

**THE DEVELOPMENT IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY
AND ITS POLEMICS BETWEEN BREVARD S. CHILDS AND JAMES BARR**

By

A. K. Lama

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*Dr. Kevin J. Vanhoozer***

Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

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Brief Highlights on the History of Biblical Theology

In order to set the scene for the contemporary discussion, it is appropriate to remember the nature of debate in the development of Biblical Theology. Since a number of authors' work on historical developments of methodologies in this discipline is available¹, the first half of this paper will review it briefly.

For more than two hundred years a plethora of volumes on Biblical Theology has been published. The contributions made by Johann Phillip Gabler (1787),² Georg Lorenz Bauer (1796),³ Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg (1835), Johann Christian Konard vonHofmann (1844), Paul S. Minear (1943), Emil Bruner (1943), Harold Henry Rowley (1944), Gerhard Ebeling (1943), Geerhardus Vos (1948), Walter Kaiser (1978), Brevard S. Childs (1970 & 1993), and James Barr (1999) are significant in understanding the discipline of Biblical Theology.

¹ This refers to the essay on the subject by the four authors in their books: (1) Gerhard F. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972); (2) James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999); (3) Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old Testament and New Testaments: Theological Reflections on the Christian Bible*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992); (4) Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

² Johann Phillip Gabler's lecture entitled *An Oration on the Proper Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objectives of Each* in the University of Altdorf on March 30, 1787 marked the beginning of the modern debate on Biblical Theology. See Gerhard F. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 21.

³ Georg Lorenz Bauer, a student of J. G. Eichhorn, published the evaluation of Gabler's writing in his book *Biblical Theology of Old and New Testaments* (Leipzig, 1796). He was the first to separate the Biblical Theology into the Old and New Testaments. See *Ibid*, 22.

The provenance of the movement of Biblical Theology can be traced back to the Reformation movement when, against the scholastic theology and ecclesiastical tradition, the cry of reformers “*sola scriptura*” became a powerful motivation for “the self-interpretation of Scripture (*sui ipsius interpret*) and the source for the subsequent development of Biblical theology.”⁴ In the beginning the phrase Biblical Theology was used to mean either “a theology which is rooted in its teachings in the Scripture and bases its foundation on Scripture,” or “it can designate the theology which the Bible itself contains.”⁵ But soon different scholars began to define Biblical Theology differently. Some called it as synonym to the *theologica exegetica*, others subordinated it to exegetical theology, and still others put it as the rival of dogmatics. Some considered it as a theology between exegesis and systematic theology in either of the testaments, yet to be discovered, but ecumenical in potential.

After the allegorical method was eschewed as invalid, the Biblical Theological movement began seeking different methodologies to understand the unity of the Old and the New Testaments through the typological method, history of redemption or *heilgeschichte*, evolutionary method, thematic method (such as covenant, revelation, redemption, messiah, faith etc), and promise and fulfillment method. While these approaches enriched the methodology of Biblical Theology a consensus was still missing.

According to Paul R. House, Gabler differentiated Biblical Theology from the dominant influence of Dogmatic Theology and proposed, “three stage approach to examine” Biblical Theology.⁶ The first stage was the collection of data concerning “each of the periods,

⁴ Hasel, *Old Testament Theology*, 15.

⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁶ House, *Old Testament Theology*, 16.

authors, and the manners of speaking which each used as a reflection of time and place” in both the Old and the New Testaments. The second stage recommended “a careful and a sober comparison” of the data to identify the similarities and differences among the authors. The third stage proposed the analysis of the emerging “universal notions.” Gabler’s methodology; however, could not clarify the idea of a “universal notion.” Is Biblical Theology about “universal notion” only? What should a biblical scholar do with the “unique notion” in the collected data?

Georg Lorenz Bauer (1796) picked up Gabler’s idea and developed it further with his historical methodology.⁷ For the first time he formulated the separation of the Old and New Testament theologies, which further complicated the case for historical continuities between the testaments and the unity of the canon.⁸

In 1831, Wilhelm M. L. de Wette, influenced by J. Fries and Immanuel Kant, published his philosophical approach to Biblical Theology.⁹ He employed a historical method based on rationalistic principles to differentiate history from myth in the Old Testament. The first half of the nineteenth century saw the dominance of historicism (*Heilsgeschichte*) and the resurgence of the concept of evolution. In 1937, Oesterley and Robinson described the evolution of the religion of Israel as beginning with animism, moving on to polydaemonism, then to polytheism, to henotheism and then finally, culminating in monotheism. Thus

⁷ Georg Lorenz Bauer examined Gabler’s idea in his first work on Old Testament Theology in 1796. He is considered as the first to separate the Old and the New Testaments. See the subtitle *A Biblical Sketch of the Religious Options of the Ancient Hebrews*. See House, *Old Testament Theology*, 17.

⁸ Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 5.

⁹ *Lehrbüch der Christlichen Dogmatik* (1831). See House, *Old Testament Theology*, 19.

Christianity was portrayed as the highest stage in the evolution of Israel's religion. George Ernest Wright (1952), W. F. Albright (1958) and others vehemently opposed these ideas of evolution in the Biblical Theological movement as an inappropriate paradigm for biblical studies.¹⁰

The tension between history and theology was still strong in 1933, when Eichrodt gave a new direction to Old Testament Theology, making it a discipline rather than a mere history. He traced the biblical notions like covenant throughout the text and did not reject the revelatory claims of the Bible. Though Wellhausen's theories on the Pentateuch still prevailed, a new group of biblical scholars followed Eichrodt's pattern. Among them were Ludwig Köhler (1935), Paul Heinisch (1940), G. E. Wright (1944), and Theodorus Christiaan Vriezen (1949). Vriezen was precise to say that the "Bible does not derive its authority from its historical correctness or infallibility, but from its theological truth, from the reliability, the trueness to life of its message."¹¹ This debate represents the struggle of seeking the authenticity of Biblical Theology within the historical-critical method. In 1957, Gerhard von Rad's two-volume publication *Old Testament Theology* brought a dramatic change of perspective on the historical critical method. Rad's form of *Heilsgeschichte* emphasized the redemptive act of God in history and also the textual connectedness between the two Testaments.

Finally, in 1955, Gerhard Ebeling clarified the four methodological problems that Biblical Theology was facing¹²: (1) difficulty in producing a unified theology of the Old

¹⁰ Robert Gnuse, "The Critic of Biblical Theologians: A review of James Barr's THE CONCEPT OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY: AN OLD TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE", *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 31, no.2 (2001):47, 44-52.

¹¹ House, *Old Testament Theology*, 33.

¹² Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 7.

and the New Testaments; (2) difficult in inner unity of each testaments because the focus was on the theology of individual authors; (3) a historical approach to both the testaments required the method to go beyond the canonical, the dogmatic, and the ecclesiastical interest; and (4) the use of term Biblical Theology was questionable. In his article *The Meaning of 'Biblical Theology'* published in 1963, he defined Biblical Theology as:

In 'biblical theology' the theologian who devotes himself specially to studying the connection between the Old and New Testaments has to give an account of his understanding of the Bible as a whole, i.e. above all of the theological problems that come of inquiring into the inner unity of the manifold testimony of the Bible.¹³

In recent years, Brevard S. Childs and James Barr have engaged in an intensive dialogue on this subject. In 1970, Childs published *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, which according to him, did not deal comprehensively on the hermeneutical issues of Biblical Theology.¹⁴ His book *Biblical Theology of the Old Testament and New Testaments: Theological Reflections on the Christian Bible*, published in 1993, represents his latest proposal on methodology for Biblical Theology. Barr also published his writings on Biblical Theology such as *Old and New in Interpretation* (1966), *The Bible in the Modern World* (1973), *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (1991), and *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (1999). In following paragraphs, the writer will discuss and critic their methodologies individually and then highlight some of Barr's objections to Childs' methodology. Finally, in conclusion the writer will present his personal paradigm for a methodology on Biblical Theology.

¹³ Gerhard Ebeling, "The Meaning 'Biblical Theology'", *Word and Faith*, (London: SCM Press, 1963), 79-97.

¹⁴ Childs, *Biblical Theology*, xv.

Biblical Theology According to Brevard S. Childs

Childs, who studied under VonRad, Borkamm, Albrecht Goetze, and Karl Barth, yearned to seek connection between the Bible and theology from his days in seminary. In 1958, he began to teach Old Testament at Yale University, where he also developed his expertise in history of interpretation and the New Testaments. Childs' credibility as an evangelical scholar has been remarkable. Contrary to the expectation, even his opponent James Barr describes him as "one of the great personalities of contemporary Old Testament study." He distinguishes him as "open-minded and imaginative, generous and creative, aware of every side of the subject, international in the scope of his understanding."¹⁵

A. Childs' prolegomena

Childs' prolegomena is borrowed from Ebeling's four basic concepts for developing Biblical Theology. First, the biblical theology is not merely limited to the author's original intention in its historical context, but it is a discipline in which the modern theologians reflect on different aspects of the Bible, trying to connect both the historical and theological components. Second, Biblical Theology should enable the modern theologians to present "the manifold testimony of the Bible" in clarity, to develop the use of the tools and skills of Enlightenment's discovery, to exegete in such a way that each testament's voice is heard clearly, and to preserve and pursue the diversity inherent in the Bible. Childs does not see the need of the post-Enlightenment approach of doing away theology in order to have objectivity in the historical approach. Third, Biblical Theology must enable the modern

¹⁵ James Barr, "Childs' Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture," *Journal for the Study of Old Testament* 16 (1980), 12-23.

theologians to reflect and seek 'inner unity' between the testaments in order to develop an 'understanding of the Bible as a whole.' Childs strong feeling for treating Bible as a whole is vivid in his statement:

Biblical Theology has as its proper context the canonical scriptures of the Christian church, . . . because of the peculiar reception of this corpus by a community of faith and practice. The Christian church responded to this literature as the authoritative word of God, and it remains existentially committed to an inquiry into its inner unity because of its confession of the one gospel of Jesus Christ which it proclaims to the world. It was therefore a fatal methodological mistake when the nature of the Bible was described solely in categories of the history of religion, a move which could only develop in the direction of contesting the integrity of the canon and of denying the legitimacy of its content as theology.¹⁶

Fourth, Biblical Theology must liberate theological methods from the Enlightenment's mindset where the Bible was subjected to the confinement of anthropological experience and philosophical clarity. It should provide a methodology to restore the Bible as scripture, the vehicle of God, and a living testimony of ancient people whose writings direct the present and point to the future.

Having been criticized for his anti-Enlightenment approach, Childs redefines his new position on the historical-critical methodology as the new approach that "seeks to do justice to the theological integrity of Israel's witness while at the same time freely acknowledging the complexities of all human knowledge and the serious challenge of modernity to any claims of divine revelation."¹⁷ He does not necessarily call this approach to be canonical. According to him, the reason why his approach to the historical development

¹⁶ Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

and canonical shaping has been misunderstood as static and lacking the diachronic dimension is that the biblical text is mistaken merely as a source, rather than a witness.¹⁸

Childs views Dogmatic Theology both as a promise and a threat depending on its construal in the practice of Biblical Theology. To him, the solution does not lie in the “general dismissal” of all dogmatics, but in seeking a balance within the tension. He thinks that neither a text can be read without ‘some sort of conceptual framework,’ nor a mere traditional dogmatic construal would enable the close hearing of the text. Childs’ Biblical Theology is not in competition with Systematic Theology. To him, a discipline is a simply useful tool and not an end itself. He suggests a fruitful cooperation of other fields such as philosophical, literary, and historical scholarships in order to illumine the biblical text and the subject matter.¹⁹ In order to do so, the biblical scholars may have to be more systematic or the systematic scholars may have to be more biblical in their approach; however, he does not explain how this should be done.

Concerning the use of allegorical and typological approaches in Biblical Theology, although Childs does not give any hermeneutical methods, he views the necessity of the use of this model in relating the New to the Old Testament. He vehemently denies James Barr’s opinion on “Typology and Allegory”, who considers no basic difference between typology and allegory because “both are derived from a resultant system in which the text is construed from the perspective of an outside system brought to bear upon it, and that the difference between typology and allegory depends largely upon the content of the resultant system being applied.”²⁰

¹⁸ Childs, *Biblical Theology*., 104.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁰ Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 14.

Nevertheless, Childs admits that the problems of interpreting the typology and allegory in Christian theology are yet to be resolved. Again on the use of great ideas or themes as the models for Biblical Theology, Childs neither recommends categorical rejection nor generalization. He suggests a critical application of the model because one can either “distort the whole by dividing material which belongs together or joining elements which do not organically cohere.”²¹

Childs believes that the use of literary model can help Biblical Theology to focus on the biblical text and recover the meaning, sense, and reference as long it does not bypass the biblical reality and distinguishes the reality of its subject matter carefully. Another current model is the Cultural-Linguistic Method proposed by its latest proponent George Lindbeck, who suggests that ‘it is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text. A scripture world is thus able to absorb the universe,’ . . .²² To him, the meaning of the text is always ‘within self-related whole’ rather than ‘extra-scriptural categories.’ On the contrary, Childs believes just the opposite. To him, the very fact that Christ incarnated into the world and called his disciple to follow him in this real world implies the validity of the language and the culture of the real world. In this model there is a need, however, to do justice with both texts and reality without separating or fusing them.

His primary concern in Biblical Theology is focused on canonicity of the Scripture, Christology, the integrity of the witness of both the testaments, and the Christian identity of the whole.

²¹ Ibid., 15.

²² Ibid., 21.

B. Childs' canonical approach

Childs admits that Biblical Theology, although assumes the theological unity in the Bible, cannot avoid the reality of inadequate direct historical evidence for establishing the scope and the precise form of the scripture. Nevertheless, he argues that there is enough strong evidence, which supports 'a concept of an established Hebrew canon' in the first century BC. He gives four arguments in support of this: (1) the treatise of Josephus *Against Apion* (AD 93); (2) the loose reference of Writings; (3) Pharisaic Judaism had a fixed scripture which did not have reference from Apocrypha in Philo; (4) The history of stabilization of Mesoretic Text of which even materials from Qumran affirms.²³ Against the historical evidences which favor the two types of attitudes for the Jewish canon among the Christian Church: one opting for a narrow canon defended by Jerome and the other being the wider canon supported by Augustine, he insists on his personal belief in the narrow canon."²⁴ To him, even the Reformers sought the primacy of scripture over tradition simply because they considered God's revelation in Jesus Christ as the critical norm of truth and faith. He thinks that, "Any appeal solely to tradition or praxis apart from the critical norm exercised by the content of the biblical witness eventually runs counter to the essence of a Christian theology of canon."²⁵ It is explicit from his arguments that the central theology that unites the scriptures into a canon is Christology.

Childs identifies canon as 'received, collected, and interpreted material of the church,' which 'establishes a theological context in which the tradition continues to function

²³ Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 60.

²⁴ Ibid., 64.

²⁵ Ibid., 67.

authoritatively for today.²⁶ Since, the lengthy process of canonization in the community of faith ‘toward a theological end’ involved ‘a profound hermeneutical activity,’ a hermeneutical construal to the canon is crucial for doing Biblical Theology today. To shape this hermeneutical construal Childs has written introductions of both the testaments in one volume, which was rejected by Barr outright and Bruggemann criticized the proposal to be without any theological content.

Furthermore, commenting on the extensive use of the Old Testament in the New Testament, Childs revises his earlier proposal of using the Old Testament citation in the New Testament as a major category for Biblical Theology (*Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 114ff). Although the Old Testament is ‘Old’ it is not ‘a testimony to miscarriage and failure,’ rather ‘the Old is understood by its relation to the New, but the New is incomprehensible apart from Old.’²⁷ Emphasizing on the integrity of the Old Testaments, he writes:

The significance of emphasizing the continuing integrity of the Old Testament lies in resisting the Christian temptation to identify Biblical Theology with the New Testament’s interpretation of the Old, as if the Old Testament’s witness were limited to how it was once heard and appropriated by the early church.²⁸

On the other hand he also acknowledges the nature of the witness of the New Testament, which demands transformation of the Old Testament. It is not clear how Childs’ Biblical Theology would unite two different and distinct voices, often contradicting, to witness to Jesus Christ. Once again, Childs fails in giving a vivid methodology for his wonderful ideal proposal.

²⁶ Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 71.

²⁷ Ibid., 77.

²⁸ Ibid.

E. Childs' hermeneutics

It is one thing to pursue the canonical integrity of the two testaments and accept them as equally valid witnesses, but it is another thing to explain the coherence of subject matter of these witnesses objectively. Most theories on this subject matter lack the clarity and consistency on hermeneutical methodology. How do we treat an Old Testament text in the New Testament? Should we go in the favor of explained (*erklären*) or understood (*verstehen*)? Childs thinks that in either case the modern exegete must distinguish from an approach that suggests that one should simply adopt Paul's method of reading the Old Testament. According to him, 'it is hermeneutically in error by assuming that every time-conditioned feature of the New Testament can be used as a warrant for its continued use without properly understanding the theological relation of its authority of its function as kerygmatic witness.'

In Biblical Theology, the hermeneutics must enable one to go beyond the level of text and hear the dissident voices of divine reality into a harmonious whole. It should seek the relation between the reality in the text and the reality known and experienced in Christ through the Holy Spirit within the community of faith. Thus, for Childs, Biblical Theology is 'normative and not merely descriptive.'²⁹

Childs' view is accused of being anti-historical, philosophically idealistic, and abstract; however, he is unashamed of his idealistic approach. Commenting the unique process of hermeneutics in Biblical Theology, he writes: "The true expositor of the Christian scripture is the one who awaits in anticipation toward becoming the interpreted rather than

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Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 86.

the interpreter. The very divine reality, which the interpreter strives to grasp, is the very one who grasp the interpreter.” Childs goes on length to discuss on what is the role of Biblical Theology in hermeneutical construal for interpreting the text, but he does not comment on “how.” The methodology remains obscure. Perhaps, Biblical Theology to him for a theologian is like an operation under the idiosyncratic non-descriptive influence. He knows how to go about his own hunch individually; however, it is difficult for him to prescribe a standard methodology. Or, it may be because there is no one form or approach.

Biblical Theology According to James Barr

James Barr, a Scottish OT Scholars who had a rich career of teaching in Edinburg, Princeton, Oxford, and Vanderbilt, is well known for an aggressive writing on Biblical Theology against Brevard Childs. To brevity of this paper; however, this paper will focus his latest book and his article *Child’s Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* published in the *Journal for the Studies in the Old Testament Vol. 16* (1980).

A. Barr’s prolegomena

Barr’s methodology is committed to scientific, philosophical, pro-enlightenment, historical-critical, rational, objective, and logical approach to the Bible. According to him the canon is a dangerous and confusing proposition for authority. It is because of such open ended methodical approach, he seems to be lacking any theologies particularly committed to either of the testaments exclusively, nor to the whole of it.³⁰ His

³⁰ R. E. Clements, Review of James Barr, “The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective”, *Journal of Theological Studies*, Vol. 51 (2000) 593-596.

commitment to his methodological approach neither enables him to agree Child's understanding on Biblical Theology nor enables him specifically outline his approach to Biblical Theology in clarity. Barr vehemently rejects Child's proposal on canonical approach and other models of Biblical Theology; however, he admits the importance of a discipline such as Biblical Theology: "I believe that at the end of the day something of the nature of biblical theology will remain necessary, and that not only biblical scholarship, but also theology as a whole, would be much the poorer without it."³¹

B. Barr's view on Biblical Theology

According to Barr, there is no simple definition of Biblical Theology because the multiple set of motivations and choices have led this discipline to confusion. To him the 'Biblical theology' is a contrastive notion, like the "Roman god Janus looking in opposite directions" or like the "the Hindu deities with multiples hands."³² Biblical Theology takes different shapes as it is compared with different disciplines. In contrast to Systematic theology, it is not authoritative and normative, but descriptive. In contrast with the non-theological study of the Bible, Biblical Theology is philological, emphasizing the study of text and language. In contrast to the history-of-religion approach, "Biblical theology has generally sought factors of constancy which supported the distinctive identity of the Bible and its religion or theology while accommodating rather than denying the facts of religious change within and religious similarities without."³³ In contrast to philosophy and natural

³¹ Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, xiv.

³² Ibid., 5.

³³ Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 11.

theology, it has “defined in essence an entry into an ancient mode of thinking,”³⁴ a theology that prefers to work within biblical concept and logic rather than philosophy, Hellenic presuppositions, and modern scheme of thought. In regard to the interpretation, Biblical Theology is an effort to put pieces together in the perspective of the entire Bible and thus it is a “pan-biblical theology.” Barr distinguishes the concept of a unified theology of both the testaments from the theologies of each testament by the term “pan-biblical theology,”³⁵ and doubts the possibility of such theology because of the dissimilarity in time and culture of each testament. Biblical theology not only tries to perceive and state theology, but also evaluates, make value judgment, and actualize its moral relevance.

C. Barr’ s canonical approach

Against Childs’ concept of Canon, Barr recommends the consideration of Jewish literature outside the traditional Jewish canon. He argues that the presence of the Apocrypha in the Septuagint was an evidence of its authenticity.³⁶ According to Gnuse, Barr believes in five directions to which Biblical Theology should move. First, Jewish theologians must be involved and generate the First (Old) Testament theology. Second, greater attention must be paid to post-canonical Jewish texts. Third, “Canonical criticism” must be clarified in order to explain what it really does. Fourth, we must move away from the models of Eichrodt and von Rad . Fifth, we must recognize that the Bible is the norm and source for theology,

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid., 1.

³⁶ Ibid., 576.

but it is not theology itself.³⁷ The broad inclusive approach of Barr to Biblical Theology certainly undermines the canonical authority of the Bible.

Barr's prolegomena of theology is quite different from Childs. He proposes four criteria for a theology possible on canonical principles. First, the theology should be open to variety of possibilities and not to be tied to a particular and personal system of belief (especially of Child's). A theology that is open to "Jewish Scholar and also to scholars from other religious affiliation and of none."³⁸ Barr is certainly not talking of a theology of a Christian confession. Second, he suggests the theology to ally with the tradition of historical criticism and modern scholarship because both are indispensable tools for him. Third, the theology must group its material in a canonical manner. One must remember that for Barr there are different canons such as Jewish, Samaritan, and Christian canon. Fourth, the theology extracted from a text, person, and event should be treated as the theology of the particular and it should be complemented with historical investigation. Barr thinks that such theology especially of the Hebrew Bible is greatly anticipated.

Barr's Polemic Against Childs

A. Against Child's Biblical Theology

According to Barr, the imbalance in Childs' theology is primarily due to his biased position such as: Anti-enlightenment, anti-historical-criticism, pro-Reformation, and his die-hard commitment to the canonical approach. He goes on to contend that Childs' proposition is "neither a work of biblical theology nor of canonical theology," but more of a

³⁷ Gnuse, "The Critic of Biblical Theologians", 44-52.

³⁸ Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 440.

personal dogmatic statement supported with “biblical proofs.”³⁹ To him Childs’ theology is not authentically of his own, but a copy from Barth. He suggests that Childs’ “entire work is an offshoot of Barthian theology.”⁴⁰ Even the vocabulary used by Childs such as ‘struggle’, ‘wrestle’, ‘utterly’, ‘grounded in’, ‘at the very heart of’, ‘Christologically,’ ‘hammered out’, are from Barth. At the same time, he indicts Childs to be different from Barth in various ways. Childs rejects the historical criticism as an enemy of theology while Barth did not. Unlike Child, Barth did not lay any emphasis on canon.

Barr charges Childs to be an unsympathetic scholar for whom, except his three heroes (Luther, Calvin, and Barth), all other theologians are wrong and he alone is the absolute and right:

“In many cases Childs does not even bother to give reasons why some one’s ideas are defective: he just hands down a minimum grade, like a professor who issues a C minus without any explanation of how the student could have done better.”⁴¹

Beside himself, Barr quotes several scholars such as Samuel Terrien, E. P. Sanders, H. Räisänen, George Lindbeck, W. A. Meek, David Kelsey, John Barton, Paul Banson, James Sanders, H. Hübner, Walter Brugeman, E. Käseman, T. F. Torrance, Paul van Buren, and Moltman, whose great theological work has been negatively judged rejected by Childs. He raises the question: “How can it be that, out of so many, only Childs has got it right?”⁴²

³⁹ Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 401.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 401.

⁴¹ Ibid., 402.

⁴² Ibid., 405.

Barr points out that Child's work on Biblical theology is not a biblical theology, but a dogmatic theology with biblical proofs – “a personal religious confession accompanied by claims that alternative religious positions are to be rejected.”⁴³ Barr gives two examples on which he tries to show how Child's work is more of a dogmatic theology. First, the idea of witness, where ‘the role of the Bible is seen as a testimony pointing beyond itself to a divine reality to which it bears witness.’ In this case the term “divine reality” and “witness” will have to be assumed from a dogmatic realm. Second, the use of the category of heresy. Barr thinks that in true Biblical Theology, there is the likelihood of producing unorthodox and heretical opinions. But, such openness is not assumed in Child's Biblical Theology thus it is more of a dogmatic theology.⁴⁴

Barr agrees with Childs on the authority of the Old Testament; however, he thinks that Childs theology of the Old Testament is the theology of the modern canonical critic. It is neither the theology of the first century nor the theology of those who were involved in canonization.⁴⁵ Commenting on Childs' retreat on the canonical approach, he expresses his delight on Childs' acceptance of the fact that it was ‘largely irrelevant’ whether one calls it ‘canonical’, ‘kerygmatic’, or ‘post-critical.’ He points out Childs recent shift in accepting some room for history in exegesis.⁴⁶

Barr accuses Childs as ‘the first-rate theological, biblical scholar’, who intent

⁴³ Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 412.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 416.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 420.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 423.

on the primacy of ‘theology’ and yet ‘damaging the theology itself,’ because he prosecute every theology except his own as a mere ‘ideology.’ Showing how Childs’ theology is also an ideology of the white American male, he writes: “The fact that he thinks it is lively, kerygmatic, biblically based, Christian faith only shows how ideological it is.”⁴⁷

B. Against Childs’ *Old Testament as Scripture*

According to James Barr, Childs proposal for treating Deutero-Isaiah as the product of sixth century in order to enhance the semantic level to a greater metaphorical and universal use is not a new method but simply a redaction criticism and an extension of existing historical method.⁴⁸ Barr views his proposal as one that (i) lacks room for compromise, (ii) uncertain; and (iii) fails to see its own limitations.

Barr considers his book to be simple, repetitious of same ideas in forty chapters, and inadequate in emphasizing the canon or canonical form. He does agree with Childs’ canonical concept as it is useful sometimes and even decisive for interpretation, but he does not appreciate his monolithic and strongly systematic emphasis on canon.⁴⁹ He thinks that Childs’ idea of canon is very vague. Sometime it is the boundary of the scripture, sometime it is final form of the book, sometime it is context, and sometime it is abstract without a definite article.⁵⁰ Other associated terms like “canonical integrity” and “canonical intentionality” for Barr are mystical phrases. Since the OT writings are historical description

⁴⁷ Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 436.

⁴⁸ James Barr, “Childs’ Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture,” *Journal for the Study of Old Testament* 16 (1980), 12-23.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

there is nothing called “canonical intentionality.” He is not convinced why the events, traditions, and persons should be taken into account as authoritative against the authority of the Old Testament. Childs proposal to him is more like an exhortation rather than of reasoning.⁵¹ He thinks that Childs’ reasons for the consideration of canonical reading is confined to showing of weaknesses and antinomies of historical criticism rather than the demonstration of its virtues. He identifies Childs to be one among the conservatives who is simply disillusioned by the historical criticism. On the other hand, he also sees him as some one whose methodology is purely dependent on historical and traditional criticism. In fact, Childs should have shown the canonical reading through a methodology untouched by the historical criticism and critical movement in the Biblical scholarship.⁵²

Barr thinks Childs proposal for giving authority to the canon in hermeneutics is like giving prime theological authority to the redactors or canonizers over the authority of canonical text, people and events out of which the text came out. He accuses Childs of reading ‘his own passionate hermeneutical interest’ into the minds of the redactors.⁵³ He disagrees with Childs that the redactors in canonization sought “universalization.” Describing from Psalm, he rather sees the contrary to the universalization.” He writes, “I cannot see how it was made more universal by saying that it was sung by David ‘concerning Cush a Benjamite.’”⁵⁴ He thinks that Childs have completely ignored the extrinsic realities in New Testament communities. These realities actually influenced the process of canonization. It was

⁵¹ Barr, “Childs’ Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture”, 12-23.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

not merely the canon that influenced the hermeneutics in the New Testament community but their faith⁵⁵. Canon does not give any hermeneutical principles for reading gospels or the epistle.

Child's preference of Hebrew canon as authoritative over the LXX, to establish the common scripture with Judaism surprises Barr. He believes if one should take Childs' canon seriously then 'it should either be a Jewish canon of the Hebrew Bible or Christian canon of the Old and the New Testaments.'⁵⁶

Conclusion

The possibilities of the multiple faces of Biblical Theology reminds us the story of the seven blind men describing the identity of an elephant in the Indian tale *Panchtantra*. What is Biblical Theology after all? Is Biblical Theology something that is yet to be discovered? Is it a branch of an academic pursuit independent of our commitment to historic Christian faith? Should our differences in theological premises and theological prolegomena need to be resolved before we seek consensus in our understanding of Biblical Theology? The answers to these questions are contentious. Nevertheless, most biblical scholars agree about the potentiality of Biblical Theology and the need for its emergence as a discipline of theology that unites the witness of the Old and the New Testaments. The writer has a dream that one day the biblical scholars would come to a consensus and restore the Biblical Theology as the unifying discipline, analogically, similar to the unifying discipline of Medical Sciences, where the study of Medical Sciences is sought through various disciplines such as

⁵⁵ Barr, "Childs' Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture", 12-23.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Cardiology, Neurology, Physiology, Pharmacology, Radiology and so on, without requiring any one of these disciplines to embody the whole of Medical Sciences. Although Medical Sciences in its totality cannot be pursued by one single branch of medical and paramedical sciences, yet each one of them cannot deny its allegiance to the Medical Sciences. A cardiologist knows that he cannot do without a pathologist; an oncologist cannot function without the help of a radiologist. They are interdependent and interrelated. Each enjoys independence in its areas of expertise without ignoring the importance and the necessity of the others. They are united in their objectivity and ethical pursuit to the physical and mental health of human beings. Likewise, Biblical Theology can also become a significant discipline in uniting all theologies for the common biblical objectivity and ethical pursuit to the spiritual wholesomeness of human race. No doubt, in the years to come the biblical scholars have the task of taking the work of Childs further for methodological clarity. (5433 words)

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