

Cambridge University Press

0521401194 - Biblical Criticism in Crisis?: The Impact of the Canonical Approach  
on Old Testament Studies

Mark G. Brett

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: setting the scene*

## I

The 1960s was a troubled decade for biblical critics who harboured theological interests. These critics witnessed the decline of an influential school of thought which, especially in the non-fundamentalist circles of North America, Britain and Germany, had promised to bridge the gap between academic studies and the use of the Bible in the churches. During the 1950s and early 1960s, the members of this so-called Biblical Theology Movement argued that theology needed to be governed by biblical categories – or more specifically by ‘Hebrew thought’ – and that these distinctive categories could be discovered through the critical study of individual Hebrew words and their etymologies. Indeed, even the Greek New Testament was thought to breathe the same Hebraic spirit. At the same time, this movement stressed that the God of the Bible was a God who acted in *history*, and that historical criticism was therefore the most appropriate method of biblical study. Rigorous study of the Bible in its ancient Near Eastern context would serve only to clarify the distinctiveness of the biblical traditions. In short, for the Biblical Theology Movement, the historical and critical study both of the Hebrew language and of Israelite history was of decisive theological significance.

Beginning in 1961, the foundations of this movement were undermined from several directions at once. First, James Barr formulated a detailed and devastating critique of its characteristic linguistic methods. In *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, he demonstrated that both the relevance of etymologies, and the

Cambridge University Press

0521401194 - Biblical Criticism in Crisis?: The Impact of the Canonical Approach  
on Old Testament Studies

Mark G. Brett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

conflation of 'biblical concepts' with particular Hebrew words, were highly problematic issues. Also in 1961, the theologian Langdon Gilkey published an essay<sup>1</sup> showing that several works of Biblical Theology had unwittingly smuggled in decidedly modern philosophical ideas even where they claimed to be thinking only with the categories of Hebraic thought. He also argued that the stress on God's action in history actually masked highly sceptical, although properly critical, conclusions about what actually happened in the decisive acts of God in Israelite history. Two years later Barr pushed this latter problem even further by rejecting the idea that revelation in history was at all central to the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup> Subsequent scholarship seemed only to confirm that the apparently distinctive ideas of the Old Testament were not as distinctive as the Biblical Theology Movement had claimed.

These were the issues that lay behind the publication, in 1970, of Brevard Childs's book *Biblical Theology in Crisis*. In this work, Childs collected the previous criticisms of the Biblical Theology Movement and added many of his own. He also made some programmatic suggestions about how biblical criticism could both move forward from this crisis and remain relevant to the needs of the churches. One of the clearest points to emerge from his writing at this stage (and one which had already emerged in his earlier, more technical monographs) was that biblical theology needed to give up its 'scientific' interest in the historicity of biblical material; he argued that we have no access to historical facts except through the lenses that biblical traditions provide. The attempt to reconstruct critically what actually happened in Israelite history was both doomed to failure on critical grounds and, in any case, theologically uninteresting. What was needed, he suggested, was a biblical theology that explored all the scriptural traditions of the entire Christian canon, comparing and contrasting them without reference to the hypotheses of modern historians of Israel. Moreover, the basic unit of investigation was to be the individual text, not the individual word. Philology was merely the servant of exegesis, and biblical theology (now in the more general sense) was to be primarily an exegetical enterprise.

Cambridge University Press

0521401194 - Biblical Criticism in Crisis?: The Impact of the Canonical Approach  
on Old Testament Studies

Mark G. Brett

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

The question that immediately arose, however, was what *kind* of exegesis? The dominant exegetical disciplines in biblical criticism had laid great stress on the origins and development of the biblical traditions before they came to be arranged in the present form of our received texts. Whether these earlier forms of the material were thought of as literary sources or oral traditions, the effect had been the same: attention had been drawn away from the 'final' or present form of the canonical literature. Exegetical hypotheses were almost invariably focused on the previous life of textual units before they came to be arranged and edited into their present contexts. Although Childs was already a recognized master of these critical historical disciplines, he quickly began to argue that the gap that they created between professional scholarship and the churches' use of the Bible was unbridgeable. Both church and synagogue had always used the canonical literature in its present form, and it is unlikely that they will ever do otherwise. Childs argued, therefore, that the rich resources of critical scholarship should be turned to focus on the biblical literature in its canonical shape and context.

An additional implication of these arguments was drawn out in Childs's commentary, *Exodus*, published in 1974. The historical critical disciplines that dealt with source documents and oral traditions could only provide the *preliminary* basis for what must be the central concern of exegesis – the final form of biblical texts. Many scholars took this concern to be simply a variant of a more recent historical discipline, redaction criticism, that focused on the final editing of the biblical manuscripts. But this was not the case. Childs was not primarily concerned with the intentions or historical settings of these final editors; he was concerned with the meaning of the texts as such, irrespective of what any author or editor might have intended at some particular stage in a text's development.

Childs's methodological statements were often not, however, as clear as one would wish. Moreover, the relationship between his canonical approach and the historical or 'diachronic' disciplines which he continued to use was ambiguous. The diachronic questions of literary sources and oral traditions were

Cambridge University Press

0521401194 - Biblical Criticism in Crisis?: The Impact of the Canonical Approach on Old Testament Studies

Mark G. Brett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

treated in the *Exodus* commentary in separate sections from his discussions of the final form. At points, he characterized these discussions of the final form as 'synchronic' to distinguish them from the diachronic exegesis he also provided. In short, there seemed to be an unresolved tension between two different approaches which were being held together in the same commentary.

With the publication of his magnum opus in 1979, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, this uneasy tension had turned into an outright polemic against diachronic approaches. He repeatedly argued that his own 'canonical approach' (again, at times characterized as synchronic) resolved a long list of impasses into which historical criticism of the Bible had led us. Moreover, the focus on biblical authors and editors in their historical contexts was misplaced, he suggested, since these authors and editors had deliberately obscured their own merely individual contributions so that successive biblical communities could focus on the text itself. For Childs, the meaning of a biblical text was not simply identical with the historically reconstructed *intentions* of any particular author or editor.

## II

I have, so far, outlined the development of Childs's work in terms which are internal to the discipline of biblical studies (although modern theology has been hovering in the wings). But having described the canonical approach in its mature formulation, it now becomes interesting to locate it within the wider context of the philosophy of interpretation. For example, Childs's argument that the meaning of a biblical text is not simply identical with its author's intention has a great deal in common with the literary movement known as New Criticism, a movement which was widely influential during the middle decades of this century. The New Critics also developed a 'formalist' approach to literary texts which set out to read them quite independently of such extrinsic information as the biography or intentions of an author. A poem, for example, was held to be a successful piece of work only if it conveyed its own

Cambridge University Press  
0521401194 - Biblical Criticism in Crisis?: The Impact of the Canonical Approach  
on Old Testament Studies

Mark G. Brett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

*Introduction*

5

meaning on its own intrinsic merits. An author, by this view, became simply one other reader once a poem was created.

The connections between New Criticism and Childs's canonical approach were recognized by John Barton in his lucid work on the variety of methods in recent biblical studies, *Reading the Old Testament* (1984). Barton's argument, in summary, is that Childs's approach is 'a natural successor to redaction criticism within a literary climate permeated by New Criticism',<sup>3</sup> although he is careful to point out that this is not Childs's own understanding of the matter. Barton's balanced account of the canonical approach is worthy of careful consideration. However, in the discussion that follows, I hope to show that there is a much wider range of literary theories that might be fruitfully compared with the canonical approach (and literary critics might be relieved to hear this since New Criticism was well past its heyday by the time Childs published his commentary on *Exodus*). Our discussion, as with Barton's, is not simply an account of Childs's scholarly intentions. Nor is it an attempt to evaluate a biblical scholar by 'external' criteria provided by the philosophy of interpretation. Rather, there are certain weaknesses in Childs's methodological reflections which can be *charitably reconstructed* by comparisons with the influential works of Hans-Robert Jauss, Karl Popper and Hans-Georg Gadamer.<sup>4</sup> Childs has received some unjustified criticisms, and I aim to show how the canonical approach can become a coherent mode of biblical interpretation.

The argument of this book will be unfolded in several stages, each addressing the central methodological problems of the canonical approach. First, Childs has sometimes appeared methodologically totalitarian: it seems as if he wants to overwhelm the entire discipline and press everyone into his service. In his better moments, however, even he has expressed more pluralist sentiments. My own argument is that the canonical approach, suitably clarified, should become *one* approach to the Bible among others. Accordingly, my 'pluralist' account of biblical studies, expounded in the first chapter, provides the wider disciplinary context for the canonical approach. In this situation of pluralism we should take care not

Cambridge University Press

0521401194 - Biblical Criticism in Crisis?: The Impact of the Canonical Approach on Old Testament Studies

Mark G. Brett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

to conflate interpretative interests that are logically separable. The concern, for example, with an author's intention is one among several interests scholars may legitimately pursue. The newer literary concern with texts as such represents another set of interests. Many of our recent methodological disputes in biblical studies have been confused since we have failed to recognize that the discipline encompasses different kinds of interpretative tasks.<sup>5</sup> Scholars need to be persuaded that no one method, however rigorous, will answer all the questions that may be brought to a text. Thus, the answer to the first problem with the canonical approach, its totalitarian tendency, is to place it in a pluralist context.

After a detailed analysis of Childs's work in chapters 2 and 3, the second major problem emerges: the canonical approach plays down the significance of historical background in the interpretation of ancient texts. In chapter 4 I analyse this issue of historical background and discover two quite separate problems, one of which relates to the interpretation of any culture (not just the biblical ones) and one which is peculiarly theological. Some of Childs's arguments about the irrelevance of historical background are here defended, and others rejected. In the long run it seems fruitless to prohibit scholarly interests in biblical authors and their historical contexts; these are perfectly coherent interests to pursue, even if the results of historical reconstruction are 'merely' hypothetical.

In chapter 5 I argue that Childs's theoretical weaknesses might best be remedied by drawing on Gadamer's philosophical discussion of 'the classic'. Gadamer argues, for example, that what makes a text classic is precisely its influence upon generations later than its author. Neither the author nor the original audience can appreciate a text *as a classic*; its future reception cannot be foreseen. I argue that the interpretation of biblical texts as *canonical* is analogous. If this analogy is accepted, then certain objections to the canonical approach can be refuted. For example, James Barr's insistence that there was no canon in the biblical period becomes an irrelevant criticism of Childs's work.<sup>6</sup> I also argue in chapter 5 that Gadamer's account of the classic, along with Popper's view of objective knowledge, can provide some justification for the low profile in

Cambridge University Press

0521401194 - Biblical Criticism in Crisis?: The Impact of the Canonical Approach on Old Testament Studies

Mark G. Brett

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

the canonical approach of both authorial intention and historical background. There is a surprising convergence of these two philosophers on one point: some texts can and do ‘speak for themselves’.

In some respects, this shift of focus from authorial intention and historical background brings the canonical approach more into line with the stress in some schools of literary theory on the role of the reader. My argument requires, however, that the canonical approach be distinguished from attempts to write the history of biblical exegesis. It is, no doubt, continual exegesis and commentary which preserves a text and gives it the status of a classic in the first place. However, for a text to *remain* classical it must engender new and different readings. Although Childs has been in constant conversation with the interpreters of past ages – a feature of his writing which distinguishes him from most Whiggish modern critics – he has always been providing us with fresh interpretations. His interest in the history of exegesis has never been simply antiquarian. Indeed, I argue that the history of interpretation represents a logically separable interest from contemporary exegesis, no matter how much we may engage in conversation with great interpreters from the past. Separating the canonical approach from ‘reception history’ (a discipline of literary criticism associated especially with Hans-Robert Jauss) is important, since although Childs has strongly emphasized the history of exegesis, the distinctiveness of his approach does not actually lie in this area. What is distinctive about the canonical approach is that it provides fresh interpretations of the final form of scripture, interpretations that are relatively independent of any author, editor or reader in any past situation.

## III

Finally, I address Childs’s theological interests. None of the preceding reconstruction of the canonical approach is directly dependent upon theology, and as a pluralist I would not like to develop a general theory about exactly what kinds of biblical interpretation will be useful for the modern church. Nevertheless, in recognition of Childs’s emphasis on the theological value of the canonical approach, this book goes one step further. It

Cambridge University Press

0521401194 - Biblical Criticism in Crisis?: The Impact of the Canonical Approach on Old Testament Studies

Mark G. Brett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

examines the points of contact between Childs's work and a major school of modern theology (or to use a more technical term 'postmodern' theology) which has been developed especially by Childs's colleagues at Yale University, Hans Frei and George Lindbeck. This school has been at the forefront of recent hermeneutical debates, especially in North America, and Great Britain. Lindbeck characterizes this theology as 'intratextual', a somewhat complex notion which at this stage can only be introduced in barest outline.<sup>7</sup> My argument, however, will be that the canonical approach can make an important contribution to discussions about intratextuality, and indeed, if it is to enter into modern theological conversations then it needs to enter through the door that Lindbeck, among others, has opened. Biblical scholars cannot go on assuming the normative value of the Bible in Christianity without actually conversing with modern *theologians* about the nature of biblical authority.<sup>8</sup>

The notion of intratextuality begins from the now familiar theory,<sup>9</sup> that a community's perception of reality is decisively shaped by its cultural tradition, its symbolic framework, and in some sense by its language. There are different views about how this lens for viewing reality should be conceived, but a wide range of social theorists and philosophers suggest that individuals do not have any access to reality except through a socially constructed interpretative framework that is constituted by webs of culture, symbol and language. On the basis of this theory, Lindbeck has constructed what he calls a cultural-linguistic model of religion, that is, of all religions.

He has also, however, gone one controversial step further. He has argued that, especially in Christianity, canonical *scripture* provides the basic material for this cultural-linguistic framework. He makes scripture intratextual in two respects: first, following Hans Frei, he suggests that it is the figural or typological reading of scripture that provides the analogical links between the diverse elements of the canon. Second, it is the figural reading *of the world* that makes the world intelligible within the cultural-linguistic framework of Christianity. That is, scripture itself becomes the interpretative framework through which individuals and events – both in the biblical period and in



Cambridge University Press

0521401194 - Biblical Criticism in Crisis?: The Impact of the Canonical Approach on Old Testament Studies

Mark G. Brett

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

the present – are to be understood. No individual or event referred to in scripture should be reinterpreted independently of this framework; although it may be possible to redescribe historical phenomena by means of non-biblical categories, such modern redescrptions cannot be said to belong to the same tradition of religious belief and practice (or, at the very least, one should say that if biblical conceptualities are to be displaced, then the burden of proof lies with those whose fundamental categories of thought are non-biblical). On this view, critical reconstructions of Israelite history which attempt to go behind scripture, and even critical interpretations of *contemporary* events which are formulated without the aid of scripture, lead to difficulties. In both cases, alternative interpretative frameworks are being conflated with the framework provided by the biblical canon.

This is, as already noted, only a preliminary outline of Lindbeck's views, and it will be filled out in the more extended discussion below. In chapter 6 I will argue that Lindbeck's ideas and those of Childs resemble each other in a number of ways, but one important point needs to be noted at this stage. The idea of intratextuality seems to be not unrelated to the attempt of the Biblical Theology Movement to think with 'biblical categories'. The rather naive theological and linguistic methods of the earlier movement have been replaced with much more subtle arguments, but the overall effect seems to be the same.

Let us not, however, underestimate the differences. First, intratextual theology has no interest in the critical reconstruction of events in the biblical period. This has been given up as an impossible exercise, or at least, an exercise that can never hope to secure public agreement. In line with Karl Barth's theology, intratextual theologians eschew all apologetic strategies of justifying Christian beliefs. Both the public realm and the academy, they argue, are far too fragmented for such strategies to be successful. They characterize themselves as postmodern since they have given up the Enlightenment optimism that all rational agents can come to the same conclusions.<sup>10</sup> This has also been Childs's position for many years.

Second, intratextual theologians are not concerned to recover

Cambridge University Press

0521401194 - Biblical Criticism in Crisis?: The Impact of the Canonical Approach on Old Testament Studies

Mark G. Brett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the intentions or thought-world of biblical times. On the contrary, it is precisely the biblical *texts* which are thought to shape the interpretative framework of Christianity. The new Yale theologians are not dependent on the old etymological approach to biblical concepts; rather, they speak more often of *narratives* as the basic unit of theological significance. Especially Hans Frei has argued that biblical scholars of the nineteenth century lost a hermeneutical opportunity when they ignored the realistic novels written by their contemporaries. Frei has introduced the notion that biblical narrative is more often 'history-like' than it is 'historical'. The meaning of a biblical text, for Frei, is to be located in the realistic narrative itself and not in any supposed historical referents to which the texts apparently point. The critical pursuit of these referents has been the undoing of biblical scholarship.

Frei's argument, in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1974), has been influential in recent biblical scholarship, and Childs himself has cited it favourably. I would suggest, however, that in a context of hermeneutical pluralism the question of reference need not be disposed of as quickly as some might wish. Indeed, some have argued that precisely on theological grounds we should be interested in what lies 'behind' the text. For example, what if the biblical canon has, for ideological reasons, seriously misrepresented the events to which it bears witness? The historical detail of what lies behind the text may then become a matter of pressing theological relevance, and this is one of the reasons why the critique of ideology has been much emphasized in recent hermeneutical discussions. I will return to this thorny issue, and to the problem that it represents for intratextual theology, as the details of my argument unfold.

We need to begin by placing the canonical approach within a pluralist understanding of contemporary biblical studies.