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Brevard S. Childs  
*Yale Divinity School*

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# The Old Testament as Scripture of the Church

BREVARD S. CHILDS

**THE AUTHOR ARGUES THAT THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL APPROACH TO THE SCRIPTURE leads to unedifying results when the practitioner fails to treat Scripture as the Book of the church, containing the record of God's unique revelation. He argues that the history of the canon has been neglected and that canonical history gives the key to understanding the nature of Scripture as the Book of the church. He concentrates on the canonical shape of the Pentateuch. Although Dr. Childs endorses the major results of the historical-critical approach to the Old Testament, he argues that the historical-critical method is neither the perfect nor the only approach to Biblical studies. All exegesis must be measured in some sense by the Gospel. The author is professor of Old Testament theology at Yale Divinity School. The paper was delivered to a symposium on "Abraham and Archaeology" held at Concordia Seminary, Feb. 25—27, 1972, sponsored by the Aid Association for Lutherans. The AAL has also made possible the inclusion of some of the symposium papers in this issue of this journal.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

**A**lmost a hundred years ago a brilliant Scottish Old Testament professor, W. Robertson Smith, hurled the challenge of rigorous historical criticism of the Bible to the English-speaking world. In the Spring of 1881 Robertson Smith delivered his now famous lectures entitled, *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church*,<sup>1</sup> to a packed audience of some 800 clergy and laity. These lectures formed the climax of his long battle within the Church of Scotland over the place of historical criticism. They struck the English-speaking world with a force which can hardly be overestimated. (The first printing was exhausted within a matter of weeks.) After 1881 the issue of Old Testament criticism could no longer be avoided by the church, either in Scotland, England, or America.

Smith argued with relentless and pas-

<sup>1</sup> Cited according to the second edition, London, 1908.

sionate logic that the orthodox Christian understanding of the Old Testament was an unreflected accommodation of Jewish theories of inspiration and canonicity which were based on arbitrary assumptions and fictitious speculation. The Jewish claim for the authority of the Hebrew Bible in terms of an unbroken succession of tradition was, upon examination, merely a dogmatic theory without a historical basis. Their theories of inspiration were in the realm of pure fable. Indeed the Jewish canon had been the result of a long period of *ad hoc* judgments secured by the devious means of allegory and rationalism. But even more important, Smith argued that Christians sacrificed the real strengths of the Old Testament by accepting the Jewish notion of canon. They fell under the same legalism as that of Akiba and the Pharisees. In the end, the voice of free and honest inquiry into the Bible was stifled.

Then Smith proposed that the Protestant Reformation had provided a way out of the morass of tradition. Scripture must be interpreted on the basis of its own testimony, not according to ecclesiastical tradition. He wrote: "The historical critic must destroy the received view. . . . It is our duty as Protestants to interpret Scripture historically. . . . It is our business to separate these elements from one another, to examine them one by one, and to comprehend each piece in the sense which it had for the first writer . . . when it was written." (P. 14)

Now this all sounds very familiar to us. Indeed so familiar that some of you will even have difficulty understanding why his approach could have caused such controversy scarcely a hundred years ago. Has it not become fully axiomatic that the Bible is to be interpreted historically in the light of its original setting? A hundred years ago Smith wrote his apology for the critical method with great enthusiasm and confidence. He was assured that his method would not only solve the problems which surrounded the Old Testament, but that "every new advance in Biblical study must in the end make God's great scheme of grace appear in fuller glory." (P. 20)

But has this really happened? After a hundred years of pursuing Smith's program, have his predictions of success materialized? The answer is not immediately apparent. Surely we have made tremendous strides in some areas. Look at the level of archaeological and historical precision which has been achieved. Consider the exciting insights of literary and form critical work on the Biblical text. And yet, upon further reflection, one encounters a host of strange anomalies. Smith was con-

fident that Biblical studies would be placed on solid, objective ground once the overgrowth of tradition had been removed. The sharp clear lines of the original Biblical message would emerge. However, in my judgment, never has the Bible been the object of more scholarly speculation than today. Never has the disagreement been greater even regarding the most elementary points of its message. Again, Smith claimed that his approach would bring a new freshness to the Bible which would sweep away once and for all "the barrenness of dogmatics." And yet how many of our seminary-trained pastors conscientiously work through the *International Critical Commentary*, or for that matter the more recent *Interpreter's Bible*, and come away with the sense of frustration and utter sterility. There is little which quickens the mind, and nothing which touches the heart.

Again, historical criticism was to free the Word of God from the tyranny of tradition, but could it be that a new form of tyranny has emerged? We have turned out generations of students whom we have fully convinced regarding the necessity of the critical method. Yet we often leave them paralyzed before our massive learning, warriors of the Gospel cramped in Saul's armor who have been robbed of their freedom. One often reads in the textbooks that the medieval church deprived the people of the Bible by claiming the sole right of proper interpretation. One now wonders whether the Bible has become the private bailiwick of technical scholars who make a similar claim. Finally, has it ever struck you as strange that ours is an age of the most beautifully illustrated maps of Palestine ever, of a whole range of

brilliant new visual aids, of commentaries without end, and yet at the same time of almost unparalleled ignorance of the Bible? Far from automatically bringing the Bible closer to the average man, the critical method flounders helplessly in our secularized churches before a growing sense of alienation. Indeed, our well-educated modern congregations can tell you that the Bible is filled with myth, but they have ceased to understand its language of faith.

Now I do not think that it is fair or accurate to blame the present impasse of Biblical studies on the historical-critical method alone. Signs of rigor mortis were certainly visible in conservative circles long before the critical school attacked their defense positions. Orthodox Old Testament scholars like Hengstenberg, Pusey, and Young stood just as much within the rationalistic stream as their liberal antagonists, and in their zeal to defend the tradition often lost its living message. The issue at stake is not whether to be critical or not, but what kind of critical understanding can best serve the Christian church in her theological task of proclamation to the world in the 20th century.

Now it is my thesis that we modern Christians have learned all too well how to read the Bible as a secular book. We have become highly skilled in studying its history and traditions, tracing its growth and redactions, and contrasting its various concepts. Yet we now find that we have difficulty hearing in it the Word of God, of being nourished on it as the bread of life, of being revived and quickened by its Gospel. We are uncertain as to what it means to understand the Bible as Sacred Scripture of the church—to stand within its tradition rather than "outside the camp."

This is my concern. How does one read the Bible from within, read it as the Scripture of the church? The problem is a profoundly theological one and touches on many of the basic issues of the faith. I do not suggest that there is one lost key which, when found, can again unlock all the treasures of life. This would be sheer arrogance. There are many dimensions of understanding, and some levels only come with prayer and much agony. But I am also convinced that when one is concerned with understanding the Bible as Scripture, one is then talking about canon. The formation of the Christian canon was that process by which the early church, testifying to the authority of its traditions, set some apart as Sacred Scripture. It seems to me that here is the place for the modern church to start seeking to regain an understanding of the Bible as her Scripture. It is also clear to me that we live in the mid-20th century and that we cannot simply return to an older, unreflected theory of canon. Many major obstacles stand in the way, yet here is the place to begin.

## II. CANON IN THE EARLY CHURCH

The early church inherited the Jewish Scriptures along with its understanding of canon.<sup>2</sup> It was simply assumed that these writings—later designated as the Old Testament—functioned authoritatively in the life of the church, even though the extent

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<sup>2</sup> The following recent books can be read with profit on the subject: N. Appel, *Kanon und Kirche* (Paderborn, 1962); Ernst Käsemann, ed., *Das Neue Testament als Kanon* (Göttingen, 1970); Hans von Campenhausen, *Die Entstehung der christlichen Bibel* (Tübingen, 1968). Of the older treatments, B. F. Westcott, *The Bible in the Church* (London, 1901), remains a classic and is still well worth reading.

of the canon remained in considerable flux both in the synagog and the primitive church. In the early church the question was not whether the Jewish Scriptures were still canonical, but rather whether the claims of Jesus Christ could be sustained on the basis of Sacred Scripture. In different ways Paul and the evangelists sought to relate the Gospel to the Scriptures of the old covenant. From the outset it was clear that, although the Scriptures were held in common with Jews, Christians were claiming a different way of reading them. The old writings had taken on new meaning in the light of the Gospel. Paul contrasted the "letter which kills" with the "spirit which gives life" (2 Cor. 3). The Bible had become for the Christian church a new book which through the work of the Spirit spoke to them of the living Christ.

In the early church before the formation of the New Testament there was a power and authority in the preaching of the Gospel which claimed the authority of the living Christ. The formation of the gospels in the last quarter of the first century reflected both the sense of a common tradition underlying the message as well as the tremendous freedom in stamping the material. The gospels showed a common concern to ground the faith in the original truth which could be trusted.

The first real crisis in the church in respect to the use of the Jewish Scriptures came in the second century when it became increasingly impossible for the Old Testament—even when read Christologically—to remain the sole norm for the Christian faith. Rather, the Old Testament had to be measured in some sense by the Gospel. In the early apologists, such as Justin, there began to emerge a doctrine

of Holy Scripture which sought to relate the Old Testament to Christian tradition in terms of an unfolding of prophecy and fulfillment. But then the real threat began to appear from within the Christian faith from those Christians who offered such an arbitrary reading of the Old Testament as to falsify the Christian tradition. On the one side, there was the danger of the tradition being lost in Gnostic speculation and pious elaboration. On the other side, there was the pressure to return to a Jewish understanding of the Old Testament which claimed independence from the Christian faith.

However, above all it was Marcion's radical handling of the traditional Scriptures which triggered the forces which culminated in the formation of the New Testament canon. Marcion sought to introduce a critical principle by which the church could determine its authentic Scripture. He argued that the original Christian tradition had been corrupted and needed not only to be radically cut loose from the Jewish Scriptures, but also to be critically recovered by sifting the allegedly authentic sources of the faith. Marcion's challenge evoked from the church a response which, after much struggle, culminated in the formation of the New Testament canon.

The early church responded to Marcion by affirming the truth of the tradition from which it lived and by defending the catholic scope of the Gospel. By means of a process of selection the church sought to determine which writings faithfully reflected the truth of the Gospel which it confessed. The concept of a New Testament canon which functioned in conjunction with the normative Scriptures of the Old Testament testified to the church's

sense of the uniqueness of the apostolic witness which was set apart from the later church tradition. The criteria by which canonicity was determined are not fully clear. The term "apostolicity" certainly played an important role in establishing a formal criterion by which to assure an unbroken tradition with the original events. Yet the complexity of this criterion is seen in the exclusion of other writings which claimed apostolic authorship. In a real sense, the content of the writings which functioned authoritatively within the church in turn provided the material norm for the term "apostolic." When the later second and third century church fathers, such as Irenaeus and Tertullian, spoke of the "rule of faith" (*regula fidei*) or the "rule of truth," they included the sum of oral tradition which comprised the true revelation on which the Christian faith was grounded and to which Scripture now testified.<sup>3</sup>

No one can deny that a variety of historical factors influenced the shape and development of the canon, such as the rise of Montanism which called forth a strong reaction in the West against the charismatic element of the early church. Nor was the question of the extent of the canon — whether the narrower Jewish canon of Jerome or the wider canon of Augustine — adequately settled, for it emerged in the 16th century. Nevertheless, the formation of the canon in the first centuries of the Christian era testified to a fundamental understanding of the nature of the Christian faith. By tying the Christian

faith to an authoritative body of Scripture the church sought to establish its truth in terms of both a historical and theological continuity with the prophets and apostles. The further one probes into the history of the early church, the more complex and diverse becomes the picture. The canon did not serve to unite this diversity into a system of truth, but rather to select those writings which provided a normative criticism for the ongoing life of the church.

Early Christianity understood the basic function of the canon to be a testimony to the conviction that the church does have a special relation to these books, thus designating them Sacred Scripture. The historical-critical approach to the Bible has demonstrated that one can read the Bible apart from this confession of the church. One can indeed stand outside the tradition and read the Bible from any number of contexts. Yet the theological issue at stake is whether there is such a thing as a canonical context, which has been the claim of the church. Has historical criticism destroyed the integrity of this confessional context, as Semler and Eichhorn thought? In my judgment, the advocates of the historical-critical method fall into their own type of dogmatism in laying exclusive claim to the correct interpretation of the Bible.

There are several fundamental theological reasons for the modern Christian church to reaffirm the canon as the context for understanding her Scriptures:

First, I believe that the ancient church was right in confessing in the formation of a canon that the Christian faith is tied to a particular historical witness. A particular set of writings is judged to contain the church's living tradition — the rule of faith — in which the life of the community

<sup>3</sup> Cf. especially B. Hägglund, "Die Bedeutung der 'regula fidei' als Grundlage theologischer Aussagen," *Studia Theologica* XI (1957), pp. 1—44.

is grounded. Our faith is established upon the witness of the prophets and apostles, not to history *per se*, nor to general philosophical insights available to all men alike.

Second, I believe that the ancient church was right in testifying to the reality of a community of faith, the church, which formed the canon as a critical norm for preserving the truth of the Gospel to which it owes her existence.

Third, I believe that the ancient church was right in bearing witness in the formation of the canon that the Spirit of the resurrected Christ continues to make his will known to his church through the medium of Scripture, which is not merely a memorial to the past but the bearer of life for sustaining the future.

But beyond this affirmation of the canon's importance, the concept of canon involves many basic hermeneutical implications which make clear why the church's task of interpreting the Scriptures cannot be simply identified with, or be an elaboration of, the historical-critical method.

The Christian canon consists of an Old and a New Testament. These two sets of writings are joined together because both bear witness to God's revelation. The relationship of the Testaments is not merely a historical one, but above all, a theological one. The Christian canon makes a claim for this theological context from which both testaments are to be separately understood.

The concept of canon implies that the normative role of this Scripture functions through the shape which the church has given the tradition in its written form as a faithful witness to the redemptive work of God. It resists the separation of text and reality in an attempt to ground the

faith on a noncanonical reconstruction of historical events or a mode of consciousness which is independent of the apostolic testimony.

The concept of canon implies that these writings have a function which is not exhausted by their original role in history, but they continue to function in the life of the church in each successive generation through the work of the Holy Spirit. By its peculiar shaping of the tradition, the canon provides the hermeneutical key for the later generation of Christians to appropriate the ancient testimony for itself.

But now enough of this theological reflection on the meaning of canon. I would like now to turn to the Pentateuch and to illustrate exegetically the meaning of canonical criticism as a way by which the church understands her Scripture.

### III. THE CANONICAL SHAPE OF THE PENTATEUCH

#### 1. *The Historical-Critical Approach*

The historical-critical study of the Pentateuch is usually regarded as one of the most brilliant achievements of Protestant Christianity. Starting at the end of the 18th century the intense research of several generations of scholars succeeded in overturning the traditional view which had been held by the synagog and church from its inception. The traditional view of the Pentateuch had assumed the Mosaic authorship of the first five books of the Old Testament on the basis of occasional references to Moses' literary activity. The Talmud made explicit his authorship of the first five books. It was also assumed that the Pentateuch contained a literal account of the history which it purported to recount, namely from the creation of the

world to the death of Moses. Both the assumption of the Mosaic authorship as well as the historicity of parts of the account were successfully challenged. By the end of the 19th century, although one could not speak of agreement regarding all the details of its composition, a broad consensus had emerged that the Pentateuch could not have been written by Moses but reflected a long history of development through an oral and literary stage, parts of which history could be recovered through critical research.

In my judgment, the results of the historical-critical study of the Pentateuch have demonstrated conclusively that the Old Testament can be studied historically and critically from a perspective outside that of the tradition. Moreover, I believe that from this historical perspective the main lines of the reconstruction of the development of the Pentateuch are basically correct. The present shape of the Pentateuch emerged only after a long history. Many of the earlier stages, especially the early literary strands of the Pentateuch, can be reconstructed. It seems to be clear that the Pentateuch cannot be regarded as a simple historical account of an early period of history written by Moses, for it is a much more complex entity. As the issue of the formation of the Pentateuch emerged in the history of scholarship, I would judge that the arguments of the critical scholars won over those who wished to defend the traditional view.

As a result of this victory of the historical-critical method virtually every introduction to the Old Testament seeks to interpret the Pentateuch by first reconstructing its alleged historical development. The various levels of the books are

then interpreted in the light of their original historical setting. Although I do not deny that such a historical enterprise is legitimate, it is my contention that this historical approach to Hebrew literature is a distinct and different enterprise from studying the Pentateuch as the Scriptures of the church. Indeed, the traditional ecclesiastical stance was extremely vulnerable when it sought to defend the canonical shape of the Pentateuch as an objective, historical account outside of the context of faith. However, it is an even more grievous error for Christian scholars to assume that the reconstruction of the literature's historical development can now replace the study of the canonical shape of the Pentateuch. This is to confuse the historical with the theological task. Rather, the present shape of the Pentateuch offers a particular interpretation—indeed confession—as to how the tradition was to be understood by the community of faith. Therefore, it seems to me important first of all to describe the actual characteristics of the canonical shape and secondly to determine the theological significance of this shape.

## 2. *Description of the Canonical Shaping of the Pentateuch*

Jewish tradition commonly spoke of the first five books as the "Torah," or the "Torah of Moses," or the "Book of the Law of Moses." At least by the time of the New Testament the term "Torah" designated the first five books within the Jewish canon. Already in the post-exilic period, particularly in the late books of the Old Testament, there is reference to the "Law of Moses," but it is not clear whether this is a comprehensive application to encom-

pass the whole Pentateuch or only the legal sections. Later Jewish tradition coined the technical term *hamishah humshe hattorah* ("the five fifths of the Law") to describe the division of the Pentateuch into five parts. The tradition is very old and assumed already in the Septuagint and all Hebrew manuscripts. The term *pentateuchus* is the Latin rendering of the Greek, meaning "the five-fold book."

The first issue at stake is whether this five-fold division actually belongs to the canonical tradition of the Old Testament or whether it was a post-Old Testament development. From a study of the terminology the question remains ambiguous. Is there any redactional evidence that these books were seen together?

First of all, it is quite clear that the five books were seen as separate entities by the final Biblical editor in spite of the obvious continuity of the one story which extended from the creation of the world (Gen. 1:1) to the death of Moses (Deut. 34). Genesis closes with the death of the last patriarch. The book of Exodus begins with the nation in Egypt. However, the Book of Exodus at the outset clearly recapitulates material from Genesis (46:8 ff.) in order to form an introduction to the new book. Likewise, the final chapter of Exodus concludes with the building of the tabernacle and summarizes its role in the future wanderings of the people. The Book of Leviticus is closely joined to Exodus and continues the same historical setting of Moses receiving the law at Sinai, but the new content does serve to set off the book from the preceding material. Again the book has a very clear conclusion which marks it from the beginning of the fourth book, Numbers. Numbers, like Leviticus,

shares the same historical setting of God's speaking to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, but the precise date formula serves to indicate a new section of material. There is also a definite conclusion to Numbers. Finally, Deuteronomy has both an obvious introduction and conclusion which establishes it as an independent work although it shares the setting on the plains of Moab with the latter part of Numbers. In sum, there is clear editorial evidence to establish five divisions within this material.

But it is necessary to push the issue beyond simply the formal aspects of the relationship. Is there editorial evidence to show a relationship in terms of content as well? At the outset, it is clear that the three middle books share the same basic content which has to do with the giving and receiving of the divine law by Moses at Sinai. This history at Sinai is connected within the three books in an explicit chronological sequence stating when Israel arrived, how long she encamped at Sinai, and when she departed. Moreover, this event is both preceded and succeeded by the account of the wilderness wanderings which led the people from Egypt to Sinai and from Sinai to the promised land. The more important issue is to determine the place of the first and fifth book in the Pentateuch. First of all, even the casual reader must observe that the book of Genesis differs greatly in its style and content from the three middle books. It recounts the history of a family and does not speak of a nation, Israel. Yet it is also evident that the patriarchal material has not been just accidentally attached to the story which follows but is integrally connected. Indeed, the patriarchal stories are consistently

edited in such a way as to point to the future. The continuing thread which ties together the material is the promise of a posterity and a land. Quite clearly, then, Genesis was seen by the final redactor as the introduction to the story of Israel which began in Exodus.

The role of Deuteronomy is more difficult to determine. It is set off sharply from the preceding books by its style, which is that of a series of speeches by Moses to Israel. Although its content is often a repetition of earlier laws, the parenthetic style is distinct. Chapter 1 of Deuteronomy states that the purpose of Moses' speech to Israel was to "explain" the law. Whatever its original role in the development of Israel's history, the editor understood Deuteronomy's role as a type of commentary to the preceding laws. Moreover, the book was given a setting different from the original declaration of the Law. Some 40 years later to a new generation Moses interprets the meaning and purpose of the law of Sinai which he had received. Deuteronomy emphasizes the unique role of Moses as mediator and interpreter of the divine will. It is therefore fully in order that Deuteronomy closes the Pentateuch with an account of the death of Moses. To summarize, a study of the content of the five books gives evidence of an intentional structuring of these books into a purposeful theological whole.

Moreover, the full force of the concept of a Pentateuch is emphasized when one realizes that the shape of this redaction is neither the natural nor the original historical order.<sup>4</sup> Rather, scholars have long

<sup>4</sup> This idea has been worked out by James A. Sanders in some detail in his recent book, *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia, 1972), pp. 15 ff.

insisted that the original tradition extended into the book of Joshua and included the conquest of the land. Thus they spoke of a Hexateuch. Whatever the force of this reconstruction, the evidence confirms the intention of the final Biblical editor to conclude the first part of the sacred tradition with Deuteronomy. For the Biblical editor the first five books recounted the story by means of both narrative and law of how God made known his will to Israel. The stories which continue with Joshua are qualitatively distinguished from the Pentateuch in that the revelation of the will of God (Torah) is assumed to be known in Israel. (Joshua 1:8)

Again, to summarize, the recognition of the Pentateuch as a special body of sacred tradition which constituted a whole is already testified to within the Old Testament itself. It needed only later tradition to formulate the terminology for a reality which it had received.

### *3. Theological Implications of the Canonical Shape of the Pentateuch*

Now that we have sought to establish the broad lines of the canonical editing of the Pentateuch, it is necessary to look more closely at the canonical shaping of each of the separate books, particularly in the light of the history of tradition which lay behind each of the books in order to determine a theological intent.

#### *Genesis*

There is a broad consensus among critical scholars in seeing behind the present form of the book a long history of development on both the oral and literary level. On the literary level it seems quite clear that separate literary sources were joined

together at different historical periods. At times the material in the strands ran quite closely parallel; at other times one strand retained a large amount of unique tradition. Although the details of the documentary hypothesis continue to be debated, the theory has maintained itself in seeing an earlier composite strand — usually called JE — which contained basically premonarchical traditions of Israel, and a later source — the Priestly source — which, although containing much very old material, received its literary formation in the post-exilic age. While much attention has been exploited in sorting out the sources and exploring the prehistory of the tradition, little effort has been directed in understanding the significance of the completed book. Yet it is the whole book which Christians read as their Scripture.

Now it is of importance to note that the Book of Genesis begins with a primeval history and only in chapter 12 actually commences with the story of Abraham. Moreover, the primeval history is a combination of these two literary strands (J and P). Interestingly enough, the two sources have been so combined as to preserve a dual witness for joining the primeval history with the patriarchal stories. According to the P source which now provides the formal bracket to the final form of the book by means of a genealogy, there is a narrowing of interest from the widest possible beginnings of the universal history of mankind to focus on the one family of Abraham. According to the J source, the history of the growth of sin which culminated in the utter fragmentation of mankind in the tower of Babel provided the theological grounds for the

election of Abraham and the future role of Israel. But the effect of the double witness of the Book of Genesis is to tie the election of Israel inextricably to a theology of creation. Although one might be able to make a case that in the history of tradition the story of Israel's redemption from Egypt was formulated first, the canonical shape of Genesis subordinated redemption to creation without divorcing the two aspects of the divine purpose with the world and his creatures. Israel was elected in the mystery of the divine will for the purpose of reconciling the world to the Creator.

Critical scholars remain divided on many questions regarding the prehistory of the patriarchal stories. It is uncertain in what form the stories were transmitted or the relation to the history of the ancient Near East. But the essential element in the patriarchal stories is the element of promise which now runs like a red thread through all the stories and determines the theological significance of these stories. The fathers live by the divine promise of a posterity and a land. The life of obedience is illustrated in these narratives — given long before the Law — which call for unswerving trust in the faithfulness of God. The Book of Genesis as the prelude to the actual history of the nation Israel provides a decisive commentary for the proper understanding of the Sinai covenant. God's revelation of Himself to the fathers is an act of pure grace which calls forth the required stance of faithful obedience. To put the issue in another way, the canonical shape which has the narrative precede the Law affords a clear check against understanding the purpose of Israel primarily in terms of the Law.

*Exodus*

The Book of Exodus reflects an equally complex prehistory of traditions lying behind the final form of the present composition. But once again there are some important editorial moves which reveal clearly the intention of the canonical shaping. A basic feature of the Book of Exodus is the interchange of narrative and legal material. The narrative material testifies to the historical moment at a particular time in Israel's history at which God made His will known to His people. For Israel to learn the will of God necessitated an act of self-revelation. Israel could not discover it for herself. Conversely, the legal formulations made evident that His covenant rested upon commandments which could be clearly understood and followed. Thus, regardless of whether in the prehistory the narrative and legal traditions developed along different lines, in the canonical form the two elements belong together, inextricably bound. Gospel and Law cannot be divorced.

Again, it is significant to note that the final form of the Book of Exodus has often combined the account of an original event with an account of the ongoing celebration of that same event. The intertwining of the original Passover with the later observance of the rite is a prime example of this practice. Clearly the canonical shape of Exodus sought to form the material in such a way as to provide a channel of appropriation for every future generation.

Finally, it is theologically significant to note that the Sinai material has been edited in such a way that the covenant is both preceded and followed by stories of Israel's murmuring and resistance to the law of God. Particularly the place of the story of

the Golden Calf provides a commentary on how the demands of God upon His people are continually supported by His mercy in the light of repeated disobedience and even apostasy.

*Leviticus and Numbers*

Critical scholarship has characterized the priestly legislation of these middle books as one of the most extreme examples of historical fiction. A great deal of late material, much of which bears even a post-exilic stamp, has been joined to the Sinai material. Yet the canonical form of Leviticus and Numbers links these books to the same setting as the last half of Exodus. The directions for cultic worship of God by Israel are closely joined to the Sinai legislation. The purpose of this shaping is clear. First of all, a witness is given that the institutions and rites which determine how Israel is properly to worship God stem from the revelation of God. Israel's cult is not her own invention. There is no tension between the spirit and form of the covenant. The canonical shape provides a critical theological judgment against any reading of the tradition which would isolate the priestly elements of the tradition from the so-called prophetic. Prophet and priest cannot be played against one another.

Again, this large bulk of priestly material, which extends through the middle books and includes the tabernacle, priesthood, and ordering of the camp, is dominated by the demand on Israel to comply to the holiness of God. The canonical shaping of the Pentateuch insisted on including these witnesses with the Sinai legislation. The theological reasons are clear enough. The presence of God which

once dwelt on Sinai now accompanies Israel in the tabernacle through the desert wanderings. The ongoing institution by which God now makes His will known is the priesthood of Aaron (Ex. 40:15). What once happened at Sinai is continued for the later generations of Israel in the tabernacle. In the service of the tabernacle the sons of the covenant realize their new life of freedom to "walk erect." The canonical redaction shaped the tradition in order to serve as Scripture for the use of later Israel. It offered a theological interpretation of the Sinai covenant. When the historical critics remove the Priestly material and assign it to the post-exilic age, then the major theological testimony of the canon is jeopardized.

### *Deuteronomy*

The Book of Deuteronomy plays a decisive role within the theological purpose of the canonical editors. Indeed, the original function of the book has been much debated. There is a broad consensus that Deuteronomy—or at least an earlier form of Deuteronomy—was associated with the reform program of Josiah in the seventh century. Be that as it may, the present shape of the book within the Pentateuch is clear and well-defined. The book consists of a series of speeches by Moses to the people in which he explains and recapitulates the meaning of the Sinai law. Moreover, the setting is on the plains of Moab just before Israel is poised to enter the promised land. Moses addresses a new generation of Israelites, the older generation who had experienced the original covenant ceremony having died through disobedience. Therefore, right from the outset, one senses that the Book of Deu-

teronomy bears the explicit role through its canonical shaping of reinterpreting the events of Sinai for the future generations.

First of all the writer makes clear in his homily that the original covenant concerned the later generations of Israel as much as the first. God's covenant was not tied to past history but was offered to all the people of God. Secondly, the interpretation of Moses is future-oriented. The promises of God are now to be realized, and future Israel is challenged to respond obediently to what lies before them. Thirdly, the purpose of Deuteronomy is to inculcate the Law in the heart of the people. The issue before Israel is one of life and death. The way of blessing and of curse lies open. Israel is to choose. Again, Deuteronomy provides a theological norm of how the Law is to be understood. (Little wonder that the book is a favorite for the New Testament.) Although the distinction between the "letter" and the "spirit" is a later one, nevertheless Deuteronomy stresses the essential role of the Law in terms of its function to conform Israel to the divine will. The very fact that the writer is able to summarize the Law in terms of "loving God with heart, soul, and might," is a decisive check against its legalistic abuse. Finally, the author offers a profoundly theological reflection on the meaning of election lest Israel misunderstand what is her responsibility as the chosen people.

Once again, and in a way different from either Genesis or the middle books, the canonical editors have shaped the material into a theological witness to be used by later generations of Israel. By removing Deuteronomy from its canonical setting and seeking to interpret it from an al-

legedly original historical context of the seventh century, the decisive function which the canon has assigned this material is lost.

#### IV. THE HERMENEUTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE CANONICAL SHAPING OF THE PENTATEUCH

Finally, I would like to sketch very briefly a few of the hermeneutical implications of this approach to Scripture.

1. First, the present shape of the Pentateuch is a profoundly theological witness which is lost if its shape is destroyed in order to reconstruct a so-called objective, historical sequence. For theological reasons later historical material in Leviticus and Numbers was projected back into Sinai, and Deuteronomy was given a non-historical setting. The present arrangement preserves a basic critical norm as to how the tradition was to be understood in the life of the people of God. The fundamental concerns of the canonical editors turns on the proper theological understanding of God's redemptive work through Law and Gospel, promise and fulfillment, election and obedience. To read the Old Testament as Scripture of the church is to seek to understand the integrity of the canonical context as a faithful witness of God's continued will for his people.

2. Divine revelation is not buried in past historical events which depend on recovery by archaeology in order to be made available to the church. Rather, the long history of the development of tradition reflects God's continuing revelation of Himself to His church which left its mark in the canonical shaping of the Pentateuch. The growth of the Pentateuch is misunder-

stood when seen as an arbitrary selection and arrangement by individuals apart from the ongoing life of the community of faith. The final shape of the Pentateuch is canonical, that is, normative for the life of faith, because it reflects the fullest form of the church's understanding of God's revelation. To read the Old Testament as Christian Scripture is to stand within this tradition of the old covenant and to read it in the light of Jesus Christ, who both confirms its truth and bears witness to its inadequacy.

3. The decisive factor in shaping the tradition was the concern to render it in a form so that it could be correctly understood and rightly appropriated by the succeeding generations of God's people. This is precisely the role and function of canon. Scripture became the vehicle by which the original historical events were faithfully remembered, but also theologically interpreted to function as revelation for the generations yet unborn. The decisive hermeneutical role of canon was to guide the church in moving from the past to the present. When the canonical shape of the Bible is disregarded, there is little wonder that the hermeneutical task of appropriating the Word of God for today becomes hopelessly bogged down in confusion. I am convinced that when the Reformers spoke of the literal sense of the Biblical text as normative (*sensus literalis*) they had in mind the canonical sense and not a hypothetical projection of what scholars thought originally happened.

4. By taking seriously the canonical shape of the Old Testament the Christian interpreter suddenly discovers that he stands in the company of all the great Christian expositors of the past. August-

tine, Luther, and Calvin, rather than being regarded as museum pieces of an uncritical age, are found to be wrestling with the fundamental issues of the faith. The effect of rediscovering the sense of canon is similarly to recognize the richness of the church's exegetical tradition which has always found in its Sacred Scripture the Word of God.

In the end, the goal of all our endeavors is that we interpret the Scripture so that men and women will recognize in them the living Christ, and God willing, some will perhaps even testify: "Did not our hearts burn within us when He opened to us the Scriptures?"

New Haven, Conn.