

CANONICAL READING OF THE OLD TESTAMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF CRITICAL SCHOLARSHIP

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I

In the early seventies of this century a new term appeared in biblical scholarship: *Canonical Criticism*. It was James Sanders who explicitly introduced this term in his essay *Torah and Canon* (1972). The discussion on this program was from its very beginning also closely linked to work of Brevard Childs. In the meantime this term and its manifold implications are widely used and debated.

Let me first of all say something about terminology. The word 'canon' has been used, of course, much earlier in Bible scholarship, but under a different aspect. We can now distinguish between two main aspects of canon studies. I quote the categorization by one well-known expert in this field: Sid Leiman in the foreword to the second edition of his book, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture* (1991), speaks about two related but distinct categories, not to be confused with each other. The one category may be termed 'canonization studies.' Its focus is on the history of the formation of the biblical canon from its inception to its closing. The other category has been termed 'canonical criticism.' Its focus is primarily on the function of the biblical canon throughout the religious history of a particular faith community. For the latter Leiman mentions explicitly Childs and Sanders, "among the founders and major proponents."

In my eyes the first category is very important, not only from a historical point of view but also to understand under what circumstances and religious conditions the canon of the Bible, as we now have it, came into being. Yet for me personally the second category is the field I am involved in. This field tends to be "theological and constructive," to quote Leiman again. This is exactly my personal interest. The main impulse to work in this field I received from Brevard Childs. His book, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (1979), had a great impact on my work with the Hebrew Bible. Before the appearance of this book I had already begun, by myself, to

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widespread debate on 'diachronic' and 'synchronic.' In this debate these two approaches are often taken as contradictions. But this is not for canonical exegesis as I understand it. Of course, the emphasis on the final shape of the text entails a kind of synchronic reading. But canonical exegesis does not deny that the text has its diachronic dimensions, and it does not close its eyes to certain tensions and even contradictions within one individual biblical text as well as among different texts. The term 'final shape' even implies the awareness of earlier stages of the text before it got shaped in its final form. The question is how to deal with the assumed earlier stages and how to relate them to the final one.

There is still another term that comes closer to the idea of canonical interpretation, namely: 'holistic interpretation.' A very good example of this method is Moshe Greenberg's commentary on Ezekiel in the Anchor Bible. He puts his holistic reading explicitly against the common modern critical exegesis which he sees often guided by prejudices. In contrast to that Greenberg himself pleads for a "listening to [the text] patiently and humbly." I like this saying very much: "listening to [the text] patiently and humbly." That is exactly what I think we have to do.

II

It would go beyond the scope of this lecture to deal with all aspects connected with the idea and concept of canonical criticism. There is a lot of literature about these questions, including several doctoral dissertations. I will mention just two of them. The first is the book by Mark Brett *Biblical Criticism in Crisis? The Impact of the Canonical Approach on Old Testament Studies* (1991). This title obviously suggests the title of Brevard Childs' book from 1970 *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (without the question mark!). Brett discusses Childs' approach under hermeneutical aspects. Even more explicitly this is done by Paul Noble in his book *The Canonical Approach: A Critical Reconstruction of the Hermeneutics of Brevard S. Childs* (1995). There are also many articles and essays in this field. Yet this kind of literature mainly deals with theoretical problems about what a canonical approach could be and should be, and in particular, whether and how Brevard Childs met his own criteria or that of the respective critical writer. All this might be useful and in a sense necessary. But what is still missing is the demonstration of how a canonical approach would be executed in the exegetical practice. Up to now there are very few examples of exegesis done from such a point of departure. But in my view this would be the test for the value of the method. What does it mean for biblical text if it will be interpreted by a canonical approach? Therefore I myself want to step down to the level of concrete exegetical questions. This will, of course, include reflections about the hermeneutical problems involved, but those problems will not be in the foreground.

Let me just mention that this is exactly the intention of the Old Testament theology I am writing. It contains a reading of the whole Hebrew Bible from its first verse to its last one, according to the given text. But it is written with the full awareness of the critical reading of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. I am very curious about the reaction this book will find in the field of Old Testament scholarship.

Given my approach to understand canonical exegesis as a continuation and improvement of historical-critical exegesis I have to start from a point where historical-critical interpretation of a text often ends. One of the main activities of exegetes in the traditional

field is to detect tensions and inconsistencies in the text which leads to a separation of different levels within the text and finally to a distinction of 'sources' and the like. Actually this leads to a destruction of the given text and to establishing new texts out of the pieces. Often commentaries in this tradition do not interpret the text we have before us in the Bible but their own 'reconstructed' texts as, e.g., the Yahwist or the Priestly Code, etc.

Let us reflect for a moment what is going on here. I want to emphasize two things. First, the interpreter decides according to his or her own criteria whether the text is homogeneous or not. Of course, in many cases those criteria are not developed by the individual interpreter but are commonly accepted by the scholarly guild; but nevertheless they are defined by modern Bible scholars. The first task of the canonical interpreter would be not to *destroy* the text by critical analytical operations but to try to *understand* it in its given form and wording. It was one of the great errors of the modern critical exegesis to judge biblical texts, and that means: critique texts, according to modern criteria. Of course, during the last century we learned a lot about the literature and the way of thinking in the Ancient Near East; but nevertheless, in exegetical decisions many arguments from the nineteenth century are still taken as valid. What the canonical interpreter has to do is, according to the earlier quoted formulation by Moshe Greenberg, "listening to [the text] patiently and humbly." No one single argument having put forward by earlier exegetes against the integrity of a text can be accepted by a canonically working interpreter without rigid scrutiny.

Secondly, the usual work of the critical interpreter is to 'reconstruct' certain earlier or 'original' texts. This 'reconstructing' of texts seems to me to be another major mistake of the traditional historical-critical methodology. Reconstructing earlier texts means fabricating new texts that never existed except in the minds or, so to speak, in the laboratories of scholars—even if it is widely accepted and thousandfold written about. But actually such a text does not 'exist.' In particular, such a text can never be subject of exegesis, and one cannot explain its message, such as a message of 'J' or of 'P' or even a message of the newly discovered 'Holiness School.'

Of course, in certain cases there will remain a tension within a text. The question is how to handle it. The usual critical way will be to emphasize the differences between two or even more levels of the text and to take them as parts of 'sources,' label them with certain names or numbers, etc. The canonical interpreter first of all will try to understand the relations and interrelations between the seemingly different elements of the text. Let me explain this by one very elementary example. For me it is obvious that the Book of Genesis is not written by one single author. In particular those elements that are usually defined as 'priestly' are clearly distinguishable from the rest. In this respect I believe that at least some basic insights of modern Pentateuchal Criticism are convincing and even fruitful. The question is how to handle those insights. Obviously chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis are written by different authors in a different language, putting the just created man in different surroundings. Traditional critical exegesis would emphasize the differences and interpret the two chapters independently from each other or even in a certain contrast to each other. Canonical exegesis will also ascertain this difference; but it will not stop there, because only now begins the real exegetical task: to try to understand the message of the given text. This implies the conviction that those who shaped the given text had a certain

idea of the relationship between the two stories and even of their common message.

This is a fundamental point. Modern scholars often believe that the so-called 'redactors' just put different texts together without caring much about inconsistencies. Therefore the scholar has to put things straight, to repair, so to speak, the mistakes ancient redactors had made. That leads very often to a separate and even independent interpretation of the individual parts of the 'reconstructed' text. This is definitely the case with the two accounts of creation in the two first chapters of the Book of Genesis. The first is written by 'P,' the second by 'J.' As I said before, there are indeed two different voices discernable. But now the interesting and really important question is: How do they sound together?

Let me just mention one main aspect: In chapter 1 God says to the just created human beings: "Fill the earth and master it" (1:28). What does this mean? One explanation is given in the second chapter. God puts the man into the garden he has made in order "to till it and keep it" or "tend it" or even better "guard it" (2:15). Looking from here it is obvious that to 'master' is not to 'subdue' or to 'rule' but to work carefully and to guard. It seems to me obvious that the author of the given text understood the relationship between the two chapters that way. They are not in contrast to each other but related to each other.

At this point there exists still another traditional mistake. Usually the first section is quoted as Gen. 1:1-2:4a. This implies that the phrase "These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created" belongs as a *subscription* to the first account of creation. But this runs counter to all the other appearances of this phrase. It is always the *superscription* of what follows. Critical scholars believed that this 'priestly' worded phrase must belong to the 'priestly' chapter 1. Recently scholars began to understand that putting this 'priestly' phrase at the beginning of the following non-priestly text shows the deliberate joining of the two stories by a sophisticated writer. I mention two well-known scholars who definitely declared that this *elleh tôl dôl* formula has to be understood as a heading of the following 'yahwistic' account. The first one is Frank Coss who made this point in his book *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (1973); the second one is again Brevard Childs who in his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* wrote that this formula in Gen. 2:4 "serves as a superscription to the account which follows and can, under no circumstances, either be shifted to a position preceding 1:1, or treated as a subscription to 1:1-2:4a" (p. 145).

The person who put this verse at the beginning of the second account of creation obviously cannot be called a 'redactor' in the traditional, rather depreciative sense. On the contrary, he makes the reader understand the continuity between the two accounts that look at creation from different points of view. Saying that includes, on the one hand, that in this case the diachronic element is fully to be accepted. This does not at all mean that traditional diachronic reading is to be accepted everywhere where it is now assumed by the majority of scholars. In many cases a more differentiated understanding of the intentions of the texts will lead to a new insight in the homogeneity of a text. But the example of Genesis 1 and 2 shows us that in a number of cases (also from a canonical point of view) certain diachronic distinctions within one text remain to be accepted. But on the other hand, taking the given text seriously means that it can never be the task of exegesis to separate individual parts of the text from each other and to 'reconstruct' earlier versions

of a text. As I said before: this kind of reconstruction means to destroy the given text and to put a new text in its place that actually never existed. Diachronic observations can only lead to certain insights or even assumptions about certain elements of the *pre*history of the text. Therefore they have to be seen from the point of view of the final form of the text. It is this final text that has to be interpreted. Neither did the final authors of the text want us to separate what they had put together nor had any believing community through the ages ever heard about the message of a 'Yahwist' and a 'Priestly Code' and whatever. They had the Book of Genesis, and they had it as part of the Pentateuch, the Torah. There is no *text* in the strict sense of the word earlier than that.

The same is true for other books of the Hebrew Bible. In some cases the problems are more complicated as in the Book of Isaiah. Many Old Testament scholars take it simply for granted that there existed a Deutero-Isaiah and also a Trito-Isaiah. Both of these assumed prophets or authors are never mentioned within the Book of Isaiah. This is one of the cases where we can see one particular disturbing way of using the historical-critical method, namely to destroy the biblical books. If you take the well known *Introduction to the Old Testament* by Otto Kaiser, you will find the three assumed parts of the Book of Isaiah dealt with in different chapters as if they did not belong to the same book. Another example: a recent German *Habilitationsschrift* had on its printed title the word '*Deuterojesaja-Buch*, 'The Book of Deutero-Isaiah.'² I wrote a letter to the young colleague asking him what he meant by this 'book,' which I have never seen. But I did not receive an answer.

In my eyes the starting point for any interpretation of the Book of Isaiah has to be that there is only *one* Book of Isaiah and not two or three. It is the task of the interpreter to try to understand the concept behind putting together texts from obviously different times into one book under the name of one prophet. Here things are more complicated than in the Book of Genesis because it is quite evident that certain texts within the Book of Isaiah belong to different periods. In the first part of the book Israel is confronted with the threat by the Assyrians in the years between 734 and 701. Later the Israelites obviously are in the Babylonian Exile, and the name of the Persian king Cyrus is mentioned who captured Babylon in 539. And even later the Israelites are seen back in Jerusalem having built the Second Temple. But the intention of the Book of Isaiah is not to serve for later generations as a source for reconstructing historical events. Again the question is, why are these seemingly divergent texts put together?

This is an interesting and sometimes disturbing question. But I am glad to tell you that for a number of years in the framework of the *Society of Biblical Literature* there has existed a seminar or group devoted to the 'Formation of the Book of Isaiah.' Here this kind of question is asked and discussed. I have to confess that even in that group we are still far from any agreement about the details, but at least we have begun to ask questions related to the Book of Isaiah as a whole.

The same is true with regard to the Book of the Twelve Prophets. I believe that here things are still more complicated because those who collected these twelve writings explicitly mentioned the names of the different prophets and in a number of cases also the date of their preaching. But again, the question is, why did they put together these twelve writings in a book that from the earliest times on has been taken as *one* book? Here also a seminar has been constituted within the *Society of Biblical Literature* dealing

with the 'Formation of the Book of the Twelve.'

Finally I will have the privilege of lecturing in a few days at the annual meeting of the SBL on *Reading the Psalter as One Theological Book*. In the Psalter things are again different. In a sense the situation is comparable to the Book of the Twelve Prophets insofar as we have clearly defined individual psalms. But there are also many hints of interrelationships between certain psalms by headings and other elements. In addition there is the division of the Psalter into five parts or 'books' which is also deliberate and meaningful. Personally, I find it particularly interesting that a number of psalms have headings referring to certain situations in the life of David. Here we have another example of diachronic and synchronic reading. It is obvious that these headings are added to the psalms at a later time. But those who added it had of course a clear idea why they did it and what they wanted to express by that. It is particularly important that the majority of these headings refer to situations in David's life where he suffered from persecution and also from the outcome of his own sins. So it is a very specific image of David that is presented in these psalms. It would be the exegetical tasks to interpret these roles of David as an example for those who pray lamentation psalms. Of course, this is just one of the many aspects that have to be taken into consideration when reading the Psalter holistically.

So in different fields the question of the unity of biblical books is asked in a new way. This does not at all mean that all the scholars involved are engaged in that kind of canonical reading I have in mind. But nevertheless, some very important steps have been taken in a direction that can lead to a new kind of scholarly approach to the texts of the Hebrew Bible.

In this first lecture I tried rather briefly to deal with the exegetical problems of a canonical interpretation of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. This whole field is at the same time of high theological relevance. This includes the question of the Old Testament as 'canon' from a Christian point of view. Can the Old Testament itself be understood as a canon in the theological sense or is it only to be taken as the first part of the Christian Bible that has no independent theological relevance? This will be one of the questions I will speak about in my lecture on The Old Testament: Jewish and Christian Bible.

NOTES

1. M. Greenberg, "The Vision of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 8-11: A Holistic Interpretation," part 1 reprinted in M. Greenberg, *Studies in the Bible and Jewish Thought*, 1995, pp. 227-234.
2. R.G. Kratz, *Kyros im Deuteroseptuaginta-Buch*, FAT 1 (Tübingen: Mohrsiebeck, 1991).

