

DANIEL R. DRIVER

Brevard Childs,
Biblical Theologian

*Forschungen
zum Alten Testament 2. Reihe*

46

Mohr Siebeck

Forschungen zum Alten Testament
2. Reihe

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*To Adriel
who has been my help
much as God is hers*

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For the Church's One Bible

Mohr Siebeck

Preface

This book represents a thorough revision and updating of a PhD thesis written at St Mary's College, University of St Andrews, between 2005 and 2008. It was defended in October 2008 under the title "Brevard Childs: The Logic of Scripture's Textual Authority in the Mystery of Christ" and resubmitted with only typographical changes. However, in part because in the present edition not a single chapter has been left as it was, and new material amounting to more than one long chapter has been added, I have given the study a new title.

Many factors spurred my revisions. First, my examination committee made sharp observations and challenges. Prof Walter Moberly, the external, pushed to keep the quality and charitableness of engagement high in all parts. And Dr Grant Macaskill, the internal, persuaded me that the order of two chapters needed to be reversed. Second, Mohr Siebeck's FAT series editors expect much, and I am grateful to Profs Bernd Janowski, Mark S. Smith and Hermann Spieckermann for accepting this work for publication. Prof Smith in particular made extensive comments that prompted me to reconsider a crucial part of the argument. I have labored to take all feedback into consideration, although naturally the judgments and faults that remain are mine. Third, a few important sources of new "data" have been examined and incorporated into the discussion. Childs' posthumously published book on the Pauline letters appeared just before my *viva voce*. Equally, I had not then read some of Childs' earliest work, including a 1952 graduate seminar paper for Walter Baumgartner that Childs lodged, along with other unique items, in an archival box at the Princeton Seminary library. Special thanks to Travis Bott for drawing my attention to this fascinating material, and to Ken Henke, reference archivist at Princeton, for providing copies. In the intervening time, too, I have been in touch with members of Childs' family, some of whom uncovered and shared a letter sent from Basel in 1953. I will long remember a warm and lucid conversation with Childs' sister, Anne Hummel, at her home in Old Saybrook.

Some of the debts that a person acquires in higher education are impossible to repay. First for me is a debt of gratitude to my primary supervisor, Dr Nathan MacDonald, who in 2004 picked up an MPhil proposal that bears no resemblance to the PhD that eventuated. He proved an excellent guide, sharpening my interests through coursework and attentive supervision. I was glad to revisit his last set of comments on the thesis while reshaping it for this book.

Dr Mark Elliott, my secondary supervisor, competently stood in the gap during a sabbatical and showed me the meaning of polymath while yet remaining a source of encouragement. Another formative part of my years in St Andrews, and one that has directly influenced this project, was the Scripture & Theology seminar founded by Prof Christopher Seitz. In it I had the opportunity to present early drafts of two chapters and to receive engaging feedback from mentors and peers. Studies in the reception of the Psalms and Habakkuk also stand out as some of the most energizing collaborations of my student career. Beyond the seminar, Prof Seitz helpfully supplied documents pertaining to Childs that could not otherwise have been obtained.

Additionally, some outside St Andrews enriched my research by helping to make it a truly international experience. Prof Brevard Childs gave an interview at his Cambridge home in the Spring of 2006. Prof Georg Steins courteously engaged a draft of my criticism of his *Habilitation* and later shared his impressions of Childs' impact on German language scholarship over coffee in Vienna. On a coastal walk in the the East Neuk of Fife, Dr Stephen Chapman recalled his experience at Yale with Childs and Frei. My wife and I are especially grateful to Fr Michael Regan of the Fondation Catholique Ecossaïse for funds to improve our French at the ICP, in Paris. And where would this work be without Frau Bahr, who fifteen years ago guided my first encounters with German language and culture?

Since moving to Toronto, unanticipated but significant encouragement to finish has come from the little congregation of St Matthew's, Riverdale. I can only name Dr Ephraim Radner, who read an uncooperative section and gave good advice, and Fr Ajit John, whose ministry is grace. My Tyndale colleague Dr Benjamin Reynolds commiserated in various ways and read a draft of the new first chapter with care. Throughout all, though, my wife Adriel has been a source of refreshment and perspective, and a tolerant and loving companion. She has lived with this work for a very long time, and her support is unfailing. I dedicate it to her on the occasion of her thirtieth birthday.

Finally, in terms of this book's production, Dr Henning Ziebritzki has been a professional director. His keen-eyed assistant Ilse König has been highly accommodating. I also thank Thomas Carr, who read the proofs closely and compiled the indexes. Still, the task of preparing a photo-ready PDF is a little daunting, leaving no hands to blame for *errata* but mine. I would be grateful to you, dear reader, for directing such matters and others of more substance to my attention. A companion webpage — <http://www.danieldriver.com/bsc/> — has been built with that purpose in mind. I offer in addition my personal email address: danieldriver@gmail.com.

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Abbreviations

Titles by Brevard S. Childs:

- Myth and Reality* *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament*. Studies in Biblical Theology 27. London: SCM, 1960, ²1962.
- Memory and Tradition* *Memory and Tradition in Israel*. Studies in Biblical Theology 37. London: SCM, 1962.
- Assyrian Crisis* *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis*. Studies in Biblical Theology, Second Series 3. London: SCM, 1967.
- BTh in Crisis* *Biblical Theology in Crisis*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970.
- Exodus* *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*. Louisville: Westminster, 1974.
- OT Books* *Old Testament Books for Pastor and Teacher*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977.
- Introduction to the OT* *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979.
- NT Introduction* *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984.
- OT Theology* *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985.
- Biblical Theology* *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992.
- Einen Bibel* *Die Theologie der einen Bibel*. Bd. 1: Grundstrukturen; Bd. 2: Hauptthemen. Translated by Manfred and Christiane Oeming. 2 vols. Freiburg: Herder, 1994–1996..
- Isaiah* *Isaiah: A Commentary*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001.
- Struggle* *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004.
- Pauline Corpus* *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul: The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008.

Other abbreviations of key titles not listed in *The SBL Handbook of Style*:

- Holy Scripture* Barr, James. *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- Concept of BTh* Barr, James. *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999.
- CD 1/2* Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics, 1/2: The Doctrine of the Word of God*. Tr. by G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956.
- Reading* Barton, John. *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1984.
- Crisis?* Brett, Mark G. *Biblical Criticism in Crisis? The Impact of the Canonical Approach on Old Testament Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- JBTh* *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie*
- Canonical Approach* Noble, Paul R. *The Canonical Approach: A Critical Reconstruction of the Hermeneutics of Brevard S. Childs*. Biblical Interpretation Series 16. Leiden: Brill, 1995.
- Canonical HB* Rendtorff, Rolf. *The Canonical Hebrew Bible: A Theology of the Old Testament*. Tr. by David E. Orton. Leiderdorp: Deo, 2005.
- ügP* Rendtorff, Rolf. *Das überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem des Pentateuch*. BZAW 147. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1977.
- Bindung* Steins, Georg. *Die "Bindung Isaaks" im Kanon (Gen 22): Grundlagen und Programm einer Kanonisch-Intertextuellen Lektüre*. Herders Biblische Studien 20. Freiburg: Herder, 1999.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

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

— James Barr

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

— Brevard Childs

Locating the work of Brevard Childs (1923–2007) can be difficult. A great deal has been written about what his canonical approach amounts to, not all of it sympathetic, not all of it helpful (critics can of course be either one without being the other). The fact that many of the portraits on offer do not much resemble Childs' self-presentation tends to obscure the scholar's actual voice, and it exacerbates the attempt to situate his contribution. Nowhere is this truer than in the multitudinous detractions of James Barr (1924–2006), who charges that "canonical criticism [sic] ... is simplistic," that the only thing its several features have in common is that they co-exist in the same mind.¹ For Barr the term canon stands not for a workable approach to biblical exegesis, but instead masks profound confusion. Childs, on the other hand, maintains against criticism like this that he would not offer "an algebraic solution to a problem requiring calculus."² Readers of Childs' work and of the controversy it has provoked thus face rather stark alternatives. Is the canonical approach a methodological train wreck, or is it a sophisticated attempt to address complicated hermeneutical problems?

In answering this question some have split the difference. Childs offers important insights, it is affirmed, and yet due to the confusion in and unwork-

¹ Barr, *Holy Scripture*, 168. Barr's uses "canonical criticism" despite Childs' protests. On its limitations as a descriptor for Childs' approach, see Sheppard, *Canonical Criticism* (in *ABD*).

² Childs, *Response to Reviewers*, 52.

ability of his program, his method must be thoroughly rebuilt. The canonical approach is flawed but can be salvaged.³ Still others have welcomed Childs' proposals as highly salubrious. Christopher Seitz, for example, counts himself with those who judge Childs' Biblical Theology "as the most brilliant proposal for theological exegesis offered in recent memory" (if "one unlikely to gain the sort of foothold necessary to transform the church in its use of scripture").⁴ But the relationship between student and teacher is less than straightforward in this instance, as evidenced by the way Seitz and Childs inform one another's work on Isaiah. Seitz dedicates his 1991 study *Zion's Final Destiny* to three honored teachers, one of whom is Childs, even as the book reconsiders Childs' main work on Isaiah up to that point (*Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis*, 1967).⁵ Childs in turn dedicates his 2001 Isaiah commentary to Seitz but does not hesitate there to probe and challenge the argument of *Destiny*. It hardly simplifies matters that Childs' sharpest critics and his strongest advocates share in the testing and refinement of Childs' thought over decades.

Gerald Sheppard, another of Childs' students, aptly describes part of the challenge here. "Childs has shown an ability to change his mind on issues and approaches over time. Ambiguities or lacunae at later stages in his work cannot be uncritically clarified by appeal to earlier positions. Yet what persists from his earlier work may remain presupposed by later formulations."⁶ To take just one instance, the 1970s argument from "midrash" seen in the late addition of Psalm titles is essential background to the argument for "canonical shaping," a ubiquitous theme in Childs' *oeuvre*. At the same time, the term "midrash" itself is increasingly rejected. Through the 1980s Childs came to view it as a mode inappropriate for modern Christian exegetes.⁷ Then again, care should be taken not to exaggerate this change dynamic. Seitz also emphasizes major strands of continuity in Childs' work over the years, and he qualifies "that already in 1970 Childs had laid out the basic defining features of the approach. These have been modified only subtly or in extending efforts..." He rightly points to no less than five instances of "durable and sustained interest" to be found starting with *Biblical Theology in Crisis*: (1) critique of historical criticism, (2) special prioritization of the final form, (3) "observations on the status of the Hebrew and Greek text-traditions," (4) critical but appreciative attention to pre-Enlightenment exegesis, and (5) "biblical theological handling of the two Testaments, in which the Old retains its voice as Christian Scripture, and Biblical Theology is more than a sensitive appreciation of how the New han-

³ Representatives of this position will be discussed in chapter two.

⁴ Seitz, *Not Prophets*, 109.

⁵ Seitz, *Destiny*, x: "Ironically, much of Childs's own later work on canon has had a decided influence on the sorts of questions and modifications I have proposed here, vis-à-vis his original work."

⁶ Sheppard, *Childs*, 575.

⁷ See chapter six for details on this development.

dles the Old.”⁸ That Childs’ thought develops over time does not make it a moving target.

But perhaps the greatest initial difficulty confronting those who wish to understand Childs is neither the need to find him amidst his many readers, nor subtlety in the development of his thought, but rather the sheer magnitude of his project. This has a couple of aspects. First, his writings adopt a cumulative scope. *BTh in Crisis* exhibits several hallmarks of the canonical approach, yet Childs would spend the next twenty-two years advancing the purpose adumbrated there. As he remarks a decade on, just after the arrival of his landmark *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (1979),

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

Introduction to the OT could only be part of the reexamination, and here in 1980 he forecasts his next two major volumes, *The New Testament as Canon: an Introduction* (1984) and *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (1992): “However, this descriptive task is far from complete. A study of the New Testament from a canonical perspective would also have to be executed before one could adequately address the central issues of biblical theology.”⁹ Thus the publication of *Biblical Theology* signals the completion of a long standing personal goal, and one with major antecedent steps.¹⁰ The issue is not just that Childs’ work is voluminous, but that it comprises a coordinated effort. It virtually asks to be read as a corpus. Second, it is not possible to be expert in all the modes and subject areas his writing covers — from biblical theology’s history and quandaries of method, to commentary on particular biblical books, to the broad contours of each testament alone and both together, to the Bible’s expansive history of reception — *all* of which appears to be ingredient in the task (his struggle) of understanding the form and function of the Christian Bible, Old Testament and New, as one witness to the church across its total life. Such a vision goes far beyond merely keeping abreast of scholarship on Exodus or Isaiah or Paul.

⁸ Seitz, *Theological Interpretation*, 59.

⁹ Childs, *A Response* [Mays], 199. Cf. the preface to his *NT Introduction*: “I would like to emphasize that this volume is an Introduction to the New Testament. It is not a biblical theology, nor does it attempt to treat in detail the whole range of questions which involves the relation of the two Testaments. It is, of course, still my hope to have time and energy one day to address these issues” (xvi).

¹⁰ Christoph Dohmen frames the matter well in his preface to the German translation of *Biblical Theology*, in Childs, *Einen Bibel*, 1:11–14.

Is Childs himself difficult to understand? Some reputable scholars have said as much — witness the case of Rolf Rendtorff, contra Barr, below in chapter three. I myself sympathize with Roy Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, who wonder that “almost all of Childs’s critics have either misunderstood, half understood, or ignored, clumsily or artfully, what has persistently served as his primary concern.”¹ If anything, Childs’ work is repetitive, especially in rehearsing this main point. On Harrisville and Sundberg’s reading, it is just this:

For Childs the Bible is more than a classic and indispensable witness to God’s concern and action, however embodied; its understanding more than a contemporizing of the church’s traditions; its ontology more than a paradigm, and more than a documenting of the human experience. For Childs the Bible, in the context of the church’s confession, is the instrument of encounter with the living God.²

To put Childs’ career thesis in other words, the historically shaped canon of scripture, in its two discrete witnesses, is a christological rule of faith that in the church, by the action of the Holy Spirit, accrues textual authority. This is the figure in the carpet, so to speak, and its outline is nothing like as difficult to spot as the one sought in the fictitious writings of Henry James’ Hugh Vereker. But neither is it an easy thesis to unpack and defend, which again is partly why Childs speaks of the struggle to understand Christian scripture. The bafflement of many of his reviewers turns on the strangeness of his vision in the modern world. Terence Fretheim’s conclusion is both frank and revealing: the “particular formulations” in *Biblical Theology*, he writes, “so often reflect a world other than the one in which I live.”³ Though less directly expressed, many others seem to feel a similar alienation, and from this perspective Childs appears as a brontosaurus who survived cataclysm only to plod through a smoldering landscape. That is, the queries critics have posed often sound less like “What does he mean?” than “What is he still doing here?”

There are indeed tensions in the canonical approach even if they are not as severe as some have charged. I postpone the question of whether or not their sum is an inconcinnity, for reasons that should become clear in the discussion of previous accounts of Childsian hermeneutics (chapter two). I will revisit the concern in my concluding chapter. In the remainder of this introduction I want to unpack two ways of locating or framing the work of Brevard Childs. The first touches his vocation as a biblical theologian, and the second, the relationship of his notion of canon to history. Both topics show Childs’ commitment to some tremendous and acknowledged challenges. Both also suggest that his approach is far from simple. I hope to give some impression of the approach’s aims, what problems it identifies, and how on its own terms these are solved or mitigated. And, as a charitable point of departure, I want to raise

¹ Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible*, 324–325.

² *Ibid.*, 325.

³ Fretheim, Review of *Biblical Theology*, 326, cited in Harrisville and Sundberg, 326.

the possibility that Childs' promotion of canon as a governing framework need not be seen as dogmatism, obstinacy or the mutterings of a simpleton, but can be appreciated as a knowledgeable embrace of an intricate, knotty subject. Then, in a third section, I will summarize this study's outline and prospect.

A. Childs as Biblical Theologian

Childs ventured into many cognate fields over his academic career. After completing four years of doctoral work at the University of Basel — this period included a semester at Heidelberg in 1951 as well — he began teaching Old Testament at a small Wisconsin seminary (now defunct) in 1954. Four years later, in 1958, he accepted a post at Yale University where he taught until his retirement in 1999.⁴ For some years he studied Jewish midrash in earnest, first with a local rabbi and then with Judah Goldin at Yale.⁵ In the meanwhile he produced a series of form critical studies in the vein of his German-speaking instructors. Later, upon writing his introduction to the OT, he devoted no less than five years to researching an introduction to the NT. The aim was to “read as widely as possible in an effort to do justice to the integrity of this discipline.”⁶ His next step toward biblical theology was the comparatively slim *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (1985). After finally realizing a Biblical Theology of both testaments in the same year he was made Sterling Professor of Divinity (1992), he returned to the OT proper by writing a technical commentary on Isaiah, despite a series of health issues that he feared would keep him from completing the task. Reprieves in his illness permitted him to give a focussed kind of attention to church history, moving far beyond his early work in the history of exegesis, for which the Exodus commentary (1974) is commonly remembered, with *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture* (2004). A notable theme in the latter title is the problem of allegory in Christian exposition of the OT. Finally, he once again turned his eye to the NT with the posthumously published *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul: The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus* (2008). The manuscript had been sent to the publisher just days before his death on 23 June 2007, at the age of 83.

How should one classify ranging work of this sort? Looking for precedents, something like Rudolf Smend's study of the work of W. M. L. de Wette presents a possibility. That study falls into two parts: there is de Wette the *Alttesta-*

⁴ The best previous account of Childs' biography is found in Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible*, 309–310. Though brief, it incorporates a personal correspondence with Childs about his life. Sheppard's earlier, longer account in *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters* is still useful but contains a few errors. See also Driver and MacDonald, s.v. “Childs, Brevard” in *The Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* (forthcoming).

⁵ See the letter that begins section B of chapter six, below.

⁶ *NT Introduction*, xvi.

mentler (part one), and then de Wette the *Neutestamentler* (part two).⁷ The neat division does not suit Childs very well, however, and actually is not broad enough. In my judgment a more general and slightly ambiguous title is most appropriate in his case — Childs as biblical theologian.⁸ Each part of this study comes under the biblical theological umbrella in some way. Because the designation is contested, though, it calls for a little explanation.

To begin with, Childs freely acknowledges that difficulties attend the genres he undertook. Note what he says about the task of writing an OT Theology, for instance. The context is a symposium on Jewish-Christian dialogue held in early January 1985, the year *OT Theology* appeared:

Seit ihrer Entstehung war es ein Charakteristikum der Disziplin alttestamentlicher Theologie, dass sie immer mit ernststen methodologischen Unsicherheiten zu kämpfen hatte. Obschon sie oft als Krone der ganzen Disziplin bezeichnet wurde, sah es so aus, als ob ihre führenden Vertreter immer wieder einen unsicheren Blick auf andere Gebiete des Unternehmens werfen würden, voller Angst, ob nicht irgendeine neue literarische, historische oder philologische Entdeckung das Unternehmen gefährde... Nicht nur, dass die Disziplin locker definiert und in ständiger Revision war, sondern gewisse grundlegende Spannungen stellen nach wie vor ihre Gestalt in Frage. Ist die Disziplin alttestamentlicher Theologie nur deskriptiv oder enthält sie ebenso ein notwendiges Element konstruktiver Theologie? Was ist die Beziehung zwischen einer alttestamentlichen Theologie und einer Geschichte Israels? Sind ihrer Aufbauprinzipien historisch, systematisch oder eine eklektische Kombination beider? Und schliesslich: was ist die Beziehung zwischen jüdischen und christlichen theologischen Interpretationen der Hebräischen Schriften?⁹

These are all among the questions he takes up at various points in his work, although it is worth underscoring that his driving concern at this juncture is theology of just the first testament. He admits that it would be “supremely arrogant” to propose a quick solution to a nest of problems so complex they seem to inhere in the discipline. Nonetheless, he commends an approach to scripture marked by constitutive features of *Christian* exposition, features which to his satisfaction have not been adequately pursued in the critical or post-critical era. “Ich möchte so in einer anderen Weise einige dieser quälenden methodologischen Fragen angehen.”¹⁰ A key element of the prescription is a reminder that OT theology has almost always been — is perhaps irreducibly — a Christian preoccupation. If so, the ecumenical dilemma for OT exegetes becomes how to appropriately handle a Jewish canon already functioning as OT within the operations of church theology.

⁷ Smend, *WML de Wettes Arbeit*.

⁸ Childs refers to himself as a biblical theologian at least once (*Exodus*, 88). As for the term itself, I have attempted to follow James Barr’s practice of capitalizing Biblical Theology when I mean a specific instance of the genre and not otherwise. The same distinction applies to Introductions to or Theologies of either OT or NT individually.

⁹ Childs, *Jüdischen Kanons*, 271–272, my emphasis.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 272.

Biblical theology itself — more than just Old plus New, “as if one could spend the first semester with Eichrodt and von Rad and the second with Bultmann and Jeremias!”¹¹ — is for Childs fundamentally a bridge-building exercise, an arena for theological reflection on the entire Christian Bible in which biblical scholarship and dogmatic theology meet to illuminate the object they share. Its “major function ... is to provide a bridge for two-way traffic between biblical exegesis and systematic theology’s reflection on the subject matter.”¹² Childs obviously enters this space as an OT specialist, and by his own admission he was not as successful coming up to speed in systematics as in the NT. “In spite of the challenge of trying to gain competence in both testaments, this task paled into insignificance before the difficulty of gaining entrance into the field of dogmatic/systematic theology. Anyone who has ever studied under Karl Barth is left with the lasting sense of inadequacy just from remembering the standards of thoroughness which he required of his students.”¹³ That is, Childs never attempted a Church Dogmatics. I doubt that his ambition ever reached that far. He made efforts at proficiency in the formal discipline of theology, although these struck him as inadequate.¹⁴ Yet biblical theology’s connecting purpose is to rejoin scripture and theology. It serves something other than dialogue for its own sake, or whatever other goals might be desirable in a strictly academic context. It arises first from a church situation, and as such it principally serves the unity of the Christian confession of one God. This ecclesial context drives Childs’ concern for “the oneness of the biblical witness,” or the “oneness of scripture’s scope” that he insists “is not a rival to the multiple voices within the canon.”¹⁵ Exactly how to articulate scripture’s unity, at both the exegetical level and the hermeneutical or theological level, admits a range of answers, but for Childs the basic confessional imperative inherent in the question is experienced and voiced at every turn.

So when Gerhard Ebeling writes of an “inner unity” to the discipline in a now classic essay on the meaning of biblical theology (1955), Childs picks up the language: “The Christian church responded to [the canonical scriptures] as the authoritative word of God, and it remains existentially committed to an inquiry into its inner unity because of its confession of the one gospel of Jesus Christ which it proclaims to the world.”¹⁶ At least three points of clarification need to be made about this claim. First, it is fair to say that the Ebeling-Childs

¹¹ *Biblical Theology*, xv.

¹² *Ibid.*, 481, cf. 551. See also Helmer, *Biblical Theology: Bridge Over Many Waters*.

¹³ *Biblical Theology*, xvi.

¹⁴ “From my library shelves the great volumes of the Fathers, Schoolmen, and Reformers look down invitingly. I have also acquired over the years many of the great classics of the Reformed and Lutheran post-Reformation tradition. However, life is too short for a biblical specialist to do more than read selectively and dabble here and there” (*ibid.*).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 719, 725.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

line, which foregrounds unity, reverses the priorities of J. P. Gabler, who for convenience's sake is often credited with calling biblical theology into existence.¹⁷ Childs admits this by calling Ebeling's definition a redefinition, and "a return to a pre-Gabler position in so far as he once again joins the historical and theological elements."¹⁸ Gabler had advocated a sharp distinction in his inaugural lecture at Altdorf in 1787, a distinction between religion and theology, between things of "historical origin" and "didactic origin," between "the simplicity of what they call biblical theology" and "the subtlety of dogmatic theology."¹⁹ Procedurally this entails further distinctions, not only between OT and NT, but also Paul and the gospel writers, right down to the level of each individual author.²⁰ Yet Gabler does not envision the final divorce of biblical from dogmatic theology, and one can only guess how he might have addressed the evaporation of his hope to eliminate "doubtful readings" of scripture in pursuit of "the Christian religion of all times."²¹ Ebeling and Childs reflect very different historical moments than Gabler. Furthermore, it would be a serious mistake to assume that Childs (the only one of the three actually to attempt a Biblical Theology) nullifies all distinctions in the name of unity. We have already seen evidence of the way he accords Jewish studies, OT and NT scholarship, and systematic theology their own integrity as disciplines. His language of "discrete witnesses" is also relevant here. Perhaps it is not too trivial a generalization to say that, in the centuries between Gabler and Childs, the burden of keeping Christian theology intact came to overwhelm the need to keep its domains apart. As Ebeling's essay concludes,

the concept "biblical theology," the false understanding of which caused theology — contrary to the original intention — to split up into different disciplines, when rightly understood points back again to the unity of theology — not of course a unity achieved by abolishing the different disciplines, but a unity consisting in the right theological use of the different disciplines, each of which has its own peculiar task and yet each is "theology" in the sense of participating in the scientific expression of the Word of God.²²

The task is to hear "the inner unity of the manifold testimony of the Bible," and the call is for "the intensive co-operation of Old and New Testament scholars" and indeed of all theological specialists, including dogmaticians and church historians. Should collaboration be achieved, Ebeling observes that "'biblical theology' would not then be a rival substitute for dogmatics and would hardly correspond either to the pietistic ideal of a 'simple' theology, but would be an

¹⁷ As Ebeling and others have shown, the first use of the term "biblical theology" goes back somewhat further than Gabler.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁹ Gabler, *J. P. Gabler and the Distinction*, 137.

²⁰ In order to establish proper comparisons of biblical ideas to "universal notions," he prescribes first "diligently isolating the opinions of each author" (*ibid.*, 142).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

²² Ebeling, *The Meaning*, 96.

uncommonly complex exercise in historical theology.”²³ This ideal counters the trend toward hyper-specialization and realigns a standard view of biblical theology; simultaneously, it denies the simplicity of pure notions that Gabler desired. In each of these respects Childs stands with Ebeling.

Second, Childs is quite frank about what constitutes the “inner unity,” and it is far from the old enthusiasm for universal religion: a biblical theologian has to do with “inner unity because of ... the one gospel of Jesus Christ.” At the center of Childs’ approach, then, is a startlingly specific confession of the lordship of Jesus Christ. To be sure, he is not the first biblical theologian to make this move. In the end there is an expressly christological side to Old Testament inquiry for one of his teachers, Gerhard von Rad, however reluctantly acknowledged by von Rad himself, however often overlooked by von Rad’s other students and successors. Yet for Childs the *Christuszeugnis* of scripture’s witness is fully embraced by 1992 and forms the heart of his *gesamtbiblische* theology.²⁴ Sometimes the utter difficulty of the assertion sounds out loudest. “Allerdings bleibt schwer bestimmbar, was es bedeutet, im Alten Testament einen Hinweis auf Christus zu finden, und das Ringen mit diesem Problem führt ins Herz der Biblischen Theologie.”²⁵ Just how should one move from the verbal or literal sense of the the OT to its true theological substance, identified by Childs as knowledge of God in the face of Christ? Most traditional Christian exegetes do so readily. Von Rad’s hesitancy in the twentieth century, and Childs’ in its own way, is symptomatic of a dilemma facing biblical scholars who feel compelled to take similar steps in a critical age. All the same, *Biblical Theology* undertakes the search for, and upholds the proclamation of, one thing from two testaments, namely, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Third, specificity about Christ puts extra strain on the biblical theologian’s ecumenical obligations. If OT theology was once presumed the crown of OT scholarship, this has not been the case since about the time Childs first waved the tattered banner of biblical theology, in 1970. Jon Levenson, in an essay exploring shortcomings in the OT Theologies of Eichrodt and von Rad, effectively describes the less certain climate that has gained predominance over the field of historical critical scholarship.

In North America, the emergence of religion departments and Jewish studies programs and departments has further contributed to the dethronement of Christian theology, indeed *any* theology, as the organizing paradigm for the study of the Hebrew Bible. As a consequence, in the elite academic world, those for whom the term “Old Testament” is more than vestigial have

²³ Ibid. He continues, “then it would be able also for its part to assist dogmatics towards a clearer grasp of the question of what constitutes scriptural dogmatics.”

²⁴ See below for Childs on von Rad, *gesamtbiblische* theology and the *Christuszeugnis* of the OT (especially chapters three, six and seven).

²⁵ Childs, *Biblische Theologie*, 24, and compare idem, Von Rad.

been put into the unenviable position of an ex-emperor who now must learn how to be a good neighbor.²⁶

Given these circumstances, one can appreciate why a theologically minded Lutheran Old Testament scholar like Fretheim judges the 1992 *Biblical Theology* as “a theological retrenchment” — a failure precisely in its ability to cope with the new climate — and “more as a somewhat belated end of an era than as ... an imaginative venture that charts new directions.”²⁷ Fretheim probably underestimates the extent to which Childs broke with those he gladly claimed as his teachers (interestingly, Levenson quotes Childs in support of his critique of von Rad). But by voicing deeper misgivings about the ability of *Biblical Theology* to address “the complex realities of the contemporary world,” Fretheim makes a potentially damaging point that Childs’ tendency to dismiss newer theological efforts by liberation, process, feminist or postmodern theologians leaves him out of touch.²⁸ The canonical approach is just too traditional to have relevance or impact. Are most historic forms of Christianity automatically out of touch, though? The attempt simply to clear and restore old paths — much older than von Rad, or even Gabler — does not exclude the possibility of dialogue with those cutting other trails. Commenting from a Jewish perspective, Levenson sees potential, if only partly actualized: “Founded upon a historical particularity — the Protestant canon — Childs’s method harbors a potential for respect for other historically particular traditions.”²⁹ This despite (or seemingly because of) the fact that a frank confessionality comes built in, with high liability for offense. “The role of canon often calls for a parting of the ways,” writes Childs near the front of his last book.³⁰ How much capacity does Childs’ work have to advance in-house or inter-religious dialogue? Readers will be of different minds, though fairly quickly one confronts real limits on the possibility for consensus. There is still the option Levenson advances, that creedal particularity set the foundation for a more substantive exchange than Gabler could have imagined, although if so, the most productive front is likely to be the one shared by people who wish to heal the breach between scripture and tradition rather than to celebrate or even exploit it. Protestant though he be, it is hardly by accident that Childs has been relatively well received by certain Jewish and Catholic biblical specialists.³¹

The full title of this study is *Brevard Childs, Biblical Theologian: For the Church’s One Bible*. The above discussion should clarify the sense of its terms,

²⁶ Levenson, *Hebrew Bible*, 32.

²⁷ Fretheim, Review of *Biblical Theology*, 324.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 326.

²⁹ Levenson, *Hebrew Bible*, 122.

³⁰ *Pauline Corpus*, 44.

³¹ By no means all Catholic and Jewish biblicalists, though see chapters two and six for examples of each.

from the vocational designation “biblical theologian,” to the ecclesial locus of Childs’ work, to the oneness of the Bible’s scope as grounded in christology. Naturally, more remains to be said on each score. First, though, another thing shown by this preliminary tour bears repeating. Childs took his project very seriously, never underestimating the difficulty of mastering so many different subject areas. Though he was uncommonly studious, he owns up to limitations in the broad personal competence he sought. We have seen the acknowledgement, too, of “quälenden methodologischen Fragen” in the operations of OT theology, as well as genuine hesitation about what it means “im Alten Testament einen Hinweis auf Christus zu finden,” particularly with respect to what has been called the double reception of the Hebrew Bible. If we can credit statements like these, if he truly feels the weight of “agonizing methodological questions” including those in the list cited above, and if with him we share an impression of the number and width of historical, religious and disciplinary chasms to be spanned, then there may be some sense in talking about calculus after all.

B. Canon and History

Generally speaking, generosity toward constructive theological work with canon runs against the prevailing mood. The canonical approach is a non-starter, according to a common worry, because biblical scholarship oriented by or to church teaching blocks the free investigation of historical periods and sources that is central to the biblical scholar’s mandate. Robert Kraft, for example, speaks of the “tyranny of canonical assumptions.” For him, and for not a few members of the Society of Biblical Literature he addresses, to speak of canon at all is to introduce a seriously distorting anachronism. “Historically responsible philological work, of course, does not pay attention to these boundaries, either as limits ... or as touchstones.”³² Kraft’s view is as straightforward as it is widespread: history trumps canon.

This attitude has not helped Childs’ reception, reinforcing a habit of incredulity toward the logic and self-presentation of the canonical approach visible especially in the literature on Childs’ so-called method. Criticism has been so severe at times that one senses why in his later work he wants to “resist the practice of some immediately to characterize [his] approach as ‘canonical,’ since the label has only engendered confusion.”³³ Yet in the end he neither abandons the term nor amends his use of it along the lines suggested by his

³² Kraft, *Para-mania*, 17–18.

³³ Childs, *Isaiah*, xii. He continues, “I hope that this commentary will be judged on its own merits apart from any prior concept of what a ‘canonical’ reading ought to entail.” The same request could well preface all of his work now.

critics. Therefore, to clear the ground for a better hearing, it will be helpful at this early stage to outline the trajectory of his thought on the relationship of canon and history — categories that stay in tension to the very last: in that sense canon *never* trumps history for him — and then to suggest the advantage of canon as an umbrella term. In other words, my purpose in this section is to clarify Childs' thought at a crucial point where it has often been misunderstood. The hope is to forestall premature dismissal of a proposal that has proved so counter-intuitive that it is commonly rejected out of hand. Is not the recourse to canon a retreat from history into dogma (a “dogmatische Flucht aus den Schwierigkeiten des historischen Geschäfts,” in the words of Manfred Oeming³⁴)? If not, why not? How can Childs' dogmatic (in the word's more positive sense), theological deployment of canon accommodate all that we know about the extremely complicated history of canon?

Those who instinctively associate “canonical criticism” with anti-historical dogmatism would do well to consider when and where Childs went to school. True enough, in the background was the sort of conservatism that resists the incursions of “higher” criticism. As the mature Childs puts it in a correspondence with Harrisville and Sundberg, “it took me some years to get beyond Hodge and Warfield.”³⁵ It is hard to say exactly when he overcame the legacy of old Princeton, which he probably knew first in the Presbyterian church his family attended in Queens, New York,³⁶ but there is solid evidence that it happened before he had his doctorate. Like many of his peers, Childs' formal education was interrupted by World War II. Anticipating the draft, he elected to start at Queens College, near home, rather than to go away to university. He was there little more than a year. In October 1942 Childs enlisted in the US Army.³⁷ Barely nineteen, he prepared to sail for Europe. On his sister's account, he had by then already taken a serious interest in theology, aided by the leader of a student group at Queens who helped guide his extracurricular reading.³⁸ Recollecting the weekly letters she exchanged with her brother during the war, the sister tells how Childs worked to teach himself Greek while aboard the RMS Queen Mary.³⁹ He returned to the United States in 1945 for

³⁴ Oeming, *Gesamtbiblische*, 195–196 = ³204–205, cf. 209 = ³216. For a fuller discussion see the section on Oeming in chapter two.

³⁵ Cited in Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible*, 310.

³⁶ Childs was born in Columbia, South Carolina, on 2 September 1923 and soon baptized Episcopal, but the family moved North because of the father's poor health.

³⁷ According to Army enlistment records (The National Archives, <http://aad.archives.gov/>, accessed 23 October 2009), Childs enlisted in New York on 17 October 1942.

³⁸ Did it include Hodge or Warfield?

³⁹ “I always have that picture, of this nineteen year old heading into war, and he was teaching himself Greek. And he said, everybody was gambling — they had crap tables going and the money was this high — and here's Bard, working away. There was something so typical about Bard's determination” (recording of a personal communication with Anne Childs Hummel, 22 November 2008). During the war, while moving from France into Germany — he

redeployment to Japan, but Truman's atom bomb kept this from happening (he was on leave, visiting his sister, when it fell). As he waited to be demobilized, Childs completed several correspondence courses through the Army Education Program, earning enough credit through the University of Michigan to graduate with an AB and an MA in 1947. From there he went to Princeton Theological Seminary (Bachelor of Divinity, 1950), and then back to Europe, to Switzerland and Germany.

Against this backdrop, it is interesting to think about what motivated Childs' selection of material when, in the summer of 1995, he submitted a small box to the Princeton Seminary archives. In addition to later papers, letters and manuscripts, there is a syllabus from an introduction to the New Testament taught by Bruce Metzger in 1948. And there are Childs' own scrupulous notes from a course on the parables of Jesus, with Otto Piper in 1949. Apart from a copy of his Basel dissertation (1955),⁴⁰ the only other testament to his student days is a paper written for Walter Baumgartner in 1952, with Baumgartner's feedback in the margins. A hardworking *source critical analysis* of Exodus 13:17–15:21 that searches out the hand of L, J, E or P verse by verse (at the end Baumgartner praised it as a "sorgfältige und wohlüberlegte Arbeit mit verständigem Urteil"), the paper indicates something important about the early direction of Childs' work in the Old Testament. If initially Childs inclined toward Greek and the New Testament, he left Princeton with something else in view. (By Harrisville and Sundberg's report, his influences at Princeton were "few" and "largely negative."⁴¹) The paper also shows clearly that Childs went to Basel for what it had to offer in the Old Testament, not for Karl Barth.⁴² Finally, whatever parallels one might be tempted to draw between Childs' years of study on the European Continent and those of Charles Hodge a century and a quarter before, the most obvious are disanalogous. In terms of their attitude to German criticism, the outcomes for these two learned men were fundamentally different.⁴³ Was there symbolism for

was in transportation, not the infantry, though according to Hummel he advanced with the front into Germany — his sister was in school at Wellesley College. She remembers writing for advice on a required, year long course on the Bible. The course introduced her to biblical criticism, and it shook her confidence in scripture. She wrote to her older brother about the issues it raised several times, sometimes twice a week. Childs responded regularly, reassuring his sister. "It was the content of what he said, but more than that it was the assurance that this wasn't the only way to look at it, that gave me great confidence," Hummel recalls. Unfortunately, the correspondence itself has not survived.

⁴⁰ See page 40, below, for details on why this was re-written in English.

⁴¹ Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible*, 310.

⁴² The relationship of Childs to Barth has been widely misunderstood. As will be seen in chapter three, Childs cautiously warms to Barth only later, at Yale, although he heard Barth lecture in his student days.

⁴³ See the published form of a dissertation Childs directed: Taylor, *The OT in the Old Princeton School (1812–1929)*, esp. 50–55 and 74–79 on Hodge.

Childs, with respect either to the famous old Princeton school or the seminary he would have remembered, in leaving this particular paper in its archives?

I. Early and Late Attitudes to History: From 1952 to 2008

Entitled “The Deliverance of Israel at the Crossing of the Sea,” the Baumgartner paper bears a curious relation to Childs’ subsequent work. Let me give some indication of its flavor. The piece begins by making detailed observations about the chosen text, noting alternate readings from the old Greek, the Syriac, the Samaritan Pentateuch, and so on. Exodus 13:20, for instance, is judged to be “very corrupt.” In a subsequent note on literary analysis the same verse is ascribed to P, because P has the most developed geographical tradition (he is following Baentsch, Holzinger and Noth, against Beer and Eissfeldt). Other verses are separated into two or more strands, though P is said to be hard to distinguish from E. Next, Childs reconstructs two main sources under the headings “The Account of the Yahwist” and “The Account of EP.” The first lacks any account of Israelites crossing the sea. Much of the subsequent discussion concerns “geographical-historical problems,” such as the meaning and location of the *יַם־סוּף* in different traditions. With von Rad and especially Noth, Childs decides that the “localization” of the sea is secondary, that in fact accounts of the Exodus contain two distinct localizations. All of this is standard historical critical stuff, of course, conversant with the best research of the day. Given the approach for which Childs is now known, what is most remarkable here is his rejection of ostensibly more conservative options. Noth’s account of incongruous traditions is preferred to Pedersen’s case that the whole of Exodus 1–14 is a historicized “passah festival.” A twenty-eight year old Childs writes,

It has been convincingly demonstrated that the slaughter of sheep, the smearing of its blood on the tent posts, and the eating of bitter herbs, belonged to the ancient nomadic sacrifice customs. However, while this connection is clear, the weak point in Pedersen’s argument is the actual connection between the passah legend and the exodus tradition. To be sure, *in its present form, the passah legend is a preparation for the exodus*, and the passah festival is a “Gedächtnisfeier.” *But an organic, primary connection fails between the traditions.* Noth sees this correctly, in my opinion, when he criticizes Pedersen at this point...

The Passah festival was originally a sacrifice customary among the “weidewechselnde Wanderhirten” before the departure for the summer pasturage. The yearly “exodus” was historified and took on the meaning of the once-and-for-all departure out of Egypt. Once the relation was created between the festival and the exodus tradition, the historifying was carried out all along the line.⁴⁴

Apart from seven short notes on undiscussed problems, this is where the essay ends. Remarkably, its basic analysis was rehearsed twice in Childs’ later work, finally being reworked for the appropriate chapter in his Exodus commentary.

⁴⁴ Childs, Deliverance of Israel, 12–13, my emphasis.

Two years before that, in 1972, Childs (then aged forty-eight) also used the paper as the backbone for the fourth lecture (of five) in the James Sprunt Lectures at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia. Something had shifted, though. The title for the lecture series that year was “Canon and Criticism: The Old Testament as Scripture of the Church,” and session four was called “The Crossing of the Sea in its Canonical Context.”⁴⁵

What changed? In due course I will give my account of major threads of continuity and change across Childs’ work. The first of two big turns happens on the road to *BTh in Crisis* — 1970 is a convenient marker. (The other is reflected in the break between chapter six, on the “mystery of Israel,” and chapter seven, on the “mystery of Christ.” It happens in the early 1980s.) Initially, though, it is important to say that the change is more subtle than has often been supposed. The double reworking of the Basel paper is a case in point.

First, the 1972 Sprunt Lectures. Lecture four uses Exodus 14 to explore an instance of “one of the most difficult problems of faith and history.”⁴⁶ The existence of sources is presupposed. There are “two basically complete, and yet different, accounts of the event at the sea,” though Childs pleads for “more flexibility in describing them than is often allowed.”⁴⁷ Then, in language straight from the old postgraduate paper, the J account is given under one heading, and the P(E) account under the next. After this, however, the analysis pushes in a new direction.

[F]ollowing the source analysis, the historical critical interpreter usually makes some comparisons of the two accounts and tries then to draw historical and theological conclusions. In my judgment, before any such move it is basic to seek to understand the whole account in its final form. There is another witness which must be heard, namely the final redaction. How does the chapter function as a whole?⁴⁸

This question was not asked in 1952. Quite the contrary. Now, though, he attends to “the present form of the biblical text,” arguing that “the final form of the story has an integrity of its own.”⁴⁹ Is the earlier account undone? Has he inadvertently joined leagues with the likes of Pedersen, or even surpassed him in the move toward harmonization?

⁴⁵ Copies of all but the first lecture are housed at Princeton. The first is “The Canon as a Historical and Theological Problem,” and I cannot say whether its exclusion is deliberate. Papers two, three and five are, respectively, “‘II Isaiah’ in the Context of the Canon,” “The Canonical Shape of the Psalter” and “Daniel in the Context of the Canon.” Revisions of all this material made its way into subsequent publications.

⁴⁶ Sprunt Lectures, 26.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 27. “This reservation is simply to share the feeling of many Old Testament scholars that the minute divisions have often gone beyond the evidence.”

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.