

*The Canonical Approach: A Critical Reconstruction of the Hermeneutics of Brevard S. Childs.* By Paul R. Noble. *Biblical Interpretation* 16. Leiden: Brill, 1995, 381 pp., \$112.00.

This is “a critical reconstruction of the hermeneutics” of Childs, as the subtitle tells us—i.e. Noble is not simply attempting to summarize the principal contributions

of Childs and evaluate them but is reconstructing the underlying hermeneutic that shapes Childs' work and then evaluating it and in some ways reconstituting it. There have been earlier attempts at evaluative criticism of Childs (works by James Barr, John Barton and Mark Brett, as well as many briefer contributions), but this is by far the most comprehensive and penetrating.

Barr faults Childs for side-stepping the power and implications of the historical-critical method and charges that he is in danger of losing historical truth; Barton assesses Childs from a largely literary point of view, examining what it means to read the entire text as a whole when the entire text is the canon; and Brett, deploying in part categories developed in the field of cultural anthropology, consistently attempts to shove Childs toward the pluralistic framework that lies at the heart of his own agenda. By contrast, Noble makes a valiant effort to understand and expound Childs on Childs' terms before offering some suggestions as to how he thinks Childs' program might be improved.

After an introductory chapter that lightly surveys earlier treatments of Childs, Noble devotes two long chapters to an analysis of Childs' canonical method as it has developed over the last thirty years. This period covers the work from Childs' seminal article, "Interpretation in Faith: The Theological Responsibility of an Old Testament Commentary" (*Int* 18 [1964] 432–449), through his introductions, commentaries and numerous articles, down to his *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (1992). These two chapters argue that several "methodological tensions" mark Childs' work from the beginning, in particular tensions between faith and reason, between the descriptive task and the normative/constructive task, between the original context of a text and the canonical context. These tensions, Noble argues, continue in the crowning volume (*Biblical Theology*) and mean that this work therefore falls somewhat short of Childs' own goals.

For instance, Childs repeatedly tells us that the OT bears witness to Christ. Yet on many occasions it is difficult to see precisely what it is that authorizes this claim. Childs often draws attention to God's suffering-redemptive involvement with humanity, or (to take a concrete text that Childs treats) more precisely to Yahweh's suffering-redemptive involvement with Israel (Isa 63:9). But Noble points out, it is one thing to grasp this divine involvement with human beings and another thing "to claim that Yahweh's suffering-redemptive involvement with humanity took the specific form of him becoming incarnate in Jesus" (p. 75), and yet another to claim that the former is an adumbration of the latter or in some sense a prior and prophetic witness to it. The canonical presupposition doubtless helps, but in itself that might warrant the second step but not (by itself) the third. So how is the conclusion that Isa 63:9 is a prior witness to Christ and his sufferings anything more than a Christianizing gloss?

In the next three chapters, Noble examines these "methodological tensions," probing and exploring, making suggestions: "Reference, Fact, and Interpretation" (chap. 4), "Historical Methodology" (chap. 5) and "Traditions and the Final Form" (chap. 6). These reflections go beyond what Childs has said in print. There is too little space to convey the plethora of points Noble offers, but a couple of examples will not go amiss. Noble constantly returns to Childs' persistent "decoupling" of a text's theological value from its historical veracity. If one must choose between semantic understanding of what a text means and genetic understanding (the latter explains the text by appealing to its [reconstructed] history), Childs prefers the former.

This does not mean that Childs rejects mainstream critical opinions. Far from it: He not only adopts them but feels he must delineate the theological value that emerges from such positions. Thus Childs emphasizes Moses' canonical (as opposed to historical) authorship of the law and its relation to the authority of the law. The attribution

of the law to Moses was not (in the modern sense) an historical judgment at all, nor was the law authoritative because Moses wrote it (for after all in Childs' view Moses did not do so). Rather, the attribution to Moses was one of the ways at the community's disposal to affirm the authority of the law that was already accepted as authoritative within the community.

But Noble points out that there are considerable problems with this attempt to separate theology from the ostensible history. First, if Moses were in fact the author of the law, this would in fact justify, in the context of Sinai and God's self-disclosure on the mountain, the law's claim to be authoritative. Some of the laws, after all, can scarcely be thought to be intrinsically authoritative. Thus the question of Mosaic authorship is historically relevant to the theological questions. More importantly, when Childs defends the theological relevance of the (late) Deuteronomistic history to the history of the divided kingdom, he is saying in effect that although the Deuteronomist's evaluations of Israel's kings are doubtless historically anachronistic and retrospective, they are nonetheless legitimate within canonical norms (in much the same way that assessment of the Nazis must be in some measure retrospective and not dependent solely on the documents produced by the Nazis themselves). But if God had not prohibited intermarriage with foreigners before Solomon's many marriages, why should he have been condemned for entering into them—which is certainly what the Deuteronomist presents as having happened? After presenting a number of such problems, Noble concludes: "Once Mosaic historical authorship is rejected it has to be asked how Israel's law did in fact develop; . . . our assessment of the canonical theologies is dependent upon the historical answers we find to this question. . . . [I]f the bulk of this legal material had its origins in the last years of the monarchy then much of the Deuteronomistic theology would surely be no more than a radical misinterpretation of Israel's history. In the case of Mosaic authorship, then, theology and historical referentiality cannot be decoupled—one cannot regard the law, for theological purposes, as having been given by Moses while also admitting that in fact it was not" (p. 88).

The next three chapters expand the hermeneutical discussion to treatments of authorial intention, reader-response hermeneutics and various other aspects of philosophical hermeneutics (including Schleiermacher's "convergent circle" and Gadamer's antiobjectivism). Noble argues, against Gadamer, for objective meaning and also for a Hirschian distinction between meaning and significance and, further, that for Childs' program to be methodologically sound it must be tied to objectivist hermeneutics. This discussion covers a lot of now familiar ground and is not particularly percipient. Noble's primary criticism of any strong and consistent form of antiobjectivist hermeneutic is the old argument that it is necessarily self-defeating, for the thesis itself must fall under the same axe. Far more subtle and telling critiques are available.

The tenth chapter is a brief discussion of the illumination of the Spirit. Childs says that Calvin's treatment of the subject is so magisterial that further discussion by him is not necessary: He merely (and usually cryptically) adopts some elements of Calvin's view. Noble therefore expounds Calvin's view and wonders if Childs is really willing to pay the theological price of adopting Calvin's views of the matter, since those views are tightly tied to other doctrines to which Childs seems unwilling to commit himself.

In the eleventh chapter, Noble evaluates Childs' "canonical exegesis" and finds it wanting. It is frequently unclear, from Childs' discussion, whether the Christological interpretations of OT passages that he advances are properly regarded as the true and proper witness of the OT to the Christ of the NT (as he claims) or are anachronistically imposing on OT texts meanings that are essentially alien to such texts. Noble himself suggests that some of the problems could be resolved by greater resort to

typological exegesis. The final chapter finds Noble reconstructing Childs' program so as to preserve the best of it, while integrating more typological exegesis and more of the implications of belief in a divine author working behind and through the human authors.

The work is well written and, considering the difficulty of the subject, admirably clear and easy to follow. In substance, Noble is more critical of Childs than his courteous tone and evident sympathy might suggest. My occasional hesitations—e.g. the treatment of reader-response theory is remarkably thin; the treatment of typology, though surely along the right lines, is too brief and too narrow to support the weight that Noble wants to rest on it—cannot detract from the importance and good sense of this work.

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