Forschung durch messianisch-offenbarungsgeschichtliche Exegese wieder stärker in den kirchlichen Umkreis zu integrieren, haben sich aber nicht durchgesetzt.”

vierten Psalmenbuches an die Kirche...⁴⁸

Little wonder that Erich Zenger guided Brunert's dissertation.⁴⁹ How to treat the Scriptures of Israel as a Christian reader, what even to call them, have, after Auschwitz, become hermeneutical problems of the first order.

Childs' ruled approach moves in a very different direction. In Brunert's view, following Manfred Oeming, Childs' theological approach to Psalm 102 amounts to a "dogmatische Flucht aus den Schwierigkeiten des historisch-kritischen Geschäfts."⁵⁰ (If he had noticed the christological apparatus supporting and surrounding Childs' reading he surely would have added a strong theological objection as well: Childs gives too much play to traditional, supersessionist readings of Jewish scripture.) Brunert does not follow Oeming in making another criticism, however. Oeming comments:

Wenn Childs die Notwendigkeit des hermeneutischen Geschäfts des "Wiederverständlich-machens" von der final form her für überflüssig hält, vermag ich ihn nicht mehr zu begreifen. Wie kann man angesichts der tiefgreifenden Entfremdung des säkularen Zeitalters von der Bibel und angesichts des bedrückenden Unverständnisses für die Normativität heiliger Schriften gerade auch des Alten Testaments glauben, eine Rückwendung zur kanonischen final form löse alle Probleme?⁵¹

Can the Bible, especially the Old Testament, say anything immediate to our day at all? Or in terms of Psalm 102:19, which generation to come—which people "being created"—falls within the scope of the text? For Brunert, what is written refers to the fourth book of psalms, lives on

48. Ibid., 307.

49. To the claim that "Psalm 102 vor allem ein jüdisches Gebet ist" (ibid., 14), compare the programmatic statements in Zenger, *Nach Auschwitz*.

50. Brunert, *Psalm 102*, 72, citing Oeming, *Gesamtbiblische*, 209 [= ³216]; on Oeming see further chapter one. Brunert seems not to recognize that Childs posits the same two literary strata in 1979 as he does in 1990. This leads him to make the implausible but not altogether atypical suggestion that Childs lapses into historical-critical mode in 1990. It is simply not true that in the later article "geht er insofern über sein ausschließliches Interesse am kanonisierten Endtext hinaus." Interest in a so-called depth dimension is there from the beginning. Neither is Childs "indifferent" ("gleichgültig") to the details of the Psalm's prehistory. Earlier stages of the tradition are of course subordinate to the final form for Childs, but they also have an important place in establishing a warrant for continuing re-application of Israel's traditions as they have been scripturally rendered. Still, remarks made toward the end of the *IOTS* chapter on the psalms voice a difficult question: "The question arises, did the later refashioning do violence to the original meaning? One's answer depends largely on how one construes 'doing violence.' Certainly the elements of continuity between the earlier and later interpretations are evident. Nevertheless, the original meaning is no longer an adequate norm by which to test the new" (*IOTS*, 522). Widespread agreement on this old crux has not been forthcoming.

51. Ibid., ²208 [= ³215].

quite naturally and appropriately in post-biblical Israel, but is killed almost without exception by the church. He must in essence reject the Christian tradition to save Jewish scriptures from the church, for the church.⁵² Yet the strategy requires that he salvage at least part of the tradition, I think, for the following reason: if Brunert’s were the first Christian generation to hear the Psalm’s true message, he would have no reason to include himself in its implied readership, as one of the **עַם נִבְרָא**. Without a Theodore, on what basis could Brunert make the subtle but significant switch to the present tense, as above? The truly perplexing dilemma here is whether a person expressly standing inside the church can so easily presuppose the perspicuity of Scripture *and at the same time* reject the *Christuszeugnis* of the Old Testament. Again, if the Jewish significance of Psalm 102 was consistently thwarted throughout Christian history, would not a more likely deduction be that the church simply has no title to it whatsoever? This would seem to be a more consistent application of Brunert’s chief criterion, which in any event sits uneasily alongside an important, tacit recognition that for the Psalm to speak in the church, it must also have spoken.

52. On his own understanding, this is where his real contribution lies. “Das wirklich Neue an der christlichen Form der holistischen Psalmenexegese scheint jedenfalls nicht der Blick über den Einzelsalm hinaus bzw. auf den Gesamtpsalter zu sein, sondern das Bemühen, potentielle übergreifende Botschaften (innerhalb) des Psalters nicht christlich zu vereinnahmen” (Brunert, *Psalm 102*, 294).

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