

## Canon Criticism and the Meaning of *Sitz im Leben*

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Since the early 1960s, Brevard Childs has made major contributions in his attempt to move beyond an old and biased biblical theology to a new, academically sound, and open-minded theology of the Christian community. While his program is inspiring it also has its disconcerting aspects. What does it mean to take seriously the decision concerning canon made by the primitive church, and consequently to base modern exegesis on the *canonical* texts? Does this approach provide a secret opening for fundamentalism, the seductive opportunity to harmonize biblical conflicts of faith, to level out historical, cultural, and social discrepancies, to homogenize the biblical message—and in the interest of whom? Is this the heretical lust for clarity and unquestioned authority (cf. Exodus 32 in its canonical shape)? Such is by no means the case with Brevard Childs's own work. But would others recognize the dangers of his approach, reducing his careful analytical work to a slogan?

Instead of analyzing the impressive work of Brevard Childs in order to discover its strengths and possible weak points, I propose here to reflect freely on one central issue at stake in a canonical approach, namely, the situational fixation of the Word of God, its incarnation in the social history of humankind. These unpretentious thoughts from a distance are meant as a small contribution to an intercontinental dialogue with my former teacher, present friend, and beloved colleague.

*Word and Reality*

Every word, whether spoken or chanted, written or televised, repeated or freshly coined, has its proper context that determines its meaning. There is no such thing as a free-floating word without any solid contextual roots, although loose bits of language occasionally may leave that impression. The soil of all meaningful human articulation is in their interaction; that is, words and language grow from social intercourse. To articulate words is, by definition, to communicate. Soliloquies in themselves are of no interest. If, however, they fall prey to the neighbor's curiosity they immediately enter the realm of communication. All this means that unless we grasp the communicative situation of any word or phrase we are unable to understand it correctly. Words are like bones: They seem rather unattractive and provide little nourishment without their flesh and meat.

At the same time we must appreciate the mobility of words and language. If we talk about "roots" and "soil" in regard to linguistic communication we do not mean to suggest any kind of petrification or sclerosis. On the contrary—in fulfilling their purpose, words are in motion all the time. They are vehicles of meaning, bridging space, time, and other gaps of differentiation. This means nothing more and nothing less than: Words are uttered in order to travel from one life situation to another, taking with them signals and calling for reactions to their place of origin. Such mobility does not mean that words are therefore vagabonds. As soon as a word reaches its addressee it becomes corporal and social again, taking its place, as it were, in the new texture of personal and communal relations. This place will differ more or less from the place occupied earlier in the speaker's world. Yet words do create ties between environments, those of speakers or writers and those of hearers or readers. And what about their significance? Do words accumulate meaning on their journeys? To the contrary, they are unloaded and reloaded every now and then like trucks that operate between various ports of destination.

It seems that the mobility of words causes major problems for the modern exegete. The interpreter of the OT in particular constantly deals with words and texts coming from a thousand-year history of a distant and ancient people. These texts have been transmitted through the ages without interruption by communities of faith, and largely

within the worshiping assembly. The texts have changed their life situations innumerable times. Together with these shifts, naturally, there occurred transmutations of meaning. How can we deal with these ancient witnesses? Looking at the long chain of transmission and of tradents of text and meaning, I cannot help but think that each station where a text incorporated itself, from the beginning to the present day, is worth serious consideration. It is difficult to imagine that any particular time or interpretation acquired or set forth a—or “the”—normative meaning. Why is that so?

Each historical situation has its own dignity and importance which may not be used one against the other. Speaking in traditional theological terms we may put it this way: God addresses humanity, taking its situation with utmost seriousness, no matter how humble and restricted the addressee's life might be. In fact, according to the Bible, God prefers the lowly situations of his weak and lost partners. Consequently, there certainly are no situations of power and glory to be singled out as guidelines for the interpretations of others. Considering the nature of the biblical God we might think of those situations of salvation and liberation typical of the biblical story. Could they be normative for our theological interpretations? Perhaps, but for the time being we should recognize the essential parity between all situations in which God has acted. Neither Exodus nor prophets, neither imperial Israel nor exilic dispersion provide an authoritative pattern for OT theology. The criteria for our interpretations, and eventually for our text preferences (cf. biblical pericopes and lectionaries) invariably emerge through a delicate interplay between present-day exigencies and interests on the one hand and biblical witness on the other.

How can the exegete become aware of that formative reality behind the text? Readers of the Bible always have felt the need to place its words within their contexts, to be sure. The collocation has been different, however, in varying times and schools of thought. In the past, a very popular mode of planting ancient texts into their respective realities was their personalization. To determine the supposed speaker or author of a given word was considered sufficient. Thus the psychic reality of the individual author became all-important. What did he feel when he spoke or wrote these words? Sunday school exegesis up to this day quite often asks this question and by asking it already strikes a juncture between the ancient situation and today's life experiences. Other approaches to the reality underlying ancient texts

include the archaeological claim that hard and fast evidence drawn from Palestinian or other ancient Near Eastern sites may be essential in locating or even proving certain biblical texts. Furthermore, all the ethnographic, linguistic, historical, and religious research in the biblical and related fields have had as their main purpose to provide the real background for the words and the Word of the Holy Writ.

In spite of all these efforts modern exegetes have been haunted, among other things, by their failure to realize fully and adequately the elusive *Sitz im Leben* of the biblical words and therefore to miss their real meaning. For this reason, modern form criticism, cult-functional analysis, and sociological investigation in OT research since H. Gunkel and S. Mowinckel turned its attention to social customs and institutions. The true background for biblical texts, they argued, is neither individual personalities nor abstract culture but human interaction in definable institutions. Recurring rites and procedures prompted by the exigencies of group life are the matrix for the origin and—still more important—the transmission and regular use of those texts that have come down to us in the Bible. Much recent research in anthropology, linguistics, and folkloristics would support this view.

The individualistic and historicist way of text analysis thus is modified, opening up to include broader, communal views. History, it seems, acquires a new dimension. It is no longer only a punctual and abstract affair, connected to previous and subsequent events by threads of cause and effect. Rather, it is the continuous experience of groups of people. The foundations of history, in fact, are the various social groupings and their interactions. Social history, then, becomes the primary concern for those who want to elucidate the background of biblical texts. The basic idea is that human interaction tends to become ritualized, and that ritualized interaction produces patterns of speech that can be classified. The modern exegete, of course, starts with textual analysis. By way of inference from its patterns and by comparing relevant life situations in similar societies the interpreter may be able to recover the true *Sitz im Leben* of given texts.

### *Types of Life Situations in the Old Testament*

The OT indeed confronts us with a great variety of life situations. There are synchronic diversities in that contemporary groups established themselves from various local or social perspectives, and there are diachronic variations resulting from successive transformations of

social bodies. The modern exegete has to follow up both lines of coordinates and determine as closely as possible the exact position of each given text.

In general and according to research done so far, we may expect the following main areas of life to be represented in OT texts: cult and cultic offices, educational processes, juridical proceedings, warfare and military activities, family life and strife, entertainment and celebration. All these are part of the synchronic level of affairs. Other areas find only occasional expression in extant OT literature, so that they hardly may be considered, from an OT perspective, as text producing: for example, daily labor, household affairs and the daily life of women, magical operations, applied sciences like architecture or navigation, and diplomatic correspondence. Although countless texts must have existed in these fields, they did not enter significantly into OT tradition.

On the diachronic level we have to take account most of all of a sequence of nomadic, tribal, urban, imperial, and ecclesiastical forms of organization, all of which left their stamps on OT tradition. But the OT as a whole cannot be understood as being exclusively tied to any one of these stages of Israel's social history. Moreover, special historical events, identifiable through names and places, sometimes have left their mark, but all of them—from the times of Moses to those of Ezra—have been substantially dissolved into the extant documents of Israel's faith.

The redactional processes, of course, demand special attention in this context. The text-producing situations brought forth the compositions of words and provided the first *Sitz im Leben* for their repeated use. Gradually, continued interest in the customary, useful, and effective texts stimulated their collection, and, to a certain degree, their authorization by the group. Thus collections of laws, proverbs, hymns, tales, and so on came together in order to be used for determined, ritualized purposes. Speaking in broad terms, we may locate these partial and functional collections of OT genres in the preexilic period. Each tradition-building group acted on its own and within a particular area of life; no normative ambitions for the whole of Israel were involved. (I would include here the authentic deuteronomic reform texts, if there are any.)

A significant change took place in exilic and postexilic times. A restored, theocratic community gathered together all the relevant tra-

ditions of old, joining them in the holy Torah that became the supreme norm for all areas of communal and private life. "Prophets" and "Writings," being lesser parts of the canon of authoritative writings, followed in due course. Is this "canon decision" of the early Jewish community to be regarded as the pivotal event, the point at which the OT text finally was created? Are all the preceding productions and uses of text merely preparatory to the authorization of the written Torah under Ezra?

The answer must be in the negative. First of all, the community that created the Torah was a particular one. It was by no means the standard, eternal social or ecclesiastical organization decreed by God for all times and all peoples. Therefore, its decisions, no matter how important they have proved to be, do not have binding force. Theologically speaking, the revelatory value of the canonized text produced by the early Jewish community is neither higher nor lower than that of those texts which originated in former stages and groups. Second, the collection of authoritative material was no homogeneous affair, because existing groups and tensions did not simply disappear in postexilic Israel. Remaining tensions include those between the exiled elite and those left in Judah, between rich and poor, clerics and laity, women and men. There were even factions within the dominating clergy (cf. Numbers 16). The emerging canon could not be a uniform or unilateral document, nor a univocal authority. Third, the older traditions that were brought together in the Torah were quite diverse, like stones from different quarries. No matter how diligently polished by selective and redactional policies, they remained witnesses of distinctive earlier experiences with God.

Consequently, the formation of the Torah was a very normal process of text production. A particular group, in this case the early Jewish community in its various locations and social shapes, used older materials in an updated form in order to articulate its own existence, conduct worship services, educate young people, administer justice, and so on. The focal point of all activities probably was the assembly of the congregation. Here all vital concerns met, and here the authoritative will of Yahweh was experienced in the reading of scripture. Divine instructions for the members' life, admonitions, chastisement, absolution, and comfort occurred in the assembly. Thereafter, the Word of God accompanied the members into their daily routines, being remembered, restudied, and rehearsed whenever necessary. In a

broad sense, Torah reflects its *Sitz im Leben*, the early Jewish congregation.

*Community, Authority, and Canonicity*

All biblical words have their specific place of origin—their *Sitz im Leben*—and their own transmission history. What made these words and texts so worthy to be transmitted through generations? Apart from their function within the group, or rather through it, the communities expressed their experience with the savior God, Yahweh. The words that tell about encounters with him have been constantly reused, not because they were sacred words, but because they carried promise and hope to advance new encounters with him and new salvation experiences.

The main contents of all Israelite experiences with Yahweh may be epitomized in the word “solidarity.” Israel’s desire, at all levels, during all the historic periods, and in all social groupings, was to maintain itself within that life-giving solidarity of God. What Israelites longed for was love through justice and peace. For the early Israelite this implied a very strong emphasis on the welfare of one’s own group. In fact, we may discern in OT literature an annoying, because egocentric, hunger for that equity and order that favors one’s own group. Yahweh most of all is a God who maintains the social position and structure of his followers. This side of the coin is in fact firm evidence of the Word’s incarnation in social structures. There is another side which shows a God who corrects crimes and faults, who sides with those who are weak or have been wronged, who invites in the outsiders and the uprooted. These features for their part prove that God has not been suffocated in a society’s concerns with itself.

If the central message within the varying testimonies of the OT is that of a helpful God, then the search for the “authority” of the texts is altogether wrong. Water in the desert has no authority but it fertilizes the ground and makes it blossom. Thus the biblical texts have no authority but they open up paths toward real human life in a wholesome social environment. They thus testify to the reign of God, and in being used and reused in their proper places they bring about that reign. Admonitions within the Bible to heed and to practice the Word are nothing else than tentatives—justified by special circumstances—to keep the community of faith together, and thus keep in contact with

the living God. Coercion comes not from the Word, but from its ecclesiastical administrators.

Decisions about canon, besides being plain text-producing mechanisms, may be necessary in certain moments in the history of a given community of faith, if taken in self-defense and in order to establish the group's identity. But they must not claim universal validity, and, in fact, such decisions never have had the force of an absolutely binding restriction. If they ever became laws to be strictly obeyed, as in times of fierce orthodoxy, they certainly seriously hampered God's activities and his revelatory solidarity with new groupings of believers.

The Christian community renewed and modified the early Jewish community's decision concerning the canon. But it certainly was an arduous, ambivalent, and never totally conclusive development that led to the Christian canon of Scripture. In the beginning we find a great deal of unrestrained, joyful use of OT Scripture on the part of small, struggling congregations. At the end canon becomes a powerful weapon in the imperial church's battle against dissidents. Yet one should also recognize the fact that Christianity's decisions concerning the canon accompanied that remarkable transition of the old Jewish faith in Yahweh to the lower strata of the Hellenistic Roman society. In this regard the emerging new canon (in open conflict with a shorter Jewish canon) signifies the production of meaningful texts for the Christian community. It happened, as it were, by using and remodeling the holy texts of the forebears.

### *The Sitz im Leben of the Exegete*

In the European hermeneutical discussion there is hardly ever any reference to the exegete's real predisposition, that is, to the interpreter's affiliation with certain social, economic, ethnic, sexual, political, or cultural groups. This is very strange indeed, because one no less than Rudolf Bultmann long ago called attention to the prime importance of "preconceived ideas" in all interpretive proceedings. But Bultmann actually limited preconception to intellectual, emotional, and religious dispositions. The *Sitz im Leben* of the exegete did not enter his considerations. This is very different with some Latin American theologians of our time. They point out vehemently the Babylonian Captivity of theology and church, naturally including exegesis. They sharpen our eyes so that we may realize our being tied up in oppressive

systems of tremendous economic (and military, political, and social) power. Feminist exegetes discover the sexist interpretation of the male majority of their colleagues. Black interpreters unmask a predominantly white and therefore racist reading of the Bible. In short, every exegete is a child of his or her own environment, bringing along her or his own world view and experiences when approaching the biblical texts.

There is no fault in this well-known and little-heeded fact, let alone that there is absolutely no help against it. There is no fault (the only fault being the failure to admit this entanglement with one's situation); on the contrary, the exegete's situational dependence is a prerequisite for any successful exegesis. The presence of God, experienced in biblical situations and testified to in biblical texts, strives to reincarnate itself in present-day milieus. It is necessary to prepare today's *Sitz im Leben* for this re-incarnation. Exegetes are in a better position than most to make themselves and their contemporaries aware of the character and limits of their own situation. It is the community of readers of the Bible who become aware of their own environment, its structures, anxieties, hopes, vicissitudes, and barriers. The present economic and political, as well as the cultural and religious, texture of society at large and its subdivisions is the frame to be investigated. The Christian community and its relation to coexisting groups and institutions need to be clarified. In short, present-day social reality (including the global aspects of world population) has to be scrutinized by the modern exegete because this reality is the only one that can become the vessel for the biblical proclamation of the reign of God. A number of issues should be considered in this effort to survey the ground for such proclamation.

First of all, we note a great many differences between reality today and reality in OT times. Science and industrial techniques have changed the world. Social relations have undergone substantial transformations. Psychological conditions and outlooks at least superficially have been modified. Cultural patterns have been in constant flux. Educational systems and contents were revolutionized. The list could go on. On the other hand, the exegete certainly can recognize more than a few similarities between old and new situations. After all, these analogies give rise to our hopes that ancient messages of the reign of God may find an echo in our own times. Similarities not only include the inner life of the person, what has been called the "eternal

humankind," but the functioning of social relations, the basic modes of how people construct their social systems and keep them going.

Perhaps the central theological question today is, indeed, How can the old messages of solidarity between God and humanity be implanted in our contexts? Or better, Does there exist a desire in our societies for justice and love, a desire analogous to that reflected in the Bible? Certainly there does. Exegetes of the OT are in an exceptionally favorable position to find in their own world longings for peace and equity that closely resemble those of the OT tradition. To tell the truth, some of these sentiments may even come from OT roots. In any case, they are extant today around the globe in all true movements of liberation, emancipation, and humanization. It seems that these favorable developments sprang up—just as in OT times—in opposition to oppression, racism, sexism, exploitation, military expansion, or ecological devastation. Exegetes, just by looking at their own contemporary situation, are liable to exclaim, The reign of God is at hand! Their work with the biblical texts should be greatly enhanced by this discovery of analogous dimensions in the present day.

To be sure, today's life situations also exercise a normative function. They predispose exegetes to ask predetermined questions and to find fixed answers according to what they and their groups expect from the texts. This restrictive role of *Sitz im Leben* is much easier to recognize in historical texts than in our own text-producing interpretation. Nonetheless, the exegete's living conditions and experiences today have a tremendous influence on his or her work, often exceeding by far all possible ancient decisions concerning the canon. Exegesis then becomes eisegesis, and the truths extrapolated from the texts are identical to those values forged within the exegete's own community. Such a state of affairs is untenable. It signifies nothing else than an absolutization of one's own position and privileges. The whole world becomes centered, and immutably so, in one's own group, value system, social or ethnic order, and all other values, especially all the "others," become subordinate or subservient to one's own proper interests. The exegete, when falling into this temptation, in fact becomes "like God." The dialogue with the testimonies of biblical faith, so indispensable for a historical—that is to say, limited—existence, proves impossible at this point. Equally barred is the exchange with differing contemporary communities of faith. Once again: No text-

producing (interpreting) situation may impose itself on others; God is acting in all of them.

Yet there cannot be denied the right of a theological proposition that insists also on the positive function of the exegete's contextuality. The parameters of our present world are destined to receive the proclamation of the reign of God. If so, the structure of contemporary reality gives some sort of orientation as to the path and goal of biblical exegesis. The exegete and his or her community pose *their* problems, ask *their* questions, open *their* lives in the face of a God who is ready to help now. This means that the dialogue with the ancient (and contemporary) witnesses invariably is directed back and forth, but certainly aims at the present-day situation. Thus, biblical texts stimulate and correct modern theological reflection, and necessarily so, because no single interpretation or confession of faith could ever express the full truth about God and the world. Taken this way, all the biblical witnesses retain their independence. Each one of them, including those of layers of texts and stages of textual tradition, has its word to say, not being subject to anybody's supervision. We, the interpreters living in the dying twentieth and the coming twenty-first century after Christ, are entrusted responsibility for our churches and states, and for all of humankind. The signs of the times are fairly obvious. Thus we should do our work of interpretation, taking with equal seriousness the witnesses to God's action right near to us—as did the OT prophets—and the witnesses from the remote past of the biblical people.

### *Conclusions*

Each "word" or "text" that is a document of faith points to its proper *Sitz im Leben* where God's action has been experienced. In interpreting texts we must consider immediately the reality behind the text. Text without reality does not exist. Strangely enough, however, our own reality becomes involved in exegesis and theology. We are not "objective" researchers, if any such person exists at all. We bring our visions with us and deposit them into our interpretations, which become new texts about the presence of that savior God of old. Mysteriously, the communication between today's interpreters and ancient believers is through the experience of social reality. And if we need any orientation as to which texts to read and how to read them we have to find our canon in our time. Canon originally means "orientation" and not "coercion." The old orientation-seeking deci-

sions of our Jewish and Christian forebears were valid only for their respective times and environments. They always had to be revised, and in fact they often were. Moreover, no community of faith ever lived exclusively on canonized literature. But contemporary orientation is highly necessary in order that fresh encounters with the living God may find articulation in new texts of faith.

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