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# BIBLICAL THEOLOGY: CANON AND PLAIN SENSE (FINLAYSON MEMORIAL LECTURE 2001)

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## THE CONTEXT

Biblical Theology is a somewhat slippery creature, which at times basks in the sun and at other times retreats quietly, or even ignominiously, into the shade. If it seems at first glance to have a simplicity about it, this is deceptive, and it has a habit of changing its form when it re-emerges for another phase of its life. At present, Biblical Theology shows signs of reaching its prime, after a spell in the wilderness. The last active period of its life was associated with G. E. Wright's *The God Who Acts*,<sup>1</sup> and also with the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by R. Kittel. This emergence of Biblical Theology was ended, by all accounts, by James Barr's critique of Kittel, especially in *The Semantics of Biblical Language*.<sup>2</sup> In its wake, Brevard Childs spoke of a 'crisis' in Biblical Theology, and developed what is variously known as canonical criticism and canonical theology.<sup>3</sup> In doing so he expressly intended to find a new way of doing theology for the church based on the two testaments. The spirit of it was close to that of Biblical Theology, and the story of the latter over the last three decades must unfold the former too.

In these last days, however, there have been sightings of Biblical Theology itself, abroad again in the theological landscape, a newly invigorated creature. A leading example is Francis Watson's *Text and Truth*,<sup>4</sup> in which he aims to re-establish the genre, beginning with a

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<sup>1</sup> G. E. Wright, *The God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (SBT, 8; London, 1952).

<sup>2</sup> James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London, 1961).

<sup>3</sup> B. S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia, 1970). His idea that the canon provided the shape of Biblical Theology was developed in his commentary on Exodus (London, 1974), and his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh, 1997). This followed Watson's book on biblical interpretation, *Text*,

critique of Barr's attack on Kittel, which he regards as a *tour de force*. Not only so, but Barr himself has weighed in with a major volume entitled *The Concept of Biblical Theology*,<sup>5</sup> which turns out to be a defence of the idea (he prefers 'pan-Biblical Theology'), though he understands it in a way quite unlike Childs or Watson.

What, then, is Biblical Theology? At the simplest level, it is letting the Bible speak today. The story as I have introduced it has focused on the world of academic theology. However, the lines between that sphere and the life of the church are not hard and fast, and the issue at stake has been how the Bible might be used in church and world. The academic discussion is at the same time a churchly one. Indeed, Biblical Theology is in essence an activity of the church. The spirit of its recovery as a concept is precisely the conviction that the Bible belongs to the church, is its inheritance, and that the church may not be deprived of it by a hegemonic academicism that effectively frustrates its use. The church's interpretation of the Bible, for itself and for the world, is not only its right, but its obligation. In this sense Biblical Theology has important parallels with that other primary activity of biblical interpretation, preaching.

#### THE METHODS AND RESOURCES OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

If then we have established the right of Biblical Theology as an activity of the church, how does it proceed? A moment's reflection on the diversity of biblical interpretation not only in the church's history but all around us today shows that this is no easy question. It involves the general problem of how an ancient text might 'speak' in a completely different modern world, that is, a general hermeneutical question. But in particular it involves the question how to read these various texts, spread over two testaments, in relation to each other and so as to discern a message for ourselves. There are further questions of definition, such as how Biblical Theology relates to other theological disciplines, especially Systematic Theology.

#### *Canonical Criticism and Theology*

The title of this sub-section seems to hesitate between two designations. Both are used, however, to refer to the method of interpretation advocated

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*Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh, 1994), which addressed problems of doing theology in relation to postmodern hermeneutics.

<sup>5</sup> James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: an Old Testament Perspective* (London, 1999).

by Childs, with good reason, because the approach not only aims to do theology, but also to revise the way in which 'critical' reading of the biblical texts is done.<sup>6</sup> Criticism of historical criticism is at the heart of the enterprise. This is not just a matter of leaving those (historical-critical) issues on one side while we get on with what really matters, nor of 'moving beyond' historical criticism, since in either case the implied recognition of that method will return to put spokes in interpretative wheels. So the critique is more pointed and severe. For Watson, historical criticism has failed because it has not led to contemporary actualization of the text. That is, it fails by its own standards, namely to provide the illumination of texts necessary to their accurate interpretation. This is partly because of the multiplicity of proposed solutions to problems posed by the method, so that the promise of *progress* in understanding is ultimately illusory.<sup>7</sup> Christopher Seitz argues too that the method delights in sophistication, so that proposed 'real' meanings, unearthed by historical and sociological study, run counter to what the texts seem to say on a plain reading.<sup>8</sup>

The consequence of this failure is that the canonical texts have a right to be heard as what they are, the Scriptures of the church. The point can be made in slightly different ways. The stress can be put on the right of the church to interpret the Bible as Scripture because that is how it has received it and is related to it (the tendency of Childs). Watson, finding a 'formalistic tendency' in Childs, wants to add that the canonical form of

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<sup>6</sup> The term 'canonical criticism' itself is attributable to James Sanders. His publications on the topic began with *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia, 1972), but note especially his *Canon and Community: a Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia, 1984). Sanders' understanding of the project differs from Childs', being hermeneutical rather than theological. That is, he is concerned with the factors that lead to a community's acceptance of certain texts as authoritative. See P. D. Miller, 'The Canon in Contemporary American Discussion' in idem, *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology* (ET Sheffield, 2000), pp. 611-14.

<sup>7</sup> Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World* (Edinburgh, 1994) pp. 58-9, cf. p. 40.

<sup>8</sup> Historical criticism is driven 'by the necessary requirement to uncover the novel, the different, the complex. That is, historical criticism is *obliged* by its own character to make sure no plain sense consensus, binding Old and New Testament witnesses, emerges, because to do so would be to admit that the plain sense had a certain priority...' (Christopher R. Seitz, 'Sexuality and Scripture's Plain Sense', in Seitz, *Word Without End* [Grand Rapids, 1998] p. 322).

the text is the most suitable for theological use, because of 'the theological judgment that the subject-matter or content of the biblical texts is inseparable from their form'.<sup>9</sup> Though this thought is indebted to Hans Frei, whose work is often read as a call for a 'literary approach', Watson insists that the point is strictly a theological one.<sup>10</sup>

I want to look now at the main contributions of Childs to the study of canonical theology. Childs' early contributions (*Exodus, Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*) were concerned with the interpretation of individual books in their final form, with a focus on the canonizing community, and the 'canonical redactor'. While conventional critical scholarship was reviewed as part of the full process of interpretation, it was secondary to the text in its final form. And in addition, the aspect of the text's post-history (Jewish and Christian) became prominent, in a move that has proved important and influential. These works, however, left open the larger questions of how individual books contributed to a theology based on the wider canon, and indeed how that wider canon might be defined. How did the canon of the Old Testament relate to the two-testament canon? How did the final form of any given biblical book relate to either? And what place did the even-handed methodology of *Exodus* really give to historical criticism? To some, the idea of canon as the key category for theology seemed too formal. And the emphasis on the final form of books led to his work being bracketed along with the literary type of final-form interpretation, or indeed structuralism.<sup>11</sup>

Childs went on to try to address these questions, especially in *Old Testament Theology in Canonical Context (OTTCC)* and *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments (BTONT)*. He argues first that canon is inseparable from the theological reflection that brought it about, and indeed that Biblical Theology continues to consist in theological reflection on that canon, by a community that stands within the canonical tradition, yet is aware of its own time-conditioned status.<sup>12</sup> Canon means

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<sup>9</sup> Watson, *Text, Church and World*, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> Watson, *Text, Church and World*, p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament* (London, 1984), pp. 101-3. Childs responds in *Old Testament Theology in Canonical Context* (Philadelphia, 1985), p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Childs, *OTTCC*, pp. 6-15; cf. *BTONT*, pp. 67-8. The idea of canon as the arena within which theology is done cf. *OTTCC*, p. 15 is tempered with the assertion of critical reflection on its content: 'the complete canon of the Christian church as the rule-of-faith sets for the community of faith the proper context in which we stand, but it also remains continually the object of critical theological scrutiny subordinate to its subject matter who is

that theological interpretation arises from the interaction of the parts of the canon. An example: 'regardless of the original historical and literary relationship between the Decalogue and the narrative sections of the Pentateuch, a theological interchange is possible within its new canonical context which affords a mutual aid for interpretation'.<sup>13</sup> The canonical quality of Childs' interpretation comes out in his address of individual topics, the Decalogue again being an example. For example, he notes how its narrative context in the Pentateuch (first of all) provides a reflection on adultery in the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. Moving out from the Pentateuch, he finds the same topic in the account of David, Bathsheba and Uriah, and other topics of the Decalogue in the Psalms, Prophets and Wisdom books.<sup>14</sup> The First Commandment is brought into connection with the narrative of Kings, and with doxology in the Psalms.

According to his method, therefore, all parts of the Old Testament become relevant to each other. This, of course, is a significant move. Historical criticism proceeded by segregating the parts of the Old Testament and stressing their distinctiveness. For Childs, in contrast, *everything* is 'witness'. For example, on the Second Commandment: 'In many ways, the story of the Golden Calf (Ex. 32) offers the most extended canonical witness regarding the use of images.'<sup>15</sup>

While *OTTCC* is an example of an apologia for Old Testament theology, Childs takes up the challenge of *Biblical Theology in BTONT*. Already in *OTTCC*, Biblical Theology and Old Testament theology were distinguished in this way: 'the task of biblical theology is to explore the relation between these two witnesses [Old Testament and New Testament], whereas the task of Old Testament theology is to reflect theologically on only the one portion of the Christian canon, but as Christian scripture'.<sup>16</sup>

To see how the main section of the argument operates<sup>17</sup> we take as an example the treatment of covenant, people of God, election. Following

Jesus Christ' (cf. *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* [Minneapolis, 1993], pp. 67-8).

<sup>13</sup> Childs, *OTTCC*, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 63-4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> In the first part of the book he deals with the sections of the two parts of the canon one by one. Then, in the major part, he addresses a number of theological themes in relation to both. In the first part his points of reference are principally historical critical. E.g. the treatment of the judges period is hardly 'canonical' in any sense (149-51) – in spite of the following of a canonical order. There are enormous possibilities for

historical-critical reconstructions of covenant,<sup>18</sup> he turns to the way in which the testaments relate. This is not just a matter of noting contrasts between them. Rather a dialectical pattern emerges within both testaments (e.g. in the Old Testament, between Israel as 'a concrete, historical nation, as well as a trans-historical, even ideal, reality'). The New Testament's relation to the Old, however, is conceived as an 'appropriation' of it, or rather of certain strands of it. If there is continuity between the testaments, it is attributable to such appropriation, and furthermore, there is also discontinuity, that is, where the New Testament has declined to follow a particular Old Testament line (for example, 'the early church remained somewhat critical of the covenant theology of the Old Testament and developed only the one aspect of the new covenant in the Synoptic passion accounts, in Paul and in Hebrews').<sup>19</sup> Again, the theme of land puts the New Testament in 'the sharpest discontinuity' with the Old Testament. This passage is then followed by a reflection on 'the continuing integrity of the Old Testament's testimony to the people of God in accordance with its own theological voice' (expressed as Israel's dependence on divine mercy; God's purpose through Israel to reconcile the world to himself; Israel's voice in the Psalter as 'the authentic response of the people by which the New Testament witness is also to be tested').<sup>20</sup> These illustrations appear to go to the heart of the dynamics of canonical biblical theology for Childs. The relationship between the testaments is conceived according to a particular pattern, in which the movement is clearly from Old Testament to New Testament, yet in which the manner in which the 'discrete' voices unite in a common witness is never quite articulated. The section's closing 'dogmatic reflections' identify the topics of church and synagogue, the shape of the modern church (assimilating indigenous forms), and the challenge of political involvement. But it is not clear how these are identified out of the foregoing.

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theological interpretation here (e.g. C. Wright), but not exploited. (Gottwald is cited in the bibliography, but not mentioned in the text. The bibliography is almost exclusively historical-critical.) There is no New Testament reflection. On Joshua, the canonical reflection is in the main indistinguishable from redaction criticism. The reflections from the rest of the Old Testament are sparse. The bibliography is once again historical-critical (pp. 143-8). In this section, the treatments are at an introductory level, and stamped strongly by traditional criticism (NB 'The Prophetic Traditions', pp. 167-80).

<sup>18</sup> Childs, *BTONT*, pp 413-21.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 443.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 444-5

It may be that Childs has responded effectively to the charge of formalism, by establishing that canonical theology involves theological reflection on the interaction of the parts, all oriented towards the central subject-matter, Jesus Christ. However, certain questions remain. The place of historical criticism remains unclear (Barr thought Childs ambivalent on it; Watson has found a retreat towards it in *BTONT*, as a bulwark against the threat of de-historicized literary readings<sup>21</sup>). His insistence on 'the discrete witness of the two testaments' presents a difficulty, because it raises the question of the nature of the relationship between them, and how exactly interpretation gives due weight to each. Childs' heavy stress on methodological programme means that he has not left fully developed exegetical examples. In addition, the issue of interpretation in general (how ancient texts speak) is scarcely broached. All of these matters seem paramount in any exercise in Biblical Theology.

### *Canon and History*

One recurring concern about the validity of a canonical method in Biblical Theology is whether it is too much a closed system, neither open to general means of acquiring knowledge, nor to the world outside the church. Childs' hesitations about abandoning historical criticism have already been noted, together with the ready association of his method with ahistorical approaches, which he deplors. These factors indicate the need somehow to take account in interpretation of the historical character of the texts that bear witness to the substance of what is believed, and of the substance itself. They are the same factors that have led, for example, to the reassertion of a 'history of religion' approach to the Old Testament in the work of R. Albertz.<sup>22</sup> Albertz is convinced that religious statements cannot be understood apart from the historical context in which they are made. This does not mean that Albertz is interested in mere description of what was true in the past. Barr, in a sympathetic treatment of the work, points out that its intention is to do interpretation precisely for the church, and in the belief that canonical tendencies 'ghettoize' interpretation.<sup>23</sup> In attempting to let the Old Testament speak, Albertz has chosen a very

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<sup>21</sup> Watson, *Text and Truth*, p. 213, referring to Childs, *BTONT*, pp. 722-3, where Childs expressly distances himself from narrative theology, and from his own former position in *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*.

<sup>22</sup> R. Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period* (2 vols) (London, 1994).

<sup>23</sup> Barr, *Concept*, pp. 118-23.



different method from canonical theology. While he resists the synthesizing of varying religious statements, which he sees as a process of abstraction, canonical theology demands synthesis. The issue, then, is perhaps more a matter of methodology than of intention. The recurrence of a history of religion approach is testimony to the demands of the historical nature of the material. A similar point might be made about Stendahl's distinction in interpretation between 'what it meant' and 'what it means'. Here too the concern is to understand texts adequately in their historical settings, yet to be able in the end to make contemporary theological 'translations'.

If the issue, then, is between a canonical approach to the biblical texts and one that stresses the primary need to understand them in their original setting, on what grounds might the former be preferred? For some, the historical approach is simply too enmeshed with historical criticism and its false pretension to deliver decisive interpretations. Watson, for example, regards Stendahl's definition as typifying the point of view of most practitioners of historical criticism.<sup>24</sup> He goes on to refute it, agreeing in this respect with Childs, that there can be no 'autonomous descriptive method'; 'The assertion that historical-critical practice undertakes the "description" of the biblical texts is dependent on a prior identification of those texts as historical artefacts – chance remnants of a previous stage of human history – whose meaning is wholly determined by their historical circumstances of origin.'<sup>25</sup> He is echoed, in this outright rejection of historical criticism, by C. Seitz, who argues that the spirit of historical criticism is to render obscure, rather than to allow texts to mean what they evidently say.<sup>26</sup>

Yet it would be misleading to suppose that biblical interpretation can be done without attention to the historical character of the texts. By this I do not mean simply that one must do the historical work first, then proceed to interpretation, a view apparently implied by Childs' re-profiling of historical criticism in *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, and apparently espoused by W. Brueggemann.<sup>27</sup> It is rather

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<sup>24</sup> Watson, *Text, Church and World*, p. 31.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>26</sup> Christopher Seitz, *Word Without End* (Grand Rapids, 1998), p. 322.

<sup>27</sup> Brueggemann and three co-authors, in an introduction to the Old Testament, express their intention to go beyond historical criticism in order to interpret the Old Testament theologically, while building on its results and remaining engaged in its perspectives; Bruce C. Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence E. Fretheim and David L. Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville, 1999), pp. 20-21.

that theological knowledge depends not only on what the Bible says, but also in some degree on historical knowledge. For example, when we ask what is meant by 'God' in the Old Testament, of course it is true that we know this by reading the Old Testament *story*. We get to know who God is by the story of the deliverance of Israel from Egyptian captivity (Christopher Seitz's essay on the meaning of the divine name as revealed to Moses is very insightful on this point<sup>28</sup>), and indeed in the prolegomena to this in the Genesis accounts of creation and of God's encounters with the patriarchs. That account, however, is completely entwined with factors that we know by means other than merely reading the Bible. In Genesis and Exodus, El who meets Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is found to be Yahweh, God of Israel.<sup>29</sup> Yahweh is introduced by reference to a deity about whom we have knowledge from history and archaeology. In other parts of the Old Testament, Yahweh is known in relation (now in contradistinction) to Baal (or the baalim), about whom, again, we have substantial extra-biblical knowledge. Even the central creedal affirmation of the Old Testament, 'Hear, Israel, the LORD your God, the LORD is one' (Deut. 6:4), turns out to be, not a simple 'monotheistic' declaration, but a statement about the nature of Yahweh, in contrast to other deities – who might be variously singular or plural, Baal or baalim.<sup>30</sup> In general, Old Testament exegesis has been hugely enriched by its awareness of the world in which its texts were written. The creation narratives are a further example, where the relation of God to the world and humanity is articulated in dialogue with other creation narratives in its religious environment.<sup>31</sup> These examples raise a host of subordinate questions for interpretation (not least why Yahweh could also be called El, but was kept sharply distinct from Baal). But they show at a minimum that the boundaries between the discourses of 'religion' and 'theology' are exceedingly elusive.

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<sup>28</sup> Christopher Seitz, 'The Call of Moses and the "Revelation" of the Divine Name: Source-Critical Logic and its Legacy', in *Word Without End*, pp. 229-47.

<sup>29</sup> See R. W. L. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis, 1992), for an account, and Seitz's response to Moberly in 'The Call of Moses'.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. P. D. Miller, 'God and the Gods', in *Israelite Religion*, pp. 365-96, especially pp. 389-90; also R. W. L. Moberly, 'Toward an Interpretation of the Shema', in C. Seitz and K. Greene-McCreight, *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs* (Grand Rapids, 1999), pp. 124-44, who argues that 'one' may mean one uniquely loved.

<sup>31</sup> This has been well documented and interpreted by G. J. Wenham, *Genesis I* (Waco, Texas, 1987).

The inevitability of 'religion' in the study of Biblical Theology is one reason why Barr continues to insist that historical criticism belongs inextricably to the task of theological interpretation. His approval of historical criticism is deeply rooted in his understanding of theological method, for he thinks, not simply that it is a necessary preparation for theology, but that there is a kind of theological knowledge that comes by 'natural' means, that is, other than by 'revelation' as that is usually meant in theological discourse. His support for natural theology is a major component in his critique of Childs' position, indebted as it is to Barth. Thus when Barr notes the religious background to the story of El and Yahweh, and especially the theory that 'Yahweh may have inherited from El the idea that Yahweh is the real owner of the land', he goes on to infer that 'it must mean that there was something akin to "divine revelation" in the El religion'.<sup>32</sup>

Does this claim stand scrutiny? When Barr says that Yahweh 'inherited from El' this particular notion, he presumably means that worshippers of Yahweh saw that what El worshippers predicated of El could be predicated of their God too. But the question remains as to what constitutes valid theological knowledge. Does the notion of divine ownership of land constitute valid theological knowledge because it was found first in the religion of El, or because it was accepted by worshippers of Yahweh, and then by the Old Testament writers? The question is further complicated because the Old Testament writers expressly oppose other forms of religion in the ancient Near East. If Barr's criterion is applied in these cases, are we to assume that the religion of Baal is not revelatory, since the biblical writers do not accept it. Or do we extrapolate from the premise that the enviroing religions *were* revelatory, and look for revelation there too? The question has some contemporary urgency, with the revival of interest in the 'popular' religion of Israel, especially the worship of the goddess Asherah, and consequences for certain types of pluralistic readings of the Old Testament. (In relation to Baal, of course, one might say that Yahweh both rejects and borrows, the latter for example in bringing rain, though in this case with the consequence of invalidating Baal's claims to do the things now predicated of Yahweh. The issue here arises, however, at the points where Baalism is rejected.)

The point illustrates how far apart Barr and Childs are in their theological methods. Barr's openness to natural theology is in proportion to his readiness to critique theological positions within the canon. He can reject theological 'voices', whether extra-biblical or not, on the grounds of

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<sup>32</sup> Barr, *Concept*, p. 137.

theological inappropriateness, which is learnt from the church's cumulative theological tradition. For Childs, in contrast, it is the voices of the biblical writers that have the final say. Barr's other main argument for natural theology – that the Bible itself uses it – does not resolve the tension between the two approaches, for the passages which may be cited in favour of the concept aim in fact to establish belief in the God proclaimed by the biblical writers (so Watson's criticism of Barr on this point).<sup>33</sup>

If Barr were right in his belief that theological knowledge can be derived from sources other than the Bible, that might strengthen the case for a religious-historical reading of the Old Testament, in which the various voices of the biblical writers could be measured against a host of other voices in the background. If one takes his contention out of the equation, however, we are still left with the interdependence of religion and theology. We have seen this at the level of exegesis of particular texts, and it is therefore clear why there is a complicated issue of methodology at the highest level of organization (that is, a canonical-theological approach or a religious-historical one).

### *Canonical Methodology*

What is decisive for a canonical approach to Biblical Theology, in my view, is the problem of the Old Testament. This proposition may not seem immediately persuasive, since works of Biblical Theology have been conceived along 'historical' lines. The classic example is von Rad's *Old Testament Theology*,<sup>34</sup> which has proved more influential on interpretation than its main methodological rival, Eichrodt's *Theology of the Old Testament*.<sup>35</sup> Von Rad's work is in reality a work of Biblical Theology, because it traces the action of God in history from the Old Testament to the New. Though von Rad distinguishes his *Theology* from a history-of-religions approach, it has a certain affinity with the latter because of its method, based on historical-critical exegesis, of examining each corpus of the material in turn, in a historical sequence. The picture is built up by a series of accounts of Israel's distinct faith experiences of Yahweh. The methodology is composite, as has been well shown by M. Oeming, who identified four categories used by von Rad: promise-history, tradition-

<sup>33</sup> Watson, *Text and Truth*, pp. 242-67. He addresses Barr's argument in *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford, 1993), and considers Acts 17, Romans 1 and Psalm 104.

<sup>34</sup> G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols) (Edinburgh, 1962, 1965).

<sup>35</sup> W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (2 vols) (London, 1961, 1967).

history, salvation-history and language-history.<sup>36</sup> But the common denominator is history, and there is a forward development from Old Testament to New.

One of the problems with von Rad's analysis is the uneasy relationship between the history of Israel discovered by historical criticism and the understanding of it expressed by Israel's faith. The proposed apprehension of the meaning of history by faith puts in question the precise role of historical criticism in discovering theological truth. As Oeming expresses it, von Rad's method 'transcends' historical criticism, and in respect of the role of faith in interpretation, he goes on to identify and expound the closeness of von Rad to Gadamer's hermeneutic.<sup>37</sup>

The ambiguous relationship to historical criticism in von Rad is well expressed by C. Seitz. Von Rad uses typology as a means to bridge the gap between an event in the past (that is, Israel's historical expressions of faith) and Christian theological interpretation in the present. That is, the ongoing 'tradition' broadens the significance of older events into the typical. In Seitz's view, however, this is insufficient, because other typologies are thinkable than the New Testament 'fulfilment', and because the category of typology struggles to cope with the fact that the later writers of the Old Testament, captivated by the glory of the event, 'manifestly misdraw the historical picture'.<sup>38</sup>

The problem also emerges starkly in connection with the category of tradition-history. The premise in this case is that the Old Testament writers engage in a reception of and reflection on existing theological traditions. In doing so, they adapt it according to fresh insights arising from new revelatory events. By adopting this perspective von Rad is able to argue that the decisive event of salvation-history that occurs in Christ is neither absolutely new, nor an illegitimate move, since the recognition of this latest saving act of the God of Israel is simply the last in a line of re-

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<sup>36</sup> Oeming showed that von Rad used the related concepts of promise-history, tradition-history, salvation-history, and language-history in his account of the relationship between the testaments; M. Oeming, *Gesamtbiblische Theologien der Gegenwart* (Stuttgart, 1987, second edition), pp. 20-33. Cf. Barr's presentation and evaluation of Oeming's argument: *Concept*, pp. 497-512.

<sup>37</sup> Oeming, *Gesamtbiblische Theologien*, pp. 33, 34-58.

<sup>38</sup> Seitz, 'The Historical-critical Endeavor as Theology', in *Word Without End*, pp. 28-40, here pp. 34-6. The passage cited (Seitz, p. 35) is G. von Rad, 'Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament' in C. Westermann, ed., *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics* (Atlanta, 1963), pp. 17-39, here p. 34.

interpretations of tradition in the light of new revelatory events.<sup>39</sup> If this seems cogent on the surface, the small print should not be missed. In a sense the new insights achieved by the biblical writers are re-realizations of existing traditions, and thus imply a validation of the tradition. However, the manner in which the tradition is acted upon is 'charismatic' and 'eclectic', charismatic because it involves free reinterpretation, and eclectic because 'what is really old and obsolete is quietly passed over, and so rejected, by the prophets'.<sup>40</sup> The issue raised by this is not the status of historical criticism as such, but of the Old Testament as revelatory, since parts of it here seem to be in principle superseded.

This discussion of von Rad therefore leads on to the question of the relative status of the testaments in Biblical Theology. Watson, while appreciating von Rad's 'typological interpretation that sees the enfleshed Word as the goal of God's history with Israel', criticizes him for largely not practising it.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps because he ultimately cannot break out of the traditional division between the disciplines of Old and New Testament studies, he is almost exclusively concerned with Old Testament interpretation as such, and 'he emphasizes the *forward* movement of salvation-history [his italics] towards a final actualization, at the expense of the retrospective movement, starting from the final actualization in Jesus, that is essential to the practice of a Christian typological exegesis'.<sup>42</sup> If Christ is 'the Word that was with God in the beginning', this implies not merely that the forward movement of the Old Testament must be complemented by a retrospective movement from fulfilment back to anticipation, but actually preceded by it.<sup>43</sup> An open-ended forward reading, not grounded in the centrality of Christ as witnessed by the whole of Scripture, is bound to lead to relativism and pluralism. (The point finds an echo in Brueggemann's advocacy of pluralism in Old Testament interpretation, and his reluctance, accordingly, to allow Christology a privileged place in it.<sup>44</sup>) Watson's claim, then, is that von Rad's declared

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 25-6.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 25, referring to von Rad's *Theology* (vol. 2, p. 345, German edition).

<sup>41</sup> Watson, *Text and Truth*, p. 205.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp. 205-7.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>44</sup> '[R]ecognition of the important role of the church in affirming and passing on the Hebrew canon does not justify interpretations of canonical literature that limit our ability to hear the canonical polyphony of voices in order to conform to patterns of acceptable church doctrine'; Brueggemann et al. in *Theological Introduction*, p. 26.

principles are indeed 'canonical', but that in practice he has simply failed to carry them through.

Watson articulates the relative status of the two testaments further in a passage that criticizes Childs' concern to maintain the independent status of the Old Testament, which, he finds, is bound to lead to 'a radical judaizing of Christianity'.<sup>45</sup> He affirms both that a Christian reading of the Old Testament (which understands it as preparing the way for Jesus) is bound to be distinct from a reading of it in abstraction from this *telos*, and that such a reading must even so have a real connection with 'what the Old Testament texts "originally" or "actually" meant'.<sup>46</sup> This balancing-act aims both to preserve the unity of the testaments in their witness to Christ and to avoid fantastic Christological interpretations. The crucial factor in maintaining the balance is that the Old Testament should be allowed to shape our understanding of the reality revealed by Christ: 'If the scope of the Christ-event is the whole of reality, then there is no danger that any of the breadth and depth of the experience reflected in the Old Testament will be lost.'<sup>47</sup> This seems to me to be entirely right. (I think it is preferable to a remark of Seitz's, in a review of Watson's book: 'The Old Testament has a horizon that is not exhausted in what we can say about Jesus.'<sup>48</sup> This is true only in a certain sense, that is, if Christology is not taken to embrace and express the purpose of the whole biblical revelation. The disagreement between Watson and Seitz at this point is over definitions of 'Christological' and 'Trinitarian'.)

In this connection, however, it is important to observe that Watson has argued, in the same volume, for a recovery of the 'literal sense' in interpretation, supported by speech-act theory. In that context he offers a persuasive reading of Psalm 42, in which he establishes a connection between its original communicative intention (or illocutionary force) and that which it has when used in modern contexts.<sup>49</sup> However, he then contrasts this continuing validity of Psalm 42 with Psalm 137, with its prayer for the destruction of Babylonian children, on the grounds that the latter contradicts 'the speech-act that lies at the centre of Christian scripture, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the enfleshment and

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 216-17.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 217.

<sup>48</sup> Seitz, 'Christological Interpretation of Texts and Trinitarian Claims to Truth', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 52 (1999), pp. 208-26, here p. 226.

<sup>49</sup> Watson, *Text and Truth*, pp. 107-19.

the enactment of the divine word'.<sup>50</sup> Because of this word, Psalm 137, although part of Christian Scripture, 'is not permitted to enact its total communicative intention', and moreover should never be used in a Christian liturgical context.<sup>51</sup>

This is the issue: does the Old Testament, in its own communicative intentions, help us understand the full range of the meaning of the Christ-event? Or are parts of the Old Testament's witness ruled out on the basis of a Christology derived from a method that gives priority to New Testament texts? (Watson assembles a number of New Testament texts around the themes of forgiveness and loving enemies as constituting a refutation of Psalm 137:8-9.<sup>52</sup>) Another way of putting the question is in terms of a 'plain sense' of Scripture. Watson and Seitz both affirm the need for this (though Watson prefers the term 'literal sense'), but they apply the point differently, Seitz being critical of Watson's overruling of one part of Scripture by another.<sup>53</sup>

#### PLAIN SENSE, HOLY WAR, AND CANONICAL METHOD

Can the plain sense of Scripture be defended in the context of a canonical reading? The question is scarcely new, and it has extensive ramifications, including one of consistency between theory and practice. Seitz, in an essay on 'plain sense' in relation to the topic of sexuality, finds a unanimity in the two testaments on the topic of homosexual acts, and asks in consequence for a bolder stance on this in the contemporary atmosphere.<sup>54</sup> This example has the advantage, from a 'plain sense' point of view, that the Old and New Testaments speak with the same voice (although it may be objected that nevertheless the texts in question raise hermeneutical issues that are not easily sidelined). The idea of a 'plain sense', in my view, faces a more immediate test where the Testaments appear to disagree. Psalm 137, and behind it Joshua and the Holy War strand of the Old Testament, is such a case. Here is a test, sharper than most, of the capacity of Biblical Theology to sustain the witness of the Old Testament in its theological synthesizing. The centrality of it as a test-

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> On the history of interpretation of conflicting texts, see the interesting essay by Gary A. Anderson, 'Is Eve the Problem?', in Seitz and Greene-McCreight eds, *Theological Exegesis*, pp. 96-123.

<sup>54</sup> Seitz, 'Sexuality and Scripture's Plain Sense', *Word Without End*, pp. 319-39



case is evident not only from its prominence among difficulties felt by Bible readers generally, but also in the literature of Biblical Theology. For James Barr the issue is clear. Joshua's destruction of the Canaanites is 'genocide', his view of the matter already expressed by his choice of term. In his view, post-biblical theological reflection teaches us that the Bible is simply wrong on this. He sees it as a good example of his distinction between biblical and doctrinal theology. 'If there was a theology of the Old Testament [meaning operating within the Old Testament], this command and practice, strange and offensive as they may be to us, do much to shape the character of the entire text and must have a central position. As a matter of doctrinal theology, on the other hand, I think it has to be simply repudiated. As a matter of the past, some sense can be made of it; but as a matter of guidance for present belief and action, it cannot be accommodated.' The only way in which he thinks it *might* be accommodated is 'the rather absurd allegorical sense, where the Canaanites become the temptations and sins that beset us'.<sup>55</sup>

Childs, in contrast, who wants to integrate the Holy War strand into his canonical way of thinking, regards the command to Israel to destroy the Canaanites as a unique, unrepeatable event. Asking how the *herem* command can be reconciled with the Old Testament's own critical stance towards violence, he responds to the objection that if killing is wrong today it must have been wrong then by saying: 'The difficulty with this approach to theology is that such a non-historical way of thinking is foreign to the Bible, which does not work with abstract ethical principles.'<sup>56</sup> He goes on: 'The effect of the canonical shaping of the conquest material is that the book of Joshua has been assigned a specific, but time-bound, role in God's economy. The conquest continued to be acknowledged throughout the Old Testament as an integral part of the divine purpose for Israel, but it was never to be repeated. It was theologically rendered inoperative by being consigned wholly to the past. Much like the lost Garden of Eden, it functioned canonically as a picture of a forfeited heritage.'<sup>57</sup> This response is interesting because of its appeal to history as a way of escaping the theological difficulty. While an avenue on to a theological response is intimated in the idea of a forfeited heritage, the conquest has nevertheless been 'theologically rendered inoperative'. If this conclusion does not seem far from Barr's more pointed disqualification it

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<sup>55</sup> Barr, *Concept*, p. 492.

<sup>56</sup> Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*, p. 77.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

may be argued that the consignment of Holy War to the past is here read out of the canon itself.

If the Book of Joshua is to participate in a canonical theology then it must be possible to say what its role is. Rather than begin with the question, 'Did God command Joshua to kill Canaanite children?', we can ask whether this part of the two-testament canon teaches something in particular that other parts do not, and how it does so in relation to Scripture's witness to Christ. (The reading that follows is in a sense a 'forward' reading; but it is prompted by a question about Christ.) The first step is to consider Joshua's position in relation to its immediate canonical environment. This is clear because at the narrative level it continues from the storyline in both Numbers and Deuteronomy, which bring the people of Israel on their journey from Egypt and through the wilderness to the brink of the promised land, all in the context of covenantal promise and obligation. Both narrative and theological factors locate Joshua at a junction in the story. Theological tradition defines Deuteronomy as the end of the Pentateuch, or 'Torah', in the primary sense of the term. Joshua is thus the first step in a new history that leads the people into its land. Joshua as beginning is recognized in the critical theory that places it at the head (after Deuteronomy itself) of the 'Deuteronomistic History'. Strong narrative threads, however, link Joshua to the preceding books, a factor recognized in the critical theory of the Hexateuch, which saw Joshua as an end-point, on the grounds that it realized the promise of land that had run through the Pentateuchal story since God's encounter with Abram in Genesis 12:1-3. In the light of the recent tendency to think of Genesis-Kings as the 'primary history' of the Old Testament (based on narrative continuity, and also congenial to a canonical approach), Joshua has a liminal function. While this term might be used more strictly of Deuteronomy, it is true of Joshua too because it marks the end of the wilderness period and non-possession, yet is itself only a prelude to possessing. It is not yet the story of Israel's life in the land.

When this liminal position of Joshua is understood its relations to its canonical environment can begin to be explored. Facing back towards the Pentateuch, Joshua is the story of a promise fulfilled: 'So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the LORD had spoken to Moses' (Josh. 11:23). The prelude to this includes the exodus, with its Passover victory over the powers aligned against God, echoed in Joshua 5:10-12, the first Passover feast held in the new land. The conquest itself is a counterpart and continuation of the overcoming of the Egyptian forces that tried to prevent the escape from slavery in that land. The breaking of the power of the

Egyptian *king*<sup>58</sup> finds an echo in Joshua's defeat of a host of *kings* in Canaan (Josh. 12:7-24). This defeat of tyrannical kingship is in turn, as Fretheim has well shown, a reassertion of God's creative purpose in contention with the forces of chaos.<sup>59</sup> Therefore the establishment of Israel in Canaan belongs to the divine purpose to re-create that is signalled in the biblical story at least from the flood-narrative (Gen. 6:5-9:17). Joshua conceives of Israel as a people whose king is Yahweh and which is constituted by an act of deliverance from slavery into freedom, a people whose unity is expressed in its common worship of Yahweh (Josh. 18:1) while its possession of land and wealth is by divine gift and distribution. Yahweh's kingship, furthermore, is mediated, not by a human king (since neither Moses nor Joshua is succeeded by his own heir), but by Yahweh's Torah, as taught by Moses, deposited beside the ark of the covenant, and made Joshua's rule of life (Josh. 1:7-8). This vision is a partial realization of the kingdom and salvation of Yahweh in the earth. The connection between creation and covenant is forged by the covenant-renewal with which Joshua ends (Josh. 24), with its explicit allusion to the primeval history, Terah, Abram, and the polytheistic world in which the re-creative plan was conceived (Josh. 24:2-4), and its basis once again in the 'book of the torah of God' (Josh. 24:26). The conquest of Canaan belongs to this picture of a realization of the kingdom, because it affirms Yahweh's victory over contesting powers, the prelude to Yahweh's rule in this part of the created world.

The Book of Joshua faces forward to the continuing story of Israel in its land. That story is characterized ultimately by the loss of all that was gained under Joshua. (In fact it begins within Joshua, in a strain in the book that insinuates a measure of failure to conquer fully, an echo of the failure of faith that caused the first failure to take the land recorded in Deuteronomy 1. Texts include Josh. 13:1; 15:63.<sup>60</sup>) The worship of Yahweh is compromised by the worship of Baal. The kings of Canaan find spiritual successors in the kings of Israel and Judah. Even the reforming King Josiah is a kind of antitype to Joshua, who remains a minor potentate even as he commands the reform, based on his rediscovery of the 'book of the Torah' (2 Kgs 22:8). His covenant renewal cannot halt the slide of Judah into exile. The march of Yahweh on Canaan to establish his

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<sup>58</sup> The contest between the powers of Yahweh and of Pharaoh is well evoked by W. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia, 1978).

<sup>59</sup> T. E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville, 1991).

<sup>60</sup> The irony in the texture of Joshua is well elucidated by R. Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist* (New York, 1980).

kingdom there is reversed by his march on Judah, a Holy War turned against the chosen people (the theme is most forcefully brought out in Jeremiah, e.g. Jeremiah 21).

The canonical development of the themes of Holy War and conquest may be illustrated by movements that can be traced in the Books of Psalms and Isaiah. Psalm 2 is a classic expression of the so-called Zion-theology, celebrating Yahweh's victory over enemies and his rule together with the Davidic king on Mt Zion. As such, and with a number of other Zion-Psalms, it provides concepts for Davidic messianism. However, it is located within a work (the Book of Psalms<sup>61</sup>) that knows of the end of the historic Davidic dynasty, and that opens up its horizon to Yahweh's universal rule (Pss 93-99). A similar trend is found in Isaiah, which contains a dispute with Psalm 2, in Isaiah 2:2-4. Here the motifs of Zion are carefully reversed, so that nations come in peace to Jerusalem, and weapons of war become redundant. While the return from exile to Judah can be depicted in terms reminiscent of exodus and conquest (e.g. Isa. 52:7-10; 60:10-14), the larger horizon of Isaiah is eschatological (especially chs 60-66). The divine kingdom will know no bounds. However, the element of victory continues to be represented by the language of conquest, and the pictures of salvation are shot through with those of subjugation (Isa. 61:5-7).

New Testament reflections lead in part to the sayings of peace and forgiveness noted above. Conquest, Passover, covenant and law are all reinterpreted in connection with the life, sufferings and death of Jesus. The victory of God is won in the heavenly places.

Yet it is victory that involves the present world and the powers that hold sway in it. The coming of the kingdom is described in the language of violence at least twice in Jesus' sayings (Matt. 10:34; 11:12). The life and death of Jesus is played out always in the face of authority, both religious and secular. The roles played by Pilate, Herod and Caiaphas show that the gospel is opposed not only in heavenly places but also on earth. 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's' invites a question and suggests a challenge. The kingdom of God implies a claim to rule where others also stake a claim. The story of the church in Acts continues to be one of contention, now featuring Felix, Festus and Agrippa, and as the story ends with Paul preaching in Rome, Caesar waits in the wings. The final appearance of Rome in the New Testament, in the guise of Babylon, is as the empire

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<sup>61</sup> A 'canonical' approach to the Book of Psalms is now common in the study of that book. See for example J. Clinton McCann Jr (ed.), *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter* (JSOTS, 159; Sheffield, 1993).

judged by God in just the kind of Holy War language used in the Old Testament's prophetic Oracles against the Nations (Rev. 17:1-18:24; cf. Jer. 50-51).

The sketch offered here is cursory, of course, and open no doubt to objections on grounds of imbalance. However, it seems to me to be one canonical trajectory. It is not a simple line, for there is a confrontation between peace and war entwined within it. Even so, the line followed was suggested by the question whether the topic of Holy War could in any sense illuminate the person and work of Christ. I think it shows that the idea of conquest and Holy War continue to have a function in theological formulation. This cannot be in such a way as to promote the use of arms in the furtherance of the kingdom, since the church's part in its establishment is to preach it, and make disciples of all nations.

However, one further question needs to be asked. In the account just offered, the theological topics of creation and Torah have played a part. I have not structured the essay overtly in these terms. However, the topics are implied in the location of Joshua within the canonical story from creation to covenant and the organization of God's people under Torah in land. It remains to ask, in this consideration of the canonical function of Joshua, whether it continues to play a part in theological reflection on these topics.<sup>62</sup> One particular application of the conquest has been made by Oliver O'Donovan in his advocacy of a political theology. O'Donovan's basic premise is that the revelation of Yahweh's rule in Israel discloses the nature of all political authority.<sup>63</sup> The three essential components of the divine rule, moreover, are victory (salvation), judgement (Torah) and land (possession). By this means O'Donovan finds that 'divine providence in history' lies behind the authority held by any regime.<sup>64</sup> The eschatological horizon of Christian moral thinking, therefore (which he expounds in

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<sup>62</sup> For some theologians, who place a high premium on the contribution of the Old Testament to theology, the answer is a strong affirmative. K. Miskotte sees Torah as a sign of the life God gives in creation, and a guide in the midst of ongoing covenant life; the address of Torah means walking with God in *his* story with us; 'in the Torah we see the "law" passing over into "gospel" and the "gospel" passing over into "law"'; the cult finds its true meaning in 'the integration of the relationship between God and his people', not apart from 'the renewed passing beyond the cult to daily acts, *to the holy war, to actual encounter with the earth*'; *When the Gods are Silent* (London, 1967), pp. 230-32.

<sup>63</sup> O. O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 45.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45f.

*Resurrection and Moral Order*<sup>65</sup>), does not preclude the operation of the divine victory in the affairs of the present world.

The elaboration of this thesis cannot be rehearsed here. It is brought to bear at this point to show one possible way in which the topic of conquest may continue to function in theology. This assimilation is not simple, however. O'Donovan makes this clear in a passage in *Resurrection and Moral Order*. Distinguishing between 'historical ends' and 'moral ends', he says that events in history are given significance by their 'end', and in Christianity the end is disclosed in the resurrection of Christ. Historical authority differs from moral authority because it can 'draw together in one narrative, to serve one historical end, contradictory movements...'. Again, 'it can reconcile where moral authority can only judge'. He goes on: 'We must expect to find, then, within the world history which Christ shapes around himself, moral incompatibilities that are reconciled historically.' Joshua is the case in point. And the point is: 'When we read for example, of the conquest of Canaan and the terms of the ban, we will understand the Christological significance of these events only if we suspend the moral question which we immediately wish to put to them.'<sup>66</sup> The moral question remains. Indeed when the unbridled acts of war are compared with 'the form of creaturely order which is shown us by Christ in Gethsemane', they are revealed as 'a contradiction to the moral order'.<sup>67</sup> The wars on Canaan reveal something that must be known before the Incarnation with its 'vindication of the moral order'. The violence of Joshua is thus brought under the judgement of Christ. In the gospel there has been a vindication of the whole created order, far beyond what was anticipated in Joshua. Joshua's victory is assigned to contingencies of the past, along with other Old Testament institutions, while 'Christ turns these fragmentary utterances of God's voice, in warrior triumphs and legislative order, into a history which culminates in the divine manifestation and vindication of created order.'<sup>68</sup>

Presumably a similar case might be made in relation to Psalm 137. Its function in the Book of Psalms has some similarity to the Oracles against the Nations of the prophetic books, especially Jeremiah, where the Holy War, once turned against Judah, is finally turned yet again, back on the oppressor (Jer. 50-51). The movement in that book is an affirmation of Yahweh's ultimate commitment to his purpose to bring the kingdom

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<sup>65</sup> *Resurrection and Moral Order* (Leicester, 1994, second edition).

<sup>66</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection*, p. 157.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, *Resurrection*, p. 159.

through Israel/Judah. If Psalm 137 is understood in a similar way, however, it leaves open the question as to the canonical view of the feelings expressed. Such feelings (again in Jeremiah) are elsewhere the subject of divine rebuke (Jer. 12:5-6; 15:19).

In his use of the Old Testament, O'Donovan shows a debt to von Rad. However, he does not make overt use of either tradition-history or typology as categories, and consequently does not directly face the difficulty felt by Seitz about von Rad's effective erasure of the old traditions. Further, while he shares the view (with Barr and Watson in their different ways) that the violent actions of Joshua come under the censure of Christ, he has not simply ruled them out of the canonical court. While Barr could think of no serious theological function for Joshua's wars, O'Donovan brings Joshua within his theological reflection on Christ, and in doing so, has read it as part of Christian theologizing, and used it to advance his thinking about the meaning of Christ.<sup>69</sup>

## CONCLUSION

I have considered whether a canonical approach is the best way to do Biblical Theology. In doing so I have reviewed some criticism of this proposal, partly on the grounds that it inhibits theological freedom, and partly that it is incompatible with the historical character of the biblical texts and subject matter. I have tried to make a case for a canonical method, however, on the grounds that it is implied in the concept of Biblical Theology itself, whose central methodological problem is precisely that of the two-testament canon. The canonical approach, however, cannot entirely dispense with a historical dimension, because of the historical nature of the texts, and the impossibility of distinguishing ultimately between religion and theology. But it is essentially in inner-canonical relationships that Biblical Theology is constructed.

The question of canonical method has to do partly with strategies of reading. What is the proper 'direction' of canonical reading, that is, should the Christian read forward from Old Testament to the New? If so, does one try to read the Old Testament first as if without knowledge of the New, as might be implied by a commitment to the 'plain sense'? Or does one explicitly read 'backward to' the Old Testament from the New? To ask

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<sup>69</sup> A further possible recourse is to lessen the difficulty of the Holy War by exegetical means, for example by seeing it as metaphorical for the need for absolute loyalty to Yahweh; Moberly, 'Shema', pp. 133-7. In that case it may be asked whether it has the force to establish the victory of Yahweh as one of the planks in the platform of his rule in the world.

these questions is to set up an impossible alternative. Inevitably Christians read the Old Testament in the light of the New, and towards the New; but equally a forward movement is structured into the Old Testament part of the canon, and to fail to observe this could only lead to a misreading (thus with Frei). Furthermore, the contours of an answer to any particular question in Biblical Theology are likely to vary according to the nature of the question.<sup>70</sup>

There are greater difficulties than this, however, and advocates of a canonical method actually proceed in quite different ways. While all agree that canonical theology must be governed by its central subject matter, namely Jesus Christ, this does not in itself solve the problem of the relationship between the testaments. If the canonical approach demands that all parts of the two testaments ought to be heard, it does not follow that they will, since in some accounts parts of the canon can trump other parts. (This was true in Childs' idea of discontinuity between the testaments, in which the New Testament did not accept the Old Testament's concept of covenant in its full range, as well as of Watson's belief that the original communicative intention of Psalm 137 was cancelled by the New Testament's themes of love and forgiveness.) The advocacy of a plain or literal sense is a valuable emphasis, but this way too lie no guarantees of unanimity, because the intention to hear texts according to their plain sense leaves the question how such texts relate to the 'centre' still to be negotiated. (The whole subject of hermeneutics in general is largely left aside in this paper, though of course it ought to be developed in relation to this point. Watson has made important contributions on it, and the topic is the subject of a major project led by Craig Bartholomew.<sup>71</sup>)

Readings are affected in the end by factors that go beyond the acceptance of a canonical method. In a closing proposal I have tried to show how a difficult Old Testament topic, the conquest of Canaan, might be assimilated into Biblical Theology. The attempt showed, I think, that such an assimilation is possible, contrary to versions of Christian theology which prefer to filter it out as incompatible with the gospel of love and forgiveness. It also showed, however, how much more is involved in

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<sup>70</sup> Barr is surely right to hold that Biblical Theology may take many forms, and does not have to be co-extensive with volumes dedicated to the subject as such, citing Barth's *Romans*, Hoskyns on John, and von Rad's *Genesis* as examples that fulfil its ideals; *Concept*, p. 143.

<sup>71</sup> Watson, *Text, Church and World*, especially pp. 15-153. Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, Karl Möller eds, *Renewing Biblical Interpretation* (Carlisle, 2000), is the first of a projected eight-volume series.



## BIBLICAL THEOLOGY: CANON AND PLAIN SENSE

Biblical Theology than exegesis, since the proposal depended on the significant hermeneutical step of supposing that the Old Testament story of God's dealings with Israel was relevant to our understanding of the nature of the kingdom of God as proclaimed and accomplished by Christ, and to our thinking about the sources of political authority in the world generally. Clearly these are disputable assumptions. However, disputes of this sort belong within, and are perhaps the substance of, Biblical Theology itself.