Canon and the Educational Repertoire

Every community that wants to last beyond a single generation must concern itself with education. Education has to do with the maintenance of a community through the generations. This maintenance must assure enough continuity of vision, value, and perception so that the community sustains its self-identity. At the same time, such maintenance must assure enough freedom and novelty so that the community can survive in and be pertinent to new circumstances. Thus, education must attend to processes of both continuity and discontinuity in order to avoid fossilizing into irrelevance on the one hand, and relativizing into disappearance on the other hand.

1. For this dynamic in the biblical text, see James A. Sanders's “Adaptable for Life: The Nature and Function of Canon,” in Magnalia Dei: The Mighty Acts of God, ed. Frank M. Cross, Werner E. Lenke, and Patrick D. Miller, Jr. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), 531–60. Sanders's terms are “adaptability and stability” (551). On a broader scale, Peter Berger, The Sacred Canopy (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967) has described the “canonical” processes of world construction and world maintenance. “Every society that continues in time faces the problem of transmitting its objectivated meanings from one generation to the next” (21). Sanders is concerned primarily with the literary process, and Berger characterizes the sociological process. It is our argument here that the literary process of canon and the process of socialization need to be seen in relation to each other, if the Bible is to impinge upon church education.
The Old Testament mirrors a community that intended to last over the generations. Therefore the Old Testament had to be concerned with education. To be sure, this concern is not very often explicit in the text; the Old Testament itself seldom addresses education frontally. But it is clearly a persistent and pervasive concern nonetheless, as the community struggled with continuity and discontinuity.²

There are two reasons why I have decided to take up these issues. First, I suspect we are at a time when there may be an important interface between Scripture study and education in the church. Church education has been intensely interested in the social sciences and has indeed learned much from them. Nothing said here is meant to detract from the positive attention to learning theory, learning process, developmental psychology, cultural anthropology, and critical sociology which have greatly influenced the awareness of the church. But in the midst of attention to the social sciences, I suggest that the biblical and theological disciplines have not been a full partner. The interface, therefore, has not been a very balanced one. Our concern here is to ask if Old Testament study can be a more effective partner in the dialogue about education, both constructively and critically. One can detect a move away from an uncritical embrace of the social sciences not only in education, but also in “pastoral care” and what we have come to call “organizational development.”

Second, approaches to church education are relatively clearly defined. Most of these approaches can be linked to one or more prominent leaders in the field. The enterprise is thus divided into camps revolving around certain agendas and methods, or we may say, certain ways of putting the question. It is convenient for study to have things stabilized in this way, even to the making of an inventory. And indeed, Jack L. Seymour helpfully offers such a summary list. It includes:

   Scholars advocating for this approach stress the importance of Christian practices of faith and include C. Ellis Nelson, Maria Harris, Charles Foster, Diana Butler Bass, Dorothy Bass, and Craig Dykstra.

2. Study: Instructional Approach to Christian Education (in the traditions of James Michael Lee, James Groome, and James Fowler)
   Many of the scholars working with this approach focus on teaching people to become competent interpreters of the tradition and connect it with daily life. Representative is the work of Elizabeth Caldwell, Sara Little, Dori Baker, and Anne Streaty Wimberly.

3. Service: Missional Approach to Christian Education
   This approach focuses on living faith in the world and bringing about transformation and liberation. Scholars working in this stream include Katherine Turpin, Evelyn Parker, Daniel Schipani, Grant Shockley, and David White.

This may be a fair summary of where we are, though there are less prominent methods and approaches not included here. But that still leaves the unanswered question of where we go next. I am proposing that an interface with Scripture study might contribute to the next steps we need to take as colleagues in a common ministry. That is the “external” reason for addressing the issue. And by “external” I mean simply a motivation that lies outside my own discipline of Old Testament study.

The “internal” motivation for addressing this topic is that shifts in Old Testament study itself suggest possibilities for a fresh interface with education. Without completely abandoning the enterprise, Old Testament study has sought to move beyond historical-critical analysis into other perspectives and methods. It is clear that these moves are required and permitted by new interfaces with various social sciences. The enterprise which perhaps holds most promise for our subject is what is loosely called canon criticism. As we shall see, that general term is used to refer to a variety of things. Canon criticism rests in the awareness that how the biblical material reaches its present form (canonical process) and the present form that it has reached (canonical shape) are important theological matters that tell us about the intent of the biblical community. In other words, the Bible-shaping process cannot be viewed as a neutral or incidental process which can be studied with critical indifference. The shaping process is itself a confessional act. By studying that process and its end result, we can learn much about the community’s self-understanding and its intent for the coming generations. Thus the broad link I suggest is that canon is a clue to education, both as substance and as a process. One reason Scripture study of a historical-critical variety has been unable to address education as a biblical theme is because canon has been bracketed out as a secondary, irrelevant, or mechanical process that had nothing to do with educational claims or intentions.
Still, if canon is neither an unexamined given nor an unintended accident, but an intentional transmitting process, then clearly it concerns education. The discussion I propose is simply this: attention to the process and shape of canon may tell us something about education in ancient Israel. In addition, it may provide clues for our own educational task, which I suggest is aiding communities and their members in the ongoing task of canon construction and canon criticism.

Our beginning, therefore, is with *canon criticism*, even though there is no agreement about the meaning of the phrase.

1. Canon criticism clearly has roots in tradition criticism, especially as articulated by Gerhard von Rad. As is well known, von Rad identified certain texts, specifically Deut. 6:20–24; 26:5–9; and Josh. 24:1–13, as the summary of Israel’s faith. These summaries he called “creeds” or “credos,” but he might well have called them the preliminary canon. That is, these summaries became the normative expression of the community faith. To be sure, von Rad located these normative expressions in the liturgy. But it is clear, especially in Deut. 6:20–24 and in the credos generally, that, liturgic or otherwise, these served an educational function. Von Rad has helped us see that the community, in its liturgy and elsewhere, did attend to the educational, nurturing, socializing agenda. And von Rad’s understanding of these credos shows that they were both *continuous* in


repeating the same data and discontinuous in receiving new data and extending the statement toward new contemporaneity. So already the argument is that if the community of faith is serious about education, it must attend to the canonical, credal process.

2. Brevard Childs has most fully addressed the concerns of canon. As I understand him, his agenda is to find a way into the Bible that moves beyond the historical-critical tendency to relativize. That is, a method must be found to respect the judgment of the community that these texts are normative and enduring, true and reliable, and not to be explained away by criticism. Childs’s way of argumentation is to address the canonical shape of each book of the Old Testament, to argue that the way the book now stands, regardless of the process, is in itself a theological statement of a normative kind.

Childs’s program and achievement are staggering. But it is not clear how it will help us in our enterprise for two reasons. First, the dialectic of holding to the old story and receiving new experience into the old story is exceedingly important and exceedingly difficult. From very different perspectives, this point is central for the work of von Rad, “The Form-Critical Problem,” in his tracing of the development of the credo, which takes new data into the classic picture; for the work of Sanders, who stresses flexibility as much as stability; and for the social analysis of Berger, Sacred Canopy. My argument is that church education has not intentionally taken up the problem both of transmitting the tradition and of keeping it open. On the one hand, the liberal stream of education in the church has largely abandoned the tradition for the sake of experiential learning, and more conservative streams, on the other hand, have presented the canonical story as though it were closed. The dialectic is the major issue. In what follows, I shall show that the tripartite structure of canon services precisely that issue.

In commenting generally on canon without special reference to the Bible, Ralph Norman, “Necessary Texts: Pluralism and the Uses of Canon,” Soundings 61 (1978): 240, makes the case for canon: (1) A strong culture will have its story straight. (2) Every story that is straight is kept straight by a good set of classic texts. (3) Classic texts must be familiar to everybody. (4) A strong culture will keep everybody familiar with classic texts.

I know of no better statement of the linkage between canon and education. Israel could not survive in an alien world if it “did not have its story straight” and did not keep the next generation involved with that story. In the same issue in which Norman’s article appears, Susan W. Wittig, “Tradition and Innovation,” p. 255, states a countertheme to Norman. She claims not that the story is kept straight by the classics, but that “the classics keep the culture straight.” That is, not only the tradition, but the community depends on the canon.

Childs is not interested in the *process* of canon, but only in its final *shape*. While such a focus is surely legitimate, it does not advance our investigation very far because it brackets out the dynamic to which we must attend. And indeed, Childs must bracket it out to make his point about the claim of the text beyond criticism. Second, Childs approaches biblical books one at a time. That is problematic because one never gets a sense of the whole of the Bible or of the whole of the Old Testament. As I hope to show, that may be our most helpful clue.

3. A much more usable approach is that of James Sanders who, in contrast to Childs, attends to the canonical *process*, that is, to the dynamic by which these materials function to become and to continue as normative. In his book on the subject, Sanders pays attention to the tripartite order of the Old Testament and sees that there are different degrees and kinds of authority, that each has a distinct role to play, and that this threefold character admits an important dynamic in the development of a sure authority.

Sanders has shown that canon, in order to maintain its authority, must be both “stable” and “flexible;” it must partake of both continuity and discontinuity. In ancient Israel the tripartite canon (law, prophets, writings) permitted and articulated this requirement. It is important that Israel formed and valued all three parts of the canon, kept them in relation to each other, was relatively clear about the function and place of each, and never tried to make one of them substitute for another. Sanders’s principle of stability and flexibility, while not simply to be overlaid upon the three parts of the canon, does tell us what to look for. It permits us to notice that over a period

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11. See the varied assessments of Childs’s work offered in *JSOT* 16 (1980) and Childs’s response. For our purposes the main issue is the relative importance of canonical shape and canonical process.
of time the emergence of subsequent parts of the canon (prophets and then writings) continues the principle of flexibility. The core of the canon, Torah, becomes increasingly removed not only in time, but also in its mode of shaping the issues.

4. Canon criticism as a way of discerning a process is closely related to redaction criticism. Here we should recognize especially the work of Ronald Clements, Joseph Blenkinsopp, Gerald Sheppard, and Rolf Rendtorff. Redaction criticism is, among other things, a study of the way the Bible uses and interprets the Bible, claiming and restating it in a new form for a new day. The relationship between old text and new expression is dialectical and delicate. It clearly is a traditioning process that both honors and takes the old text seriously (thus stability); at the same time, however, it gives freedom for a fresh articulation (so flexibility). Specifically, Sheppard has argued that there has been a sapiential traditioning process in which Old Testament texts have been recast according to a new epistemological frame. He says that this process has not just added a new piece of canon, but has decisively impinged upon the old material as well. Thus the dynamic of canon requires that it not just remain open-ended. It is a dialectical process in which new claims are either recognized in or assigned to the old materials. The wisdom process thus represents a remarkable response to a radically changed situation.

17. A fine example of this dialectic is found in Paul D. Hanson, “The Theological Significance of Contradiction within the Book of the Covenant,” in Canon and Authority, 110–31.
18. See Sheppard, Wisdom as a Hermeneutical Construct, 13, where his thesis is stated. His argument is that the period after the exile offered such a changed epistemological situation that it was the sapiential reinterpretation of the older part of the canon which continued to let it be pertinent and authoritative. That is, authority is not sustained by rigidity, but by responsiveness to the new situation.
But the new response is made completely on the grounds of the old tradition.

Sheppard has rightly seen that this process (so Sanders)\(^\text{19}\) which has reshaped the literature (so Childs) constitutes a major hermeneutical move. It is not a neutral literary process or simply a translation to get from one period to another; it is, instead, engaging the text in subtle ways as the live Word of God that can give vitality to the community. This hermeneutical enterprise permits the text to continue to have vitality, authority, and relevance for new generations in new circumstances.\(^\text{20}\) This suggests, then, that the hermeneutical enterprise is something church educators can no longer regard as outside their responsibility.

Such an approach to Old Testament study clearly holds enormous promise for us. It places in a new context much of the old historical-critical learnings to which we are witnesses and heirs. As educators, we should pay attention to the canonical process in Israel. For if we can understand how Israel dealt with these difficult matters of continuity and discontinuity, of stability and flexibility, we may arrive at a new sense of authority in education. We may understand afresh how the Bible is the live Word of God. We may even come to see education in the church and outside the church not as a professional, rational enterprise, but as a calling that is urgent both for survival of the community and for the faithfulness of the community.

This, then, marks our starting point: the process of canon is a main clue to education, a process which partakes of stability and flexibility, continuity and discontinuity. By attending to this confessional act,

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\(^\text{19}\) In his 1976 article “Adaptable for Life,” Sanders addressed himself primarily to the process, in contrast to Childs who, by definition, cannot give primacy to the process. For our purposes the process is important because it is there that the main points of contact occur with the ongoing and contemporary educational process.

\(^\text{20}\) Childs, Introduction, indicates a healthy regard for the dynamic process (79). Indeed, he understands a rigid placing of the text in an identifiable past as a matter of “decanonizing,” that is, of denying the text its present authority.
we may avoid the hazards of rigid *fossilization* which hold to a frozen, unresponsive canon, and to a deep *relativizing* which gives up everything for a moment of relevance. The canonical process is not done by outsiders or by calculation or by professional educators. It is a confessional, theological act done only by those for whom everything is at stake. It follows that the *educational process*, faithfully carried out, can be performed only by those who submit to the *canonical process*. Everything is at stake for them in the educational process because that process is intimately linked to the canonical process, where everything is likewise at stake. There is not a learner in the church, young or old, who is not in fact engaged in the process of canon. My concern is to address the intentional educational task of the church. But I would also insist that every formal and informal act in preaching, in liturgy, and in pastoral care (even counseling) is a canonical enterprise of probing the normative, of casting off old pieces of canon that are no longer vital, and of embracing new aspects of canon which address us inescapably. Canon has to do with life. And in the end there can be no noncanonical life or ministry which can have any sense, meaning, joy, or, certainly, staying power.

We may begin our consideration with Jer. 18:18, a verse often cited as a way of entry into the canon. The verse poses serious difficulties. It is attached to the complaint of vv. 19–23, but it does not seem to be an integral part of the complaint. Rather, it is a quote set in the mouth of Jeremiah’s opponents. Its function appears to be an attack upon the authority of the prophet.

The verse is nicely framed in an *inclusio*:

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at the beginning: Come, let us make plots against Jeremiah. . . .

at the end: Come, let us smite him with the tongue, and let us not heed any of his words.

It is not clear who Jeremiah’s opponents are, or what the plot is.22 But what is important for us is that inside the summons to conspiracy is a summary of Israelite authoritative knowledge:

Surely (kî) the Torah shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor word from the prophet.

Perhaps the conspirators convinced themselves that they could proceed against Jeremiah because the knowledge structures and the authority structures were sure and reliable. Therefore, this particularly troublesome man was dispensable. It may give us some pause about education in a community of faith that the modes of knowledge and the authoritative offices are here bracketed by a summons to eliminate them. The structure of the passage suggests how precarious instruction is in Israel, perhaps because of how subversive it is perceived to be when faithfully done.

But what interests us is the middle part of the verse, which identifies three sources of knowledge and three authoritative offices. If the verse stems from the seventh century, as seems plausible, we suggest that these three modes are not late developments which can be arranged chronologically. This old assumption can no longer be sustained, especially about wisdom. Rather, the threefold pattern here points to parallel and persistent modes of knowledge and education which must have been operative from of old in Israel. If we therefore