

In recent years as the historical critical method has increasingly come under attack both from within and without the scholarly guild, numerous responses have sounded in its defence to assure their modern readers that the basic structure which emerged since the Enlightenment is both intact and indispensable. Several well-known scholars have launched passionate defences and sought to ground its theological legitimacy in the Reformation (e. g. Ebeling, Käsemann, Krentz).

I have no doubt that some of the claims made by these modern apologetes are true. Historical criticism is here to stay. Much of the conservative opposition is badly misplaced and even docetic in nature. Nevertheless, I remain largely unsatisfied with this defence and feel that the basic issues of the critical method in interpreting the Bible have been inadequately treated. Perhaps an analogy to the problem can be derived from Melancthon's example. On the one hand, he sought to persuade his students of the indispensability of studying Aristotle's rhetoric. One could not learn to understand the use of language, concepts and logical categories of theological discourse without the masterful guidance of the great philosopher. On the other hand, he could also flatly state that to build one's theology on Aristotle was to effect a disaster beyond description. For him, as for Luther, Aristotle and the gospel were alien to each other and irreconcilable opponents.

To apply the analogy, I would agree that historical criticism is an indispensable teacher. From it the interpreter learns a multitude of things about the text, its meaning, history, and audience. Exegesis performed without its aid seems naive, often crude, and flat in its dimensions. Yet also in this case, this information stands in a dialectical relation to the biblical witness which has a unique story to tell about God and his redemption which enters the world of time and space, but shatters its laws and mores through endless surprises. It is the claim of the critical method for exclusively first priority which is the issue at stake. To allow the theology of the church to add a homiletical topping after the basic critical work has been done is small comfort. The theological battle has been surrendered at the outset. When Krentz confidently asserts: 'Historical criticism provides a way for the Scriptures to exercise their *proper critical function* for the church' (65), he has not grasped, in my judgment, the full dimensions of the claims which the critical method is demanding of the church.

IV

Although an Introduction is hardly the place to enter into a lengthy debate with competing models of New Testament interpretation, a brief discussion may aid in sharpening the profile of the canonical proposal.

Then again, P. Stuhlmacher has sought to delineate a new approach to exegesis in several recent articles and monographs. He criticizes the functionalism of historical criticism because of its method of historical distancing of the past from the present and in its use of a general principle of historical analogy. In fact, criticism is still dominated by Troeltsch's three principles. As a way out of the impasse he proposes a 'hermeneutics of consent' (*eine Hermeneutik des Einverständnisses*) which seeks to achieve an openness to the truth claims 'about man, his world, and transcendence' (*Historical Criticism*, 85). What is needed, according to Stuhlmacher, is a new perception which is 'the readiness to take up and work through the claims of the tradition' (*ZTK* 68, 148). Although the proposal is theologically serious and calls for a detailed response, it appears to me that the appeal to a 'dimension of transcendence' as a final exegetical move built onto a historical critical exegesis suffers from major problems. It assumes that the critical method is basically sound, but simply stands in need of an additional dimension which is, of course, a move different in kind from his historical exegesis. His suggestion remains vague and diffuse because it does not take into account the actual canonical shaping of the New Testament literature. Rather, he appeals for aid to a 'history of exegesis' (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) which, however, never achieves an integral relationship to the biblical text itself. As his commentary on Philemon illustrates, this history becomes an appendix to his critical historical and literary analysis. His actual exegesis fails to reflect the peculiar features of the letter's canonical intertextuality.

Finally, R. E. Brown addresses the issue of canon in an essay with the title 'What the Biblical Word Meant and What it Means' (*The Critical Meaning*, 23-44). Brown approaches the problem in terms of the various senses of the New Testament and distinguished several different levels of meaning. The literal sense is its meaning when it left the hand of its author or redactor, the canonical sense is its meaning when seen in the context of the larger canonical collection, and an ecclesiastical meaning which is an extension of the canonical is how the later church understood its sense. Brown argues for the basic priority of the literal sense as recovered by the historical critical method, but he does allow for the legitimacy of derived levels of meaning. He questions 'canonical critics' as to what preponderance one gives to the meaning derived from historical criticism and is suspicious of its centrality being eroded.

My major criticism of Brown's approach is that his hermeneutic separates the biblical text into different levels which destroys the fundamental dialectic between what a text meant and what it means which is the essence of canon. As a result of his levels of meaning the special texture of the biblical text which combines the past and the present is irreparably rent. By giving over the basic task of exegesis to the usual methods of historical criticism, Brown shatters the genuinely theological dimension of the text and effects a multiple reading which is reminiscent of the medieval church's appeal to the four senses of scripture with all its ensuing problems. In my judgment, the inability of Brown's method to deal adequately with the theological dimensions of the text emerges most clearly from his book on *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York 1977). In spite of impressive critical analysis the theological yield is small indeed and the separation between description and constructive theological exegesis is never overcome.

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METHODOLOGY OF CANONICAL
EXEGESIS

It is now in order to turn from the more theoretical discussion of the hermeneutical issues involved in exegesis, and to focus on the more specific task at hand. How does the canonical approach affect actual exegesis? What factors, perspectives, or rules govern the study of individual books? How does one proceed?

Interpretation begins with the canonical form of the text (cf. the excursus on text criticism). The move is obvious because to speak of the New Testament canon is to identify that corpus received as scripture. The canonical form marks not only the place from which exegesis begins, but also it marks the place at which exegesis ends. The text's pre-history and post-history are both subordinated to the form deemed canonical. The goal of the enterprise is to illuminate the writings which have been and continue to be received as authoritative by the community of faith. However, in between the point of beginning and ending lies a complex exegetical process. The interpreter enters into a dialogue with the text in an effort to discern how each writing within the New Testament canon construes its material in order to bear truthful witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The interpreter is reading the text toward a particular goal, namely, one which is congruent with the kerygmatic character of the scriptures in bearing testimony to God's redemption of the world in Christ. The focus on discerning a writing's canonical shape derives from the conviction that the text's kerygmatic purpose functions within the peculiar form of that witness. The canon as a designation of the collection marks the parameters of the scriptures, but the canonical shaping of the text leads the interpreter to discern how the material within the canon was fashioned through a particular intertextuality to render its special message.

The search for the canonical shape of the text begins with a reading which looks for traces either of how the author intended the material to be understood, or of the effect which a particular rendering has on the literature. The point is to take seriously a writer's expressed intentionality, but without pulling text and intention apart. At times the canonical text receives a meaning which is derivative of its function within the larger corpus, but which cannot be directly linked to the intention of an original author (cf. ch. 10 below, on Gospel Harmony).

One of the first places to look for indications of canonical shaping lies in the structure of the book. Obviously the formal means by which the material is ordered affects the content of the book in an integral way. However, within the books of the New Testament the structure of the whole is often unclear. Therefore, it is important from a canonical perspective to observe whether a book's structure is equivocal and lends itself to a variety of possible interpretations (cf. Matthew). A construal of the structure which in fact eliminates portions of the book should be viewed with suspicion (cf. Luke 1–2). Frequently patterns of interchange between dogmatic and paraenetic sections (cf. Hebrews) play a more significant canonical function than a book's overarching structure. Within the gospels, attention to the manner in which the narrative features render the material is of great importance.

The purpose of the author is often most clearly stated in the praescript or in the conclusion (Luke 1.1–4; Acts 1.1–5). Conversely the effect of a lack of a praescript on the reading of an epistle can give important leads on how the letter now functions (e. g. Hebrews). Similarly, conclusions often indicate a writer's intention (John 20.30), or provide an important canonical setting (Heb. 13.22; II Tim. 4.6ff.). Finally, the significance of the superscriptions should not be underestimated. They were added during the final stages of canonization, but frequently give a valuable clue on how the church first heard the message (cf. Hebrews, Revelation).

Another crucial feature in discerning how a writer construed his material is the search for the particular context in which it was placed. A major polemic of the canonical approach is directed against the manner in which historical critics often treat this problem by assuming the centrality of a hidden historical reference even when omitted by the writer, or by assigning a major force to be the effect of the delay of the parousia (Luke, Acts), or of a developing 'early

Catholicism' (Acts, Ephesians, II Peter). While a canonical approach is well aware of the variety of historical forces at work in the development of a composition, it seeks carefully to determine to what extent such forces have been consigned to a text's distant background or assigned a major role in the foreground. The historical critical method being criticized is one which reconstructs an allegedly original historical context and then refocuses the composition on the basis of such a theory (cf. Matthew). The search for the theological function of a writing can be only correctly achieved when the peculiar form of a passage's intertextuality is recognized which always stands in a subtle dialectical relationship with its original historical referent. Thus, although it is possible that John's Gospel arose in an environment which shared some significant features with a proto-Gnosticism, the present form of the Gospel has largely subordinated this inheritance and even rendered it inoperative in conscious opposition to its theology (cf. also Colossians).

It is erroneous to infer that the canonical approach which is being outlined is opposed to historical criticism in principle. The issue at stake turns on how it is used. Recovery of the pre-history of a composition, such as Q, can be useful in measuring both the continuity and discontinuity with the present canonical function. However, to insist on finding the key to the final form of the text in this early stage of development can easily become a hindrance in discovering its canonical role. Most modern commentators agree that the Fourth Gospel shows abundant evidence of being a multi-layered text. Yet to read the present Gospel according to a reconstructed theory of its levels easily results in badly misconstruing its canonical function (cf. ch. 8 below, on John). Similarly to assume that proper interpretation of a text depends on the critic's ability to provide the needed antecedents of understanding runs in the face of a canonical approach which seeks to correlate the function of the text with the information provided by the fourth evangelist. Nevertheless, a positive value of the historical critical method is the aid which it offers in sharpening the interpreter's ability to distinguish different voices within a text, and to guard against the conservative tendency of traditional exegesis to translate the New Testament canon into a single monolithic block by means of easy harmonization. The discovery of diversity is not the goal of exegesis, but its presence remains an important factor which has been worked into the texture of the canon.

A basic feature of the approach being outlined is the careful attention in discerning how the material is rendered into scripture in order to provide an access to its witness by successive generations of Christians who did not themselves experience at first hand, Christ's ministry. The very phenomenon of a canon provides a basic warrant for inferring that the material of the New Testament was shaped toward engendering faith and did not lie inert as a deposit of uninterpreted data from a past age. A variety of different techniques were used in the collection and reshaping of the Pauline corpus which sought to expand the canonical function beyond the scope of the original addressee, and yet to retain a high level of particularity. The occasional nature of the Pauline corpus was largely retained, but significantly modified in many of the letters.

Then again, the four Gospels shaped the tradition in different ways in order to provide the reader access to the evangelical message. Mark retained the perspective of the pre-resurrection disciples for whom Jesus' real identity was hidden throughout most of his Gospel, whereas the Fourth Gospel was written consistently from the vantage point of Christ's mission as the Divine Son, who was sent from God. For Luke-Acts the category of proof-from-prophecy provided the means by which to span history from prophecy to fulfilment. At times the original context was blurred into an intentional ambiguity in order to bear witness to a new theological reality. Sometimes high levels of literary and theological tension were retained (II Corinthians), whereas at other times the speeches of individual apostles were fashioned into one uniform pattern (Acts).

At this juncture much of the controversy with the historical critical method emerges. The canonical approach regards it as a threat to exegesis when critics historicize the New Testament material by assuming that the sharper the historical focus, the better the interpretation (cf. the debate over Romans). Often the effect of postulating a specific, concrete referent is to destroy those very canonical features by which the message is rendered in its unique form. Therefore, in spite of a plethora of new information, the true theological witness of the text is rendered mute. The critic presumes to stand above the text, outside the circle of tradition, and from this detached vantage point adjudicate the truth and error of the New Testament's time-conditionality. In contrast, the canonical interpreter stands within the received tradition, and, fully conscious of his own time-conditionality as well as that of the scriptures, strives critically to discern from

its kerygmatic witness a way to God which overcomes the historical moorings of both text and reader. The difference between the methods does not lie in an alleged polarity between tradition and criticism, but between the nature of an analytic approach and one which is consonant with the theological function of a normative religious canon.

A frequent indication of how the New Testament seeks to transcend its original historical context lies in carefully observing the function of the addressee of a composition. At times the original disciples are precisely portrayed in their historical context and only by subtle analogies are subsequent readers addressed. At other times the disciples become an obvious transparency for the one obedient response of the church (cf. John). A shift within a narrative or a letter from singular to plural, from 'I' to 'we', frequently signals a form by which to confront subsequent readers (cf. Acts). Finally, a variety of different techniques are employed by which to expand the original recipients of a letter in order to encompass the larger Christian church (cf. I Peter, Ephesians).

The canonical approach to the New Testament concerns itself with authorship, but in a fashion different from the debates generally engaged in between conservatives and liberals. It seeks to pay close attention to the theological function of eyewitness claims (Luke 1.3; John 21.24) without immediately translating the biblical testimony into a question of historical referentiality. Similarly it attempts to interpret the function of a claim to Pauline authorship of a letter which appears to have extended the witness beyond the historical period of Paul's ministry (cf. the Pastorals). Again, it seeks to explore the role of a canonical portrait of Paul or Peter which is only partially congruent with a critical reconstruction of the historical apostles. Thus the canonical approach accepts as helpful many of the interpretive options which stem from the model of pseudepigraphy, but remains critical of the appeals of these categories in doing full justice to the theological function of indirect authorship which has a special function within the canon (cf. the Pastorals, I Peter).

Of particular interest to the method being proposed is the concern to deal seriously with the effect which the shape of the canonical collection has on the individual parts. At times the larger corpus exerts a major influence by establishing a different context from that of a single composition. The effect of a holistic reading of the four gospels can be seen in the longer ending of Mark which functioned

to bring Mark's gospel into harmony with the fourfold collection. A major canonical issue arises in seeking to explore the effect of including the Pastorals within the Pauline corpus, or of severing the original linkage of Luke's two-volume work into two parts, with separate and distinct functions within the canon assigned to Luke and to Acts. Likewise the relation in one canon between books so different as Galatians and James calls for careful reflection. Finally, a canonical approach seeks to determine whether a canonical 'harmony' of the four gospels is possible which avoids the pitfalls of both rationalism on the right and historicism on the left. How does attention to the canon's role aid the interpreter in dealing in a theologically responsible fashion with both the unity and diversity of the gospel witnesses? (cf. ch. 10 below on Harmony).

In conclusion, the principal concern of the canonical approach can be briefly summarized. Its aim is not to provide a short-cut to exegesis, nor is it to offer an interpretation of each passage within the New Testament. Rather, it seeks to sketch a different vision of the biblical text which profoundly affects one's concept of the enterprise, but which also makes room for the continuing activity of exegesis as a discipline of the church. It is likely that future scholars who work seriously with the implications of the canon will arrive at different interpretations of individual passages and indeed of the entire books. Such correction is all to the good. However, the nature of the debate will be vastly different among those who share a canonical vision of interpreting the New Testament as sacred scripture of the church. One test of continuity between generations of readers will be to determine the extent of a genuine family resemblance which reflects both diversity and individuality within the discipline.