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Barr on Canon and Childs:
Can one read the Bible as Scripture?

by Gerald T. Sheppard

Few matters are of more importance to evangelicals than the authority of Scripture. One hears echos of Billy Graham's confident "The Bible says . . ." and watches anxiously as denominations split and professors are publicly chastised or lose their jobs at evangelical institutions for crossing over some debatable line into biblical criticism. But a concern with the authority and inspiration of Scripture is, of course, not just a matter of importance to self-labeled "evangelicals," as is shown, for instance, by Paul Achtemeier's recent *The Inspiration of Scripture.* Likewise, James Barr's *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* follows his *Fundamentalism* and seeks to clarify the issues especially as they appear among non-evangelical advocates of "canon criticism." Because of considerable interest in this area by evangelicals, I want, first, to respond to Barr's blistering attack on Brevard Childs and, second, to say a brief word about the future of a canon contextual approach as I see it. My comments are not intended to underplay the importance of other developments in biblical studies, including the social scientific investigations of the ancient world which helped to shape Scripture.

If fundamentalists put Jesus' words in red, historical critics have often put half and quarter verses in italics.

At the outset, many of us who are not conservative historical critics may feel that evangelicals have in general drawn a line against historical criticism at the wrong place and on the wrong issue. We may suspect that both liberalism and fundamentalism are "modernist" options which falsely buy into an over-simplified scientific view of how "history" determines the meaning of texts. Gadamer and the post-Enlightenment fathers of suspicion—Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud—have helped us in this regard. As protestants we may see behind fundamentalism a legitimate concern which seems almost entirely lost in the midst of the internecine warfare of the "battle for the Bible." Arthur T. Pearson, one of the authors in the widely circulated *The Fundamentals* once wrote, "like Romanism, [higher criticism] practically removes the Word of God from the common people by assuming that only scholars can interpret it; while Rome puts a priest between a man and the Word, criticism puts an educated expositor between the believer and his Bible."[1]

While I would reject any anti-intellectual sentiments against the genuine necessity of "educated expositors" in the church and find the attack on Roman Catholics too crudely typical of prejudices of that time, at least Pearson recognizes a real danger. Putting the matter in a slightly different way, critical scholars as biblical commentators have often started with Scripture, then chosen to interpret a reconstructed text other than that which exists in the hands of both common and uncommon people. Such commentary is frequently aimed at the interpretation of only a pre-redactional sub-text or solely of the history of tradition behind a biblical book. For example, Gressmann in his commentary on 1–2 Kings interprets only the *oral* level of the narratives behind 1 Kgs. 1–19.[2] If pious fundamentalists put Jesus' words in red in order to uncritically elevate parts of the Gospels, historical critics have often put half and quarter verses in italics which promptly causes them to become invisible to the commentator. This latter tendency, together with the rearrangement of material in biblical books in the course of a commentary, may indeed change the context and, therefore, the meaning of a biblical text. In essence the resulting scholarly text may be some alternative, speculatively reconstructed "text," in extreme cases a recovered text which never functioned as Scripture within any religion. This procedure is not wrong in itself, but raises provocative questions about how scholars and the laity of the church can share a common text at all.

Barr on "Canon Criticism"

A number of biblical critics, like Brevard Childs and myself, have specifically sought to raise this question of how a particular context, namely, that of a text in a Scripture, has meaning within a Jewish or Christian faith. We are not alone in this inquiry. Wilfred C. Smith has brilliantly stated this same problem for studies in comparative religions.[3] New Testament scholars like Raymond Brown and Old Testament exegetes like P. Ackroyd and R. Clements have also begun to investigate how the context of the scriptural canon ordered and "presented" the voice of a prophet or apostle, so that the presentation itself becomes one of the most important factors in the resources of faith for Judaism and Christianity.[4] Other more

[1] "Antagonism to the Bible," *Our Hope*, XV (1909) 475.

[2] *Schriften des Alten Testaments* (1921, 2nd. ed.) 259ff.

[3] Cf. his "The True Meaning of Scripture: An Empirical Historian's Non-reductionistic Interpretation of the Qur'an," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 2 (1980) 487–505 and "The Study of Religion and the Study of the Bible," *JAAR* 39/2 (1971) 131–40.

[4] Cf. R. Brown, *The Critical Meaning of the Bible* (Paulist, 1981); P. Ackroyd, "Isaiah I–XII: The Presentation of a Prophet" *VTSupp* 29 (1977) 16–48; and R. E. Clements, "The Unity of the Book of Isaiah," *INT* 36/2 (1982) 117–29.

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philosophical, literary-critical or rhetorical positions, like that of Hans Frei, Paul Holmer, Frank Kermode, and Phyllis Trible have, likewise, called for attention to the synchronic dimension of existent biblical texts as mirrors of the really real. Without being able here to survey the wide range of these diverse proposals, I want to say that it would be an error to isolate, as Barr has done, one scholarly endeavor from the "climate of opinion" in which even the most innovative suggestions find their common currency.

By reason of just such an isolation, Barr's critique comes close to a personal *ad hominem* rather than a judicious assessment. Work on "canon criticism" by James Sanders, past president of the Society of Biblical Literature, is tersely dismissed in a few paragraphs as "depend[ing] very largely on vague wording and *non sequiturs*."[5] In his giant-killing role, Barr has reserved for Brevard Childs the privilege of receiving the weight of his unrelenting, homiletical denunciation.

We are invited to turn the clock back to tired, ambiguous expressions which only obscure the explicit issues in the current hermeneutical debate.

Barr declares self-confidently that the proposal of Childs at the end of *Biblical Theology in Crisis* "comes like a rabbit out of a hat."[6] Rather than wondering about his own ability to understand, Barr scolds Childs for "muddled conceptual incoherence" and calls readers back to Barr's own selective version of the Biblical Theological Movement.[7] The appendix offers a dramatic, personalistic account of how Barr struggled in vain to be sympathetic with this movement. We are taken through the earlier period of Barr's cautious approval in his articles year after year until the appearance of Childs' massive *Introduction*. Particularly in relation to the issues of historical criticism, Barr found at last "deep faults and incoherences in [Childs'] thinking."[8] Nevertheless, all of this certitude comes from an Oxford professor who openly admits,

> I was myself never much of a historical-critical scholar. I do not know that I ever detected a gloss, identified a source, proposed an emendation or assigned a date. If scholarship is as much dominated by historical criticism as we nowadays hear, such a record must be rare.[9]

Repeatedly throughout this series of bromides, Barr plants one of his favorite charges—the hidden presence in Childs of conservatism, traditionalism, or worse, fundamentalism! Harold Lindsell will be surprised, almost as much as Childs and his conservative critics, "that Childs' valuation of traditional critical scholarship is almost exactly the same as the valuation attached to it by conservative/ fundamentalist circles." Barr seems aware that his assertion will sound a little awkward on these shores, so he assures us as well as himself: "It is a perfectly reasonable and intelligible judgement."[10] Barr's readiness to make such judgmental generalizations has already prompted his British colleague, Peter Ackroyd, to preface a study of "Isaiah I–XII: Presentation of a Prophet," accordingly,

> So much of critical scholarship is still geared to the classic formulations that it is somehow felt to be hardly necessary to concern ourselves with such apparently outmoded lines of thought [such as how the book of Isaiah may still be "somehow linked to the prophet"]. I propose to raise these questions because I consider them important; I do not for one moment fear that anyone will suppose that I am thereby disclosing myself as a biblical fundamentalist, though I may have to accept the dubious distinction of being misquoted [by fundamentalists] as having abandoned one of the key points of critical scholarship![11]

Sadly, Barr has chosen just such fear, which he considers a weak and ignoble tactic in fundamentalist apologetics, as his principal weapon. In an ironic double charge, Childs is guilty of both flirting with an adventurous hermeneutic like that offered by Bultmann and siding with obcurantist conservatism, all at the very same time![12] In a volunteered bit of psychobiography, Barr judges further that "his work [regarding the valuation of traditional history] gives the impression of a fulfillment of an inner death-wish of liberal criticism."[13] Conversely, one suspects that Barr, who is himself remarkably conservative in his treatment of the biblical tradition, may be projecting a repudiation of his own earlier fundamentalism into his assessment of others who do not share his continuing historical conservatism. Though I hesitated to discuss his criticism of Childs in quite this way, the whole slant of Barr's diatribe requires this response. Otherwise, the substantive issues he raises might gain a deceptive autonomy which they do not deserve to have on their own.

Barr's Alternative Proposals

Perhaps the best way to evaluate Barr's challenge is to consider three of his positive constructions in the light of what he thinks he rejects from Childs' work, as well as that of others of us whom he rarely engages.

First, Barr, wants to play off a distinction between "biblical faith and scriptural religion." Childs is portrayed as advocating that Christianity be "exclusively controlled" by a "*completed* scripture," to which Barr offers the commonplace argument that the "men [sic!] of the Bible" belong to a period prior to the Bible and that, "Jesus in his teaching is nowhere portrayed as commanding or even sanctioning the production of a written Gospel, still less a written New Testament."[14] Consequently, Christianity during the formative period, in which the New Testament was born, can be described by Barr as not "scriptural religion" at all.

Immediately I am struck by how Barr has chosen *his own* biased language to establish an easily refutable caricature of a sophisticated debate. One might ask if any theology is ever, even after the formation of the Bible, "exclusively controlled" by Scripture. Since the Bible does not itself spell out a single clear "scriptural" hermeneutic, the very decision about how one reads Scripture entails an extra-biblical judgment within the religion which treasures it. Even an evangelical scholar like E. Earle Ellis must come to this same conclusion regarding Paul's "midrashic" use of the Old Testament. Ellis is forced to conclude that for the apostle, "The grammar and the historical meaning are assumed; and Pauline exegesis, in its essential character, begins where grammatical-historical exegesis ends."[15] Childs' own work on the *sensus literalis* of Scripture alone should be sufficient to show how unrepresentative Barr's terminology is of Childs' own position.[16]

Moreover, by Barr's attacking the idea of a "completed scripture," he introduces once more his own *ad hoc* and wooden terminology which misses entirely the logic behind Childs' own insistence that "It is still semantically meaningful to speak of an 'open canon.'" Childs specifically warns that one "obscures some of the most important features in the development of the canon by limiting the term only to the final stages of a long and complex process which had already started in the pre-exilic period."[17] Furthermore, my own published dissertation on "canon conscious redactions," done under Childs, and other subsequent writings along these same lines ought to have caused Barr to suspect the poverty of such a summation of Childs' view of canon.[18] Barr, thus, equates "canon" and "Scripture," then portrays Childs' discussion of canon as overly committed to a theory of a "completed" collection of books. Childs has already rejected this position in his various writings.

Barr's own proposal of "biblical faith" versus "scriptural religion" is, in my understanding, an extremely simplistic historical formulation. What degree of early Christian usage of the Old Testament would allow that first century faith to be called a "scriptural religion,"

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[5]Barr, 157.
[6]Barr, 134.
[7]Barr, 159.
[8]Barr, 133.
[9]Barr, 130.
[10]Barr, 148.
[11]Ackroyd, 17.
[12]Barr, 145ff
[13]Barr, 148
[14]Barr, 2, 21, 12.
[15]*Paul's Use of the Old Testament* (Baker, 1981, reprint fr. 1975) 147.
[16]"The Sensus Literalis of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem," 80–93, in *Beitrage zur Alttestamentlichen Theologie: Festschrift fur Walter Zimmerli zum 70. Geburtstag* ed. by H. Donner, *et al.* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978).
[17]Barr, 58.
[18]G. T. Sheppard, *Wisdom as a Hermeneutical Construct, BZAW* 151 (1980) and "Canonization: Hearing the Voice of the Same God in Historically Dissimilar Traditions," *Interp.* 36/1 (1982) 21–33.

perhaps viewed as a Jewish messianic sect? Would the Roman Catholic church in periods of high regard for megisterial traditions be called by Barr a "non-scriptural religion"? Barr himself, like some fundamentalists, merely assumes we will all agree on what constitutes "exclusive control" of faith by a Scripture. Finally, would all of the figures in the Bible be qualified as "men" whose faith is not scriptural? Matthew? What of earlier scholarly treatments of the New Testament use of the Old, such as W. Zimmerli's *The Law and the Prophets* or C. H. Dodd's *According to Scripture*? Barr's own position remains confusing and inchoate.

Putting the same question another way, would every reconstructed author or redactor in the entire Bible qualify as a "man" of biblical faith? If one were to accept the suggestion of F. Cross and T. H. Gaster that behind Psa. 29 lies a Canaanite hymn to the sun god, would that Canaanite author also be classified by Barr as a man or woman of "biblical faith"?[19] Most importantly, how would I know what constituted a "biblical" faith without some preconceived, canonical notion of a "Bible" in which only certain figures are mentioned? Otherwise, it seems more logical to go with a New Testament scholar like Helmut Koester and simply speak of the general pluralism of religious beliefs within the early Christian period. But, then, "biblical faith" would hardly seem to be an inadequate label for everything we find in a multi-faceted description of Graeco-Roman religion. If Childs' proposal leaves open some fresh questions for the discipline of biblical studies, Barr's alternative too facilely closes the door with vague and circuitous reasoning.

A similar set of problems arises in a second suggestion of Barr. Accusing Childs of a "deductive" interpretation of Scripture, Barr advocates an "inductive" approach.[20] On the surface such an admonition seems salutatory, a proper encouragement to let the Bible dictate its own terms of interpretation rather than to impose one's own ideas onto it. However, this inductive/deductive choice proves to be a false dichotomy. What object of investigation have I *deductively* chosen in order to do an inductive analysis? Of course, one does not stumble upon the Bible like the encounter with an unclassified form of flora and fauna. Those who helped shape and preserve this literature already registered their own deductive assumptions about its nature and value upon it. To ignore that deductive editorial influence, in a pristine attempt to be purely inductive, invites delusion and misses the idiosyncratic traces which define the very existence of the Bible as a human production. The call for solely an inductive approach must assume that this work received an accidental, natural formation and, then, was arbitrarily canonized by a "council," a position Childs openly disavows. The setting of inductive/ deductive options proves itself to be the imposition of a simplified, quasi-philosophical choice into the discussion of what Barr himself knows to be about traditions with a complex literary history.

Priority is for a scriptural text and context because of our pragmatic concern with a living faith.

A third assertion by Barr is that Childs' "muddled" suggestions only serve to distract scholars from the older and simpler issues of how the Bible has meaning. Barr assures us that "the criterion for biblical criticism is, and always has been, *what the Bible itself actually says.*"[21] If by Bible in this sentence Barr means the Scripture we possess, then how can this be the same as "biblical faith" which occurred *before* the formation of that Scripture? Does one not need a "Scripture" before it, as Bible, can "say" anything? Exactly what then is Barr's "Bible"? Should any ancient Near Eastern tradition we can reconstruct behind the Scripture be labeled "Bible"? Is what the original words of Jesus "say" identical with what the Gospels "say"? If all these levels of tradition are the same, then Barr would appear to agree with fundamentalists who see no development between original historical words and the first "autographs" of Scripture.

It is true that Barr's concern to know "what the Bible actually says" is the same argument used in apologetics for the historical-critical method in the mid-nineteenth century, but most evangelicals could correctly observe that such has precisely not been what historical critics have always sought to interpret. So, too, Yale scholar Hans Frei has profoundly shown in his *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* that the referential drive of biblical criticism meant that its goal became more a pious reading of what *history* "says"—a history to which the Bible refers—rather than what the Bible *per se* says. Only by maintaining a very conservative theory of tradition history, more like that prevalent within the fundamentalism he rejects, can Barr prove the case otherwise.

Barr's phrase also presents other problems familiar to the hermeneutical debate among contemporary evangelicals. It is a circumlocution which may seem to anthropomorphize a piece of literature called "the Bible." How does literature "say" anything? Without a more explicit theory of literary criticism we are given only an opaque formulation. The Council on Biblical Inerrancy asserts similarly that Scripture is "inerrant" in all that "it affirms." Does this statement presume an intentionality theory of meaning? A midrashic sense of the text? A realistic memetic assumption of figural correspondences? A materialist deconstruction of the ideology of the writer? The message from an "implied" author? Is that author also God in the way that Aquinas defined "literal sense"? Instead of challenging us with a suggestion wherein lies greater clarity we are invited to turn the clock back to tired, ambiguous expressions which only obscure the explicit issues in the current hermeneutical debate about Scripture. In any case, perhaps someone like Barr who has "never been much of a historical critical scholar" is neither the best defender of modern historical criticism nor the most likely person to interpret the problem of its relation to the reading of ancient texts as a "Scripture" in the life of a community of faith.

The Future of Canon Contextual Studies

As I see the present situation in this country, we have broken off a one-sided love affair with historical-critical methods which originally promised not only to tell us "what the Bible says" but also to end the plurality of interpretation of the same texts. If diverse churches once found multiple meanings for the same text by pre-critical literary means, historical criticism has not simplfied things by showing that behind almost every biblical text can now be found a plurality of sub-texts within the pre-history of the Bible. Barr is certainly correct in disparaging approaches which give lip service to historical criticism, then opt for a purely synchronic reading, one which pretends that texts simply float above both history and our diachronic lexicons. Childs and others of us are moving in a different direction, towards the question of how one uses the results of criticism, conservative or liberal, in such a way as to enhance and to illuminate a text, any text. We grant that our priority is for a scriptural text and context because of our pragmatic concern with a living faith. As Christians we obviously have vested interest in how the Bible can be a faithful witness to the revelation of God in history over being merely an antiquarian reference to religions in the Ancient Near East. If we sound disparaging of historical criticism, it is because such criticism has so often been accompanied by a pretentious theory which ends interpretation with a pious reading of a reconstructed history rather than a historical reading of a constructed text.

A "canonism" will be no more helpful than historicism. Barr completely misunderstands the genius of Childs' contribution when he turns the whole investigation into a quest for a systematic method called "canon criticism." Childs and I have both dropped the latter term; it occurs nowhere in his *Introduction*. Rather than being primarily in pursuit of new "methods" or a closed system of interpretation, we are excited about a new vision of the biblical text. I suspect, anyway, that the best methods arise only in response to a worthy vision of a text, which is about as close as they might ever come to being truly "inductive." Without such a vision there is no text, only marks on a page and indentions in clay. In the final analysis, the best interpretations must always exceed the limits of the best methods. If Scripture could talk, as Barr's abovementioned phrase almost implies, I suspect it would greet us first with the words of Jesus, "What did you go out into the wilderness to behold? A reed shaken by the wind?" (Matt. 11:7; Lk. 7:24).

[19]F. M. Cross, *BASOR* 117 (1949) 19ff. and T. H. Gaster, "Psalm 29," *JQR* 37 (1946) 54ff.
[20]Barr, 22, *etc.*
[21]Barr (italics his), 37.