

BREVARDS. CHILDS

Old Testament
Theology
in a Canonical
Context

Childs, Brevard S.

Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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Brevard S. Childs was Sterling Professor of Divinity (Emeritus) at Yale University until his death nearly two years ago on June 23, 2007. Best known for his 'canonical approach' to Scripture, Childs left behind a legacy of impressive scholarship and theological reflection in the service of the academy and the Church. *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* is Childs' "understanding of Old Testament theology in a less technical form than [his] earlier commentary and introductions." (xiii) According to Childs the "most pressing need within the contemporary scene seems to be in suggesting a new manner of theological reflection rather than once again rehearsing in detail familiar lines of earlier research." (xiii) In enters his 'canonical approach.'

After surveying the history of Old Testament theology and noting the continuing problems, Childs lays out his canonical approach which I will quote at length:

The initial point to be made is that the canonical approach to Old Testament theology is unequivocal in asserting that the object of theological reflection is the canonical writing of the Old Testament, that is, the Hebrew scriptures which are the received traditions of Israel. The materials for theological reflection are not the events or experiences behind the text, or apart from the construal in scripture by a community of faith and practice. However, because the biblical text continually bears witness to events and reactions in the life of Israel, the literature cannot be isolated from its ostensive reference. In view of these factors alone it is a basic

misunderstanding to try to describe a canonical approach simply as a form of structuralism (*contra* Barton). Moreover, one of the enduring confusions within the discipline is that of maintaining the formal canonical categories implicit in the term 'Old Testament' theology, but in practice developing the discipline as an allegedly objective science without any true reference to the canonical form and function of the literature. The canonical approach which I am suggesting is explicit in developing an approach which is consistent in working within canonical categories. (6)

He goes on to discuss the development of the formation of Scripture noting the process began in the pre-exilic period and extended through the Hellenistic period. He notes the theological development of the Scriptures which were intended to serve future generations of believers and says that "[c]anonization proper... was the final stage in the process [which] established the scope of the authoritative literature." (6)

Childs contends that OT theology is a distinctly Christian discipline, and rightly so, for without a NT it makes little sense to think of the Hebrew Bible as the OT. But Childs goes beyond this surface level argument and suggests that the OT is "set in sort of dialectical relationship with the [NT] and the ongoing life of the church." (7) He also argues that "a relation of some sort is assumed between the life and history of Israel and that of Jesus Christ." (7) And finally, he sees the assigning of certain parts of the OT as the 'center' of OT theology to "confirm a basically Christian stance even when highly secularized." (8) But the problem isn't solved once one recognizes that the discipline of OT theology is a Christian discipline. From there it needs to be worked out in practice. Childs points to some flaws in the interpreters of old (e.g., the medieval period) with their spiritualizing and allegorizing the entire OT in order to have reference to Christ, or to force the entire OT into a scheme of prophecy and fulfillment. He suggests that such procedures "destroyed the integrity which the Christian canon had assigned to this portion of scripture." (8) Childs argues that "the [OT] functions within Christian scripture as a witness to Jesus Christ precisely in its pre-Christian form." (9) He continues by saying that the task of OT theology isn't to Christianize the OT by identifying it with the NT, but rather to listen to its own testimony about the God that the church worships.

The opening chapter is really the meat of the book. From there he goes on to examine various scriptures, themes, characters, and offices in the OT, keeping a keen eye on intertextuality and the manner in which the various topics under discussion function throughout the canon. He is careful to note at various points throughout his study that he is not engaging in a sociological reconstruction of the OT or taking a history of religions approach to the text. His prime intention is to read the text theologically; to read it as Christian Scripture. The most substantive chapter in my opinion was chapter 7, "The Theological Significance of the Decalogue" in which

he draws heavily from his Exodus commentary but summarizes the material in a much more concise fashion.

The chapters in which he touches on anthropology are also noteworthy. In chapter 16, "Male and Female as a Theological Problem," he takes Phyllis Tribble to task on her interpretation of 'Adam' as an androgynous 'earth creature' in the creation narratives of Genesis 1-2. Childs contends that there is a danger of both the 'theological right' and the 'theological left' of misreading these passages to support ideologies that were never intended. For the right the danger is in thinking that they support a male dominated society "which would transfer the mores of a fallen society to the kingdom of God." (192) It is in the unity of man and woman that humanity is constituted. The danger from the left is to read these texts as if there were no distinction in roles, goals, and capacities, i.e., to read them as if they reflected a modern egalitarian ideology. Not so says Childs, "God chose to create two different forms of humanity for different functions within his creation." (192) He closes the chapter with a brief mention of homosexuality and how it "stands in striking disharmony with the [OT's] understanding of the relation of male and female." (194) He contends that "[t]he theological issue goes far beyond the citing of occasional texts which condemn the practice," and that "the [OT] views homosexuality as a distortion of creation which falls into the shadows outside the blessing." (194)

If I were to lodge a single complaint about this book it would be that it's too short. Childs doesn't offer himself enough space to really dig down into all of the topics he covers, and this is something that he recognizes at various points throughout the book. The citation system is also less than ideal with references appearing in parentheses that must be deciphered through the end-of-chapter bibliographies. There is an author index as well as a Scripture index but no subject index. This isn't really a problem though as the table of contents is fairly detailed and functions in the same manner as any subject index would. All in all I find Childs' canonical approach intriguing and I think that *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* served as a nice introduction to it. I'm confident that as I work through his other volumes armed with this preliminary knowledge of his approach I'll be able to comprehend much of what he says. In terms of OT theologies, this one is too short to be used as a primary text, but I'd certainly recommend reading it alongside any of the more substantial volumes out there.