CHAPTER 2

Canonical Exegesis of the New Testament Gospels: Five Cases

2.1 Brevard S. Childs

The Presbyterian scholar Brevard S. Childs (1923–2007) of Yale Divinity School was, together with Sanders, the most prominent representative of “canonical exegesis” in the English-speaking world, and was, to a considerable extent, responsible for placing question of the canon back on the exegetical agenda. Childs, like Sanders, endeavored to produce work on both the Old and the New Testaments, and was theologically strongly influenced by Karl Barth. Here, however, only his work on the New Testament as well as his general approach will be discussed, even though it is only one part of Childs’ scholarly endeavor. As is well known,

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1 As Christoph Markschies, “Epochen der Erforschung des neutestamentlichen Kanons in Deutschland. Enige vorläufige Bemerkungen,” in: Becker/Scholz (ed.), Kanon, 578–604, 578–579, observes, the question of the canon is, like questions having to do with the development of ecclesial ministries, often very tightly bound up with a scholar’s ecclesial loyalties, hence, of all the scholars discussed here, the ecclesial tradition to which they belong will be mentioned.

2 See especially the following works: Childs, Crisis, a programmatic work including examples of his method (149–219); idem, Old Testament, idem, New Testament, and Theology. Childs also produced a number of commentaries in which he used his own exegetical approach: The Book of Exodus. A Critical Theological Commentary (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974) and Isaiah (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); see further also: idem, The Church’s Guide for Reading Paul: The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) and idem, The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004). An extensive bibliography can be found in Daniel R. Driver, Brevard Childs, Biblical Theologian: For the Church’s One Bible (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 293–299; on the reception of Childs in both Anglophone and Germanophone academia, see idem, o.c., 35–79; another recent overview of Childs’ program is: Chen Xun, Theological Exegesis in the Canonical Context. Brevard Springs Childs’ Methodology of Biblical Theology (Frankfurt: Lang, 2010). See for this and the following also: Stefan Krauter, “Brevard S. Childs’ Programm einer Biblischen Theologie,” ZThK 96 (1999), 22–48, as well as the earlier brief treatment by Eckhard J. Schnabel, “Die Entwürfe von B.S. Childs und H. Gese bezüglich des Kanons. Ein Beitrag zur aktuellen hermeneutischen Fragestellung,” in: Maier (ed.), Kanon, 102–152, and Smit, “Wegweiser.”

Childs’ main aim was to develop a consciously theological approach to the entire Christian Bible by emphasizing the biblical canon as the hermeneutical key to Scripture. Here, it will be outlined what this amounted to for Childs, both in theory and in terms of exegetical practice: A sketch of his hermeneutical theory will be followed by the analysis of an example of his exegesis.

2.1.1  The Canonical Approach of Brevard S. Childs
Childs began developing his approach at the backdrop of what he saw as the failure of the Biblical Theology Movement. He first provided a full outline of his concerns and his program in his 1970 Biblical Theology in Crisis. Here, he argued vehemently that “the canon of the Christian church is the most appropriate

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4 On this movement, see e.g. Zwiep, Tekst ii, 102–108. Sheppard probably formulates the issue between Childs and the biblical theology movement well, when he wrote: “as the more rigorous historical orientation of the modern period came to dominate, canonical issues seemed to belong only to the last steps in a long process, at great distance from the original historical events upon which the revelatory claims of a religion depends. Therefore, modern scholars, whether conservative or liberal on questions of biblical history, tended to shift the treatment of these subjects to the back of introductions, following the lead of such major orthodox interpreters as J.G. Carpzov (1721). This same priority of biblical history to biblical text informed much of the recent “Biblical Theology Movement,” which often focused the theological worth of the Bible to the “acts of God in history” or defined the biblical witness in terms of an “actualized” report about a historical event. The canon could be viewed, according to this model, as merely a late and flawed pre-modern effort to preserve efficacious “confessions” about history. A canonical approach challenges the assumption that the earliest historical events play such a determinative role in the capacity of scripture to have authority or to render reality. Without denying the value of information gained by means of any critical investigation, a canonical approach seeks to understand a different issue: How a biblical text is normative with religious interpretation, that is to say, how the context of ancient traditions within scripture functions as an arena in which certain religious questions are asked and answered. In this approach, one seeks to recognize the textual warrants and rules whereby a scripture makes specific religious claims, perpetuates paradoxical and ambiguous expressions of faith, engenders the need for repeated interpretation, and imposes upon the reader a vision of the world that God has made.” (Sheppard, “Criticism,” 862).