

# READING SCRIPTURE CANONICALLY



*Theological Instincts  
for Old Testament Interpretation*

MARK S. GIGNILLIAT

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CANONICALLY

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For my students,  
in prayerful hope  
for a life of continued learning  
and devotion

The Bible and its principal Subject  
are endlessly fascinating.



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# INTRODUCTION

I tell my students about an early preaching experience of mine. I was young, in my early twenties. I had taken several years of Greek and emerged from my undergraduate experience with misplaced confidence in my ability to teach and preach the Scriptures. Then my number was called for a preaching engagement. I was ready. I had done it before. Nothing new. With Greek text and commentaries spread around me, I entered the fray as I prepared a sermon series on Hebrews 11. What I wasn't prepared for was the small crisis awaiting me. As I studied, parsed verbs, and explored lexical threads, I realized that the sermons I was writing were primarily descriptive in nature. I was talking *about* Hebrews 11, providing lexical information on "faith," and offering background material on various intertextual traditions. In effect, my sermons were learned (I tried) talks on Hebrews 11. They were not sermons crafted for the sake of an encounter with the living God. I felt stuck.

I'm overstating the narrative a bit, I'm sure. Even my younger self wanted sermons that were truly sermons and not lectures. But I do remember feeling troubled. I felt like I was struggling to put on a blazer that didn't fit right. Something was off. It was the living character of the biblical texts that escaped me. Or at the

very least, I struggled to lean into this lived dynamic, the fuzzy line where teaching or description yields to preaching, theologizing, and arrestment. Of course, such an effect remains within the provenance of the Holy Spirit's teaching office. Yet the posture, expectations, and (dreaded word) "methods" that one brings to Holy Scripture will either serve or obstruct Scripture's reason for existence.

I am writing this book with my younger self in mind. I'm talking to him and students of all types who have some working knowledge of the historical-grammatical or historical-critical study of Scripture.<sup>1</sup> I too had some exegetical tools at my disposal, and the target audience of this book is students, broadly conceived, who are not completely new to the scene of biblical studies. Yet, perhaps like me, they feel stuck. They are either searching for or in need of theological and hermeneutical instincts that will help them read and engage Holy Scripture as a living witness.

This book is not a be-all or end-all for this purpose. In fact, my primary, if not sole, focus is on reading the Old Testament. (As an aside: I remain on an exorcist's quest to stamp out Marcion's pestering presence in Christ's church: Marcion, be gone!)<sup>2</sup> Christian readers do well to remember that the New Testament never existed, nor does it have an existence, apart from its relation to the Old Testament.<sup>3</sup> The New Testament authors and early church theologians read the Old Testament as a Christian witness. This kind of reading instinct and strategy has always been with the church. Without much effort one could even argue that the New

1. Here I'm thinking of standard works of hermeneutical introduction, such as Douglas Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, 4th ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009); Odil Hannes Steck, *Old Testament Exegesis: A Guide to the Methodology*, trans. J. D. Nogalski, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: SBL Press, 1998); William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Nelson, 2004).

2. See a cobelligerent in this quest, Brent A. Strawn, *The Old Testament Is Dying: A Diagnosis and Recommended Treatment* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

3. In technical theological language, and borrowing from the categories of Christology, the New Testament is *anhypostatic* apart from its relation to the Old Testament.

Testament and trinitarian legacy of the early church would not exist without that interpretive impulse. All of this is to say that the scope of this book, with its focus on the Old Testament, is limited from a Christian canonical standpoint. Nevertheless the Old Testament is fertile soil for working out these Christian reading practices. Theological categories and instincts are requisite for engaging the Old Testament's theological subject matter. So this book should equip readers with a theological grammar and a set of interpretive instincts to aid in their reading of Scripture as an enduring canonical witness.

The book falls into two separate parts. I did not plan this structure at the outset, but in time it became both apparent and appropriate. The first part deals with the material character of the Old Testament. What is the Old Testament? How does its place in the Christian Bible impact our reading of it? What theological commitments are necessary as a first step to faithful reading? These questions and more like them center on the following canonical concerns: What is the significance of Scripture's final form? How is textual intentionality best understood from a canonical/scriptural perspective? This first section concludes with a chapter on textual criticism. Admittedly, the air can become thin when delving into text-critical matters, but textual criticism should not be devalued, because it seeks to establish the scriptural text at its most basic level. Theological categories are necessary for this kind of work as well.

The second part of the book focuses on the Trinity as the Old Testament's essential principle—or better, reality. Does the triune character of God flow from the Old Testament's own internal logic and claims, or is it simply a later Christian imposition on the ancient text in Hebrew or Greek form? And if God is triune, what are the interpretive implications for reading the Old Testament, even when readers recognize that the Old Testament came to be before the full outworking of trinitarian dogma in time? These are big questions whose answers change the interpretive game

from beginning to end. To put a focus on this book as a whole, the following question drives the project from beginning to end: *How and why should we read the material of Scripture—words, sentences, paragraphs, books, and so forth—in conjunction with Scripture’s theological subject matter?*

As a personal word, I have been intrigued and vexed by this question for some time and will continue to pursue it in various ways. This book is an offering to those who have similar pressing concerns and who, like me, are just somewhere along the way toward answering them. Given the magnitude of the question’s subject matter, final formulations will always be around the next bend in the road. Heaping spoonfuls of humility and modesty are needed at every turn. Nevertheless, I do believe critical and creative inquiry into this book’s driving question ranges somewhere near the heart of the church’s long-term health and faithful witness. That might sound hyperbolic at first hearing. But I don’t believe it is. I offer this book to readers in gospel hope.

*Part 1*

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# SCRIPTURE'S MATERIAL FORM

# I

## Scripture and Canon

This book aims to provide an introduction to canonical reading practices for those with some working knowledge of the basic tools of biblical studies. In this sense, the book functions like a hospitable welcome into a very large house rather than a geological survey brushing away the dirt from every potential lead. As will become more obvious as the book progresses, the canonical approach presented in this book resides within the Christian theological tradition. Without the eyes of faith and an ecclesial context for reading and reception, the instincts presented in this volume may appear foreign.<sup>1</sup> The second part of the book is devoted to the most basic and defining facet of Christianity's theological identity:

1. Such a claim does not intend to downplay the benefits gained from other interpretive approaches or faith settings, most especially Jewish approaches to reading the Hebrew Bible. Rather, the identification of this approach with the Christian interpretive tradition is offered in the hope of enhancing dialogue and identifying theological/ecclesial contexts as necessary and legitimate for biblical reading. Jewish and Christian interpretation may agree on the religious and historical forces at work in the canonical process, attending to it and its religious/theological motivations as an important facet of biblical exegesis. Nevertheless, this book offers a reading strategy in which examining Scripture's material form *and* theological subject matter fuses them together on a single hermeneutical horizon. If and when this hermeneutical fusion happens, it will lead to interpretive differences between faith communities. This is to be expected and welcomed. From the Jewish interpretive angle, see esp. Jon

the triune identity of God and the interpretive implications of naming God in this way. Nevertheless, on the front end of our journey, the theological character of this reading strategy must be sorted out as well: How do we define important terms? What theological commitments are required for faithful hearing of the biblical text?

These theological instincts and commitments are the tail wagging the dog of the canonical approach. God is not a god of the gaps, fitted in here or there to make sense of interpretive conundrums. Rather, a doctrine of God's providence undergirds the entire project, including our grappling with the creaturely/human dimension of the biblical texts—the material classically offered in standard Old Testament introductions and hermeneutical textbooks. I often tell my students, at every level of their training in biblical studies, that without a robust doctrine of God's providence, their interpretive ship will remain rudderless and lost. Without a Christian metaphysic of some sort (more of this in the second part of the book), the approach offered here falls apart and fails to persuade.

To propel us out of the gate, this chapter focuses primarily on two important front matters. First, what does the appeal to canon entail theologically? Second, when we speak of Scripture broadly or of the Old Testament in particular, what is it? Along Aristotelian lines of reasoning, the object of study determines our methods of study. If this idea holds water, then identifying Scripture's "whatness," or Scripture's ontology, is a crucial matter of first importance. As this chapter will claim, faithful readers cannot identify Scripture's nature apart from its relation to God's self-revealing and redemption.

### **Canon and Scripture: Clarifying Terms**

A potential brick wall faces the canonical approach right out of the gate. What exactly does the appeal to *canon* suggest? What

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Levenson, "Teach the Texts in Context," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 35, no. 4 (2007): 19–21, <https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/articles/autumn2007/teach-text-contexts>.

positive effect does a term like *canon* have on the hermeneutical approach set out in this volume, when its basic, shared definition is so contested? Scholars are of varying opinions when defining canon. The marked tendency within the secondary literature is to distinguish between canon and *Scripture*. On this account, canon serves a more crystalline, formal, and external role when attending to the character of the Old Testament. Canon, as differentiated from *Scripture*, relates to the external choice of a religious community regarding what books are deemed in or out of their Holy Writ. Canon connotes list. As such, scholarly investigations of canon are located in the world of religious and social history. Here carefully imagined religious-social projections are weighed against empirical evidence in the hopes of gaining further clarity on the historical and religious forces at work in the canon's coming to be—a target whose clear aim is equally matched by unclear evidence.<sup>2</sup>

To place “canon” and “*Scripture*” in related but distinct silos runs the risk of distorting the internal pressure made by the biblical documents themselves on the community of faith: Jewish and Christian. This is by no means a denial of the historical and religious forces at work in various phases of Jewish and Christian history, forces that properly recognized which books “sullied the hands” and which did not. Nevertheless, canon as list stresses under its own brittleness and allows marginal questions about particular books (is Esther in or out?) a disproportionate influence on the term's usefulness. According to these terms, *canon* as a concept becomes hostage to our ability to sort out the

2. For example, Timothy H. Lim states, “I will use ‘canon’ to refer to the list of biblical books.” *The Formation of the Jewish Canon*, Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 4. “Authoritative scripture,” on the other hand, refers to “the collections of authoritative writings that appear before the appearance of the first lists” (4). On this account, Lim sides with the linguistic/conceptual relegation of “canon” to list, a move associated with the likes of Eugene Ulrich and others. In agreement with Sid Leiman, however, Lim's notion of authoritative scripture before the closing of the canon recognizes the theological forces related to the preservation and associative reading practices of certain texts deemed authoritative, such as the books of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms. Leiman simply refers to these books as “canonical,” a linguistic move Lim does not follow.

**CANON AND SCRIPTURE:** Defining these two terms remains contested among biblical scholars. Drawing from the resources of the canonical approach, this chapter maintains that *canon* and *Scripture* resist formal distinction. *Canon* functions as a *broad theological category* where multiple matters pertaining to the compositional and editorial processes of biblical books reside. It is not a term relegated to the conceptual realm of a final list of biblical books.

historical *whence*, *when*, and *who* as it pertains to these kinds of problems. These questions remain the material of continued scholarly research.

Put in different terms, the fuzziness at the painting's edge runs the danger of distracting from the whole picture. Questions such as "Did Jesus have a canon?" are answered by a disproportionate appeal to the blurry margins at the edge of the list. In this vein, some would answer this question negatively because of the historical uncertainty about the closure of the last part of the tripartite canon, the Writings (*Ketuvim*), during Jesus's own time. Precisely at points such as these do the categories of Scripture and canon bleed into one another so that distinguishing them becomes a formal matter whose substantial difference is hard, if not impossible, to sustain.

The model on offer here softens the distinction between Scripture and canon. The latter, in terms borrowed from Brevard Childs, functions as a *cipher* that allows ample room for multiple factors contributing to the writing, shaping, and preservation of the biblical materials.<sup>3</sup> From this standpoint, the appeal to "canon" or "canonical" recognizes a beginning and an ending to the process of writing, expanding, editing, shaping, and preserving biblical books. Rather than relegate the term *canon* to the end of that process alone, as the final moment when a book was deemed in or

3. Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 70.

out among a list of other books deemed in or out, the canonical approach allows for more flexibility. The approach offered here takes into account the entire process leading to final “canonization.”<sup>4</sup>

Emphasizing the distinction between canon and Scripture formalizes the former, relegating it to the final stage of a long and complex process. Yet a “canon consciousness” is actually embedded in the literature itself, and it exerted pressure on various religious bodies in the creaturely act of canonization or the forming of set lists. To make matters clear, canon registers its proper theological force when it is understood first as an internal property of the biblical texts and second as an external decision or act.

### **A Brief Excursus on Defining “Canon”**

Stephen Chapman ranks as one of the clearer and abler voices for sorting through the problem of defining Scripture and canon in relation to each other.<sup>5</sup> Chapman’s approach can be set in conversation with Eugene Ulrich, who takes a different view.<sup>6</sup> The term and concept of “canon” make no appearance in the Bible, according to Ulrich. Where the word *kanōn* appears in the New Testament, it does not refer to an authoritative collection of books (see 2 Cor. 10:13, 15, 16; Gal. 6:16). “Thus, the term and discussion of it are absent from the Hebrew and Greek Bibles, suggesting that the term is postbiblical,” concludes Ulrich.<sup>7</sup> Ulrich finds it odd that the term “canon” is not discussed as a reality in Judaism and nascent Christianity, especially if the concept was important.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, no entry for the term “canon” is found in the *Dictionary of Biblical*

4. The term “canonization” is reserved for the decision-making process of synagogue or church in recognizing which books are in or out. For a helpful theological account of the relationship between recognition of canonical books and the creaturely processes attendant to this recognition, see John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), chap. 2.

5. See Stephen B. Chapman, “The Canon Debate: What It Is and Why It Matters,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 4, no. 2 (2010): 273–94.

6. Eugene Ulrich, “The Notion and Definition of Canon,” in *The Canon Debate*, ed. L. M. McDonald and J. A. Sanders (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 23, 21–35.

7. Ulrich, “Notion and Definition of Canon,” 23.

8. Ulrich, “Notion and Definition of Canon,” 23.

*Theology* or the theologies of Eichrodt and von Rad (though the latter can be challenged).<sup>9</sup> These noteworthy absences, according to Ulrich, should be taken seriously. However, it appears that Ulrich's linguistic claim confuses the lack of a term's presence with a lack of a term's essential concerns. One could as easily conclude that the Bible makes no claims about the Trinity because of the lexeme's absence in the Bible.

Ulrich makes use of Gerald Sheppard's distinction between "canon 1" and "canon 2."<sup>10</sup> The former relates to the ruled character of authoritative books: *norma normans non normata* (the norming norm, which cannot be normed). The latter promotes the notion of list and by its very nature is closed. For Ulrich, to speak of an open canon is self-defeating because the very term *canon* precludes openness. However, Chapman believes Ulrich's use of Sheppard's categories—canon 1 and canon 2—does not do justice to Sheppard's overarching concerns. Sheppard did not see a strict sequential linearity between canon 1 and canon 2, with the latter understood as a sequential consequence to the former. In fact, according to Chapman, "fixity is a pole rather than a stage," just as Sheppard argues.<sup>11</sup> A hyperattentiveness to canon as fixity runs into problems in light of the historical evidence, because "determining the precise time and circumstances of the absolute fixation of the canon is a matter of crucial importance—except for one thing: it is in fact chimerical."<sup>12</sup> In fairness to Ulrich's argument, he seeks for lexical clarity by appealing to the Christian tradition itself. He is not opposed to the terms "canonical" or "canonical process" when speaking of authoritative Scriptures present before the formalization of various lists (Sheppard's canon 1), but he relegates canon proper to the decision to include or exclude. Ulrich's efforts are for the sake of clarifying the scholarly discussion.

9. See *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Xavier Léon-Dufour, 2nd ed. (New York: Seabury, 1973); Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. A. Baker, 2 vols., Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961); Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1965).

10. See Gerald Sheppard, "Canonical Criticism," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:864–65.

11. Stephen Chapman, "Second Temple Jewish Hermeneutics: How Canon Is Not an Anachronism," in *Invention, Rewriting, Usurpation: Discursive Fights over Religious Traditions in Antiquity*, ed. J. Ulrich, A.-C. Jacobsen, and D. Brakke, Early Christianity in the Context of Antiquity 11 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2012), 284.

12. Chapman, "Second Temple Jewish Hermeneutics," 285.

Childs, on the other hand, would simply call Sheppard's canon 2 *canonization*, while situating more closely the relation of canon 1 to canon 2. In other terms, canon 1 is the precedent reality of canon 2, though with Chapman we do well to remember that fixity is itself a pole rather than a definitive stage. Canon 1 and canon 2 relate to each other materially: one does not exist without the other.

### The Significance of Scripture's "Whatness"

The Christian church has never operated without a canon.<sup>13</sup> The church, along with the synagogue, is an institution of the book. Words, sentences, and larger discourse units are of consequence in the church's continued efforts to name, worship, and follow after God. Because this literary dynamic is at the heart of the church's identity, the language of the Christian Scriptures matters, even with its varied forms of human discourse, such as law, poetry, narrative, and didactic expression. While the Bible is human in its source from beginning to end, it resists easy reduction to its human sources alone. God has spoken (*Deus dixit*) and is speaking.<sup>14</sup> The exegetical wrestling with the polyphonic voice of Holy Scripture means coming to terms with God's direct address to his church. Later chapters will explore the hermeneutical implications of Scripture as divine address.

While the human and institutional agents attached to the writing, editing, and preserving of the biblical books should never be diminished, Christians around the world today and from the church's inception dive headlong into the Scriptures for the sake of hearing the word of God.<sup>15</sup> The liturgical conclusion to the

13. Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977). Thorny historical questions about the finalization of the New Testament canon often obscure the more rudimentary insight of the Hebrew Scripture's properly basic and canonical role in the apostolic and early church periods.

14. See John Webster's deft handling of the dogmatic relationship between the creaturely character of Scripture and its divine source in *Holy Scripture*.

15. In a public lecture titled "Religion and Literature," T. S. Eliot fulminates against those who reduce religious literature, in particular the Authorized Version

**CANON AND SCRIPTURE'S ONTOLOGY:** Locating the canon of Scripture theologically in God's divine economy of revelation and redemption provides a proper appreciation for the canon's nature and role. While God and Scripture are differentiated from one another, the latter is a "fitting" means by which God determines to reveal himself.

public reading of Scripture uses the present tense for a reason: "This *is* the word of the Lord." As this book hopes to demonstrate, the confession of faith regarding Scripture's nature (or ontology, "what it is") impinges on the interpretive approach taken. In other words, the subject matter being studied shapes the interpretive methods used to understand it.

### Scripture and God: Differentiated yet Fitting

A classical stream of Protestant thought identified Scripture as the cognitive principle of theology (*principium cognoscendi theologiae*). God, according to this stream of thought, is the essential or ontological principle of theology (*principium essendi theologiae*).<sup>16</sup> Put differently, God is the substantial object

of the Bible, to its "literary" merit. Such a reduction is an abuse; it is parasitic if not pestering. The Authorized Version's literary influence on the English language, muses Eliot, is not due to its consideration as literature. Rather, its influence stems from its reception as God's Word. Eliot claims, "Those who talk of the Bible as a 'monument of English prose' are merely admiring it as a monument over the grave of Christianity." *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. F. Kermode (New York: Harcourt, 1975), 98. Eliot predates "literary criticism" or the rise of literary approaches associated with figures such as Robert Alter. So his learned rant cannot be read as targeting "literary approaches" per se. Rather, his criticisms are aimed at a secular sensibility that values, say, the Authorized Version solely in terms of its literary merit or its signal position in providing linguistic continuity for the English language. The Authorized Version's enduring viability, in Eliot's estimation, has little to do with such linguistic or cultural concerns.

16. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. 2, *Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 96, chap. 3.

of Christian theological inquiry. With God as the essential principle and goal of Christian theology, Holy Scripture provides the primary location and material for the intellectual/rational engagement with God: no Scripture, no full apprehension of God.<sup>17</sup> For those predisposed against or unfamiliar with Protestant scholastic modes of theological speech, these categories admittedly run the risk of speculative abstractions. But such risks may be avoided when these somewhat cold categories are seen within God's self-determination to be a God in fellowship with humanity. On this account, Scripture is the loving gift of God to his people so they may continually seek him and order their lives toward him, while resting in the confidence that God has not left our desire to know him within the realm of human self-achievement.<sup>18</sup>

By an act of theological retrieval, John Webster makes use of these Protestant scholastic categories by plotting out the relationship between the cognitive and ontological principles of Holy Scripture.<sup>19</sup> They are related to each other such that to have the one demands the other. The ontological principle, or the truth that God is and he speaks, grounds the cognitive principle as it relates to Holy Scripture. As Webster puts the matter, "Holy Scripture is a function of God."<sup>20</sup> Therefore, Holy Scripture's canonical role as the normative guide for Christian thought and life derives its authority from the loving rule of God. Its textual character remains a dynamic means of continued divine self-disclosure. It is not a static "textual deposit."<sup>21</sup>

17. In theological terms, ontology and economy, though distinct matters, must be kept together. There is no access to the theological reality and forces that gave rise to Scripture apart from the providential economy that produced them.

18. For a recent defense of masculine predicates of the divine, see Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay "On the Trinity"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

19. John Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 128–29.

20. Webster, *Domain of the Word*, 129.

21. Webster, *Domain of the Word*, 129. The Reformational conjoining of Word and Spirit is another way of addressing the same issue.

Webster's insights into the character of Christian Scripture and its subject matter elicit continued reflection. The following claim is no exception:

Christian theological reason is not an indeterminate intellectual activity, reason in search of an object, but reason to which an approach has already been made with unassailable might, to which an object has been given. This object represents itself in textual form. The form does not exhaust its object—how could a mere text fathom the untold depths of God's life? But the form is fitting, and through it theology does encounter the divine summons; and so theology is not a free science, but bound to (and therefore liberated by) the one in whose company it finds itself placed.<sup>22</sup>

A few concluding reflections are worth parsing out from this theologically pregnant passage. The object of inquiry (rational/cerebral) and worship (ascetic/whole person) presses itself on the inquirer/worshiper. Part and parcel of this pressing is the gracious provision of a means to the object of inquiry—namely, Holy Scripture. God as object and Scripture as approach are determinate within the redemptive economy for how God orders the goal and means of our theological pursuits. Still, God and Scripture refuse coequal status in their relationship. In other words, God cannot be exhausted by Scripture's textual form: *finitum non capax infinitum* (the finite is not capable of the infinite). At the same time, "The form is fitting."<sup>23</sup> As a "fitting form," Scripture functions as a witness to God's triune self-disclosure. It does so because God, in his gracious movement toward humanity, determines it to be so. The arguments for Scripture's "fittingness" rest finally on this theological confes-

22. Webster, *Domain of the Word*, 129.

23. On analogy, a similar claim is made regarding the relationship between the persons of the Godhead in their eternal procession and their temporal mission. The particular role of the *personae* of the Godhead in the temporal mission is "fitting" with their particular relation in the eternal processions. See Giles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, trans. F. A. Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 413–19, chap. 15.

**CANON AS RICH AND FERTILE SOIL:** The internal pressure of the biblical documents leading toward canonization identifies these texts as a means of continued divine self-disclosure. Given the stability and diversity of the Old Testament's content, fresh modes of inquiry and strategies for intensive/cross-associative reading remain a promising field of study for Christian theology.

sion and cannot be sustained by modes of reasoning external to theo-logic.<sup>24</sup>

The differentiated-though-fitting relationship between God and Scripture demands the church's continued giving of itself to the exegesis of Holy Scripture. Because Scripture is *not* God, while at the same time remaining a sanctified means for apprehension of God, it follows necessarily that the exegesis of Holy Scripture continues as a never-ceasing activity of Christ's church. This self-giving to the continued reading and hearing of Holy Scripture takes place in recognition of God's dynamic interaction with the church of yesteryear, today, and the future, opening avenues of dialogue with interpreters past and present. This understanding of the canon represses any notion that the exegesis of Holy Scripture has been or ever will be superfluous. The canon's subject matter simply will not allow it.

### **The Richness and Flexibility of the Old Testament's Material Form**

Webster's fine account of the matter may be supplemented by appeal to the flexibility of the Old Testament's own canonical form (more will be said of this in the coming pages). Since God is the subject matter of Scripture, it goes without saying that its

24. See Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 138–39.

textual form cannot exhaust the subject matter. In part, the diversity of voices within Scripture originates in the richness of its main character and point of interest: God. At the same time, the material form of Scripture itself resists exhaustive treatment, and this despite the enormous amounts of interpretive work given to it over the centuries.<sup>25</sup> Scripture's subject matter is infinite, yet its material form is finite. Nevertheless, the material form of Scripture, finite as it is, is a flower whose budding never ceases in its faithful reception and reading.

Anyone broadly familiar with academic publishing today might find the preceding statement teetering toward the hyperbolic. Do we really need another commentary on Isaiah? The question is fair enough, though I might retort offhandedly, "Yes, we could use another commentary on Isaiah." But the simple point registered here is that the historically conditioned material of the Old Testament has been shaped into larger canonical units, with the intention of cross-associative reading for the sake of continued reflection and actualization. Put simply, the potential for a deeper appreciation of the textual dimension of Holy Scripture remains, despite the voluminous work already given to it. Childs clarifies,

The canonical process involved the shaping of the tradition not only into independent books, but also into larger canonical units, such as the Torah, Prophets and Writings. For example, law was seen from the perspective of wisdom; psalmody and prophecy were interrelated; and Israel's narrative traditions were sapientialized (cf. Sheppard). The canonical process thus built in a dimension of flexibility which encourages constantly fresh ways of actualizing the material.<sup>26</sup>

25. George Steiner claims, "A sentence always means more." *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 82. With his own Augustinian hermeneutical instincts engaged, Steiner warns, "The absolute decisive failing occurs when such approaches seek to formalize *meaning*, when they proceed upward from the phonetic, the lexical and the grammatic to the semantic and aesthetic" (81). We might ask Steiner, Why is this a problem? He answers, "There is always, as Blake taught, 'excess' of the signified beyond the signifier" (84).

26. Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 13. The work by Gerald T. Sheppard that Childs alludes to here

The canon itself is not packaged so that its material form and internal associative dimensions have been cauterized once and for all.<sup>27</sup> New avenues of inquiry and fresh doors of associative reading are ever before readers of Holy Scripture.<sup>28</sup> The fields certainly bear the marks of heavy passage, but they remain white unto harvest.

### Canonical Legacy: The Prophet as Word

The Old Testament does not hesitate to identify and narrate the human agents whom God inspires for his teaching and prophetic ministry. In other words, the Old Testament does not blush when it speaks of the human servants whom God sets apart for this particular task. We receive much about Moses the man. His story continues to provide fodder for Hollywood's imagination. We follow the tortuous and exhilarating narratives of Elijah the prophet—from the top of Mount Carmel to his hovering in a wilderness cave. Jeremiah's personal angst leaps off the page as he is weighted down under the heft of God's word. While these narrational dynamics are at play in various measures of detail, the Old Testament insists on the enduring legacy of the words delivered by these servants. Their words as God's Word extend far beyond their human existence and consciousness. A disproportionate relationship, then, exists between the words of the prophets and the prophetic personae who deliver them.

Wherever one lands on the critical matter of Isaiah's compositional history—how many Isaiahs are there?—it is noteworthy

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is "Hearing the Voice of the Same God through Historically Dissimilar Traditions," *Interpretation* 36 (1982): 21–33.

27. The recent spate of interest in the intertextual dimension of the Hebrew Scriptures is exhibit A. By way of introduction, see Bernard M. Levinson, *Legal Revision and Religious Renewal in Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

28. Walter Moberly's fresh readings of Old Testament texts are a case in point: R. W. L. Moberly, *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

that no named authorial prophet appears after chapter 39. The last we see of Isaiah the man is the scene depicting his bad news to King Hezekiah about future Babylonian invasion (39:5–8). (As an aside, readers may recall Hezekiah's chivalrous response to the bad news: At least "there will be peace and security in my days" [39:8].) After this scene, there is no more indication of a prophetic persona as author. Isaiah the prophet may hover around chapters 40–66 like a spirit. Delitzsch has a memorable description of this Isaianic phenomenon. Isaiah "floats along through the exile like a being of a higher order, like an angel of God."<sup>29</sup> But his person is not present. Isaiah as a prophetic book, in its portrayal of the prophet's physical presence and subsequent absence, may speak to the disproportionate relationship mentioned above between the prophetic persona and the prophet's words. In fact, the very next chapter of Isaiah provides the theological rationale.

The grass withers, the flower fades  
 when the breath of the LORD blows on it;  
 surely the people are grass.  
 The grass withers, the flower fades,  
 but the word of our God will stand forever. (Isa. 40:7–8)

In the latter half of the book of Isaiah, the central dramatic figure is not the human prophet per se but the word of God, which stands forever.<sup>30</sup> Grass comes and goes. So do prophets, who count their days along with the rest of creaturely humanity. But the Word

29. Delitzsch famously changed his mind on the compositional history of Isaiah in the fourth edition of his commentary. He sees it as likely that a pupil took on his master's mantle in extending Isaiah's prophetic word into a new moment. The pupil outdoes the master in his elevated style, according to Delitzsch. He concludes his comments on Isaiah's critical issues by claiming that subsequent authorship by an Isaianic disciple "may possibly be the case. It seems to me even probable, and almost certain, that this may be so; but indubitably certain it is not, in my opinion, and I shall die without getting over this hesitancy." Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1894), 1:39. See Christopher R. Seitz, *Word without End* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 177.

30. As Seitz clarifies, "Isaiah's 'persona' is not extended into chs. 40–66 except as his word finds vindication and extension through new voices, perhaps even Isaiah's

delivered by the prophet far outlasts the flowered existence of Isaiah the man, or any human prophet for that matter.

Zechariah the prophet echoes the claims of Isa. 40 at the beginning of his prophecy: “Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever? But my words and my statutes, which I commanded my servants the prophets, did they not overtake your fathers?” (Zech. 1:5–6). Zechariah speaks of the effective nature of the prophetic word to “overtake” or “catch up” with those who hear it, leading them to repentance.<sup>31</sup> Prophets do not live forever, yet the effect of their words continues to do so because the prophet’s words are God’s word. Many prophetic books begin with “the word of the LORD” coming to the prophet (cf. Mic. 1:1). The word of the Lord as the divine agent of God’s own self-giving is generated by God’s activity to and through human agents, an activity whose effect and power continue beyond the earthly existence of prophets and apostles. The prophetic word of God continues to effect repentance in the hearts of hearers around the world.

An example of Isaiah’s enduring voice occurred one autumn afternoon as I sat around a kitchen table with several women from our church. They asked me to spend some time discussing the book of Isaiah with them. Afterward, I thought about Isaiah’s claims in 40:7–8 in relation to our gathering in that modest setting. Here we were, millennia removed from Isaiah the prophet, hunkered down around a table, seeking to hear God’s word through writing that has long outlasted its prophetic persona. Isaiah’s prophetic book anticipated my time with these women of the

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‘second selves,’ to use Delitzsch’s phrase. It is the word of God that stands forever, not Isaiah or his ‘persona’ abstracted from that word” (*Word without End*, 179).

31. Boda understands **אָשַׁח** (*nsg*, overtake) within a covenantal context (Zech. 1:6) rather than the typical hunting context. In other words, the prophetic word and legal statutes will catch up with God’s people as they render a blessing or a curse (cf. Deut. 28). Boda explains, “The divine word, either as law or prophecy, is an enduring and active force whose threats were faithfully fulfilled.” Mark J. Boda, *The Book of Zechariah*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 83.

church because even though Isaiah the prophet is long gone, his prophetic word endures forever. It anticipates all times when God's people seek to think God's thoughts after him.

## Conclusion

The canon of Holy Scripture is the means by which God continues to disclose his person and will to his church. Holy Scripture's authority derives from this Christian confession of faith: "And he spoke by the prophets" or "Christ died for our sins, *according to the Scriptures*." As the cognitive and essential principles of Christian theology relate to each other, so also do the authority of Jesus and Scripture. To paraphrase Karl Barth on the subject, "There is no authority of Jesus in the church without the authority of Scripture. You cannot have the one without the other."<sup>32</sup> To claim Jesus as Savior and Lord necessitates an affirmation of the canonical authority of the Word that witnesses faithfully to him. We cannot have the one without the other.

A Christian confession regarding the character of canonical Scripture lends itself to a corresponding hermeneutical approach. This book is an attempt to bring this confession of faith to bear on the exegetical and critical inquiry into Scripture's material form, particularly its first part, the Old Testament. The cognitive principle of Scripture, with God as its object of inquiry, shapes the intellectual approach and method of inquiry. While all the elements of a humanly authored document are true of Holy Scripture, the ontological principle will not allow our method of reading to be hemmed in by its creaturely status. A theological account of canon confesses these human documents "are a witness forever," and seeks to read the text within the frame of its nature and role.

32. Barth actually wrote, "To say that Jesus Christ rules the Church is equivalent to saying that Holy Scripture rules the Church. The one explains the other, the one can only be understood through the other." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. T. Thompson and H. Knight (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), I/2:693.