Canon fire

By Walter Brueggemann in the December 5, 2001 issue

In Review

Isaiah (Old Testament Library)

Brevard S. Childs
Westminster John Knox

Since the publication of his *Biblical Theology in Crisis* in 1970, Brevard Childs (recently retired from Yale Divinity School) has pursued a single-minded interpretive

agenda with passion and imagination: that the legitimate interpretation of the Bible is as the scripture of the church. Interpretation is to be done in the context of the faith of the church and in the service of its practice. In a variety of ways he has opposed the practice of “autonomous” interpretation outside the matrix of faith that is characteristic of the academic guild, which is preoccupied with historical questions, and which regards historical criticism as the goal and end of interpretation. From Childs’s perspective, the nature of the biblical material itself makes interpretation inescapably theological. It has as its subject the theological claims made in and through the text and received by the church.

While Childs’s claim is contentious, he has largely succeeded in changing the face of the interpretive project, and he has done so almost single-handedly. (His effort has been greatly abetted by the fact that in the 1970s, as he got under way, there was in Old Testament studies a widespread break away from historical criticism. That break was part of a larger loss of confidence in modernist certitude that was broadly based and no doubt sharply advanced by the failure of the “experts” concerning the Vietnam War. Thus Childs’s program is not without contextual connections, though he himself would minimize the impact of such a context.)

Childs has decisively altered the way in which interpreters like myself, who are situated in the church, do interpretation; moreover, even those who disagree with his perspective, sometimes vociferously, must struggle with the questions upon which he has insisted and the perspective he has legitimated by the power of his argument.

For his program in general Childs prefers the catch-all term “canonical,” which, over time, has meant a variety of different things in his writing. But it has consistently meant that the biblical text is shaped with a theological intentionality that is deeply and intimately connected to the most elemental faith claims of the church. Childs has written a series of books, an impressive corpus, that has become discipline-defining. Each has been something of an experiment to see how the biblical material might be read afresh from a canonical perspective, even though Childs himself would eschew the term “experimentation.”

It seemed evident to me in his *Introduction to the Bible as Scripture* in 1979 (wherein he considers the “canonical” shape of each book of the Old Testament) that the Book of Isaiah was his most successful probe. Isaiah’s expanse and complexity gave him working room for interpretation, and it lent itself peculiarly well

to the dynamic of “old/new” that has been defining for Childs’s interpretive approach. The “old/new” for Childs is variously Old Testament–New Testament, old text–new redaction as interpretation, or historical-canonical.

In each case, Childs’s point is that in the biblical text one can see the canonical interpreters themselves reworking older material in order to make fresh, normative theological claims that move decisively beyond the locus of the early text. The Book of Isaiah, with its important divisions by biblical critics into “First, Second and Third Isaiah,” especially lends itself to this argument. In the present volume, Childs continues that particular probe and moves in rich and suggestive directions.

Childs’s commentary is a remarkable achievement, nothing less than an intellectual tour de force. The reader needs to ponder what passion, resilience and steadfastness are required to keep a particular interpretive agenda always in view through such a long text, some of which is less than scintillating and some of which surely defies interpretation. Childs works through the text without ducking any of the difficult problems it presents and offers suggestive theological interpretations. He gives only slight attention to textual problems, so that the commentary has none of the marks of the older, forbidding commentaries that have the feel of a phone book.

In his erudition, Childs is, of course, fully engaged with the critical tradition of scholarship; his primary contemporary conversation partners are W. A. M. Beuken, Christopher Seitz, Marvin Sweeney and Hugh Williamson. In the end, however, it is Childs’s own fresh perspective that claims attention, sometimes yielding sober analysis and sometimes (as in chapters 24-27) the soaring rhetoric of passionate exposition. Much of what the book offers is well-expressed consensus interpretation. Here and there one might quibble with a detail. But the sum total is stunning in its readiness to rethink the text and the faith to which it testifies.

Childs’s purpose, however, is not merely to offer yet another commentary, albeit an innovative and comprehensive one. Rather it is to call repeated and sustained attention to the interpretive process within the text whereby materials that can be located historically are transposed through a redactional process into canonical materials that are no longer connected in any primary way to their historical rootage, but to the total encompassment of the larger canonical text, and are to be interpreted not historically but canonically. Child’s procedure is to call attention to each text’s problematic, and in his exposition to show not only how the problematic

may be resolved but how the problematic itself becomes a clue to faithful canonical interpretation. It is this recurring act of transposition that preoccupies the work and that constitutes a decisive gain, as the text is shown to be an intentional theological project.

In order to appreciate fully this programmatic accent, it is useful to cite Childs's recurring insistence on it:

> It is thus crucial that the interpretation not focus simply on the preliterary form of the text. To interpret this text as a historical vestige, moored in misguided hopes from Israel's past, is to misunderstand the canonical forces at work in shaping the prophetic tradition into a corpus of scripture directed to Israel's subsequent generations of faith.
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> Although accurate historical dating can at times be of exegetical significance, the crucial interpretive task lies in determining the narrative function to which such texts have been assigned, rather than in supplying a reconstructed setting apart from its present literary (canonical) context.
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> The proper role for the study of the diachronic dimensions of the text lies not in fragmenting or in replacing the synchronic level, but in using a recovery of a depth dimension for increasing an understanding of the theological substance that constitutes the biblical narrative itself. When an earlier generation used the term kerygmatic, it was expressing a similar concern.
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> Hermeneutically speaking it is crucial to understand how the major force in the shaping of the prophetic corpus derived from the experience by Israel of an ongoing encounter with God mediated through scripture rather than through the direct influence of allegedly independent events of world affairs. It is precisely this filtering process of scriptural reflection on the ways of God that gave a coherent meaning to the changing life of Israel in the world of human affairs.
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> The second point to make . . . turns on the theological role of the editors in shaping the biblical material to render it in light of the larger literary collection.

> In sum, I would argue that the crucial interpretive problem of 56:1-8 lies in carefully distinguishing between the literary (canonical) function of the text and historical reconstructions developed according to a prior diachronic interpretation of its setting, dating, and postexilic addressee.

It is this transposition to the canonical that permits the text to have its free, recurring say in the Book of Isaiah and, consequently, in the faith of Israel and of the church.

Despite the power of this programmatic interpretation, it is nevertheless true, as Childs himself occasionally recognizes, that the matter is not so simple, and he cannot be done so readily with the "historical." Thus he can say of Isaiah 15-16 that "much of the difficulty of understanding this passage lies in the inability to establish its original historical setting." And in the complex narratives of Isaiah 36-39, he is at pains to insist upon historical rootage: "I shall defend the position that the speech of the Rabshekeh is not simply a free creation of the redactor and without any serious connection with the historical events of 701 but has an important element of historical verisimilitude. . . . And even in its redacted form the text is placed after 587, surely an historical judgment." Thus the narrative reflects "a genuine historical memory." As a consequence, there "are certain restraints on Israel's creative imagination." Chapter 39, moreover, is a "bridge" between Babylonian kings.

Indeed, Childs is quite aware of the danger of cutting off a text's historical rooting so as to produce a "timeless" text, a critique to which his work has been subjected. "The importance of studying parallels lies in providing a check against isolating the Hebrew prophet from his specific historical context as if his text represented a timeless religious literature that floated above all historical particularity," he writes. "In sum, Isa. 53:2ff. cannot be interpreted either as simply a future prophecy or as a timeless metaphor of the suffering nation of Israel." The linkage of historical and canonical is complicated, and Childs has not been able to resolve it. But what he has done is to legitimate and make clear the "canonical" side of this dialectic that has been absent from most "historical" studies.

The Christian reader of this commentary will be interested in the connections between Isaiah and the New Testament. On the whole, Childs is most restrained in making such connections and for the most part does so only when the text is explicit. On only two occasions does he offer an extended interpretation pointing toward the New Testament.

First, he provides a reflection on Isaiah 53 “Within a Canonical Context.” There he is free to make explicit the Christian claim that Isaiah 53 was a text, “as authoritative scripture, that exercised pressure on the early church in its struggle to understand the suffering and death of Jesus Christ.” One of Childs’s most helpful interpretations concerns the vexed issue of Isaiah 49:6, wherein the servant Israel seems to have a mission to Israel. Childs proposes that the faithful prophet “has been named servant, not to replace corporate Israel—the servant in Second Isaiah remains inseparable from Israel—but as a faithful embodiment of the nation Israel who has not preformed its chosen role.” Thus the relation of servant to Israel is as *ecclesiola* in *ecclesia*.

Second, Childs offers a brief comment on the quotation of Isaiah 61 in Luke 4. He observes that in Luke’s usage, Isaiah 61 is “scripture’s foreshadowing of [Christ’s] entire earthly ministry,” that the servant songs refer to the “entire mission of the servant, his life, death, and offspring,” and not simply to his death. These particular cases exhibit the fine balance Childs practices as a passionate Christian interpreter and as a restrained exegete who listens attentively to the texts.

Childs’s book is an immense act of interpretive imagination. It is in this regard that I raise a query that does not detract at all from my profound appreciation for what he has wrought. The commentary is very much the scholarly accomplishment of an identifiable scholar, an imaginative interpreter who is present in this remarkable interpretation. Yet Childs sometimes—I think too often—proceeds as though his interpretive finesse were simply a “given” in the text itself (rather like the defense of Aaron, though in Childs’s case with a positive outcome. Aaron claimed simply that, when he threw the people’s gold into the fire, “out came this calf”). This tone tends to obscure the imaginative work of the interpreter, and gives the impression that the interpretation is beyond criticism, as though it were an unquestioned given in the text itself. It gives the interpretation itself something like canonical status. But Childs’s interpretations are not textual “givens,” but are often based on certain critical, redactional judgments that are “made to stick” by the force of Childs’s assertion, and they are in the interest of sometimes rather explicit theological advocacy.

A case in point is Childs’s recurring use of the term “coercion,” by which he apparently means that the text itself, in its deep authority, requires a certain exposition, redaction or reading. This is a curious usage on two counts; first it is a term that bespeaks harsh force, a connotation that I would not attribute to an authorizing evangelical text. And second, what Childs has found to be coercive—that

is, inescapably required—has not been found so by many other theologically serious interpreters before him.

I respectfully suggest that the coercion is not on the part of the text itself, much as Childs might wish it to be, but on the part of the interpreter, who with passion matched by learning strains to establish the interpretive point beyond a shadow of doubt or reservation. That is, what the commentator marks as “coercive” is presented as a canonical claim, so that the imaginative force of the interpreter remains hidden. The inference from such a rhetorical usage may be that this is a final reading not to be questioned, a claim that Childs himself would make only in his moments of deepest passion.

The temptation of the “canonical” commentator to hide in the “canonical” text is moreover evident in Childs’s dismissal of perspectives other than his own. While he looks askance at historical interpretation per se, he is completely impatient with “sociological” interpretation, dismissive of “psychological” interpretation, alert to what is “ideological” and utterly contemptuous of what he terms “modern ‘politically correct’ formulation.” The latter charge is leveled against interpretations that, to his mind, are excessively “inclusive,” when the “canonical” makes clear that the “wicked” are not ever to be included.

Now Childs may be correct about misinformed sociological and psychological interpretation, and I make no defense of the cases he cites. What I wonder about is the characteristic assumption of the commentary that “theological” interpretation, as distinct from the psychological or sociological, is pure and innocent and, moreover, that this commentator work is completely free of such matters. I am unpersuaded. This commentator, like every commentator, is deeply set in a myriad of experiential forces that cannot be screened out simply by a resolve to do the “canonical,” even as the ancient powers of canonization were not innocent and detached. As the text is not “timeless,” for all of its theological intentionality, so every commentator produces work that is “timeful” and surely not disinterested. It is no derogation to notice that Childs’s commentary is not an innocent one, but is, like every serious commentary, a powerful advocacy against several implied adversaries.

The conclusion of the Book of Isaiah (66:23-24) is particularly noteworthy because the penultimate verse asserts in wondrous fashion that “all flesh shall come to worship me,” whereas the final verse moves in the opposite direction of harsh

judgment on those who rebel. Childs insists on verse 24 as a decisive clue for reading, whereas much interpretation and synagogue practice give the final word to verse 23. Of verse 24, Childs concludes: “The enemies of God in Third Isaiah are identified with those of every age—thus the consistent appeal to the enemies of First Isaiah—because they constitute an ontological opposition to God’s will.”

The vigor of this verdict is noteworthy, because Childs seems to escalate the rhetoric even beyond that of the text itself by an introduction of the modifier “ontological.” The use of the term is startling and seems to move in a Manichean direction. This term, together with Childs’s earlier-stated contempt for “politically correct” inclusiveness, suggests a profound rejection of those who stand outside the pale of a faith that is “canonical” and “coercive.” In any case, after that rhetorical venture, Childs draws back to join traditional practice: “It is, therefore, not by chance that the book of Isaiah closes on this same note of judgment. Still, it is not wrong theologically when the synagogue chose to repeat the promise of 66:23 after v. 24 in order to bear testimony that the worship of the one true God by his faithful has the last word.” But the harshness of the added modifier rings in one’s ears, because we cannot have it both ways as a final word, standing theologically with verse 23, canonically with verse 24.

For all his commitment to the faith and practice of the church, Childs has not written a commentary easily accessible to those working in the church. He has not intended to do so. His is more of a meta-commentary, concerned with elemental interpretive matters. But those who are willing to do the work that this commentary requires will be deeply rewarded. Pondering this commentary will stiffen the spine of the faithful for preaching, teaching, interpretation and life in the world.