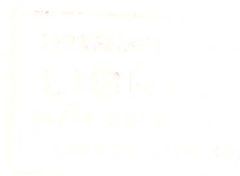


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CANON AND CRITICISM: A RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR CHILDS

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It is somewhat surprising to find that a major new introduction to the New Testament has been written by a scholar who has made his reputation in the field of Old Testament study.¹ But Professor Childs explains that his earlier work, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, seemed “incomplete and vulnerable without attention to the remaining part of the Christian Scriptures” (xv); and so, he goes on, “For over five years my primary research energy has gone into New Testament studies” (xvi). His book bears witness to the enormous amount of material that he has read and absorbed in that time. But, as the title (*An Introduction to the New Testament as Canon*) suggests, this is not an ordinary introduction, concentrating on questions of authorship, dating, historical background and the like. Professor Childs’ thesis is that New Testament scholars’ preoccupation with such matters and with the so-called historical-critical method in general has led to a serious misunderstanding of the New Testament. In this review-article, I wish to offer a response to Childs’ attack on historical criticism as it has traditionally been practised. Childs is by no means alone in his disillusionment with historical criticism, which is shared by many theological conservatives, structuralists, feminists, and exponents of “narrative theology”. The present article therefore addresses itself not simply to Childs’ book but to the broader question of the value and significance of historical criticism as a way of studying the New Testament.

What does Childs mean when he calls his book an introduction to the New Testament *as Canon*? One might expect that a book with such a title would pay much greater attention than usual to the process by which the early church came to accept the New Testament texts as canonical; and this is indeed the case. But what is at the heart of Childs’ “canonical approach” is the belief that the New Testament is the book under which the Christian church has always stood and still stands, and that interpretation must feel the full impact of that fact. The function of the New Testament is to be “authoritative, canonical literature of both an historical and a contemporary Christian community of faith and practice” (36), and this “calls for a theological description of its shape and function” (36) which acknowledges that “the sacred scriptures provide a true and faithful vehicle for understanding the will of God” (37). Childs is thus asserting “the integrity of a special reading which interprets the Bible within an established theological context and towards a particular end, namely discerning the will of God” (37). Aware of “the promise that God continues to reveal his will through this vehicle (i.e. the canon), earth-bound and fragile in its very nature” (44), the interpreter must approach Scripture with “an expectation of understanding through the promise of the Spirit to the believer” (40); he must see it as his task to extend “the kerygmatic testimony of the New Testament into an encounter with the modern reader” (40).

One might suppose that all this is simply another attempt to bridge the gap between historical criticism and the church’s use of the Bible, a problem which has been

tackled many times before but which to a large extent still remains unresolved. But Childs’ argument is more radical than that. He asserts that the assumption that “the sharper the historical focus, the better the interpretation” has the effect of silencing “the true theological witness of the text” (51). In other words, the attempt to understand a text in the light of the historical circumstances from which it derives is a hindrance and not a help to a genuinely theological interpretation. The gap between the historical and the theological approach remains as wide as ever, but the former is dismissed as of only peripheral significance, legitimate “only within a certain context” (387), by comparison with the latter, the all-important theological task. Indeed, historical criticism is in the last resort unnecessary, since “theologically the community of faith confesses that it has already been provided with a sufficient guide” for the interpretation of Scripture (395)²

This, then, is Childs’ ambitious programme: to turn away from preoccupation with a text’s particularity and time-conditioned character, and to regard it instead as an abiding witness to God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ through which he still makes himself known to the church. One catches here echoes of past theological controversies about biblical interpretation: Is learning and intellectual ability a sufficient qualification for interpretation, or must the interpreter first be enlightened by the Holy Spirit? Traditional biblical criticism is a modern representative of the former view, Childs of the latter. No doubt this programme will sound attractive to many — and not only to theological conservatives, with whom Childs is in many ways not particularly happy to identify himself.

But does this programme actually succeed in its aim of shedding new light on the biblical texts, rescuing them from the limbo of time-conditioned particularity to which a misguided historical criticism had consigned them? New hermeneutical methods are to be assessed not by the claims which their advocates make for them, but by whether or not they work in practice — by whether or not they lead to a profounder insight into the true meaning of the text. It is here that, in my opinion, Childs is often disappointing. Take, for example, some comments on the Epistle to the Romans that are typical of the tone of much of the book:

The canonical shape of Romans lies in the book’s potential to transcend the original concrete historical setting. When treasured and read as scripture by a community of faith the nature of Paul’s witness to God’s eschatological intervention in Jesus Christ for the redemption of the world establishes a new context and unleashes a continuing power by which to address each new generation of Christians with the implications of the gospel. (263)

I do not find these comments particularly illuminating, for two main reasons. The first is that, despite the claim that the “canonical approach” is new, this passage merely repeats a view of Romans that has been set forth again and again by most of the best-known Pauline interpreters over the past sixty years or so. Examples could be multiplied from the writings of Bultmann, Kasemann, Bornkamm and many others, which indicate that the view that Romans “transcends the original concrete historical setting” has been the dominant one. Childs does scant justice to the

passionate concern of such scholars as these that the message of Romans should not be consigned to the past but should address our own generation. (In this connection, it seems strange that Kasemann's commentary on Romans, which — however much one may disagree with it — is one of the unquestionably great modern New Testament commentaries, can be so cursorily dismissed as “tedious and difficult to use” (550).) This is one example of a problem which recurs throughout the book: what is supposed to be a new and significant alternative to traditional exegesis often turns out to be remarkably similar to the exegesis which it is intended to replace.

My second complaint about the passage quoted above concerns the way in which the New Testament has been translated directly into contemporary theological affirmations; in summarizing the theological content of Romans, Childs is at the same time making his own confession of faith. I do not wish to claim that it is impossible to make the proclamation of Romans or of any other New Testament book one's own; but what does seem illegitimate is the short-cut straight from the text to one's own credo without a thorough discussion of the meaning of the language one is using — a discussion which belongs to the province of the systematic theologian. Phrases like “God's eschatological intervention in Jesus Christ” and “the redemption of the world” are all very well as part of the peculiar language-game played by theologians, but they are mere rhetoric with no significant content if their meaning is not explained. I would not be surprised if many members even of “the community of faith” had very little idea of what an “eschatological intervention” might be. The use of such language in itself does little or nothing to clarify the meaning of the biblical texts.

But more important than the question of whether or not Childs has succeeded in providing a significant new approach to the biblical texts is the question he raises about the validity of the historical critical approach to the New Testament. As we have seen, Childs concedes to historical criticism a limited validity within a certain (unspecified) area, but holds that it is often a hindrance to interpretation and in the last resort unnecessary. At one point, he describes the standpoint he is opposing as follows: “The critic presumes to stand above the text, outside the circle of tradition, and from this detached vantage point adjudicate the truth or error of the New Testament's time-conditionality” (51). This sentence deserves careful exegesis. To begin with, the critic is accused of “presumption”, the *hybris* which theologians tell us is the essence of sin. Those who try to free themselves from inherited pre-suppositions and prejudices, and who make their goal the objectivity pursued by all true scientific and historical work, are simply guilty of “presumption”, and should instead submit themselves to the authority of “tradition”. The critic's sin is blamed on his “detached vantage point”, his “standing above the text”, and his “adjudicating its truth or error”. But the attitude of detachment should not be seen in this negative light. Detachment means respect for the integrity of the text, the desire to let it be itself without arbitrarily trying to force it to address one's own concerns. Detachment means rejecting the narcissistic approach which asks only, “What can get out of the text?” In this respect, the attitude of the biblical scholar is the same as that of the anthropologist studying the culture of a little-known tribe: he must respect the integrity of the object of study, and not try to use it as a means of furthering his own ends. In

the last resort, detachment should be associated with humility and not with *hybris*, and so should be regarded as an intellectual virtue.

But to describe the work of the biblical scholar solely in terms of “detachment” would be seriously misleading. In addition to detachment, historical study demands a passionate commitment to recreating the past and to making it live again. Its aim is not to ignore what is of central importance and to concern itself only with what is peripheral, but to bring to life texts which are otherwise to a large extent obscure by showing that they are written by and for real people with real human needs and concerns. It calls for the exercise of sympathy and imagination as well as learning, and to that extent is far removed from the coldly calculating attitude which the word “detachment” might suggest. This answers the complaint that biblical criticism is not “existential”, that it does not involve or affect the interpreter's subjectivity. It is true that biblical criticism is not “existential” in the sense that, unlike “canonical criticism”, it does not claim to be able to mediate “encounter with God”; it has no such theurgical pretensions. But it is “existential” in the sense that becoming acquainted with another country and culture may be an occasion not just for an increase in knowledge but for enrichment, insight and the broadening of one's mental horizons.

Admittedly, New Testament scholarship does not always live up to these high ideals, and one suspects that much of the modern dissatisfaction with it derives from encounters with some of its duller manifestations. One thinks for example of books devoted to the exegesis of single verses, which, having laboriously worked through all the multitude of scholarly opinions on the subject, conclude that the verse in question is hopelessly obscure and will probably never be really understood. One thinks too of more speculative books which attempt to prove highly dubious hypotheses with still more dubious arguments, which convince no-one but their authors, and which merely succeed in exasperating their readers. But such works as these are not the heart of the problem, which is the fact that entering the world of the New Testament is a demanding and complex matter, calling for patience and persistence. There are no short-cuts to insight. It is wrong to dismiss the careful, methodical investigation of comparatively minor points as irrelevant to the true purpose of the New Testament, since it is often through such attention to detail that the broader picture begins to emerge. The patience which this requires is again in the last resort an ethical quality.

Childs' main complaint about historical criticism is that it is irrelevant to the church. This complaint may be answered in various ways. First, historical criticism is relevant to the church because the desire for understanding is an integral part of being human. This desire for understanding is not such an urgent human need as the basic needs for food, shelter, community and so forth, but it is significant nonetheless. We find ourselves in a world which is in many respects puzzling, but we also find that we have a capacity for understanding which enables us in a limited but important way to come to terms with the world. It is this real need, and not mere idle curiosity, which motivates both the child's persistent questioning and the historian's attempts to understand the past from which we have come. The members of “the community of faith” are normal

human beings with human needs, and in their case the question about the past from which we have come will take the specific form of a question about the nature of Christian origins. For such people, the insight into Christian origins which historical study can provide is or ought to be not only interesting but also important. On Childs' view, this ought not to be so; such people should presumably be dissuaded from historical investigation, since the community of faith has *already* been provided with a sufficient guide for the interpretation of Scripture (395). But whoever these Gnostics may be who claim to possess the fulness of knowledge and insight by virtue of their membership of the church, many Christians will persist in asserting that they do *not* understand Scripture as fully as they would like, and so will continue to regard historical study as important.

A second answer to the complaint that historical criticism is irrelevant to the church is to point to its importance in achieving freedom from theological and ecclesiastical absolutism. The continuing influence of the various forms of fundamentalism (and not only Protestant ones) is obvious, not least in Professor Childs' native land. Although some may find in them a way to a satisfying and meaningful life, they are ultimately to be judged as morally as well as intellectually inadequate, since they do so much to foster a world-view which sees fellow human beings solely in terms of their religious commitment. The divisiveness of such a world-view is clear: those who share the ideology of the fundamentalist group are the righteous, and the majority of the human race which does not share it is simply written off. The sectarian stance of the New Testament offers abundant justification for this outlook, and it is therefore important for the church as well as for society that there are institutions in which a different approach to the New Testament is taught — one which emphasizes its variety and time-conditioned nature. By contrast, Childs' approach seems to provide no way of countering theological absolutism, even though that is not something which he personally would favour. It is not the case that the freedom from such absolutism which historical criticism helps to provide is necessarily the freedom of secular irreligion. Proof of that is the fact that most of the best-known theologians of this century (Karl Barth is perhaps an exception) have been able to make use of its findings in their own work of theological construction.

Historical criticism is thus relevant for the church: it enables its members to understand where they have come from, and it provides an effective counter to a misuse of the New Testament which has damaging social consequences. On the other hand, it is important to assert the freedom of historical criticism from church control; it has its own logic, autonomy and integrity, and the church may not impose restrictions on it. But it seems that Childs does wish to impose restrictions on it in the name of the church. On the *a priori* grounds that a particular writing is in the canon, he claims to be able to know that certain interpretative possibilities are correct and that alternative views are erroneous. Here are some examples of this:

- i) Since the Gospel of Matthew is canonical, it *cannot* teach that salvation is dependent in part on human moral effort (75).
- ii) Since the Pastoral Epistles were accepted into the canon as Pauline, the (probably correct) theory that they are in fact pseudepigraphal should not

determine the way in which they are interpreted (382ff).

- iii) The Epistle to the Hebrews was linked by the early church to the apostle Paul, and so is not to be interpreted as post-apostolic (418).
- iv) As a canonical book, Acts provides hermeneutical guidelines for the interpretation of Paul's letters (240).

What is at issue here is not whether the individual opinions are correct in themselves; it is the claim to be able to establish particular views not by means of generally-accepted methods of exegesis, but on the *a priori* grounds that the text is canonical. It is nowhere explained precisely *why* modern interpreters should have their freedom curtailed by the decisions taken in the first few centuries of the church's existence about the contents of the canon. It is simply assumed that loyalty to the contemporary community of faith *must* involve acceptance of the canon as one's chief hermeneutical principle. One must stand unquestioning within "the circle of tradition"; one must submit to the authority of the past. Wherever this attitude belongs, it is not in the modern university, and one doubts if it is really what the modern church needs either.

Childs' argument is complex and hedged about with qualifications. He is not simply a conservative who wishes to re-establish an old-fashioned view of Scripture. Instead, he wishes to assert both that historical criticism is correct in many of its conclusions, and that this should have no real impact on the church's use of the Bible. It is a curious balancing act, and one cannot feel that it succeeds in its aim of pointing the way to a new and more satisfactory form of biblical interpretation. It is apparently motivated by nostalgia — nostalgia for a time before the advent of insistent historical questions, when the canon was regarded as a self-evident unity, when the identification of the contents of the Bible with the truth was unquestioned, and when the Bible served in an unproblematic way as food and drink for both soul and mind. But Paradise (if that is what this was) has been irretrievably lost, and the way back is barred. Whether one likes it or not, historical criticism is here to stay, since despite all its problems and ambiguities it does succeed again and again in illuminating texts which are otherwise obscure. There will no doubt continue to be tensions between historical criticism and a more church-oriented view of the New Testament, but tensions are not always a bad thing, and are in any case rarely resolved by simply denying the significance of one of the partners in the debate.

It may be worthwhile in conclusion to discuss this tension between the concerns of historical criticism and of the church in connection with the New Testament. To dismiss it as deriving from sheer obscurantism on the part of the church is too facile a solution, and it is regrettable that this patronizing attitude is so often taken. While spokesmen for the church may sometimes be guilty of obscurantism, the problem goes deeper than that. From Childs' standpoint, the problem may be summarized as follows: Whatever its value may be, historical criticism does not seem to speak adequately about the real subject of the New Testament, i.e. God as he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. Whatever one feels about Childs' methods and conclusions, one must respect the integrity of this point of view, which would be

shared by very many with some knowledge of an academic approach to the New Testament, but for whom the church and not the university is the natural context for New Testament interpretation. Let us therefore pose the question: In what sense, if any, does historical criticism further the enterprise of theology, rational discourse about God?

One type of answer to this question would be given by those New Testament scholars (probably a majority) who are committed both to a historical study of the New Testament and to the church's belief that the New Testament is the irreplaceable witness to a unique act of self-revelation by God. Such scholars would emphasize that revelation and the biblical testimony to it were given in a time-conditioned form; the treasure is to be found only in the earthen vessels of particular circumstances, persons and places. To deny this would be to reject the incarnation and to affirm docetism. Historical study of the New Testament is therefore indispensable for theology; it is not itself theology, but constitutes an essential prolegomenon for theology. Such an approach has its problems, but it is quite possible to pursue historical study of the New Testament with integrity and to regard it as ultimately ancillary to the still more important theological questions. This at least goes some way towards answering the complaint that historical criticism inevitably ignores the heart of the New Testament.

But historical study need not fulfil this purely ancillary role; it does not necessarily serve the explication of the church's faith in Jesus Christ, since in itself it is neutral and cannot presuppose a particular religious commitment. One may find oneself unable to accept the proposition that the New Testament is the authentic witness to a unique divine self-disclosure. If so, all that one will be able to see with the

aid of historical criticism will be purely human activity: the genesis of a new form of religion, sometimes moving and impressive, but no less a human artefact than any other form of religion, and so lacking the ultimate significance ascribed to it by Christian theology. But such a position is not necessarily as devoid of theological content as it might seem. In Christian tradition, the phrase *via negativa* refers to the denial that God is appropriately described in human language, a denial which is paradoxically a way to God, the mystery beyond language from which all existence derives. "God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few". Historical criticism, carried on in independence of Christian faith, may take a path which is both negative and genuinely religious. It may lead one to believe that the history reflected by the New Testament is in principle no different from any other history: the product of conflicting human intentions, compromises, misunderstandings, and all the other ambiguities of human life. One may therefore conclude that God is *not* in this place, that the key to the ultimate mysteries which we think that we dimly perceive is not to be found in the events underlying the New Testament. This discovery (if that is what it is) may paradoxically be itself a way to God, if with the *via negativa* one holds that this must be a way from what one thought one knew to what is unknowable, and from what one thought was clear to what is incomprehensible. Such an experience is perhaps at least distantly related to the encounter with the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, which, according to some, is what religion is really about.

NOTES:

1. B.S. Childs, *An Introduction to the New Testament as Canon*, SCM Press, London, 1984, pp. xxv + 572, price £15.
2. In its context, this statement is concerned only with the Pastoral Epistles. But it applies equally well to Childs' approach as a whole.