

---

# BIBLICAL EXEGESIS

---

A Beginner's Handbook

REVISED EDITION

JOHN H. HAYES

CARL R. HOLLADAY



John Knox Press  
ATLANTA

32439



# CANONICAL CRITICISM:

## The Sacred Text of Synagogue and Church

---

The Bible is the sacred Scripture of synagogue and church. This means that the writings comprising the Jewish and Christian Scriptures are endowed with a special authority and are granted a special role by these believing communities. Earlier in the book, we noted some factors involved both in treating a text as sacred and in the interaction between sacred texts and religious communities (see pp. 13-14, 17-18). At this point we need to note some of these issues in more detail.

The sacred texts—the canon—of a religious community are what may be called foundational documents in that they are constitutive and regulatory for the life and faith of the community. This status of canonical texts is based on the belief that they reflect and bear testimony to truth in a unique and unrepeatable manner. The belief about the texts' relationship to truth is usually undergirded by claims about their origination through special inspiration and about their character as revelatory documents. As foundational texts, they are understood as embodying and reflecting, in at least embryonic fashion, the essence of the faith and practice of the community.

This privileged status ascribed to canonical texts means that they are read and understood in the believing communities in a manner different from all other texts. The believing communities function as interpretative communities that read the Scriptures using given conventions and strategies. First, the text is read with expectations that differ from those brought to any other text. The believing community reads and listens to the Bible assuming its relevance and expecting to hear through its words a witness to, if not the voice of, God. Through the Scriptures, believers anticipate an existential encounter with truth. Second, the universe of the sacred text, or to use structuralist terminology, the semantic universe of the text, challenges the reader and hearer to share its world and con-

victions. A canonical text thus confronts the audience with an autocratic claim to faith acceptance; it authoritatively imposes itself. Third, canonical texts are read with a degree of receptivity rarely extended to other texts. When the believer and believing community read the Scriptures, they do so as "believers." This means they already accept the faith presented and presumed by the text and thus hear the sacred text in light of the prior faith. The text is thus approached with a "preunderstanding." The text is heard within the context of the faith. A secondary consequence of this preunderstanding and contextual hearing is the tendency to ignore or indulge differences, inconsistencies, and problems within the text. The reader fills out and smooths over differences and difficulties within the text in light of the overall cohesion of the canon and in terms of the community's faith perspective.

In recent years, there has been a vigorous call to read and exegete biblical texts explicitly as canonical Scripture. Different terminology has been used to designate this type of exegesis: canonical/canon criticism, canonical hermeneutics, canonical exegesis, canonical interpretation, and so forth. Several considerations related to canonical interpretation should be noted.

(1) The canonical approach is synchronic and thus text-reader oriented. In this regard, canonical reading of texts has many parallels to redaction criticism and structuralist interpretations. The text to be exegeted is the final form, namely, the form of the text that achieved canonical status. **The** reader is understood specifically as a reader standing within the believing community for whom the text is canonical. This means that the interpreter is not concerned with the issues characteristic of historical-critical approaches—the **earliest** or pre-canonical form of the text or tradition, the original intention of **the** writer, events and experiences behind the text, or the historical/sociological/psychological context that gave birth to the text. These may be given some consideration but are not the decisive factors for reading and understanding the text. (Already in his *Confessions*, Augustine wrestled with the issue of the "truth of things" vs. the "intention of the speaker [Moses]," preferring the former since it was difficult to **know** whether "Moses meant this [interpretation] and wished this to be understood from his account" [Book 12, Chapters 23–24]. Thus the tension between a canonical reading and the original author's intent was already an issue for Augustine.)

(2) A canonical reading of a text will vary depending upon which believing community is doing the reading and which canon is being read. Jewish, Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant scriptural canons dif-

fer considerably from one another. Simultaneously, the faith perspective within which canonical texts are read also varies considerably, not only among the major religious groups themselves, but also among various denominations within the same religious tradition. Even the content of books such as Esther and Daniel differs from one canon to another. Obviously, Christians read the Old Testament with different expectations and different theological preunderstanding than Jewish readers. In other words, the symbolic worlds and the reading conventions of Jews and Christians differ appreciably.

Even the canonical ordering of the books in the Jewish Bible and the Christian Old Testament illustrates a major difference in approach and preunderstanding. The books in the Jewish Bible are ordered into three divisions-Torah, Prophets, and Writings. Priority is given to the Torah. The medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides (1135-1204) describes these divisions as three concentric circles with the Torah in the center and the other two divisions as illustrative commentary arranged in descending order of authority. This structure and its underlying assumptions indicate that the books in the second and third divisions are to be read looking backward-the Prophets and the Writings are read in the shadow of the Torah. The Christian canon, on the other hand, is structured into the four following divisions-Torah, History, Poetry, and Prophets. Placing the prophets with their predictions last encouraged the Christian to look beyond the Old Testament and to read the preceding material with a forward-looking rather than a backward-looking orientation.

(3) Canonization separated the meaning of the texts from dependence on their historical or original use. Texts that once grew out of and were rooted in particular historical contexts and communities have been detached from such contexts and made accessible to a wider and universal audience. In canonizing the literature, the believing communities declared the writings to be universally and permanently relevant and accessible. The canonical process loosened the texts from specific historical settings and transcended the original addresses. Synagogue and church declared that the historically conditioned and original meaning of the Scriptures was not their only nor their most important meaning. Prophetic preaching, for example, was originally addressed to specific historical and rhetorical situations; because the situation was known, explanatory details were not required. When such material became part of a later literary document and the memory of the rhetorical situation had faded, then the content of such speeches assumed a more genera-

lized cast. Isaiah's speeches in 1:2-20 and 2:6-22, for example, were probably originally delivered in light of the recent devastating earthquake under Uzziah (Amos 1:2; Zech. 14:5). The material itself, however, provides no clues that unequivocally point to, and none that demand, such a setting. Thus these two speeches, now severed from their original setting, lend themselves to interpretation in general and/or futuristic categories. It was not just the canonical process per se that dehistoricized and generalized the material; the nature and content of the speeches and the editorial process had early on already given such material this open-ended, unhistorically conditioned quality. Now in their canonical form, the reader encounters the material without specific historical associations.

An example of the deinstitutionalization with the resultant generalization of material can be seen in the case of the psalms. Most if not all of the psalms were originally composed for and utilized in services of worship. The editorial and canonical process which shaped the Psalter produced a book of compositions whose original association with Israel's worship is almost totally obscured.

(4) A canonical approach avoids the atomization and thus the isolated interpretation of texts. A text is to be read as part of the Bible in its entirety, not as an independent, single unit. Each passage is read as part of a biblical book, and the biblical book is seen as part of an even larger entity-the canon as a whole. The whole is thus greater and more authoritative than any of its parts. Thus even a biblical book has only penultimate authority since it is the Bible as a whole that possesses final canonical authority. (It can be argued that even the canon has only relative authority since the Bible is read in the context of a believing, interpretive community whose faith and beliefs provide the lens for interpreting the Scriptures. The faith of the community places constraints on the possible meanings just as the faith of the community established the limits of the canon initially.) The believing community reads and hears the Scriptures, assuming the canon's internal cohesion. Thus, even a passage from the Old Testament read in the church will be heard in light of the New Testament. Texts are read and heard in interaction and concert. The mutual interplay among texts, which results produced an accumulative effort, transcends any one text. This does not mean that the believing community should or does suppress the plurality and fluidity in the biblical writings. (The church, for example, consistently opposed any move to reduce the number of the Gospels or to replace the four with a single harmonization.) The assumption is, however, that the

understanding and interpretation of an individual text must conform to the constraints resulting from the text's existence as part of a larger work.

(5) Canonical criticism is overtly theological in its approach. In terms of our diagrams on pages 24-25, a canonical approach interprets the Bible as a mimetic reflection of reality, as a vehicle for understanding the will of God. The Bible is Scripture and must be so interpreted. If historical-critical studies ask what the individual units and books in the Bible originally meant, canonical criticism is concerned with the meaning of the text for the canonizing community and with the present meaning of the text.

Some examples can illustrate the character and method of a canonical reading and interpretation of biblical texts. The book of Isaiah provides one of the clearest illustrations of the impact of canonical reading. Historical criticism has demonstrated with a reasonable degree of certainty that large portions of Isaiah, at least chapters 40-55, come from the sixth century. Second Isaiah, as this material is designated, has been attached to and become a part of a collection attributed to Isaiah who functioned during the eighth-century reigns of Kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (see Isa. 1:1). (Third Isaiah, chapters 56-66, about which there is less certainty, has undergone a similar fate.) Thus, in the editorial process leading to the book's canonical shape and content, chapters 40-55 were loosed from any explicit association with the events of the sixth century. (References to Cyrus, as in Isa. 45: 1, do not absolutely demand reading chapters 40-55 with reference to the sixth century.) Simultaneously, they were "rehistoricized" and associated with the prophet Isaiah and the eighth century. This shift had the effect of intensifying the futuristic cast of the material and the redemptive character of its content. Likewise it strengthened an understanding of Isaiah and his prophetic preaching in terms of the prediction of future events:

By the spirit of might he [Isaiah] saw the last things,  
and comforted those who mourned in Zion.

He revealed what was to occur to the end of time,  
and the hidden things before they came to pass.

(Sirach 48:24-25)

As we noted earlier in this chapter (see section 3), in the editorial process, historically specific oracles of Isaiah assumed a generalized tone. Isaiah 9:2-7 and 11: 1-9 once spoke about a particular contemporary ruler on the throne of David (in this case probably King Ahaz). In their

more dehistoricized general form, such passages lent themselves to and, in fact, practically required an idealistic and messianic interpretation. In their edited canonical form, the prophet did not appear to be speaking while looking around at his contemporaries; he appeared to be looking forward to one who would come. As part of a Christian canon these **Isaianic** texts defy a reading which does not simultaneously resonate in some fashion with the early church's claims about Jesus.

A canonical exegesis must take into consideration not only the final form of the text but also the final form of the text as part of canonical Scripture. There are no First, Second, and Third Isaiahs in Scripture, only the book of Isaiah. Certainly the Christian community could hardly think of Yahweh's chosen leader in Isaiah, solely in terms of Isaiah 9:2-7 and 11:1-9, and without regard for such texts as Isaiah 52: 13-53: 12. Historical-critical considerations might argue that the two sets of texts derive from different contexts and originally referred to different figures (although this might be questioned even on historical-critical grounds). Their presence now within one book encourages association in interpretation.

A text from the book of Ecclesiastes could be treated differently depending on whether one is working from historical-critical or canonical perspectives. A strong and reasonable case can be built for Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 being a late editorial addition to the book. Throughout much of the remainder of the book a rather skeptical and pessimistic view is taken of life and religion. Historical critics assume that the original book was completely skeptical in outlook. The later addition, however, suggests to the reader that one should not give in to doubt and unbelief, that is, it relativizes the preceding skeptical advice. The final form of the canonical text has overridden the skepticism of an earlier form. Obviously a canonical reading must take 12: 13-14 into consideration in exegeting other texts in the book. The pessimistic thrust of the book is thus mitigated by the optimistic conclusion.

The content of one book may also relativize the content of another. Throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, no hope is held out for believing in immortality or the resurrection of the dead. In fact Ecclesiastes 3:19 declares that humans suffer the same fate as animals; both die without hope. If this text is interpreted within a canon that contains the Wisdom of Solomon (as in Orthodox and Catholic circles), then the assertion of the Ecclesiastes text is highly relativized, since Wisdom 3:1-9 clearly affirms immortality and rewards after death. When Ecclesiastes 3:19 is read as part of a canon containing the New Testament with its strong and

pervasive emphasis on the resurrection, the content of the Ecclesiastes text is even further relativized.

So far, we have illustrated canonical criticism primarily with reference to the Old Testament. The approach has similar implications for New Testament interpretation. Canonical interpretation emphasizes that the New Testament should be interpreted in terms of its final canonical form. Several general inferences drawn from such a conclusion differ radically from typical historical-critical perspectives.

(1) Reconstructed settings in the life of Jesus should not be given priority in interpreting the sayings or teachings of Jesus. Much modern interpretation of the teachings of Jesus relies on the assumption that these teachings must be freed from their present literary contexts and projected back into the socio-politico-religious circumstances of the historical Jesus in order to be understood properly. A canonical interpretation would conclude that such hypothetical reconstructions are of benefit only if they contribute to an understanding of the present form and **construal** of the text.

(2) Pre-canonical literary compositions may not be appealed to as the key for understanding canonical compositions. For example, the reconstructed document "Q," which was apparently used by the authors of Matthew and Luke, may aid in understanding how traditions and sayings were once formulated and transmitted but cannot be assigned any determinative authoritative status in interpreting the final canonical form of the biblical materials. Similarly, although the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts were apparently originally a single composition, they were canonized as two separate works and in the final analysis must be so interpreted.

(3) The chronological order in which biblical books originated is not decisive for exegesis. Modern scholarship tends to assume, for example, that 1 Thessalonians was the first written of Paul's epistles. In the canon, however, Romans opens the collection of Pauline writings. In establishing this order, the early church predisposed the reader to interpret the remainder of Paul's writings in light of the book of Romans. The canonical construal of the material thus severed the letters of Paul from their chronological moorings. A canonical reading thus differs from one based on chronological considerations.

In carrying out a canonical interpretation of a passage, the interpreter focuses not on the original authorial intention or the circumstances of the original situation but on how the text in its present form and construal bears the theological witness to faith and the gospel.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### The Development of the Biblical Canons

- Aland, K., *The Problem of the New Testament Canon* (Oxford/Westminster, MD: A. R. Mowbray & Co./Canterbury Press, 1962).
- Attridge, H. W. (ed.), *The Formation of the New Testament Canon* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983).
- Barton, J., *Oracles of God: Perceptions of Ancient Prophecy in Israel after the Exile* (London: Dar-ton, Longman and Todd, 1986).
- Beckwith, R., *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism* (London/Grand Rapids: SPCK/Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985).
- Best, E., "Scripture, Tradition and the Canon of the New Testament" in *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 61 (1979) 259-89.
- Bruns, G. L., "Canon and Power in the Hebrew Scriptures" in *Critical Inquiry* 10 (1984) 462-80.
- \*von Campenhausen, H., *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972).
- Detweiler, R., "What is a Sacred Text?" in *Semeia* 31 (1985) 213-30.
- Dunn, J. D. G., "Levels of Canonical Authority" in *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 4 (1982) 13-60.
- Farmer, W. R. and D. M. Farkasfalvy, *The Formation of the New Testament Canon: An Ecumenical Approach* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983).
- Gamble, H. Y., *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).
- Leiman, S. Z. (ed.), *The Canon and Masorah of the Hebrew Bible: An Introductory Reader* (New York: KTAV, 1974).
- Leiman, S. Z., *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1976).
- Lewis, J. P., "What Do We Mean by Jabneh?" in *Journal of Bible and Religion* 32 (1964) 125-32.
- Lightstone, J. N., "The Formation of the Biblical Canon in Judaism of Late Antiquity: Prolegomena to a General Reassessment" in *Studies in Religion* 8 (1979) 135-42.
- McDonald, L. M., *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988).
- \*Sundberg, A. C., Jr., *The Old Testament of the Early Church* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1964).
- Sundberg, A. C., Jr., "The Protestant Old Testament Canon: Should It be Re-examined?" in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 28 (1966) 194-203.
- Sundberg, A. C., Jr., "The 'Old Testament': A Christian Canon" in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (1968) 143-55.

### Canonical Criticism

- Ackroyd, P. A., "Original Text and Canonical Text" in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 32 (1977) 166-73.

- \*Barr, J., *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (London/Philadelphia: Oxford University Press/Westminster Press, 1983).
- \*Barton, J., *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (London/Philadelphia: Darton, Longman and Todd/Westminster Press, 1984) 77-103, 140-57.
- Brown, R. E., *The Critical Meaning of the Bible* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981).
- Brueggemann, W., *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).
- Childs, B. S., "The Old Testament as Scripture of the Church" in *Concordia Theological Monthly* 43 (1972) 709-22.
- Childs, B. S., "The Exegetical Significance of Canon for the Study of the Old Testament" in *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum* (vol. 29; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978) 66-80.
- \*Childs, B. S., *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London/Philadelphia: SCM Press/Fortress Press, 1979).
- \*Childs, B. S., *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (London/Philadelphia: SCM Press/Fortress Press, 1985).
- Coats, G. W. and B. O. Long (eds.), *Canon and Authority: Essays In Old Testament Religion and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).
- Fowl, S., "The Canonical Approach of Brevard Childs" in *Expository Times* 96 (1985) 173-75.
- Keegan, T. J., *Interpreting the Bible: A Popular Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985) 131-64.
- Lemcio, E., "The Gospels and Canonical Criticism" in *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 11 (1981) 114-22.
- Roth, W., *Isaiah* (Knox Preaching Guides; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987).
- Sanders, J. A., *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974).
- Sanders, J. A., *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).
- \*Sanders, J. A., *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).
- Sheppard, G. T., "Canonization: Hearing the Voice of the Same God Through Historically Dissimilar Traditions" in *Interpretation* 37 (1982) 21-33.
- Siker, J., "The Theology of the Sabbath in the Old Testament: A Canonical Approach" in *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 11 (1981) 5-20.
- Spina, F. A., "Canonical Criticism: Childs Versus Sanders" in *Interpreting God's Word for Today: An Inquiry into Hermeneutics from a Biblical Theological Perspective* (ed. W. McCown and J. E. Massey; Anderson, IN: Warner Press, 1982) 165-94.
- Steinmetz, D. C., "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis" in *Theology Today* 37 (1980) 27-38.
- Stuhlmacher, P., *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

# Integrating EXEGETICAL PROCEDURES

---

The goal of exegesis is an informed understanding of a text. All the exegetical procedures and types of criticism which we have discussed in the preceding chapters have this as their aim.

At this point, the student may feel a bit overwhelmed by the diversity of critical approaches which can be utilized in exegeting a biblical text and somewhat submerged in a mass of what appear to be prescriptive directions. Here one may wish to ask, "Is all of this necessary merely to understand a text?" "How is it possible to use and integrate all of these procedures?" Before discussing some of the more practical aspects of exegesis, several suggestions perhaps should be made at this juncture.

(1) The task of biblical exegesis is not unrelated to much of the work that is done in general theological education. In fact, many courses which involve the reading and analysis of sources, whether primary or secondary, present occasions for doing forms of exegesis. Whenever one encounters a text and asks such questions as, "How should I read this text?" "What does this mean?" "Why is this said this way?" "Why does the text say this and not something else?" "How can I rethink what is said so as to give it expression in my own words?" one is engaged in exegesis. Thus exegesis, even of technical works, is not an activity strange to theological students. We should recognize much of our work as exegetical in orientation and be conscious that much that is learned from the interrogation of a text in a non-biblical area has relevance for and can be carried over to the interrogation of a biblical text.

(2) Practically all biblical studies, even if they are not designated as "exegetical," are relevant to the task of exegesis. Introductory and other courses on the Bible explore facets of the nature and content of biblical documents, the history and religion of Israel and the early church, and the culture and background of biblical texts. Many of these topics