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Review: Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible

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BOOK REVIEWS

Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible. By Brevard S. Childs. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993, 768 pp., \$40.00.

This work constitutes not only the *magnum opus* of Brevard Childs, esteemed Professor of Old Testament and Sterling Professor of Divinity at Yale University, but also the capstone to years of wrestling and refinement regarding the method, nature and content of Biblical theology. Childs has long been an advocate of the "canonical" approach to the Scriptures—that is, that in affirming two testaments (parts) of one Bible he is affirming not only a hermeneutical activity but that the reception of the multi-leveled compositions/traditions (books) of Scripture within a faith community is the reception of a norm whose authority and meaning lies in the literature itself as a whole—of course in relation to God, its object, to which it "bears witness." By such an approach, Childs is endeavoring to lead modern Biblical studies into a new and more fruitful way of reflection on the contextual elements of Scripture in relation to and within the whole (canon), thus renewing Biblical theology as a discipline. He also intends to build more effective avenues of relation to the systematic/dogmatic theological disciplines, with which he is clearly much concerned—especially within the Reformed lineage from Calvin to Barth. Like Calvin and Barth, Childs sees in theological reflection on the "witness of scripture" a further tool in illuminating Scripture.

While this volume is "officially" structured in seven interrelated parts, the book actually unfolds in four parts, each part critical in either method or content to what follows. The first two major sections, "Prolegomena" and "A Search for a New Approach," together form the "why?" of Childs' canonical approach to Biblical theology. He overviews Biblical theology since Gabler, along with appreciative analyses of earlier Christian approaches since Irenaeus. This sets the stage for Childs' canonical approach to the two parts of Christian Scripture as "witness" to the subject matter (i.e. God). Here the surprising but interesting influence of Barth is evident in his approach. "The Discrete Witness of the OT," the second section of this tome, takes the argument sequentially (diachronically) through the prominent "traditions" (e.g. creation, patriarchal, Mosaic, monarchical, prophetic, apocalyptic, etc.) to uncover in each the critical "consensus" on development and shapings that occurred within and between them, while uncovering through these layers (understood as they now stand in their canonical context) the "trajectories" that are critical to the larger Biblical-theological enterprise. Likewise, in "The Discrete Witness of the NT," Childs probes historical-critical problems related to the various leading "traditions" (e.g. Church's earliest proclamation, Pauline gospel, four gospels, post-Pauline age, etc.), and thereby, again, the leading theological "trajectories." It is in this third section where Childs really comes into his own Biblical-theologically, with Paul's "theology" being apparently of central interest. The last and longest major section and, indeed, the heart of the work is "Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible." Herein Childs unfolds what at first glance may seem to be semitransitional theological *loci*, but this assessment would be a mistake. Chapter by chapter he presents the Biblical-theological fruit of his canon criticism, which, it seems to this reviewer, is much (and rightly so) informed by the

Heilsgeschichte approach, as well as the theo-logical, Christocentric thinking of Karl Barth. He begins with the "Identity of God." This is not in the way of Pannenberg but out of the revelatory-encounter/experience nexus, i.e. God and historical peoples, Israel and the Church, in the world. He concludes with "God's Kingdom and Rule" and "The Shape of the Obedient Life: Ethics."

In response, it may be said initially of this remarkable book that it starts slowly but soon picks up much speed. Despite clear acknowledgment of most normative post-Enlightenment historical-critical methods and their conclusions about origins, dating, redactional shaping levels, and sources of the OT and NT texts of the Christian canon, Childs is often quick to defend the Scriptures from extreme positions that he takes to be false, overzealous applications of critical methodology. He is also defender of the integrity of the canonical text in its present form. He is meticulous (especially in the OT) in his discussions of text-critical outcomes in relation to the most prominent traditions and the problems arising from each, with solutions. Then Childs' ever-present and consequent concern for the leading "trajectories" arising from the traditions is garnered toward his Biblical and dogmatic theological outcome. His discussions of Q and of issues directly and indirectly connected to the Jesus Seminar are, as in all like discussions, most insightful and helpful.

But Childs is also not merely theologically concerned, desirous to bring together again what others have torn asunder, i.e. the disciplines of exegesis and Biblical theology *from* systematic theology; he also is well informed in both the systematic/dogmatic and historical-theological issues and trends. As noted, his admiration of the Biblical-theological methods of Calvin and especially Barth are rooted, not superficially but profoundly, in what he perceives to be the "spirit" of their Reformed methods. Childs is a consciously committed *Christian* scholar, and his repeated affirmation of and submission to the authority of the Christian canon as a whole, along with central Christian doctrines (e.g. the Trinity, and the deity, atoning death and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ), clearly reflect this fact. Throughout, it is Childs' intention first to demonstrate that an essential aspect of real theological reflection in Biblical theology is the move from the dual witness of Scripture to the reality of God, to which the "witnesses" of the canon point. This is the Barthian movement from witness to Reality. In this way Childs enacts his canonical Biblical-theological purpose.

Yet concerns about this text do face the evangelical reader. At a surface level, Childs' section on the OT is so meticulous in its detailed "pro-con" discussions about the various historical-critical outcomes that preliminary theological trajectories seemed all too few and thin at best. This surely reflects his OT specialization. Childs regularly knuckles under to the "authority" of critical "consensus" upon which, and in reaction to which, he then appears to build his own canonical approach. But a present consensus will soon crumble as will all that is built upon it. In this way Childs too often seems to be running a "dialectical gauntlet" between "rationalistic, reductionistic liberalism" and "biblicism"/supernaturalism, though his sentiments theologically would often seem to be closely allied to historical orthodoxy. Again, this is more often the case in his handling of the OT than in the NT section. Somehow, in all this, he can then critically deny an OT claim about an event while affirming that God acted! It seems that by his "canonical approach," for all of its possibility, Childs allows himself to have and use the critical methods in approaching the discrete texts while affirming the authority of the *whole*. Such a straddling would seem to lack real historical and conceptual unity. Over and over, Childs' only reply to certain critical methodologies (e.g. history-of-religions approach) is that they thus crippled the theological enterprise. But that is the realist point at issue. In the process he seems to affirm implicitly the greater authority of the NT in relation to the OT (p. 379). Childs wants to show

that the Church's path of theological reflection lies in its understanding of its Scripture, its canon and its Christological confession as it encompasses the reality and mystery of God's ways in the world with his people. Yet for all of the helpfulness of his Biblical theologizing, via the hermeneutical-theological insights of Karl Barth, he has fallen prey to the Barthian dilemma regarding both history and finite human language. Scripture as text is (*à la* Hans Frei) finally separated from issues of true historicity, while the Word of God remains "transcendentalized" from time and human language (cf. Bonhoeffer versus Barth).

None of the above remarks is intended to undermine the intrinsic value of Childs' book. The last half of this work, the critical-Biblical-canonical-history of redemption-dogmatic theological reflection of Brevard Childs, with the preceding analyses of the NT, is an absolute jewel, exciting to behold, follow, and hear. This book is extremely helpful and insightful, and its potential usefulness, whether for classes or as a springboard toward further theological reflection on the Christian Scriptures, is obvious. It is highly recommended.

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Studies in Old Testament Theology: Historical and Contemporary Images of God and God's People. Edited by Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., Robert K. Johnston and Robert P. Meyer. Dallas: Word, 1992, 333 pp., \$17.99.

This collection of essays on OT theology, dedicated to the life and ministry of former Fuller Theological Seminary president David A. Hubbard, is a fitting tribute to a man who contributed much to evangelical scholarship, both as a scholar in his own right and as a facilitator of scholarship at the helm of a prominent seminary faculty for almost thirty years.

After four personal tributes to D. Hubbard in the opening chapter, the design of the volume is intended to be comprehensive of the discipline it treats, dividing its attention among methodology and the three canonical divisions of the Hebrew Bible (Torah, Prophets and Writings). A final section, composed of two chapters on current issues of concern to numerous Christians today—Israel and the Church, and the environment and OT ethics—serves as a capstone.

The eighteen authors of this volume represent, quite intentionally I suspect, a broad range on the theological spectrum, even including one Roman Catholic writer, thus giving the work the stamp of ecumenism that D. Hubbard fostered within the Christian community.

The main contribution of the book, aside from the well-deserved tribute to D. Hubbard, comes in the first ("Methodology") and middle sections ("The Old Testament") of the volume. Section 1 contains studies by Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., on "Doing OT Theology Today," Elizabeth Achtemeier on preaching, "From Exegesis to Proclamation," and Daniel P. Fuller on "The Importance of a Unity of the Bible." Quite effectively does R. Hubbard introduce the whole volume in that he suggests a topical approach to OT theology that "conceives of the OT-NT relationship as a series of parallel theological trajectories moving from one testament to the other" (p. 41). In point of fact, that is the general approach of the book to the discipline. Not to disparage this system, which has served OT theologians beneficially through the centuries of interpretation, it nevertheless is sometimes resorted to when no theological center can be identified, an issue



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