

THE BIBLE AS CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE

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THE BIBLE AS CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE

The Work of Brevard S. Childs

THE BIBLE AS CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE

THE WORK OF BREVARD S. CHILDS

Edited by

Christopher R. Seitz

and

Kent Harold Richards

with editorial assistance
from Robert C. Kashow



Society of Biblical Literature
Atlanta

THE BIBLE AS CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE
The Work of Brevard S. Childs

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PREFACE

This volume has been prepared at the suggestion of Kent Richards. Professor Childs was honored with two Festschriften on the occasion of his sixty-fifth and seventy-fifth birthdays, and indeed I was the editor of the second of these. I want to acknowledge the help of my St. Andrews colleague Mark Elliott. At the Vienna SBL Meeting following the death of Brevard Childs, Mark helped me think about constructing this particular tribute.

I decided, rather than seeking contributions from former students and focusing on the Old Testament alone, to include a sample of historical, theological, New Testament, and other essays. I also wanted a more international sample, so we have essays on theological aspects of Childs's work from Murray Rae of New Zealand and Neil MacDonald of London; New Testament essays from Kavin Rowe and Leander Keck; chapters on the history of interpretation from Mark Elliott of St. Andrews and myself; Old Testament contributions from Bernd Janowski (Tübingen), Jörg Jeremias (Marburg), David Petersen (Emory), and Stephen Chapman (Duke). Younger scholars, who had listened to Childs lecturing for several seasons at St. Andrews, were also chosen to contribute (Don Collett, Daniel Driver and Mark Gignilliat). The essay on the rule of faith, a significant theme in Childs's work, is supplied by Leonard Finn. I am indebted to Mr. Robert Kashow for his editorial and clerical help with this project. Further thanks go to Jonathan Reck, who kindly prepared the indices for this volume. Daniel Driver of Toronto translated the essay of Professor Janowski and also provided the bibliographical data for Professor Childs. I am grateful to Bob Buller for his willingness to stick with this project through a transitional season at SBL.

I have decided to include the tribute I gave to Professor Childs at Vienna and leave it in its original oral form. I have also included an essay of my own in relation to Childs's observations on the psalm titles (1971).

Offering his own tribute to Childs in Vienna, James Kugel remarked that a rabbi once said, "I learned much from my teachers, much from my

colleagues, but most from my students.” Kugel then paused and said he didn’t think that was true at all. “No, I learned the most from colleagues.” Childs had been that kind of colleague for him at Yale. He was for many years that kind of colleague for me as well.

Christopher R. Seitz



ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by David Noel Freedman. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
ANF	<i>The Ante-Nicene Fathers</i> . Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. 1885–1887. 10 vols. Repr., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994.
ANQ	<i>Andover Newton Quarterly</i>
BBB	Bonner biblische Beiträge
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum theologicarum Lovaniensium
BEvTh	Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
BibSem	Biblical Seminar
BibThom	Bibliothèque Thomiste
<i>BiOr</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Orientalis</i>
<i>BLE</i>	<i>Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique</i>
<i>BN</i>	<i>Biblische Notizen</i>
BThSt	Biblische Studien
BTONT	Brevard S. Childs, <i>Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflections on the Christian Bible</i> . Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992.
<i>BZ</i>	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche
CBET	Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology
CBOT	Coniectanea biblica. Old Testament series
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CTM	<i>Concordia Theological Monthly</i>
CurBS	<i>Currents in Research: Biblical Studies</i>

ECCA	Early Christianity in the Context of Antiquity
EdF	Erträge der Forschung
EHS	Europäische Hochschulschriften
EKKNT	Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
<i>EvK</i>	<i>Evangelische Kommentare</i>
<i>EvT</i>	<i>Evangelische Theologie</i>
<i>ExAud</i>	<i>Ex auditu</i>
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
GAT	Grundrisse zum Alten Testament
GNT	Grundrisse zum Neuen Testament
HBS	Herders Biblische Studien
<i>HBT</i>	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
ITS	Innsbrucker theologische Studien
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JBTh</i>	<i>Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
<i>JSS</i>	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
<i>JTI</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Interpretation</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
KStTh	Kohlhammer Studienbücher Theologie
<i>KuI</i>	<i>Kirche und Israel</i>
LSTS	Library of Second Temple Studies
<i>LThK</i>	<i>Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche</i> . 3rd ed. Edited by Walter Kasper. Freiburg: Herder, 1993–2001.
<i>ModTheo</i>	<i>Modern Theology</i>
MTV	Münstersche theologische Vorträge
NTD	Das Neue Testament deutsch
<i>NZStH</i>	<i>Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie</i>
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OrChrAn	Orientalia christiana analecta
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTS	Old Testament Studies

PL	Patrologia Latina. Edited by Jacques-Paul Migne. 217 vols. Paris: Migne: 1844–1855.
<i>ProEccl</i>	<i>Pro Ecclesia</i>
PTR	<i>Princeton Theological Review</i>
QD	Quaestiones disputatae
RB	<i>Revue biblique</i>
RelS	<i>Religious Studies</i>
RGG	<i>Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart</i> . Edited by Hans Dieter Betz, Don S. Browning, Bernd Janowski, and Eberhard Jüngel. 8 vols. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998–2005.
RHPR	<i>Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses</i>
SBAB	Stuttgarter biblische Aufsatzbände
SBET	<i>Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology</i>
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLSymS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
SBS	Stuttgarter Bibelstudien
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
SDSSRL	Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature
SHS	Scripture and Hermeneutics Series
SJT	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
SMRT	Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought
SNTU	<i>Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt</i>
SSEJC	Studies in Scripture in Early Judaism and Christianity
ST	<i>Studia theologica</i>
STDJ	Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah
STI	Studies in Theological Interpretation
StZ	<i>Stimmen der Zeit</i>
<i>ThBeitr</i>	<i>Theologische Beiträge</i>
<i>ThPQ</i>	<i>Theologisch-Praktische Quartalschrift</i>
<i>ThRev</i>	<i>Theologische Revue</i>
<i>ThTo</i>	<i>Theology Today</i>
TQ	<i>Theologische Quartalschrift</i>
TRE	<i>Theologische Realenzyklopädie</i> . Edited by Gerhard Krause and Gerhard Müller. 36 vols. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1976–2004.
TZ	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
UTB	Uni-Taschenbücher
VG	<i>Verkündigung und Forschung</i>

VGWTh	Veröffentlichungen der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft für Theologie
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZNT	<i>Zeitschrift für Neues Testament</i>
ZThK	<i>Zeitschrift fuer Theologie und Kirche</i>



WORKS OF BREVARD SPRINGS CHILDS

With the exception of reviews, which represent only a sampling, the following is a complete bibliography of Brevard Childs's published works. Those with an interest in unpublished letters and papers should not miss the Brevard S. Childs Manuscript Collection, housed in the Princeton Theological Seminary archives. A finding guide may be found in the Seminary's online catalog.

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TRIBUTE TO BREVARD S. CHILDS AT THE
INTERNATIONAL SBL MEETING IN VIENNA, AUSTRIA

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Upon return from his customary spring residence in the United Kingdom, Brevard Springs Childs took a serious fall at their Connecticut home, from which, after a week in the hospital, he never recovered. He was eighty-three years old and had suffered from the after-effects of Lyme disease for many years, but was in reasonably good health and had just finished a manuscript project in Cambridge, England. So it was a shock to those of us who knew him and stayed in touch with him to learn of his death. SBL Executive Director Kent Richards very kindly asked me to pay him tribute. I am not sure I am competent to do that, and I am very sure an event like this would have made Childs wince. Childs was an intensely private man who preferred that his work speak for itself.

Much could be said at a section like this. This is all the more true with a figure like Brevard Childs who wrote in such a wide variety of forms: on both testaments; on the history of the discipline; on theological, historical, and methodological questions; on *Receptionsgeschichte*; on Isaiah and Exodus in extensive commentary treatments; on Biblical Theology; and before his untimely death, on the Pauline letter collection. I have written myself on Childs's contributions, and have recently published a long evaluation of the canonical approach, and I do not care to go over old ground here. If nothing else were said about Childs the scholar, it would be that he always sought the outer limits of a project, and did not rest until he could convey something both of the details and the comprehensive whole of a thing. I have never encountered a more curious mind. That also meant he was frequently misunderstood, sometimes very sympathetically, other times less so—quite apart from those who did understand and just disagreed!

What I would like to do is focus on one general theme, appropriate to this setting. *Childs and the formal discipline of biblical studies*. Childs believed in the necessary role of the academic discipline of biblical studies, as essential to the church's critical engagement with culture and for its own internal welfare. Childs loved the idea of a formal discipline of academic biblical studies, and always tried to honor it by attending to its phases with care and with critical insight. Part of this was simply the historian in him: Childs knew that at every period of the church's life there was manifested the formal concern for thinking seriously about the Bible: in commentary, introduction, hermeneutics, homiletics, apologetic. The great figures of the church's life—and of Judaism—were biblical scholars, and that was what I believe he saw as his own vocation and calling.

So there was in Childs a deep appreciation for learning and study, as a Christian discipline and virtue, coupled with the sense that this would be hard work, spiritually and practically. I can recall on numerous occasions receiving unwanted support from Childs, in the form of accounts of the struggles of this or that scholar or churchman in this or that period. Like most people, I wanted the politics of academic life to go my way; Childs wanted politics to be endured for the sake of the discipline of biblical studies, knowing that the joy of the Christian life could only be known through suffering and perseverance. He had history on his side in mounting this case.

I first encountered Childs in the pages of his 1974 Exodus commentary. I was studying in seminary, and then at the University of Munich, and I wanted a teacher who could demonstrate mastery of the most difficult questions of methodology and interpretation. That commentary struck me as an example of enormous hard work, if not always straightforward insight. It was not an easy commentary to use, and this had to do with its ambition. To my mind, this was its appeal. But it was also able to be used with profit by the preacher or Sunday school teacher.

A second and related memory was of attending my first SBL meeting. It was in 1982, and a group of us poor graduate students trundled down from New Haven to the New York Hilton. The session I remember was on Childs's *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*. Assembled were the great and the good, the gladiator class of *Alttestamentler*: Bernard Anderson, Norman Gottwald, Jim Mays, Paul Hanson, Pat Miller, maybe Rolf Knierim (my memory is cloudy). As was typical of Childs, he did not attend. In addition to whatever allergies he had to such events, he was, I later learned, already hard at work on the *Introduction to the New Testa-*

ment and his mind had, as always, moved on. Strange it may seem to those who did not know him, Childs never discussed his own work in seminars and never promoted his theories or held forth on his own ideas. Instead, he listened carefully and taught his students to think critically. I am sure he viewed panel discussions of his work as too personal. (Those of us who have the idea that assigning our own publications to students is a good idea must learn the hard way.)

At the time I was surprised at the vehemence of the reaction to his 1979 publication, which ranged from mildly bemused to aggressively negative. My sense was that Childs was viewed as having somehow abandoned the disciplines of OT study (source, form, tradition, and redactional study) in the name of something called—wait for it—“scripture,” and that, in the minds of some, this could only amount to piety, harmonization, false trails leading to the final form, and so forth. In other words, it amounted to a repudiation of critical foundations. I had not read the book, and did not recognize Childs in these reactions. The Childs I knew from the classroom had not tossed aside the critical skills shown in the Exodus commentary. When I did read *IOTS* I confess I did not understand it, and also did not recognize it as an introduction. But I could never accept that Childs had gone into a strange country. I assumed it was a book I would have to return to later when my Ph.D. seminars and dissertation were behind me.

I mention this because, twenty-five years later, the scene has changed dramatically. There was nothing, not even in Gottwald’s *Tribes of Yahweh*, of the present character of social scientific methods or reader response—concern with matters in front of the text, in the community or the reader, or in the text’s latest phases of alleged social construction and constructing. Ironically, it would be Childs who, at the end of the day, probably looked far more like a conservator of academic methodology and the disciplines of critical analysis, in their source to form to tradition to redaction phases, than like their opponent or their dismantler, in the name of the Old Testament “as scripture.”

It is important to reflect briefly on the development of critical theory as it moved through alleged phases, what Koch could in the late 1960s optimistically describe as clear “extensions” of previous methods. Here, I believe, we find the unique contribution of Brevard Childs as an Old Testament scholar, that is, in his particular understanding of the nature of critical theory and its role in biblical interpretation and hermeneutics. In a word, Childs accepted critical observations in a local and non-comprehensive sense, using that which he believed appropriate to the biblical

texts in question, and so tuned rightly to some dimension of proper interpretation. In that sense, he could accept something like sources in Genesis, because he acknowledged the way that Gen 1 and Gen 2–3 diverged at key points. The real question was what to make of the seam joining them and its larger effect on both texts.

Or, in his treatment of the crux regarding “this will be the sign for you” in Exod 3, he could accept the form-critical analysis of Gunkel and his students, and believe that the original sign, found in the oral tradition, was the bush; but that in the development of the traditions, in their literary form, a vestige of the older oral tradition had not been cleaned up or smoothed over. Examples like this—in the Psalms, the prophets, the Gospels, or the letters of Paul—could be multiplied.

In his work on the canonical shape, Childs was endeavoring to understand how the final form makes its particular sense. Recourse to aspects of critical theory would here manifest their usefulness. What one could not find in Childs was a sense that the phases of critical theory revealed a kind of *comprehensive usefulness of the methods in their entirety*. Their results were far more partial and provisional. Moreover, one had to exercise enormous caution in moving from one part of the canon to another. I recall finishing a dissertation on Jeremiah, in which I made heavy use of redaction criticism in order to understand the maturing form of the developed text. When I went to Isaiah to understand its final form, these methods did not work in the same way. Yet simply appealing to the synchronic shape of the final sixty-six chapters brought reactions of disdain from Childs. What was at issue was accepting the limitations of an honest account of the state of research in question for a given work, and seeking to move beyond impasses revealed precisely because of the limitations of the methods, and especially of asking them to go beyond their proper, more limited, remit.

The irony here is that by being used selectively and critically, these critical methods retained a more enduring character in Childs’s work than in many others. I think there are several explanations for this, and one has been mentioned already. Childs wanted method to serve the purpose of helping him understand the theological implications of the final form of the text, not for the reproduction of a full scale history of religion behind the text or a seamless tradition-history straddling it. Neither religion nor an account of what von Rad called trying to understand “what Israel thought about Yahweh” interested Childs as ultimate affairs. This meant that method was at the service of understanding a *given*, not something to

be retrieved or reconstructed: the given of the biblical text in its complex final form.

So method was not a project intended to make independent and comprehensive sense, but to serve a specific purpose: understanding the complexity of the biblical text in the form in which it lies before us. That there was a depth dimension was a given for Childs. This understanding meant that he accepted his own particular historical location in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries where this dimension had been rightly brought into focus. He did not seek to imitate previous interpreters, but only to learn from them. The specific cultural challenge of historical reference was one given in a particular form for the generation Childs knew himself to be a part of, and that challenge had to be faced on its own terms, and then transformed in the light of the biblical text's own special brokering of history.

Consider as well another problem in the development of critical methods: the desire to have them cooperate at maximal levels from one phase to the next. Childs did not ask the form-critical concern with origins and small oral units to magically join up with an inquiry starting at the other end, that is, literary sources revealed by attention to problems in the final form of the literature. The grand consensus of von Rad and Noth on this matter never really attracted Childs, and in the end he treated these phases as tools to be used where useful, and not organic products whose success demanded a seamless edifice. Of Bernard Anderson's bestselling *Understanding the Old Testament*, Childs could remark: it's better than the Bible. One could say that as well about efforts to smooth over the serious differences that quite properly divided phases of critical inquiry.

And of course these "better than the Bible" edifices don't last, probably because of their tendency to overreach. Jeremiah has shown in a recent article how profoundly un-durable were the major planks in the von Radian and Nothian edifice: *Klein Credo*, sacral league, Solomonic enlightenment, Yahwist as theologian, Wisdom as Israel's answer, the Hexateuch, and so on. It all made a kind of sense as an independent project once upon a time. But one could well ask whether even von Rad's own Genesis commentary really required this enormous critical prolegomena. Childs was more interested in which aspects of critical method genuinely assisted us in hearing the biblical text. Far more intriguing to my mind, therefore, were von Rad's final ruminations about the effects of the joining of sources, although this joining blunted the profile he had wished to give to the Yahwist. Von Rad had the courage to entertain the question, but not

to pursue it with any vigor, due to his enormous investment in the grand consensus of thirty years of work. Childs, it seems to me, took the best of von Rad and moved on to areas von Rad would have seen as proper extensions of his ideas.

An opposite problem can also arise in the formal discipline of biblical studies. When a grand consensus fails, the danger is in thinking that one can free oneself from problems by developing a kind of selective amnesia about what previous phases had properly identified. At present there is a tremendous interest in a kind of neo-*Literarkritik*, focused on the final redactional stitching and the forces responsible for these, often at a high level of abstraction. I have in mind the work of Kratz, Steck, Kaiser, and others. Almost absent is any confidence about historical depth and the way form-criticism could posit an original tradition, figure, or saga. Childs never tried to recast these with great precision, but saw the reality to which the text referred in more general ways, never denying that something quite specific had triggered the development of the tradition. To choose a metaphor from Scotland: His concern was with single malt, not peat, barley, or water. But no whiskey can be made without these.

To conclude: It is something of an irony that the man who in 1982 was seen as a threat to historical-critical theory now retains far more of the historical depth of the biblical text precisely because of his concern to understand the final form. In *IOTS* there is a real Hosea, who married a real Gomer, in order to give a real message to the northern kingdom about real problems in their understanding of fertility, worship, and the nature of God's care. That this realist critique becomes a metaphor capable of extension to Judah, through a Judah redaction, and to future generations, through a closing appeal to wisely learn from the past, erases neither the original Hosea and Gomer nor the specific word given by God to that time and place. Childs was interested in the way the word of God *given in time* was a word *for the times*. This is what he saw the Bible demonstrating in its final form, through a careful analysis of it armed with all the tools of critical theory available to him. And this attention to history through time also animated his interest in the Bible's use in the church catholic through the ages, up to and including our own specific age. It would be wrong to call Childs unhistorical, and right to call him historical, but only in the most far-ranging sense.

Above all I will miss the confidence Childs had in sketching the character of the discipline, all the while interrogating and pressing it. There was in him a confidence that formal study of the Bible needed to happen

in serious, public, disciplined ways, and that the church would then need to think through and commend what it was able to commend, with confidence, just as would the academy. Childs wanted the church to remain committed to serious biblical study, taking up with confidence challenges brought by cultural location, but always believing the Bible had a way of reframing such challenges according to the purposes of God. What worried him was a cleavage opening up, leaving the church and the academy each to do their thing, both becoming the lesser for it.

For Childs it was a mistake to look behind the Bible or too far in front of it, precisely because the final form of the text had sufficient riches for the church's life, to sustain and renew it. In its final form, the Bible offered a complete and ready-made set of problems to work through, and challenges sufficient for a lifetime and more—especially for someone seeking a comprehensive account. Never one to work as a quartermaster, Childs always had a comprehensive account in view.

It's a privilege to pay tribute to a teacher, a colleague, and a friend. I am sure this talk would have made Childs very restless unless it failed to commend the vocation that was his own, with attention to both its challenges and its hopefulness. I know he will be greatly missed, by family, friends, students, colleagues, and those who were challenged by his writings.

A verse from the Psalms comes to mind when I think of the contribution of Brevard Springs Childs, the man and the scholar. לֹא לָנוּ יְהוָה, “Not to us, Lord, not to us, but to your name be the glory.”

