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# CANONICAL THEOLOGY: AN EVANGELICAL APPRAISAL

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Recent emphasis on narrative hermeneutics and on canonical exegesis has shaped new possibilities of constructive dialogue between evangelical orthodox and mediating critical scholars. Doubtless some conservative enthusiasm for these developments flows from a misconception of what advocates of the new hermeneutical approaches really imply. Some welcome only what they find compatible in the new approaches without wrestling with underlying assumptions and debatable consequences. But others are ready to grapple with important aspects of the current hermeneutical shift. What is beyond dispute is that narrative theology and canonical exegesis, in some respects at least, mark significant breaks with the recent modern critical approach to the Bible.

I propose to discuss the view of canon exegesis which Professor Brevard Childs has influentially propelled into the current hermeneutical controversy. Professor Childs is a formative thinker of profound erudition and high courage. No scholar should gloss convictions that have emerged from his lifetime of critical engagement. From early graduate studies in biblical introduction that liberal historical criticism dominated he returned to several decades of teaching in America during which he noted the disintegration of the broad European critical consensus, the rise and fall of the post-Barthian biblical theology movement, and the ensuing 'widespread confusion' precipitated by the modern critical approach to Scripture. It is from this confusion that he proposes to rescue us.

## **Critical 'Orthodoxy'**

For several generations higher critical 'orthodoxy' has insisted that for cultic purposes the biblical writers superimposed upon the ancient past an imaginative history, one that reconstructs and embellishes supposedly earlier and more reliable literary strands. The regnant critical approach subordinated divine action to cosmic processes and viewed the Bible as merely a religious search for Hebrew self-identity. It levelled Scripture to the plateau of universal religious literature and eroded its distinctive witness to an authoritative Word of God. Stimulated by the Enlightenment's contempt for miraculous theism, the modern theories searched for primitive sources considered more trustworthy than the Scriptures. Even where philosophical idealism prevailed, and not raw naturalism, it conformed Judeo-Christian claims to those of religion-in-general. So Adolf Harnack,

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for example, insisted that the divine Christ of the Pauline epistles was a speculative reconstruction of a primitive non-miraculous Jesus.

The main goal of biblical criticism was to identify behind the biblical text an earlier, more reliable and more normative record. Into this primitive 'black hole' biblical critics funnelled a remarkable divergence of supposedly long-lost superior original sources. Critical scholars indoctrinated multitudes of divinity students to believe that competent Bible study requires concentration on documents such as J, D, E, P, and Q as an Ur-Bible that would yield a surer clue to the essence of Hebrew religion and history than does the scriptural literature.

The assumption of a developmental reconstruction of religious narratives was not, to be sure, without some basis in other Near Eastern literature. Sumerian religion exhibits, as Jeffrey H. Tigay points out, multiple literary sources enabling us to trace the evolution of its spiritual traditions over a long period of time, most notably the Gilgamesh epic (*The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*, Philadelphia, 1982). But no independently-existing earlier sources corresponding to biblical materials have been found.

Critics routinely questioned Scripture's historical trustworthiness whenever independent extrabiblical confirmation was lacking. But during the past half-century, archaeological findings publicized by William F. Albright and others nurtured confidence that the biblical writings reflect accurately even the patriarchal and Mosaic eras. Such archaeological confirmation somewhat turned the flank of Wellhausenian theory that required much later datings for the pre-prophetic period, although critical scholars like John Van Seters (*In Search of History*, New Haven, 1983) still disallow the essential historicity of the Pentateuch.

Although higher critical 'orthodoxy' allowed for later textual insertions by redactors, it could muster no impressive agreement over either the content or the date of such later alterations and additions. Professor Childs' verdict is that the dating of P remains 'a tentative enterprise at best' (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, Philadelphia, 1979, p. 124), and that critical research tracing the development of D is in a 'fluid state' with 'no signs of moving toward consensus' on the issues it raises (*ibid.*, p. 208), and moreover that many assumptions of 'the "orthodox" literary critical method' still must be examined (*ibid.*, p. 121). Nothing confronts the critical enterprise more embarrassingly than the unfruitfulness of its theory that Scripture presupposes ancient earlier documents whose precise content conflicting schools of thought have been unable to stipulate but which are nonetheless held to constitute sources more trustworthy than the received biblical text.

**Brevard Childs' Dissent**

Professor Childs rejects much of the outcome of recent historical criticism for three reasons: (1) It is less concerned to analyze the canonical text than to revise and reconstruct Hebrew history and its religious and literary development. (2) It mistook canon formation as an activity external to the biblical literature, ascribing it to a fourth-century ecclesiastical imposition of normative writings. (3) It failed to grasp the dynamics of canon formation in dialectical relationship with Israel's and the early church's religious consciousness that shaped a tradition normative for faith and practice.

By his complaint against mainline historical criticism Professor Childs does not intend the wholesale repudiation of critical method or of any and all investigation of earlier documentary sources, nor does he propose a return to traditional evangelical datings of canonical materials. What he objects to is the critical postulation of normative pre-canonical sources and a consequent devaluation and distrust of canonical materials. Professor Childs deplores a particular tradition that for a century and a half had a stranglehold on higher critical inquiry. He rejects the modern heralding of the history of critical studies as a movement from ignorance to objective truth as vigorously as he rejects an extreme conservative dismissal of it as merely an enthronement of human pride over biblical wisdom. But fruitful study of the Bible, he contends, will not come from improved source analysis, or pursuit of some new genre, or surfacing some previously overlooked redactional layer. 'The contribution of historical criticism to exegesis', he insists, 'does not lie in separating so-called genuine from non-genuine oracles, nor in seeking to recover the faith of the community at different stages in a book's composition' (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, p.336). Childs specially objects to historical-critical concentration on developmental stages rather than on analysis of 'the actual canonical text which has been received and used as authoritative Scripture by the community' (*ibid.*, p. 40). The regnant liberal view brought historical-critical method to a standstill instead of achieving an intellectual breakthrough; its overall effect was to confuse and to divert biblical studies from their real goal.

Professor Childs would refocus critical energies from a backward look for pre-scriptural normative sources to the canon itself as the legitimate focal point of biblical learning. The prime task of historical criticism, as he sees it, is to illumine the intention of the editors who gave final shape to the canon. Its central concern is to concentrate on the hermeneutical importance and theological message of the canonically shaped materials.

Childs energetically applauds the gains registered by modern scholarship in philological, textual and literary criticism, and in

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historical knowledge and exegetical precision. He pursues historico-critical exegesis of the canonical text as a highly legitimate enterprise provided the text is not arbitrarily correlated with naturalistic assumptions. All the standard questions faced in courses in biblical introduction remain to be critically investigated – whether biblical materials really come from contemporaries to whom tradition assigns them, whether independent sources were used and if so whether and how authors or redactors incorporated these – in short, the complex process of textual development that issues finally in the scriptural canon. Childs is open to two or three Isaiahs and, for that matter, to the derivation of numerous New Testament letters in their canonical form from other than traditionally stipulated authors. But while historical criticism may unravel the literary history of a text, the history of textual formation, Childs emphasizes, is not decisive. The final canonical form, by contrast, is authoritative.

In expounding the emergence of Scripture, evangelical scholarship finds less reason for departing from canonically-indicated authors of the component biblical books. It leans more heavily on the factor of divine revelation and prophetic-apostolic inspiration, without on that account minimizing the biblical writers' personality differences and stylistic peculiarities or excluding their use of sources.

By contrast, Professor Childs stresses a reformulated canonical content reflecting the work of editors. He does not view the canon, therefore, as aiming to preserve a pure prophetic-apostolic text. Hence he must relate divine revelation and inspiration to the canon in non-traditional ways. But if ancient materials embodied in the canon are no longer identifiable as specifically prophetic or apostolic, then the prophetic-apostolic autographs are in principle levelled to the same non-normative plane as are the ephemeral P-D-Q critical sources.

Professor Childs thinks, for example, that Mosaic authorship should not be a historical problem; later generations that regarded Mosaic authorship as normative, he holds, attributed post-Mosaic traditions to the great Hebrew lawgiver. But it seems incredible that believers who received and perpetuated prophetic-apostolic writings imposed as the Word of God would have unprotestingly accepted such misleading attribution and the view that only as redacted by unknown editors could the ancient writings be regarded as normative for future generations of believers (*cf.* 2 Tim. 3:14). Nor do such passages as Luke 1:1–3, 2 Peter 3:15f. and Revelation 1:3 justify the view that the canon rests on 'a dialectical combination of historical and theological criteria' and that the canonical text evolved as a process of selection and shaping of material into a scriptural norm by a

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'community of faith' that reformulated the prophetic-apostolic witness in dialectical interaction with it.

Bruce Waltke makes the point that if critical scholarship must 'admit ancient material in the (biblical) sources yet cannot demonstrate beyond reasonable doubt their inclusion of later material', we have no reason to reject out of hand the notion 'that Moses authored the essential core of the Pentateuchal material' ('Historical Grammatical Problems', in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, ed. Earl D. Rademacher and Robert D. Preus, Grand Rapids, 1984, pp. 71-120, at p. 92). The case for critical reconstruction seemed impressive when critics dismembered the scriptural record in much the same way, but their intramural differences more and more frustrated scholars who disagreed among themselves over such rival assumptions as the relative priority of linguistic or of theological criteria. Their confluent erosion of confidence in the canonical text on the basis of conflicting theories and divergent reconstructions provoked an accelerating desire to study the text as it stands as an intentionally-given norm. Recognition that the canonical text reflects an integral unity resistant to divergent pre-canonical patchwork discouraged proposals for a comprehensive canonical reconstruction.

### Focus on Canon

Evangelical scholars have applauded emphasis on the canon as the critical issue in biblical introduction, on the primacy of the canonical text, on the enduring hermeneutical significance of the final form of the canon, and on the illumination of its meaning as the main task of textual criticism. Formation of the canon was no mere historical accident or even an ordinary historical development, nor was it a late ecclesiastical council's special achievement that expressed the church's supposed infallible judgment. The canon was shaped, rather, by an interaction of divine and human factors that constituted it the regulative context and content for doing biblical theology.

The tenuous critical assumption that the biblical canon was an evolutionary development given fixed form by a late ecclesiastical council steadily eroded interest in a normative text. Modern hermeneutical theories moreover rejected objective interpretation not simply because no interpreter is assumption-free, but through larger claims also that the interpreter's own epistemic contribution ranks above that of the text's author, or that historical or metaphysical realities exclude universally shared meaning. So relativized was textual meaning that biblical interpretation seemed doomed to existential subjectivity or to nihilism.

Canonical exegesis and narrative hermeneutics both dispute the emphasis that our contemporary experience supplies the best key to

the real sense of Scripture. Instead they emphasize the priority of the biblical narrative, or in the case of canon exegesis, of the final canonical text, as the source of meaning that illumines our experience.

Professor Childs' exposition leaves the sense of the term 'canon' sometimes confusing. To be sure the Greek *kanōn* was already used in ancient times with multiple meanings – a rule or measure, a particular range of books, a divinely authoritative literary deposit. Sometimes Professor Childs uses the term of a specific literary corpus (the present Old Testament and/or New Testament); sometimes merely of the final form of the Judeo-Christian literary tradition in contrast to earlier sources which it supplements, interprets and reconstructs; sometimes abstractly as a principle of authority. But most notably he uses it not simply of the final stages of setting limits on the scope of the sacred writings but rather for the whole process by which he thinks the authoritative tradition was collected, edited, ordered and transmitted. In the preface to the second edition of *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* he employs the term for a long process of formation of the biblical text and divorces it from exclusive association with the stage of text-canonization. At times he seems also to use the term to include the modern Christian's interpretative activity in identifying with and appropriating the heritage.

Professor Childs therefore projects a unique view of the canon and of its relation to historical criticism. He rejects the notion that formation of the canon was 'a late, ecclesiastical activity, external to the biblical literature itself' and 'subsequently imposed on the writings' (*The New Testament as Canon. An Introduction*, Philadelphia, 1984, p. 21). He contends that canon-consciousness 'arose at the inception of the Christian church and lies deep within the New Testament literature itself' as particular traditions played an authoritative role for a community of faith and practice. Hence Childs postulates 'an organic continuity' in the historical development of an established canon 'from the earliest stages of the New Testament to the final canonical stabilization of its scope' – although this continuity 'was hammered out in continuous conflict'. Hence Childs ascribes to the early church a considerably larger role than did the Protestant Reformers both in the determination of the canon and in the articulation of its content. This larger role of the church in giving finality to the canon is asserted more than argued. But it thrusts upon us the question of the extent to which the theological truth of the canonical text is embedded in the interactive mind of the early church reflected by editors who are presumed to have given final shape to the canon.

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The canonical hermeneutic does not reject redaction-criticism but rather introduces it at a different stage and for a different role. Redaction-critics usually seek to interpret the biblical books by reconstructing their supposed historical development, on the premise that the key to the shape of a book lies in some referent outside the text that requires reconstructing the text. But canonical hermeneutics is concerned rather with the text in its finally given form, and seeks to grasp its expressed intention. It is interested in redaction-criticism only 'to the extent that it aids in a more precise hearing of the edited text', Childs comments. It has no interest in reversing 'the priorities of the canonical text, either by bringing to the foreground features left in the background, or by providing a referential position from which to evaluate the rightness or wrongness of the canonical intent' (*ibid.*, p. 301). We are to work back from the decisive final text to and through the layering that led up to it (*ibid.*, pp. 41f.). But this restriction of hermeneutical movement from the final text through the New Testament to the Old Testament, on which Childs insists, ignores the fact that the gospels – and frequently the epistles also – unhesitatingly move also from the Old to the New Testament, perhaps nowhere more impressively than in Matthew's invocation of prophecies that Jesus in turn fulfils.

By the same token, Childs must dismiss the priority of historico-grammatical interpretation insofar as he considers authorial intention not decisive for exegesis, historical analysis and pre-canonical usage as irrelevant, and theological content and meaning as distillations exclusively of the canonical text. While the canonical approach establishes the boundaries within which exegesis is to be conducted, it does not rule out in advance a variety of differing exegetical models, e.g., liturgical or dramatic, which might engage the text as it functions within the context of the community of faith. But 'it does not agree with a form of structuralism which seeks to reach a depth structure of meaning lying below the surface of the canonical text.' It 'differs sharply from ... "kerygmatic exegesis" which reconstructs the historical situation in the interest of a theological response' and from the traditio-critical approach by emphasizing the normative status of the final form of the text (*ibid.*, pp. 74f.).

### **Attainment of Canonical Status**

In the evangelical orthodox view the various New Testament books did not acquire canonical status either by late ecclesiastical determination or by a process of evolutionary development or by canon-formation involving a dialectical relationship of creative interaction between the early church and a revered tradition subject to reinterpretation. Most evangelicals consider Professor Childs' mediating view of dialectical canon formation fully as unacceptable

as is the liberal critical view that the canon is the achievement of a late fourth-century church council. For if textual normativity is the achievement of a final canonizing community, then the meaning of the biblical text is dissolved into what the early church decided, and the decisive role of the prophets and apostles is effaced.

Professor Childs projects a post-apostolic dating (about A.D. 100) even for a settled Old Testament Hebrew text. But critical views that connect the final form of the Old Testament text with the council of Jamnia have very little if any foundation; Roger T. Beckwith (*The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church*, Grand Rapids, 1985) and others have recently given massive impetus to an earlier more conservative dating. Evangelicals insist that the New Testament church from its outset acknowledged the authority of the Old Testament. This view is reflected by the apostle Paul (Acts 28:23; Rom. 15:4); by Matthew the evangelist and by Jesus (Matt. 5:17). The Old Testament canon was considered divinely authoritative and Christ was heralded as its fulfillment. In this sense the early church even from the time of the disciples was never without an authoritative canon. Jesus appointed apostles as official channels of divine revelation. They in turn proclaimed the Word of God both orally and by letter. They expected their writings to be circulated and read in the congregations much as the Hebrew canon was read in the synagogues.

Against views that the New Testament canon was a post-apostolic ecclesial development of no real significance for understanding the shaping of the New Testament – whether Bultmann's view that catholic bishops imposed it to promote doctrinal and ecclesiastical unity, or Barr's view that it was an accidental occurrence lacking hermeneutical significance – Professor Childs holds that the beginnings of the process of canonization are located in the New Testament itself and were motivated by theological concerns that cannot be dissolved into sociological or historical explanation. Childs shares the view of H. von Campenhausen (*The Formation of the Christian Bible*, Philadelphia, 1977) that the apostle Paul already had in mind a Christian Bible. But he supplements W.G. Kümmel's emphasis, that the canon derived from a need to preserve in writing the truth of the oral tradition once the first generation of witnesses had died, in order to stress the relevance of the canonical process for 'the formation of the New Testament books themselves' (*The New Testament as Canon. An Introduction*, pp. 12 f.).

Childs dismisses as too simplistic the conservative view that the New Testament canon is 'a natural growth of universally recognized authoritative writings into a normative apostolic collection' (*ibid.*, p. 13). He contends rather that the material itself reflects a complex process of shaping forces issuing in multi-layered writings reflecting

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a variety of perspectives. Childs seems quite disposed to see the canon as fixed in its outer limits by a decision of the Eastern and Western branches of the church about the end of the fourth century. This places him against conservative views that the canon was largely completed during the first half of the second century or decided earlier simply on the basis of a principle of apostolicity that served to freeze the tradition at particular points. He is critical of 'soft' historical criticism by conservative scholars and calls for a much more rigorous critical approach (*ibid.*, p. 35). The meaning of the text is not found by seeking its sense only in one particular historical context (*ibid.*, p. 36). The commentators Childs prefers for describing the theological function of the canon as Scripture are seldom conservative expositors.

Professor Childs is wholly right in his emphasis that historical investigation has not illuminated the pattern of events whereby a fixed collection of books took its place as the completion and consummation of the Hebrew canon. There is unquestionably a legitimate and necessary sense in which the received canon must be called post-apostolic. The early church did not universally possess the present canonical books as a definitively complete collection during the apostolic age.

### **Apostolicity and Canon**

The writings appeared over a considerable time span during the lifetime of the apostles. The gospels and epistles were preceded by authoritative oral proclamation. But even before that, the Old Testament illumined by the words and deeds of Jesus functioned as canon. The sporadically appearing apostolic writings officially interpreted Jesus' life and teaching in an expanding canon whose full content and scope was as yet indeterminate. Consequently there is a sense in which we must technically distinguish canon from Scripture, as well as from oral proclamation, not indeed in terms of authority, but in terms of scope. The collection of a well-defined literature as a formal canon normative for the church's existence and life involved an historical process.

Some scholars have argued that the canon must be a post-apostolic phenomenon on the ground that the idea of a closed canon is necessarily associated with an awareness that classical prophecy is at an end. Yet completion of the canon does not as such add a higher authority to the component parts. The individual writings, to be sure, may gain full relevance and meaning only in the context of the complete canon. But authorial intention nonetheless remains fundamentally important for the constituent parts as well as for the whole. The apostles may indeed not have been conscious of the fact that they were writing letters that would be collected in canonical

form, and hence that they were penning the full equivalent of Old Testament writings that would appear as part of a more comprehensive accumulation. Some recent expositors contend, however, that Paul presupposes a written form of the new covenant when in 2 Corinthians 3 he speaks of the old written covenant in contrast with the new. In any case, the apostles' imposition of written documents to be read as authoritative in the churches already implies the idea of canonicity. The principle of canonicity is therefore not post-apostolic, and the scope of the canon is best defined in terms of the principle of apostolicity.

The difficulty with this view that apostolic commendation is the criterion of canonicity lies not merely in unpersuasive critical theories that a fourth-century church council sanctioned our New Testament as a specific collection of writings; or that theological diversity in the early Christian writings obscured their normativity until false teachers and cults evoked a literary tradition to distinguish orthodoxy from heresy; or some other speculative variation on the critical theme that the canon is but a human achievement. The early church kept the principle of apostolic authority alive, and shared the conviction that normative Christian literature is not indefinitely open-ended (*cf.* Luke 1:1-4). Yet it remains the case, nonetheless, that the apostles conveyed no direct revelation of the express limits of the canon, and that the local churches did not universally share a complete collection of inspired writings.

To be sure, the Apostolic Fathers quote the apostles authoritatively on a par with the Old Testament. Moreover, they also indicate that the apostles are authoritative even if no longer living on earth; the earliest fathers appeal to 'living memory' of apostolic teaching and later fathers to what 'is written'. The inescapable implication is that apostolic teaching is authoritative even before a complete canon is accessible. Already by Irenaeus, who claimed contact with the apostolic generation through Polycarp and barely misses inclusion with the Apostolic Fathers, a definitive literature is stipulated - four Gospels (no more, no less) and well-defined additional writings including Paul's letters.

Equally important, apostolicity is a forefront emphasis: the prior authority of the apostolic community is specifically stated. Nowhere do the church fathers give any indication that they are acting creatively to constitute the canon. The Muratorian canon (about A.D. 200) seems simply to acknowledge the books that the churches used and considered integral to the Christian heritage.

**Providence and Canon**

What explanation best accounts for this situation? Instead of appealing to an obscure process of dialectical canon-formation, many evangelicals appeal to special divine providence to explain the compilation and preservation of the canon. If one asks why providential divine sovereignty could not have been equally operative through dialectical canon-formation, the response is that apostolicity is a more compelling principle than dialectical process to account for the reception of the canonical books as authoritative. The serial reception of these documents by local churches, to which many of the letters were addressed, and their subsequent distribution and dispersion to more distant churches, seems a more natural explanation of why no indication exists of formal finalization of the canon as one might expect in the case of a single climactic event.

The hypothesis of a process of dialectical canon-formation implies the need for such a culminating event to mark the community's achievement of the final text. Through its inability to uncover such an event, historical criticism led earlier to the emphasis on evolutionary development of the canon and the theory of late ecclesiastical imposition. If historical criticism erred in the recent past by looking for prior sources more reliable than the Mosaic-prophetic writings, Childs' alternative duplicates that error by projecting authoritative post-apostolic sources. Childs' canonical editors are presumably more authoritative than the apostolic autographs. Supposedly, issuing from a process of traditio-ecclesial dialectic, they confront us with an editorial authority surpassing that of the apostles to whom Jesus specifically vouchsafed the guidance of the Spirit of Truth.

The apostles were ever on the move in fulfillment of a missionary mandate while the early churches were simultaneously growing and multiplying. Some of these house churches the apostles pastored, some they briefly visited and taught orally, some they handed over to others, some arose through the missionary outreach of converts. The apostles were mobile – Paul going to Rome and perhaps even to Spain, Thomas possibly to India, others elsewhere to new and proliferating churches. Only with difficulty could the sporadic apostolic writings keep up with the expanding Christian movement in an age without modern means of communication and travel. It is not surprising that churches, treasuring what autographs or copies they had, nonetheless had somewhat differing lists, and that for a time uncertainty might prevail over the composition of the growing canon. The churches in the late first and early second century were better positioned than the churches in the fourth or in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to acknowledge Christianity's real charter documents. The complete canon emerged from recognition that the

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Christian churches, guided by the principle of apostolicity, treasured the apostolic writings and continually returned to them as foundational to the church's life and growth. That need not mean that apostolic authorship was the exclusive hallmark of documents received by the churches as authoritative. Apostolic commendation was equally serviceable, since the apostles were the divinely authorized interpreters of the crucified and risen Christ's ministry and mission. What was decisive for the canon is authorship by the apostles and/or their attestation of apostolic colleagues who faithfully relayed the apostolic message.

It is, admittedly, difficult to extrapolate this principle of apostolicity from some components of the canon, but it is explicit in most of the writings and implicit in others. It is unnecessary to insist that the apostles intended all their letters for a necessary or permanent role in all churches; Paul's reference to an epistle to the Laodiceans (Col. 4:16) seems to identify a letter that was not preserved. Yet nothing supports the notion that the apostles prolifically produced such letters. Although the first Gospel is formally anonymous, a good case can be made for authorship by the apostle Matthew. But the authorship of Hebrews is much more in doubt. There is no known apostolic commendation, moreover, for some writings by non-apostles, for example, Jude and James. Yet it is incredible that the early church which accepted the core books on the basis of apostolicity would have accepted other books as equally authoritative on some rival basis.

The providential operation of the Spirit of Truth supervised the preservation and collection for post-apostolic generations of inspired books which the apostles wrote or commended as authoritative, and which Christians through the ages have treasured also for their inherent worth. Canon-criticism, which elevates the textual authority of post-apostolic editors above that of the apostles, must cope with the fact that while the canon enlivens the names of Paul, Peter, John and other evangelists, the supposed canonical editors are nameless phantoms reminiscent of P, D and Q.

Professor Childs speaks of the canon's 'growth' in a way that dissolves interest in verbally inspired autographs. To be sure, he holds that 'the authoritative Word gave the community its form and content in obedience to the divine imperative' (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, pp. 58f.). This phrasing emphasizes supernatural initiative, but it accommodates at the same time a broad relational view of divine revelation and inspiration. It avoids the widely held evangelical insistence on a canon constituted essentially of inspired autographs, authoritatively imposed upon the early churches, and received as unrevisable normative statements of Christian revelation.

**Tradition and Canon**

What the churches receive, rather, on Childs' view, is authoritative tradition that church leaders are free to modify by way of selection and expansion, redaction and interpretation. For, as Professor Childs adds, 'reception of the authoritative tradition by its hearers gave shape to the same writings through an historical and theological process of selecting, collecting and ordering'. This involved 'a series of decisions deeply affecting the shape of the books'. The fixed nature of 'the divine imperative' and of 'the authoritative Word' is here somewhat unclear.

Professor Childs also escapes traditional Protestant limits on the church's role in shaping the Bible and he revises the contrast of biblical authority and church tradition. Reformation and evangelical scholars look at the Bible as more than a faithful expression of the church's oral tradition. They emphasize the verbal inspiration of Scripture and absolute veracity of the original text, and in consequence link final composition of the canonical writings essentially to the respective traditional authors. But Childs considers this evangelical Protestant alternative a lost cause, one that evaporates any significant role for historical criticism, even as he rejects also the liberal critical alternative which evaporates any significant place for the canon. Liberal interest in textual criticism aimed at the scientific recovery and restoration of an earlier and better tradition, and dismissed the canon as 'an external ecclesiastical validation without any real interest for the shaping or interpretation of the biblical literature' (*ibid.*, p. 45). For Childs the crucial task is 'to overcome this long established tension between the canon and criticism'. The canonical approach 'differs from a strictly literal approach by interpreting the biblical text in relation to a community of faith and practice for whom it served a particular role as possessing divine authority' (*ibid.*, p. 74).

It may be that Professor Childs' suggestion of the very late date of about A.D. 100 for Jewish standardization and Christian acceptance of an authoritative Old Testament is motivated in part by a desire to escape the evangelical emphasis on an objectively inspired literary deposit unrevisable by a process of community interaction. This late date positions an emerging Old Testament alongside the New in a simultaneous process of early Christian canon-formation that arrives at a normative biblical text through interaction with the believing community. Yet it seems strange to hold that the church first embraced an authoritative Hebrew canon only after the church separated itself from Judaism. For the early church, correlation of the Jewish Bible with Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the Old Testament and the singular authority Christ conferred on the apostles was far more consequential than any late Jewish textual

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standardization of the Old Testament supposedly about A.D. 100, a date that most non-evangelical and evangelical scholars alike consider unacceptably late. The much earlier recognition of the cessation of prophecy in principle excluded later external additions, and there is no indication that the books were open to ongoing internal addition.

Conceptually it is not difficult to grasp Professor Childs' proposal of a process of interaction of revered tradition and creative community response. In a sense this is what goes on continually throughout church history, with its sporadic eruption into new movements and denominations, and their justification of distinctive or novel positions by appealing to an interpreted or reinterpreted normative text. The Word gives the believing community its form and content, yet the community collects, selects and reorders the revered texts. A developing corpus of authoritative literature is shaped in constant dynamic interaction with the community that treasures it, and gives the text new and decisive meaning for those not personally involved in the original revelatory events.

### **Community and Canon**

But the larger problem facing canon exegesis is that of identifying just which community canonized a specific final text, and when and how. The canon was not, Professor Childs insists, the achievement of a late church council nor, he contends, was it an authoritative apostolic imposition. But then, within which community and when did the text become unrevisably fixed? When and where did a comprehensive Christian community first exist to accredit the final canonical form?

When one raises the issue of canonicity in this context, one can understand why Professor James Sanders argues for a fluid text rather than for a decisive final text that the early Christian community accredited. Professor Sanders merely extends permanently the textual fluidity that Professor Childs holds to have routinely prevailed until the eventual sudden emergence of a decisive final form of the text. Although Professor Childs' alternative insistence on a final authoritative canon seems to me the superior view, his emphasis on community formation unfortunately forfeits support for an authoritative canonical text which that text itself implies.

Evangelical orthodoxy has emphasized that the New Testament has its authoritative ground in Jesus' special designation of certain followers as divinely qualified interpreters of his life, death and resurrection-ministry. The fact that Jesus promised that the Spirit of Truth would recall to them what he had taught during his earthly ministry implies that he addressed contemporaries who would build on eyewitness and earwitness relationships in their exposition of his life and message (John 14:25f.). Even Paul was a belated eyewitness

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of and earwitness to the resurrected Jesus. In consequence, a distinctive apostolic authority inheres in the New Testament, an authority grounded in the risen Christ and mediated through the Spirit who superintended the apostles' oral and written proclamation. The early church was answerable to the apostolic message, even as the apostles were themselves earlier bound to the Spirit-given prophetic Word.

While in one sense the canon came 'through the church' it did not come 'from the church'. The church recognized the divine inspiration of certain writings, but it did not confer or directly share in that inspiration. The church in worship services read apostolically imposed writings and considered conformity to their teaching a test of divine obedience.

What evidence is there that the New Testament incorporates community additions and revisions on a canon-wide basis? Professor Childs concedes an 'almost total lack of information regarding the history of canonization' (*ibid.*, p. 60). The complex process of canonical development largely eludes critical reconstruction, he adds, for we 'cannot decipher all the layers of tradition and redaction'. Historical criticism predicated on diverse assumptions has reached conflicting conclusions about canonical sources, revisionary additions and datings of various strands of the canon.

Under these circumstances does discussion of canon-origination and canon-formation then become merely a mass of rival *a priori* and conflicting theories in an area of uncertainty? In view of the evidential silence concerning a canonical process, is there an alternative superior to Professor Childs' theory of interactive canonical process? Is Professor Childs' quite nebulous reconstruction of canonical process any more convincing than was the documentary search for ancient pre-biblical sources to which biblical critics eagerly but arbitrarily attached normativity? If the crucial first-order issue is the authoritative nature of the final canonical text, and identification of its constitutive struts is a second-order concern, as Professor Childs implies, should we not reconsider whether the principle of apostolicity is as credible as if not more than, the premise of interactive process? Is the case for canonical process formulated by Professor Childs as persuasive as that for apostolicity? Does not the final canonical text itself lend support to apostolicity rather than to community-formation as most decisive for the canon's final form?

### **Earliest New Testament Witness**

Even the earliest New Testament components weigh against excessively differentiating apostolic oral teaching from written Scripture and canonical content. Already in 2 Thessalonians, widely

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conceded to be among the New Testament's earliest documents, the apostle Paul expressly equates the authority of apostolic oral teaching and apostolic written teaching. In 1 Thessalonians he stresses that the gospel is not of human origin but of divine origin; the apostolic message, he writes, 'truly is God's Word' (2:13). In 2 Thessalonians he declares that believers are to hold fast the traditions which the apostles taught, and which the Thessalonians learned from them 'by word or by letter' (2:15). Apostolic instruction was to be received as equally authoritative, whether conveyed by word of mouth or by letter, whether taught orally or by epistle (the reference is doubtless to 1 Thessalonians). From the outset of his ministry, Paul considers Scripture no less authoritative than oral teaching and does so long before the received canon could have been completed.

Oddly Professor Childs thinks that the canonical process 'did not seriously alter' the original shape of 1 Thessalonians (*ibid.*, p. 356), but that 2:13-16 might possibly be a secondary expansion. But if we do not have apostolic originals except as editorially fused into the final canonical text, are such judgments not presumptuous and highly speculative? It is doubly strange that Professor Childs specially questions the very passage that assigns divine authority to the apostolic message. Unstable as its moorings may be in Professor Childs' approach, we may nonetheless be gratified by his verdict that the original letter was a written substitute for the apostle's presence and, significantly, was to be read from the start not only by one specific historical community but by the whole community of faith. Subsequently it gained 'a new canonical role in which it was joined to a larger collection and designated as normative scripture for a community of faith' which included later generations.

Again, Professor Childs states that 2 Timothy 3:15 ff. shows that the role Paul formerly exercised in physical presence among the churches is now assumed by 'the collection of sacred writings' as 'a divinely ordained means for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness' (*ibid.*, p. 392). By inspired Scripture the text intends the Old Testament, but before long the church would assign a similar function to 'Paul's own letters'. This comment is remarkable for its discrimination of 'Paul's own letters' in a canonical context which supposedly disallows any distinction of apostolic autographs. Moreover, what vital significance has canonical attribution to Paul, since Childs (who considers a canonical Moses problematical) tells us elsewhere that we need not trouble ourselves over Mosaic authorship just because later generations attributed post-Mosaic traditions to Moses? Childs rejects pseudepigraphical authorship of the Pastorals but holds that their relationship to Pauline authorship is indirect rather than direct, on the supposition that the Pastorals arose after Paul's death (*ibid.*, p. 386).

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Instead of viewing the inspired apostolic/canonical writings as nurturing the church, Childs in fact holds that the believing community formulated the scriptural role of Paul's writings (an inversion that Calvin would have compared to the daughter giving birth to the mother, rather than the mother to the daughter). Childs declares it unwise to begin exegesis only after deciding the issue of authorship. Canonical interpretation does not begin with a judgment regarding historical authorship but allows 'the peculiar features of the text's shaping to determine the meaning and role which historical and non-historical elements play within the text itself' (*ibid.*, p. 386). The historical enterprise, while legitimate, 'is not identical with the theological enterprise of discerning the canonical shape of the material' (*ibid.*, p. 387). 'The canonical process of collecting, recording, and interpreting the Pauline tradition has resulted in blurring the sharp historical lines' (*ibid.*, p. 387).

Childs' view deprives us of singularly inspired apostolic autographs, holds in suspense the authorship of components of the canonical text, does not firmly exclude all possibility of pseudepigraphical authorships, leaves unsure the range of historical factuality in the canon, and to compensate for this loss relies on the church's recognition of revered tradition and its redaction into an authoritative canonical collection.

If we ask how by contrast the canon itself views Scripture, the answer is that even the very earliest apostolic writings, dispatched and received before most components of the New Testament originated, reflect a regard for the divine authority of the apostolic epistles. The canonical process therefore includes a recognition of scriptural authority prior to the inspired tradition's final canonical form. The canon does not treat scriptural components as if they acquire finality and authority only if and when they are canonically frozen, or as if their authority is in any way, even in part, suspended upon a creative contribution or reconstruction by the community of faith. The divine authority of apostolic letters was not contingent upon their future canonical inclusion, although canonical inclusion attests their authority. The collation of writings as a distinct literary corpus did not first constitute them finally and decisively authoritative. The apostles did not have a compilation of the canon in view at the time of writing. A prior inherent authority precipitated their inclusion in the final canonical corpus. The notion that Scripture became authoritative only through its final canonical inclusion depends in part upon the theory of a late conjunction of the Old Testament with the New, and in part upon a debatable view of canonization.

Childs rejects any canon that gives priority to divine initiative and minimizes the believing community's response to the divine Word in

canon-formation. In designating specific writings as Scripture, he contends, the church 'confessed its faith in the divine origin of its Scripture in a thoroughly time-conditioned fashion' (*Biblical Theology in Crisis*, Philadelphia, 1970, p. 105). Childs does not ascribe to the canon either a divine or apostolic sanction; rather, he ascribes the formative role in canon development to the early church. The canon's authority consists in faith's understanding that through this human literature the living Lord continues to address the people of God.

Nowhere is Professor Childs more obscure than in unpacking this relationship. His synthesis of historical development, critical interpretation and normative canon does not escape a costly modification of the historical Christian understanding of revelatory Scripture and of canonical authority.

### **Text and Canon**

According to Professor Childs the aim of textual criticism is to recover the standardized canonical text, not to restore an original text. Childs stresses that canonical authority may differ from the original writer's intention. Are we then to infer that no identity of textual content or meaning need exist between the final canonical text and prophetic-apostolic autographs?

Childs is critical of the view of F.J.A. Hort, one shared by B.B. Warfield, A.T. Robertson and many evangelicals, that the goal of textual criticism is to recover as far as possible the original words of the New Testament. Modernist critics of that view have long held that no text should be considered authoritative because none is inerrant and all incorporate a time-conditioned content. Childs considers the conservative alternative objectionable because it does not 'adequately link text with canon'.

Conservatives do in fact link text with canon by insisting that the canon preserves divinely inspired autographs that the apostles imposed on the recipient churches. But Childs holds that the apostles and the canonical text stand in a very different relationship, one which involves a fallible apostolic text and then a complex editorial process of selecting, editing and revising an inherited message until the final canonical form blends theological and linguistic elements into a normative collection of revered tradition. Hence Childs doubts that author-intentionality can be discriminated from the canonical text. To be sure, he distinguishes apostolic tradition from ecclesiastical tradition. But he connects the canonical text dialectically, and often obscurely, with what readers of the canonical text hear as containing not only a normative tradition but early ecclesial interpretation and reinterpretation of the heritage.

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Childs stresses this activity of incorporating textual interpretation in connection with copying of the text between A.D. 50 and A.D. 125. At times the process involves intentional change or reconstrual, not to falsify but by adding a specific theological dimension to promote a canonically approved view. Hence the relation of the written word to the received word which embraces a particular theological dimension becomes a focal point of interest; attention is fixed not on the autographs but on a final canonical text in distinction from these.

The search for a historically accurate text behind the received post-apostolic canonical text Childs regards as misguided. What he sacrifices, therefore, is the special divine inspiration of an original text. Instead, he connects divine providence with the community of faith's whole process of transmission, selection, addition and interpretation that issues in the canonical text. He abandons the view that the present multiplicity of copies – with its different families of texts – derives ultimately from apostolic autographs. An intermingling of written and oral tradition is said to have been prevalent in the early church. Childs replaces interest in an apostolic original by interest in the text supposedly most influential among a variety of traditions. No pure text is any longer assumed; instead, a stage of fluidity is affirmed in which a multiplicity of textual traditions compete until a complex recensional development achieves a relatively stable text over several generations. The effort to restore original autographs is therefore considered inadequate for establishing 'the church's received and authoritative text' (*The New Testament as Canon. An Introduction*, p. 527).

Evangelical scholars have long conceded that the Spirit's inspiration may impel a later inspired writer to offer nuances of meaning not evident to an earlier inspired writer. Examples are Matthew's application to Jesus of certain Old Testament prophecies, or Paul's special use of quotations from the Septuagint. But that is not to say, as Professor Childs seems to, that the larger 'community of faith' (the precise extension of this term is sometimes obscure) contributes to a development, selection and freezing of a final authoritative meaning or that the final canonical form encapsulates an authority unanswerable to the inspired prophets and apostles. The apostles are governed in their interpretation of Scripture by a definable hermeneutic, as Don A. Carson notes, one that is traceable to Jesus himself, and using typological and other elements along a salvation-historical axis. The canonical-exegesis stance, by contrast, emphasizes growing insights by the early 'community of faith', which some expositors extend to the current life of the Christian community, or especially to contemporary biblical critics some of

whom do not hesitate to presume the Spirit's illumination in their reinterpretation of Scripture.

For Professor Childs, to be sure, the canonical text inseparably fuses what the text meant and what it means. Only the final reconstructed canonical form is authentic Scripture; Scripture and the canonical form are inseparably identical. Even where he concedes that the canonical text is mutilated (as in 1 Samuel 1:24, for example, where he acknowledges that the Septuagint and Qumran preserve the proper meaning) Childs stays nonetheless with the canonical text. Yet Childs refuses to identify the canonical text uncritically with the *koine textus receptus* in which textual corruption has encroached upon the tradition (*ibid.*, p. 527). Hence the goal of textual criticism is to recover the text that 'best reflects the true apostolic witness found in the church's Scripture' (*ibid.*, p. 527). The critical interest shifts to a text different from apostolic autographs and yet not wholly identical with the last stages of 'a stabilized *koine* tradition'.

But if we lack access to an authorial text or meaning independently of a canonical text, how can we confidently say that the canonical text fuses authorial and finally decisive meaning? Any sacrifice of authoritative apostolic autographs (or of copies) must shift elsewhere the authority for the content and meaning of the message. In the recent past, loss of interest in authorial meaning readily invited the view that the text means whatever the regnant critics affirm. Does Professor Childs' approach shift definitive meaning to past regnant first-century ecclesial conviction encapsulated in the final canonical form, that is, to the early church in living interaction with the sacred writings? If author-intention can be comprehensively altered by canon-intention, are we not then involved in a massive programme of community redaction? Since the community is said significantly to shape the canon through which it interprets the divine Word for future generations, is not an independently objective canon or Scripture displaced by the church community as an equivalent authority?

The text of Scripture is, of course, always an interpreted text. No exegete approaches it without preconceptions and assumptions. But must we on that account view the canonical text as a community product in the sense that the believing church shapes its decisive meaning? Professor Childs opposes multi-level meanings which Scripture is held to have acquired during a multi-staged development. He contends that the final canonical editors have correlated earlier materials without identifying original sources vis-a-vis final redactors, into a text whose meaning is fixed in the authority of that text experienced in the life of the believing community.

The entire history of the received tradition, from the patriarchal to the apostolic eras, is indeed attested by the canonical Scriptures as a

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single layer of authoritative text and meaning. Yet one reason that Professor Childs prizes canonical intentionality over authorial intentionality may be the higher critical assumption that the received tradition is not derived from its traditional authors even when the canonical text implies and affirms that it is. When Professor Childs bids us to hear the canonical Isaiah as a unitary message, he does so because most multi-source scholars atomize the book's message, not because he considers the book of Isaiah the divinely inspired work of an eighth-century prophet, for he is not averse to its multi-source origin by two or three authors. Childs would enhance the book's unity by universalizing chapters 40–66 rather than applying them specifically to Israel. Hence canonical exegesis accommodates subordinating authorial intention not only to canonical intention, but to preferred modern critical intention as well. Professor Childs holds, to be sure, that in its final form the text no longer continues to evolve as something to be exploited by the fluctuating consciousness of inventive interpreters. But even if the task of criticism is to illumine the intention of editors who gave final shape to the canon, it would seem that modern historical criticism can apparently become creatively decisive in reconstructing an obscure process of canon development.

Crucial questions arise, moreover, both over the nature of canonical truth and the historical reliability of the canon. The question of normative truth 'for Christians' is not identical with the question whether what Christians affirm is intellectually sound and exerts truth-claims on non-Christians. To view the New Testament simply as the church's liturgical and didactic book no more establishes the universal truth or factual history of its message than does a recognition of the Koran's role in Islam or that of the Book of Mormon in the Church of Latter-Day Saints. The intellectually sensitive enquirer must ask whether the redemption the Bible affirms actually puts us in touch with objective truth and historical fact.

A persuasive case for divine disclosure and for scriptural truth requires more than an evasion of negative historical criticism. Professor Childs proposes to recover the Bible's theological relevance by stressing the final text of a tradition that throughout its development was considered authoritative. Under the umbrella-concept of theology he subsumes the topics of religious authority, religious belief and doctrine, and religious experience. The canon's unifying feature, he tells us, is not literary or structural but an overall theological coherence. The canon is a theological whole whose parts function coherently and meaningfully in reflecting divine judgment, forgiveness and grace.

But on what ground ought a Confucian or Hindu to opt for the Bible? In the end all questions are subsidiary to the issue of whether

the canonical process as Professor Childs conceives it leads simply to a final normative text (whose religious perspectives are enmeshed in the early church's reciprocal interaction with the tradition) or whether the text offers universally valid theological absolutes and doctrinal truths. Are scriptural affirmations about God and man and the cosmos and history 'for Christians only' or are they cognitively relevant truth-claims that are intellectually incumbent upon non-Christians also?

### **Revelation, Canon and Authority**

The nature of divine disclosure here presses for attention. Textual scholars devoted to questions of introduction may well insist that theologians focus more appropriately than do they on concerns of revelation and truth, and of revelation and history. Yet Professor Childs expressly rejects the historical-critical tendency to interpret biblical literature as a natural epiphenomenon of Israel's sociopolitical-economic history, and in doing so offers some broad theological perspectives. Although not articulating in a schematic way the indispensable particulars of biblical theology, he emphasizes nonetheless that all the developing canon's editors affirmed divine judgment and redemption.

From his protest against wedding historical criticism to naturalism, we infer that when writing of God's grace and judgment Childs disavows a subjective vision of reality, deism and pantheism, and affirms instead that God is transcendentally real and that biblical theism accords with the ontologically real world. He does not subscribe to George Lindbeck's replacement of cognitive orthodoxy with a cultural-linguistic theory of religion, nor does he reduce all doctrine merely to a second-order concern. He reaches beyond the experiential theology represented at Yale from the time of Horace Bushnell through H. Richard Niebuhr to David Kelsey.

Childs nonetheless expressly repudiates propositional revelation, that is, divine disclosure of a fixed deposit of objective truths or doctrines. 'The heart of my canonical proposal has been missed', he writes, 'when this conservative theory seeks to ground biblical truth on objective propositions apart from the reception by a community of Christian faith and practice.' He postulates a dialectical relationship between text and experience. 'In a polemical debate with the theories of conservative propositionalists and liberal experientialists', he would insist, he writes, that the function of the canon was not propositional, although the church did use the canon in a propositional as well as in other ways (*ibid.*, p. 544). 'There was a truthful apostolic witness to Jesus Christ', he observes, 'a faith once-and-for-all delivered to the saints, on which Christians grounded their existence. In spite of a variety of legitimate formulations of the

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one Christian faith, and in spite of the historical time-conditionality of the confessions, the Bible as the church's rule of faith laid claim to saving truth' (*ibid.*, p. 545).

These comments, not untypical of recent dialectical formulations, hold in tension two conflicting emphases. Over against religious commitment nebulously anchored in experience, Professor Childs insists on cognitive factors: a 'truthful apostolic witness', a ground of Christian existence transcending the believer, the normative authority of a specific literature, and an (unelaborated) faith 'once-for-all delivered to the saints'. At the same time he distinguishes these cognitive elements from a divine propositional revelation of truths and emphasizes a 'saving truth' not categorized as universally valid; additionally, he considers Christian confession to be marked by historical time-conditionality, and affirms the legitimacy of a variety of formulations of 'the one Christian faith'.

Such an approach commendably aims to escape an experience-centred faith. But can Childs really achieve that objective even in a revelatory context if the believing community supplies faith's propositional content in a time-conditioned confession that is inescapably multiform and pluralistic? It clarifies little to note, as Childs does, that 'the church used the canon in a propositional as well as in other ways', since sentences are the minimal unit of sharable meaning; the canonical witness by contrast, attests that God routinely spoke to the prophets in sentences, and that in his revelation God conveyed divine truths to inspired writers as a crucial aspect of his redemptive self-disclosure. Professor Childs' references to revelation and inspiration are largely undeveloped.

Although he considers the canon authoritative, it is for Professor Childs neither the Word of God nor infallible. Scripture, he says, mediates the authoritative divine Word, although just how, and what this involves, is obscure. For Childs, the canonical development reflects a history of encounter between God and Israel, but it is the text's final form alone that witnesses to the entire history of redemption.

Canonical Scripture, we hasten to add, is indeed the Christian's verifying principle. But what test are we to apply to truth-claims associated with revelatory encounter? Are the basic Christian beliefs reflected in the ecumenical creeds normative for Christian faith simply on the basis of the scriptural expression of how biblical believers understood their religious heritage, or do they define the content of transcendent divine revelation? For evangelical orthodoxy, the Bible's central doctrines are binding not simply because they comprise authoritative traditions, but also and especially because they are cognitively true on the ground of divine rational revelation that discloses the nature of the real world. What one misses in Childs'

exposition is any elaboration of revelation that sustains this conviction. An ever-developing community of faith can hardly contribute to the canon's universal authority if it has no objective criteria for determining whether or not the canon is universally authoritative, and if it exhibits no explanatory principle that makes its commitments credible.

For the biblical community, by contrast, what lends distinctiveness to Scripture and canon are supernatural revelation, inspiration and authority. The appeal to a process of canon-formation through a confluent shaping by the early church is both less direct and less compelling than the inherited Reformed view of divine inspiration and authority. If the canon represents a judgment by the community of faith on the basis of an historical process that issued in a normative corpus of writings, does not the community really constitute an authority just as ultimate, and even more so, than the canon? An ecclesiastically commended authoritative text is hardly the same as an authoritative divinely-inspired text.

If the meaning of the text does not inhere in a scripturally-embedded revelation that is objective to the community of faith, but rests in divine authority experienced dynamically in the life of the believing community, then the question arises whether the early Christians were possibly wrong in applying the ancient prophetic promises to Jesus of Nazareth. If the canon and the community reciprocally gave each other life and meaning, on what basis can we distinguish transcendent authority from experiential vitality? In rejecting Jesus the Jews appealed to their revered tradition to repudiate his messianic claims. Would dynamic experiential 'acceptance' of their tradition as other Jews interpreted – or reinterpreted – it yield an equally valid creative meaning and revelatory truth?

To say that in pre-canonical times a process of authoritative tradition plus responsive community formation shaped the canon may in fact justify or accommodate an even larger destabilization of authority. If the present canon is really the early church's self-understanding of the Bible, and the modern critical understanding differs, why should one pattern of community-formation be considered decisively normative over another? If the first canonical stabilization of the text in interaction with a community of faith led on the one hand to an Old Testament canon by appealing to which many Jews across the centuries have rejected the messianic claims of Jesus of Nazareth, and led on the other to a New Testament canon that embraced the Old in full confidence that Jesus is the Christ, what in principle would exclude some future canonization of a more comprehensive final text that incorporates both Old Testament and New Testament into a 'Universal Testament', one that reconstructs

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the presently inherited tradition by setting messianity in pan-religious context by an ecumenical redaction implemented by contemporary critics? If the Hebrew canon once brought life to the Jews but was placed by the early Christian community of faith into a new and larger context identifying the Christ in terms of Jesus, why may not an ecumenical faith-community today universalize that identification in terms of a pan-*Logos* doctrine? If in the interest of canonical unity Professor Childs can trans-historicize the meaning of Isaiah 40–66, assigning to this passage a timeless quality rather than referring it primarily to the Hebrew historical context, why may not the canon of the early church now be trans-historicized by an ecumenical church that sets the *Logos* in Christ in the context of universal salvation? Why may not the present canon in principle be enfolded by a more comprehensive ecumenical canon that prizes the metaphorical above the historical and assimilates the particularity of Jesus Christ to a universal Christ-principle by which all world religions manifest the hidden Christ?

If canon exegesis renders irrelevant an autographic authorial intention, must we then really assume that fallible early Christian interaction and interpretation that shaped the canonical Scriptures is unrevisable? Does the shift from authorial intention to a canon-church correlation convincingly undergird a faith 'once-for-all delivered to the saints' (Jude 3)? In the absence of objectively valid religious truth, it will take more than 'saving faith', and more than time-bound confession and doctrinal pluralism, to preserve the current ecclesial interpretation of messiahship from reverting to either secular Jewish or to pluralistic ecumenical interpretations.

### **Historical Factuality**

As noted, Professor Childs meshes his theory of canonical process with qualified respect for historical criticism. He disavows any intrinsic marriage of criticism to naturalistic theory, as well as the legitimacy of critical pursuit of earlier sources more reliable than Scripture, and denies any presumed omniscience even in identifying supposedly precanonical documentary strands. Whatever light historical criticism sheds on literary development, he insists, will not be decisive for canonical authority and meaning. Childs puts additional distance between historical criticism and the canonically authoritative text by emphasizing that the canon carries its own implication of the historicity of redemptive acts and does so quite apart from any verdict by historical criticism. This is an important distinction, one that I have made also – although in a somewhat different way – in *God, Revelation and Authority* (Vol. II, 1976, pp. 330f.). Since Scripture authoritatively gives the meaning of the divine redemptive acts (which as historical events are not self-interpreting),

it implies and presupposes the authenticity of those acts independently of empirical historical confirmation which as such is but tentative and never absolute.

In Childs' detachment of higher criticism from pursuit of a primitive Ur-Bible as its main role, some critics have sensed his suppression also of the canonical text's historical concerns. On Childs' premises the canonical text gains its sense not through a literal interpretation of original events in relation to which the text first arose, but through its meaning for the Christian community. To be sure, many conservative scholars grant and even insist that historical research cannot conclusively establish the facticity of historical redemptive events, or of any events. But evangelical scholars do not forfeit the integrity of biblical history. Professor Childs seems at times to imply that the canon deliberately eliminates much of the text's historical anchorage. Bernard W. Anderson has complained that Childs confusingly applies the term 'history' to divine-human encounter while he dismisses the value of seeking a particular account's historical referent. Evangelical scholars by contrast insist that insofar as redemptive acts are declared to be historical they are historically investigatable. Is Childs, in other words, promoting a canonical hermeneutic that so concentrates on the community of faith's canonical sense that it compromises historical factuality? If historical acts insofar as they are historical are in principle put beyond the realm of possible historical investigation, then the price becomes too high for a religion in which divine revelation relates centrally with the particular life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, not to mention prior Old Testament redemptive events.

Although Professor Childs accepts many results of historical critical method, he sets these aside in order to base exegesis not on its empirical verdicts but rather on the final canonical text whose form is transhistorical. The theological task of the church can thus proceed in a nonhistorical way. As Elmer B. Smick puts it, 'the final (canonical) form of the text has relativized past historical events' ('Old Testament Theology: The Historico-Genetic Method,' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26, 1983, pp. 145-155, at p. 147). For all Childs' focus on the canonical text, Smick holds, 'his search for scriptural authority will be elusive until he is willing to face the issue of the integrity of Biblical history' (*ibid.*, p. 147).

Childs protests that 'the peculiar dynamics of Israel's religious literature' has been missed because of a 'predominantly historical interest' that disregards 'the peculiar function of canonical literature' (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, p. 40). For him preoccupation with historical 'political, social or economic factors' loses the fundamental dialectic of the canonical process, in which 'the

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literature formed the identity of the religious community, which in turn shaped the literature' (*ibid.*, p. 41). 'In the search for the canonical shape of a biblical book', Childs asserts, 'pre-critical interpreters often saw dimensions of the text more clearly than those whose perspective was brought into focus by purely historical questions' (*ibid.*, p. 82). The issue, he concludes, is 'not whether or not an Old Testament Introduction should be historical, but the nature of the historical categories being applied' (*ibid.*, p. 41).

Childs is not unaware that evangelicals view with some reservation the relationship he postulates between the Bible and history. He writes that 'when conservative and neo-Evangelical Protestants occasionally align themselves with portions of my canonical proposal, they accept the emphasis on the authority of the Bible, the role of the final form of the text, and the need for using the entire Christian canon. However, the caveat is quickly expressed that the historicity of the biblical accounts as the objectively verifiable foundation of the faith has been inadequately defended' (*The New Testament as Canon. An Introduction*, p. 543). He charges that in approaching the historical issue evangelicals espouse an objectionable 'modernity' no less than do recent historical critics.

We do well at this point to differentiate between four emphases. It is one thing to say that comprehensive scriptural inspiration authenticates the historical factuality of the biblical redemptive acts. It is quite another to note also that the inspired biblical-theological interpretation carries an implication of the eventness of redemptive acts independently of historical investigation. It is still another to say that the historical-event claims of Scripture are, as dialectical theologians hold, of such a nature that historical criticism is irrelevant to such claims. Finally, it is still another matter to say that historical criticism can decide whether divine redemptive acts depicted in Scripture are (or are not) supernatural.

It is both possible and feasible to combine the emphases that divine inspiration vouchsafes the reliability of biblical history, that the scripturally-given meaning of redemptive acts supplies its own track of confidence in the factuality of those events, and that the biblical redemptive events are not beyond historical investigation to the extent that they are alleged to be historical.

But suppose, alongside one's affirmation of divine scriptural inspiration, one allows for historical error and interpretative misjudgments in the text? Can one then any longer confidently contend that redemptive acts actually underlie related theological interpretation? Or that canonical interpretation is necessarily trustworthy, even if religiously authoritative?

One may, of course, as do some Barthians, argue from interpretation to background 'events' whose 'eventness' is so isolated

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from the history that historians investigate that they lie beyond the province of historical inquiry. But such linguistic artifice satisfies only those who seek to rationalize a prior rejection of supernatural historical revelation. Or one may hold that historical criticism conclusively judges the factuality of asserted historical acts. But historical method cannot confirm or disconfirm any historical event absolutely, since no empirical science can get beyond high probability. If historical or scientific investigation could absolutely disprove the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, the case for Christianity would crumble. But empirical science cannot absolutely disprove anything; the door must always remain open for revised judgment. The factuality of historical revelation does not hinge on the verdict of historical critics. Yet an undisputed negative verdict by such critics would in principle invalidate canonical representations of revelatory history.

Apart from an explicit doctrine of revelation and inspiration, appeals to canonical teaching cannot decide the truth and factuality of the content of Scripture. In the historic evangelical view, divine inspiration is what constitutes Scripture authoritative, and not simply the fact that Scripture comes to us in a comprehensive final canonical form. If, as Scripture attests, God reveals himself intelligibly and verbally, then it is credible that the writers of Scripture give us a God-breathed textual content that tells the truth about God and his purposes and actions. Behind the redemptive acts implicit in canonical interpretation stands the rational disclosure and communication of God who authoritatively inscripturates his revealed truths and goals.

A biblical scholar can properly appeal to canonical authority in support of the historical dimension, and do so with the same confidence that he places in the text's theological and moral teaching. Nor in emphasizing a line of confidence independent of empirical verifiability need one exclude representations about the cosmos.

With notable inconsistency Professor Childs applies the premise that God's acts can be inferred from a track independently of historical method. For among the canonically-attested acts of God is the divine inspiration of prophetic-apostolic proclamation. What lends credence to the comprehensive authority and reliability of the scriptural history and teaching is textual inspiration. When the production of the canon is linked essentially not to inspired prophets and apostles, but is connected instead to fallible supplementers, editors, redactors and interpreters, divine inspiration becomes so insubstantial as to be powerless. In short, an appeal to canonical history grounded one-sidedly in the theology of the canon cannot overcome the problems of an errant divine inspiration, however much

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one commendably disavows a historical-critical method that has betrayed biblical studies into irreconcilable contradictions.

Professor Childs disclaims the charge that his canonical approach sponsors 'a non-historical reading of the Bible', and rejects any general principle that 'history is unimportant' for the Bible. The issue at stake, he says, is rather 'the nature of the Bible's historicity and the search for a historical approach ... commensurate with it' (*ibid.*, p. 71). He insists that 'there is no "revelation" apart from the experience of historical Israel' and that only the canon does justice to 'the nature of Israel's unique history' (*ibid.*). 'To take the canonical texts seriously is to seek to do justice to a literature which Israel transmitted as a record of God's revelation to his people along with Israel's response' (*ibid.*, p. 73). 'The witness of the text', he asserts, 'cannot be separated from the divine reality which Israel testified to have evoked the response' (*ibid.*). 'The final form of the biblical text alone bears witness to the full history of revelation' (*ibid.*, p. 76). 'The witness to Israel's experience with God lies not in recovering ... historical processes', for 'history *per se* is not a medium of revelation which is commensurate with a canon .... Only in the final form of the biblical text in which the normative history has reached an end' can 'the full effect of this revelatory history ... be perceived.'

The emphasis that redemptive history is not self-interpreting is indeed wholly welcome. Evangelical theology affirms that inspired Scripture gives the meaning of these events. That Jesus died on the cross is historical fact; that Christ died for our sins is the event's revelatory significance as conveyed by Scripture. But since Professor Childs disavows propositional revelation, and connects the fixed canonical sense instead with a revered tradition correlated with the believing community's creative response, dissonance and divergence will qualify the meaning, even if the authoritative canon constitutes a limit to such discord. It is noteworthy that in the last quotation above Professor Childs speaks of the canon as reflecting not 'the full meaning' but rather 'the full effect' of the revelatory history. In other words, revelation is channeled not into objective truth but rather into experiential dynamic.

Professor Childs therefore seems at times to engage in a shell game in his handling of the historical. On the one hand he insists on the factuality of the unique religious experience of the Hebrew people and emphasizes that the biblical text frequently refers to historical processes and to discernible historical events that have become an integral part of the canonical literature and therefore must be taken seriously. He stresses that the literature is not simply or primarily interested in history, but the real centre of the witness requires reading it holistically for its emphasis on the will of God for the community of faith. Yet at other times he seems to

subordinate the historical to the spiritual in such a way that historical critical problems appear to be irrelevant to the reality of canonical revelation.

Professor Childs seems to reject the competence of historical-critical method in one context only to affirm it in another. In effect, he tells us that it is futile for historical investigation to reach behind the canon for earlier and more reliable sources on which the biblical writers are alleged to have superimposed legend, myth or other imaginative constructs. The reason for this futility is not that an inquiring student of religion may not probe a possible explanation of biblical data on these assumptions. Nor is it only that such an effort runs counter to Scripture's witness to its own origin and nature. The reason for this futility is rather that such investigation ends repeatedly in contradictory outcomes that reflect the critics' arbitrary *a priori*. The canonical writings by contrast set the stage for fruitful investigation by witnessing to unique divine revelation and action that does not rest upon empirical methods for its sanction and legitimacy. All this is gain.

But Professor Childs then reintroduces the very method that led biblical studies into pre-canonical confusion. Suddenly it seems to acquire new competence to unravel a complex canonical process and development, one that Childs champions apart from any direct scriptural validation and despite far-reaching critical disagreement. Critical interpretation of post-apostolic canonical process has led to contradictory conclusions no less extensive than has critical interpretation of supposed pre-biblical sources and the pre-canonical process.

### **Autographs**

Professor Childs unfortunately relativizes the importance of definitive biblical autographs, in part because he considers error an integral part of the authoritative canon. Thus we are locked up in his view not only to fallible prophets and apostles, but also to a fallible final text containing fallible interpretation by fallible canonical editors, not to mention fallible contemporary critical scholars who pronounce the very last current word about canonical finalities.

Problems do exist with infallible autographs, but they are not what many critics think they are. Some debunk them as merely an evangelical apologetic stratagem, and emphasize the fact that no one can produce or exhibit them. But no one can display fallible autographs either. The argument for fallible rather than infallible autographs turns not on empirical data but on philosophical assumptions. What we have are copies, not originals, and their disagreements – although largely matters of grammatical detail, and involving no credal matters – rule out their absolute identity with

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the originals. Obviously to discount divine inscripturation by emphasizing that human nature is inescapably fallible and sinful has baneful implications for divine incarnation as well.

To say that all talk of inerrant originals is irrelevant since we possess only errant copies overlooks an important point. There is a significant difference between a supposedly authoritative copy that is necessarily errant, and an authoritative inerrant original of which we have an errant copy. In one instance we deal with a text that is inherently fallible, and are faced at all points with the possibility of human error; in the other, we are offered an essentially trustworthy text which here and there, wherever divergences in the copies attest, some evident alteration has taken place, even if largely grammatical and not involving doctrinal revision.

Critics also protest that in copying the text copyists made not merely unintentional errors but deliberate changes, even if those changes are not theological or doctrinal. But here, too, speculative assumptions are involved. For example, the Second Book of the Psalter seems, in contrast to the other four books, routinely to alter Yahweh's name to Elohim. Some critics think this change was made to accommodate reverential avoidance of the divine Name. By contrast, others hold that poetic parallelism in the original and not scribal recension may account for the variation.

The problem that critical textual scholars created by assigning differing importance to varying text-types – e.g., the majority text versus an editorially reconstructed text – may perhaps have lessened interest in autographic inerrancy. But the dispute over textual types nonetheless presupposes that some one text has primacy – not merely chronological primacy but primacy of content that normatively defines the canon itself.

Apart from the conviction that such a text puts us fully in touch with truth as the originally inspired writers proclaimed it the search for an authoritative text would have far less value. What Professor Childs proposes to do is recover the theological relevance of the Bible by stressing the final text of a tradition that was received as authoritative while at the same time it was editorially interpreted and reformulated. But evangelicals in affirming the authority of the final canonical form of Scripture, and the canon's normativity for biblical theology, consider the canon as a deposit of autographs which because uniquely inspired vouchsafe the truth and factuality of their revelatory content. The relationship between the written text and the primitive Christian community did not constitute the canon's authority but rather reflected that authority. Evangelicals resist any notion of canonicity that locates scriptural authority merely in the fact that in these writings the church continues to hear the Word of God. The fact that a canonical text functioned as Scripture did not

objectively validate the Bible's divine authority in the early Christian community. The achievement of a canon whose authority an interacting community acknowledges and to which it submits does not in and of itself guarantee its divine authority. The Protestant Reformers insisted that Scripture is self-authenticating; it does not stand indissolubly dependent upon the primitive church. The canon witnesses, in the apostle Paul's words, that Scripture functions profitably for the church's thought and conduct because it is antecedently 'God-breathed' (2 Tim. 3:16). The reason for taking Scripture and canon seriously, according to their identical and independent self-witness, is that Scripture is the Word of God that confronts us with divinely given imperatives and truths.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses**

To its credit, canonical theology commendably challenges the tyranny over biblical studies that historical criticism imposes through unwarranted assumptions. It refocuses scholarly interest on a normative canonical text as being the authoritative content and context for Christian theology. This development, at the present stage of critical controversy, is a monumental achievement. Its movement away from recent modern criticism and its renewal of links with classical Protestantism and evangelical orthodoxy are evident in several important respects:

1. Canonical theology affirms the primacy and decisive authority of the canonical text.

2. It affirms the comprehensive unity of Scripture and requires exegesis in the context of the entire canon instead of distinguishing between stages of authority or a canon within the canon.

3. It affirms Scripture as the only legitimate context for Christian theological reflection.

4. It boldly challenges prevalent critical dogmas, and openly recognizes that continuing critical diversity attests historical criticism's vulnerability to perverse assumptions.

5. It reconnects redemptive history with the biblical text instead of suspending it upon empirical historical confirmation, and concurrently emphasizes biblically-given meaning rather than bare historical events.

These positive features of canonical theology must, however, be counterbalanced by its serious weaknesses:

1. If, as canonical theology claims, the early church legitimizes and definitively construes Scripture, then the Bible is subordinated to the church. Even if it rejects the historical-critical verdict that the canon answers to the higher authority of primitive pre-canonical sources, and the verdict also that the canon is the late fourth-century imposition of an authoritative church council, the theory of

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dialectical canon-formation nonetheless implies that a twentieth-century critical scholarly elite authorizes a text whose definitive form relates less to prophetic-apostolic sources than to ecclesial editorial contributions. Canon criticism does indeed hold historical criticism at bay by emphasizing the lack of consensus and of persuasive evidence for documentary redactionist claims. The fact is that the recent projection of a dialectical process of canon formation is similarly and no less vulnerable since its when and how of canon completion remains both obscure and disputed.

2. Professor Childs' comments on revelation are too skeletal either to satisfy the scriptural representations of that doctrine or to supply a clear warrant for scriptural authority.

3. The subordination of prophetic-apostolic teaching together with the forfeiture of authorial intention reflects an inferior view of divine inspiration and discounts the importance of apostolicity for canon-formation.

4. Both Professor Childs' ambiguity concerning the objective historical factuality of many of the biblical redemptive events and his undeveloped references to special categories of history minimize the scriptural emphasis that apart from the historicity of biblical core events the Christian faith collapses.

5. Alongside Professor Childs' emphasis on personal response and commitment, his theology does not clearly indicate the objective cognitive truth of Scripture. The weakest link in Childs' canonical proposal lies in its nebulous views of divine revelation and inspiration.