

Canon and canonical scripture interpretation

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Canon transliterates a Greek word meaning “measuring rod,” and then “rule,” “standard.” In this article, the term will designate the collections of writings set apart from others by the faith communities of Judaism and Christianity as having special authority in matters of faith and practice. *Canon* is therefore more or less equivalent to “Bible” and “holy/sacred scripture.”

Canon has traditionally been used in the context of discussions of the origin, extent, and level of authority of these collections. Scholars generally agree that the Jewish scriptures (our Old Testament) were canonised in three successive stages: the Law/Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. This canonisation process was complex and probably extended from the fifth or fourth

century BCE, at the latest, to the end of the first century CE; much debate surrounds the details and dates of the process.

Historical-critical methods uncovered valuable knowledge about the development of the texts and about the ancient world. But the theological meaning and message of the Bible became increasingly elusive.

The early Christian church had at first only one canon, the Jewish scriptures, used primarily in their Greek version, which is known as the Septuagint. The Septuagint contains a number of writings, called the Apocrypha, which are not found in the Hebrew canon; most of them were originally composed in Greek. The early churches circulated, read, and held in high esteem the

writings now in our New Testament, but for some time they did not consider these writings equal in authority to the Jewish scriptures.

By the second century, the church felt it necessary to establish its own canon, called the New Testament (new covenant) because the church understood itself to be living under the new covenant predicted in Jeremiah 31:31. For Christians, this designation

effectively made the Jewish scriptures their *Old Testament*. The church had increasingly recognised the authority and power inherent in the writings now making up our New Testament. Councils and official pronouncements only affirmed this authority; they did not confer it.

Against Marcion, a church leader who rejected the Old Testament altogether and accepted as canonical only a truncated Gospel of Luke (“cleansed” of Jewish elements) and ten letters of Paul, the main church affirmed the Old Testament as canonical for Christians and added many of the writings now found in our New Testament. As was the case for the Old Testament, the process of finalising the list of New Testament books took some time; that process was completed by the end of the fourth century. Regarding the extent of the Old Testament canon, the church has never reached complete agreement. The Roman Catholic, Anglican, and (with slight differences) Orthodox churches have included the Apocrypha in the canon as deuterocanonical (having a lesser authority). Protestants have generally accepted only the list of books in the Hebrew canon.¹

Historical-critical scholarship and theological scripture interpretation

Prevailing trends in biblical scholarship from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment on led increasingly to a reading of biblical texts from the outside, first from a rationalist point of view, and then from a historicist one, rather than from the vantage point of faith. Both modes of reading resulted in fragmentation of the biblical texts in search of specific data. Rationalists decided on the basis of (supposedly) universal reason what of the Bible’s content God (if there was one) could have intended, and what God did not intend. Historicists avoided the question of God and anything supernatural by defining the transcendent claims of the Bible as lying outside their competence; theirs was the task of mining from scripture “historical” data for constructing a “true” picture (as judged by empirical yardsticks) of the history of Israel, the “historical Jesus,” and the early church.

For such historical reconstruction, noncanonical ancient writings from within and from outside Israel and the church were as useful as biblical data; in fact, these scholars often considered

such texts more trustworthy, because they were less likely to be “skewed” by faith elements. Archaeological finds were often especially welcome, to support or to discredit biblical claims. What the faith communities of Israel and the church had considered canon, holy scripture, had no distinctive status in this “historical-critical” approach. In retrospect, however, many scholars today recognise that the supposedly objective historicism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had its own presuppositions, its own beliefs.

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Biblical studies developed ever more sophisticated historical methods to penetrate behind the final text of the Bible to uncover its earlier stages of development. Seminary students learn about literary criticism, form criticism, redaction history, etc. These approaches uncovered much valuable knowledge about the development of the biblical texts, as well as about the ancient past and its cultures. But the theological meaning and message of the Bible, or the place and mes-

sage of God, became increasingly elusive. As a result, many pastors became insecure in preaching from the Bible, and congregations went hungering for the word of God. From the early twentieth century on, various Christian historical-critical scholars recognised this dilemma and attempted to build Old Testament and New Testament theologies on a critically reconstructed textual foundation. They produced impressive works and gained much insight, but this mode of establishing biblical theology by historical-critical means remained problematic for the church.

Toward canonical Bible interpretation

In 1970, Brevard S. Childs issued a major challenge to the whole agenda of historical-critical Bible scholarship with the publication of his epoch-making book *Biblical Theology in Crisis*.² He did not reject historical-critical study as such, but he argued that the historical-critical search for precanonical stages behind the final (canonical) text could not lead to an adequate theological understanding of the Bible. In this work and in many others to follow, he developed a new agenda that has come to be called

“canonical criticism,” although he at first rejected that term.³ Many scholars have found Childs’s appeal convincing and have developed their own versions of canonical criticism/interpretation, following Childs in his basic direction but also modifying his approach in various ways. In the following section, I will outline key points that have marked canonical scripture interpretation in recent decades; I do not intend to characterise Childs’s position specifically.⁴

Canon and community of faith. The Bible, understood as canon, must not be separated from the faith communities, Jewish and Christian, that have discerned it to be canon; they form its first and most proper interpretive communities. Canonical interpretation of the Christian canon (both testaments) is interpretation from within the faith community. That does not make it unscholarly; rather, it defines the context and aim of interpretation differently than Enlightenment-based historical-critical study does. In other words, to derive Christian theology from the Bible, one must interpret it from within, rather than take a “detached” stance so as to interpret it from without.

From precanonical to canonical context. Canonical interpreters generally do not reject historical-critical interpretation as such. However, the two approaches have different interests. Historical-critical study generally proceeds from the final text to its earlier stages, in order to understand the Bible’s prehistory and origins. Canonical study seeks to understand the final text, and it uses historical findings only insofar as they shed light on the final text. Historical criticism sees the proper context for interpreting biblical texts to be the historical context of their time of origin or their stages of transmission. Canonical criticism emphasises that these earlier historical stages were not canon (holy scripture) for either Jews or Christians. To discover the meaning of biblical texts as scripture for these faith communities, one has to interpret them in their final form and in the (literary) context of the whole Bible in its final form.

Final text and canonical authority. Canonical interpretation privileges the final canonical text, but not by disregarding the long process of its shaping. What Childs says of the Old Testament in this respect applies to the whole Bible as well: “The shape of the biblical text reflects a history of encounter between God and

Israel. . . . The significance of the final form of the biblical text is that it alone bears witness to the full history of revelation.”⁵ In other words, the contributions of the various speakers/authors and tradents collectively reach a fuller fruition in the final text than the separate contributions at different stages could achieve—even assuming our data and methods were adequate for reconstructing these earlier stages. This broad collective foundation of revelation is the foundation for the authority of the canon.

Of course, closure of the canon does not mean the end of God’s work or revelation. On the faith assumption that God acts in character—is faithful, to speak biblically—it is precisely the canon that helps the Christian community in discerning new revelation. Further, an ongoing process of exegesis, hermeneutics, and theological creativity offers a wide scope for a dynamic faith development as history moves on. The canon also offers a common base that makes dialogue between various Christian scholars, churches, and denominations fruitful.

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Diversity within the canon and intra-canonical dialectic. Christian canonical interpretation acknowledges the great diversity of texts and viewpoints the communities of faith have included in the canon. The analogy of a basketball game can illustrate the diversity of texts held together by the canon, and the nature of canonical theological deliberation. The court represents the boundaries of the canon, the players are the individual biblical books or texts, and the game (the ball’s movement) is Christian

theological interfacing of texts in dialogue. The ball must stay within the court. There is no spot within the court, however, where the ball may not at some time bounce, and no player who cannot at some time handle it legitimately. (Every biblical text can address us as word of God at some time.) Some players are stronger than others, and the players do not all handle the ball equally often. (The Gospels or Isaiah will carry more of the brunt of the game than Nahum, Esther, or 3 John.) There are positions and rules. But the ball cannot be withheld from any team member on the court (any text included in the canon), and sometimes

even the weakest player may shoot a basket (make a theological point).

Sampling the impact of canonical interpretation

To apply canonical interpretation to scripture allows us to hear the Bible's message in new and significant ways, on at least three levels: the level of short texts, the level of longer bodies of texts (a book or another longer literary unit), and the level of the whole canon (for Christians, both testaments). I want to illustrate this effect with a few examples, viewed against the contrasting background of historical-critical interpretation.

Canonical interpretation of a short text within a longer unit

Exodus 2:23-25. Historical-critical analysis generally considers these verses about God's taking note of Israel's suffering to be an insertion of the late P (Priestly) source into a continuous story context from the older J (Yahwistic) and E (Elohistic) sources of the Pentateuch. It disturbs the flow of the story. Martin Noth, for example, in his widely read historical-critical commentary on Exodus, makes this observation in one sentence, and then excludes this text from further interpretation, moving from 2:22 to 3:1 in his exegesis.⁶

From a canonical perspective, on the other hand, which regards all parts of the extant text to have equal integrity (so that none may be dismissed as secondary, intrusions, etc.), I see the use of verses 23-25 as shaping the story in a particular way: The three earlier sections of Exodus 2 (vv. 1-10, 11-15, 16-22) recount the escape (or "salvation") of one Israelite, Moses, from Pharaoh. Like chapter 1, these parts of chapter 2 are marked by an apparent absence of God. A tension is set up for the reader: What about the other Israelites? In 2:23-25, the reader is allowed a glimpse behind the scenes: God has not forgotten the other Israelites but remembers his covenant with Abraham. We, the readers, can now expect that the God who has saved Moses and remembers the other Israelites will save the latter also. Moses is the first fruits (1 Cor. 15:20) of those to be saved. This reading not only sees integral importance in this short text but contributes to my understanding and structuring of the whole book of Exodus (cf. below).⁷

Canonical interpretation of a biblical book

Amos. Historical-critical scholarship has rightly established a long history of textual development of the book of Amos, extending from the prophet Amos himself to the final form of the book. Most of the precanonical layers of the book—to the extent that we can reconstruct them—carry through, even if in ever-revised form, the theme of God’s judgment. Only the very last verses (9:8b-15) introduce the theme of salvation, with focus on the house of David. These verses have been regarded by most historical critics as “inauthentic” later addition(s). Historical critics have generally focused their interest on the “authentic” words of Amos, attributing decreasing value to later stages of the text, and usually dismissing the final salvation verses as inconsequential for the message of the book.

From a canonical perspective, however, Brevard Childs acknowledges the long prehistory but sees precisely in these last salvation verses the most important step in the canonical shaping of the book. The final shapers of the canonical text let the judgment theme of Amos stand in all its harshness, but by adding these verses, they endow the book with a wider interpretive horizon. In Childs’s words, “The editor effects a decisive canonical shaping of the book by placing Amos’ words [of judgment, first on Israel, then also on Judah] within a broader eschatological framework which transcends the perspective of the prophet himself.”⁸ The theological significance of the conclusion is to stress that salvation and not judgment is God’s ultimate plan for Israel.

Exodus. From a historical-critical standpoint, the book of Exodus represents a particularly motley amalgam of materials from diverse sources. The intertwined Pentateuchal sources J and E provide a sort of story line for chapters 1–19, repeatedly interspersed with passages from the source P. Chapters 20–24 and 32–34 seem to show J and E again, but they include a large amount of originally independent legal material. Chapters 25–31 and 35–40 (the tabernacle chapters) are such extensive blocks of P material that they throw the whole book off balance, so that many commentators give them brief and scanty attention. This assessment—though highly hypothetical—may well represent fairly the complexity of the book’s precanonical development. In their concern for sources, however, historical critics have generally paid

little attention to the compositional integrity of the final canonical book, basing their exegesis largely on the interpretive context of the precanonical sources.

My own canonical approach to the book of Exodus began with the literary hypothesis that—in addition to being a part of the larger Pentateuch—Exodus also has its own literary completeness. If so, then all parts must contribute to the meaning and message of the whole. “What is Reuel/Jethro’s function in relation to the whole?” I asked myself with some puzzlement. He is prominent in two places far from each other (2:16–4:20) and (18:1–27) but

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appears nowhere else. Studying these two, I discovered that Jethro’s role is that of host; he welcomes first Moses, escaped from Egypt, and then Israel, also escaped from Egypt. Each of these welcomings is followed by a theophany (appearance of God) with a commission, first to Moses at the burning bush, and then to Israel at Mount Sinai, wrapped in smoke and fire. This parallelism between Moses and Israel became for me the foundation of the canonical-literary structure of the book: salvation, then commissioning (of Moses), followed by salvation, then commissioning (of Israel, foreshadowed in

2:23–25; cf. above). Within this structure of the whole, one can trace a narrative movement from Israel building for Pharaoh as slaves (chapters 1–2) to Israel building freely and enthusiastically for God (chapters 35–40); the main theme of Exodus is not liberation (in the political sense) but change of masters.

Seen thus, the extended tabernacle chapters can no longer be disregarded as an inflated later Priestly expansion but become a necessary completion of the book’s message. Nor can the story of Israel’s engaging in self-chosen and idolatrous worship at the foot of the mountain (the golden calf story in chapters 32–34) be understood properly if one does not keep in mind that this event happens at the very time when up on the mountain God gives Moses instructions for proper worship, although the former derives from the sources J/E, and the latter (chapters 25–31) from P. Canonical shaping has melded the two into one coherent and

meaningful text, even if stylistic differences and other details have not been fully harmonised.

Canonical interpretation on the level of the whole canon

The canon as embracing both testaments. All Christians hold, at least formally, that the Christian canon includes the Old and the New Testament, in that order. This inner structure is not haphazard, and the order is not interchangeable; the church holds the two parts together, giving the Old Testament priority as theological foundation, and granting the New Testament priority as fullness of ultimate direction. Accepting this unity, canonical interpretation insists that a text does not yield its Christian theological message until it has been interpreted in the context of the whole canon (both testaments). Christianity has never defined precisely how this exegesis is to happen but has left it to the probing of exegetes, theologians, and preachers. Our lectionaries, for example, suggest both Old and New Testament readings for each Sunday, but the preacher or worship planner carries responsibility to work with these texts.⁹ The weight of a biblical theme may be lodged in either testament. Christian theology of creation and of family, for example, are based primarily on Old Testament texts but receive significant New Testament nuances. The nature of the coming kingdom of God, on the other hand, and the role of the Messiah in it, although they build on Old Testament prophecy, find their fullest exposition in the New Testament.

The order of books within the testaments. The order of books in the testaments varies for Jews and Christians, and to some extent for Christians in their various Bible translations and editions. We can hardly assume that every aspect of the order within any Christian Bible edition is theologically meaningful. Nevertheless, some arrangements have long been recognised as deliberate canonical shaping. After Judges, which presents a lawless society, especially regarding women (Judges 17–21), comes Ruth, which again puts women at the centre, but here in a Torah-abiding society. What is achieved when an originally coherent work, Luke-Acts, is now separated by the Gospel of John? Does Romans stand at the head of Paul's letters because of theological preeminence or simply because it is the longest of the epistles? Many such questions tantalise the mind of the interpreter.

Conclusion

I believe canonical interpretation to be particularly effective in helping the church read the Bible in search of the biblical foundations of Christian theology, a task that historical-critical methods have failed to do adequately. One must remember, however, that no one method is perfect. The turn to canonical interpretation in recent decades shares many continuities with pre-Enlightenment approaches to scripture, but it is not regressive; it employs historical-critical methods and data to the extent that they are needed to illumine the canonical text. It is an approach—a cluster of methods—that is not static but is being honed to increasing adequacy by the contributions of a growing number of contemporary scholars.

Notes

¹ For the story of canonisation, see V. George Shillington, *Reading the Sacred Text: An Introduction to Biblical Studies* (London: T & T Clark, 2002), 110–36. A recent and new construal of the story of canonisation can be found in John W. Miller, *How the Bible Came to Be: Exploring the Narrative and Message* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004).

² Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970); see especially 97–107.

³ Like Childs, and at approximately the same time, James A. Sanders (*Torah and Canon* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972]) also called for renewed attention to the canon, but by a “canonical criticism” that would constitute another subdiscipline of historical-critical study and thus not challenge the historical-critical tradition.

⁴ For a thorough, critical, but sympathetic study of Childs’s approach, see Mark G. Brett, *Biblical Criticism in Crisis? The Impact of the Canonical Approach on Old Testament Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁵ Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 75–76. Cf. also Brett, *Biblical Criticism*, 97–98.

⁶ Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary*, trans. J. S. Bowden (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 33, 36–38.

⁷ For fuller canonical treatment, see Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Waterloo, ON; Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000), 44, 49–50.

⁸ Childs, *Introduction*, 407; cf. 405–408.

⁹ In the Believers Church Bible Commentary series, the section “The Text in Biblical Context” also invites the reader to discover intertextual relationships.

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