How scripture speaks: Brevard Childs (1923-2007)

by Stephen B. Chapman in the September 4, 2007 issue

Brevard Childs, one of the leading Old Testament scholars of the 20th century and a biblical theologian of international renown, continued to publish major new works right up until his death on June 23. His magnum opus was undoubtedly *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Fortress, 1993). This 745-page volume was followed by a commentary on Isaiah (Westminster John Knox, 2001), a further volume on the reception history of Isaiah (Eerdmans, 2004) and—in a manuscript finished just before his death and to be published later this year—a treatment of Paul's letters.

Childs's scholarship was too wide-ranging and subtle to be summed up in a slogan or thumbnail sketch. In many respects, however, his life's work could be viewed as a sustained act of reflection on how reading the Bible is not, in a phrase made famous by the 19th-century biblical scholar Benjamin Jowett, "like reading any other book."

Moderns adopted that program in order to make the Bible fully susceptible to grammatical and historical analysis, and Childs never hesitated to affirm that historical criticism brought a genuine advance in exegetical precision. In certain ways one does read the Bible like any other book, especially perhaps another ancient text. But not in *every* way.

That qualification expresses the core of Childs's scholarly concern. For Childs the biblical writings are religious documents, and they are either read with awareness of their religious nature—read "as scripture," in his words—or they are badly misconstrued. In his view scripture was, in fact, being "rendered mute" even within the church because the hermeneutical assumptions of modernity increasingly excluded theological concerns in advance. The contemporary loss of scripture's "voice" was the problem that Childs set out to address.

That task would entail a complete reappraisal of the methods and goals of historical criticism. As it had come to be practiced, historical criticism produced a stultifying

Humpty Dumpty effect. The biblical text was deconstructed on the basis of historical guesswork so scholars could reconstruct the history behind the text. Yet once the sources and stages of the text had been identified, scholars either neglected the question of how the text had then achieved its present shape or substituted their reconstructed history for the story presented by the text itself. Either Humpty Dumpty was not put back together again or he took on a disfigured appearance.

The theological necessity of doing justice to history lay at the heart of the historical-critical impulse, and no one challenged Childs more on this point than James Barr, a British Old Testament scholar who passed away last October. What Barr and others had difficulty seeing was that Childs did not advocate an unhistorical reading of the "final form" of the biblical text but an approach that appreciated what literary critic Robert Alter terms "composite artistry."

In Childs's treatment, for example, the dramatic differences between the creation accounts in Genesis 1:1-2:4a and 2:4b-3:24 could be readily acknowledged. Most likely these two versions had arisen at two different times in Israel's history and in two different streams of tradition. But for Childs, it is wrong to say that there are two different creation accounts. Perhaps there once were two creation accounts, but they have been editorially combined into a single account in the text's received form, and the task of the interpreter is ultimately to investigate that combined account's coherence and logic.

To articulate the fullness of its understanding of creation, Israel had found it necessary to attend to both traditions; to read only one, or to read one at the expense of the other, makes the historical mistake of reifying a perspective that might never have existed on its own terms and was in fact later judged by Israel to be insufficient.

Uncompromising in print and in the classroom, Childs demonstrated at the same time a gentle modesty born of self-criticism. He taught his students not to interrogate the biblical text but to allow the text to interrogate us. It was obvious that the text interrogated him; just to hear him pray before a lecture was to take a deep plunge into the paradoxes of Christian existence before God.

One sunny Saturday I spotted Childs sitting with Barr during a football game at the Yale Bowl. They appeared to have a splendid time together. I greatly regret the false impression on the part of some that Childs was ungenerous to other scholars.

Nothing could be further from my experience of him.

Yet like others of his generation, not least his friend Barr, Childs did not shy away from making normative judgments in print. He felt a high responsibility to provide reliable guidance to others, not only as a scholar but as a churchman. Scholarship for Childs was never a clever game or an amusing hobby but a spiritual vocation in which he faithfully put himself entirely into his work.

If Childs took aim in his scholarship at the iron curtain that had arisen between biblical studies and theology, his lasting contribution is to have inaugurated an era of scholarly *glasnost*. The recent lively discussions of “theological interpretation,” the multiplication of new commentary series with an explicitly theological focus, the intensity of interest in the history of biblical interpretation—all of these developments have their origin in Childs’s courageous early scholarship.

At a time when many were dissatisfied with the status quo but unable to feel their way forward, or hesitant to claim a Christian identity within the academy, Childs inspired a generation of pastors and professors to begin reclaiming the Bible for the church. Read as the church’s book, as “canon,” the Bible is not “like any other book” but unique, and it requires readers who celebrate its anomaly. Canonical interpretation, in Childs’s vision, does not amount to the arbitrary valorizing of the received biblical text but rather locates the interpreter within the community of the faithful, those who read scripture theologically not as one more exegetical option among many but because it is a matter of life and death.