THE CHALLENGE OF CANONICAL CRITICISM TO BACKGROUND STUDIES

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INTRODUCTION

Background studies attempt to understand the socio-historical context of the author, to reconstruct the historical setting of biblical texts, and to explain the historical referents in the text. Since the early 1970s, canonical criticism has been on the rise. Brevard Childs has led the way in this new methodology. The impression left by Childs is that the canon is the sufficient context for interpreting New Testament writings, including the gospels. But, if the goal is to understand fully, or as fully as possible, the author's intended meaning, then background studies should not be so easily dismissed. In fact, much in the gospels is inexplicable without a basic knowledge of the world of first century Palestinian Judaism. To the extent that Childs' canonical approach ignores background studies, it is in danger of

¹ Background studies are not to be confused with historical criticism, which includes source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism. While the former looks at the historical setting at the time of writing, the latter is primarily interested in the pre-history of the gospels and in making historical judgments about their authenticity. Also, background studies are not intended to be an end in themselves but rather a means to an end, namely, understanding better the author's intended meaning. For a helpful distinction between background studies and historical criticism, see Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991), 127.

² There are indeed different types of canonical methods. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the canonical criticism of Brervard Childs as it applies to the gospels. Although Childs prefers "canonical approach" to describe his method, it has become nomenclature to group his method under the rubric of canonical criticism. See, for example, Mikeal Parson, "Canonical Criticism," in *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation*, ed. David Black and David Dockery (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991): 255-298.

³ For the interpretation of texts, the goal is to understand the author's intended meaning. Yet, there are different levels of understanding. Someone might have a superficial understanding of a text, while someone else has a thorough understanding of that same text. Helpful here is Bloom's taxonomy, which distinguishes six progressive levels of understanding: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. See Benjamin Bloom, et al, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals* (United Kingdom: Longman Group, 1969).

⁴ David Garland writes, "Much of the basic story of the New Testament would be incomprehensible if the reader did not posses some knowledge about the ancient world, its beliefs, practices, and political history," in "Background Studies and New Testament Interpretation," in *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation*, ed. by David Black and David Dockery (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 349.

misinterpreting the gospels. In this paper, it will be shown how canonical criticism (by itself) is inadequate not only for Evangelical hermeneutics but gospel interpretation. Canonical criticism indeed has value as an interpretive method but it should not be practiced in isolation from background studies. In fact, these two methods should be used in a complimentary manner.

WHAT ARE BACKGROUND STUDIES?

Method of Background Studies

Background studies of the gospels involve three distinct steps: understand the sociohistorical context, reconstruct the historical setting, and explain the subject matter. In the first
step, a diachronic ("across time") step,⁵ the modern reader attempts to understand the historical
and cultural developments that set the stage for the writing of the gospels. Most scholars agree
that the proper context for studying the gospels is Second Temple Judaism,⁶ 515 B.C. to A.D.
135. Although the time between the closing of the Old Testament canon and the opening of the
New Testament is often referred to as "the silent years," this is not entirely accurate. It may be
acknowledged that there was "no prophet in Israel" during this time period,⁷ but that does not
imply that Judaism was stagnant. In fact, the evidence would suggest otherwise, e.g., OT
Apocrypha, OT Pseudepigrapha, and Dead Sea Scrolls. From these intertestamental writings, it
is clear that the Judaism of the OT developed and splintered into the Judaisms of the NT. For
example, the OT says nothing about the synagogue or the Samaritans that are so common in the

⁵ Regarding the distinction between diachronic and synchronic, Grant Osborne writes, "'History' is the diachronic aspect, relating to the milieu within which the sacred writers produced their works; it refers to the events and times within which God's sacred revelation is couched. 'Culture' is the synchronic aspect, referring to the manners, customs, institutions and principles that characterize any particular age and form the environment within which people conduct their lives," in his book, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991), 127.

⁶ The older designation, Intertestamental Judaism (430 B.C. to A.D. 30) has been replaced with the broader and more inclusive title, Second Temple Judaism.

⁷ The Jewish historian, Josephus (A.D. 37-100), writes, "After the latter prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel," in *Against Apion*, 1.8.

gospels. Neither does the OT speak about the various factions of Judaism in Jesus' day, e.g., Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Herodians. J. Julius Scott observes that the original readers would have been familiar with this context, making it unnecessary for the author to explain every detail. Modern readers, on the other hand, are foreigners in this distant land and they need these details explained.⁸ It is, therefore, necessary for modern readers to familiarize themselves with the socio-historical context of the gospels so that they can interpret the gospels in the way intended by their first-century Jewish authors.

Although modern interpreters will never fully understand this historical context, they will be able to sympathize with the Evangelists' perspective and be better prepared to interpret their gospels. Grant Osborne rightly states, "The information we glean from the [background] sources become a filter through which the individual passages may be passed. The alternative is for the modern reader to read the ancient text through the filter of their modern perspective. Knowledge of the socio-historical context, in fact, establishes boundaries of possible meaning and helps modern readers to avoid anachronistic interpretations. The validity of their interpretation, in fact, is directly proportional to its historical plausibility. In their book, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard offer this test for the validity of any interpretation: "For any interpretation to qualify as the intended meaning of a text, it must be the most likely meaning given the circumstances of the original writing and reading of the passage. Any suggested explanation of a passage that would have been

⁸ J. Julius Scott, Jr., *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

⁹ The perspective of the author has variously been described as mindset or worldview. For the purpose of this paper, the term "perspective" will be used to refer to the socio-historical perspective of the author, a perspective inherited from their culture and developed from their own personal experiences. This perspective consists of beliefs about customs, conventions, institutions, relationships, etc. It is helpful for modern interpreters to identify this perspective, as much as possible, so that they can better understand what the author writes. Later in this paper, the modern reader's perspective will be addressed.

¹⁰ Grant Osborne, 21.

inconsistent with or inconceivable in the historical or cultural setting of the author and recipients cannot be valid."¹¹

The next two steps of background studies falls into the category of synchronic ("within time") because they are concerned with studying the specific time in which the gospels were written. 12 The second step of background studies is to reconstruct the historical setting of the text. When it comes to the gospels, there are actually two historical settings to consider: Jesus' historical setting and the Evangelists' historical setting. Regarding Jesus' setting, the narrative context must be used as the proper context for interpreting his actions and sayings. 13 From this context, the modern interpreter can gain valuable information, such as audience, location, purpose, and timing in the ministry of Jesus. For the historical setting of the Evangelist, the modern reader will want to reconstruct, as much as possible, the circumstances surrounding the writing of the gospel. Of interest here are questions about the author, such as who wrote the gospel? Is there any debate about authorship? What is known about the author? When did the author write? What is known about the author's location? For what purpose did the author write? Also of interest are questions about the original readers, such as, what is known about the original readers? What is the reader's relationship to the author? What is known about the reader's location. To reconstruct the historical setting, the interpreter considers both internal and external evidence. Victor Matthews writes, "The gulf of thousands of years can be bridged, at least in part, by insights into their [people of the Bible] everyday life. These can be garnered through close examination of the biblical narratives and through the use of comparative written

¹¹ William Klein, Craig Blomberg, Robert Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 175.

¹² On these two steps, Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard write, "The goal of historical-cultural research is to reconstruct or at least to comprehend the historical setting and cultural features of the specific passage as clearly as possible." 182.

possible." 182.

13 Form critics have traditionally been dismissive of narrative contexts, attributing them to the creative license of the Evangelist. But isolated from their narrative context, Jesus' actions and sayings are almost limitless in their possible meanings.

and physical remains from other ancient civilizations."¹⁴ Internally, the interpreter looks for clues in the text about the author and the reader, their relationship, and the occasion for the writing. With each careful reading of the text, the modern reader becomes more informed about the historical setting of the Evangelist. This new information in turn aids the modern reader in better interpreting the gospel so that a hermeneutical circle (spiral) emerges.¹⁵

For external evidence, the modern interpreter should consider a variety of background sources: primary sources, secondary sources, and tertiary sources. Primary sources consist of the records and remnants of the past. ¹⁶ The remnants are the physical evidence that has been discovered by archaeologists, such as, pottery, coins, tools, weapons, houses, etc. The records that have been discovered provide more detailed information about the past. For studying the gospels, modern readers should consider the OT, OT Apocrypha, OT Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Philo of Alexandria, Josephus, Rabbinic literature, NT Apocrypha, and Patristic writings. Aside from primary sources, there are secondary sources. Numerous books and articles have been written by scholars to explain the historical implications of primary sources for biblical interpretation. Much of this scholarship is made available through Bible study tools, such as Bible atlases, Bible handbooks, Bible encyclopedias, Bible dictionaries, Bible introductions and surveys, and background studies, including books on manners and customs. ¹⁷ Tertiary sources largely consist of Bible commentaries, where scholars apply the information of

¹⁴ Victor Matthew, *Manners and Customs in the Bible* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1988), xiii.

¹⁵ Scot McKnight writes, "Yet 'background' does not imply that we need to know everything about the ancient world before we can comprehend the Gospels. In fact, the process is a circular one: as we understand more about the Gospels, we understand more about that world; and as we understand more about that world, so we understand more about the Gospels," in his *Interpreting the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 27.

¹⁶ For a helpful introduction to the variety of primary sources for gospel studies, see Craig Evans, *Noncanonical Writings and New Testament Interpretation* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1992). For an anthology of selected readings from the primary sources, see C.K. Barrett, *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1961).

¹⁷ A helpful survey of secondary sources can be found in Frederick Danker, *Multipurpose Tools for Bible Study* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

secondary sources to specific Bible texts. But do these background sources really help to reconstruct the historical setting of the gospels? When it comes to the authorship of the gospels, many scholars consider them to be anonymous. Yet, Martin Hengel has demonstrated that no extant manuscript of the gospels circulated without titles. Similarly, the witness of the early church fathers confirms the traditional authorship of the four gospels. The identification of the original audience and the determination of date, of course, are more speculative but not without some merit. By considering the internal and external evidence, the interpreter hopes to reconstruct the historical setting of the gospels.

The third step of background studies is to explain the subject matter or referent (i.e., the objects to which the text refers, whether manners, customs, institutions, movements, relationships, weights & measures, etc.). Examples of manners and customs found in the gospels include: circumcision, almsgiving, phylacteries, oaths, fasting, sacrifices, ceremonial purity, barrenness, table fellowship, engagement, marriage, divorce, hospitality, shaking dust off your feet. Religious/political Institutions include the synagogue, temple, Sanhedrin. To be included as religious movements (groups): Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, Essenes, Herodians, Samaritans. Social relationships referred to in the gospels include: landowner and tenant, master and slave, husband and wife, father and son. Weights and measures include: talent, mina, stater, denarius, drachma, lepton, stadia. Some of these conventions may sound familiar but the modern reader should not assume that they were practiced in exactly the same way back then. Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard warn: "our understanding of ancient customs might be so colored by

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¹⁸ Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Collection and Origin of the Canonical Gospels* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2000).

¹⁹ Papias (ca. A.D. 60-130), for example, has been instrumental in confirming the authorship of the first and second gospels.

what we think they mean that we miss their significance."²⁰ To understand these cultural conventions from the author's perspective, the modern readers should consider a variety of background sources (see above for list of sources).

Problem with Background Studies

Background studies of the gospels are not beyond criticism. One such criticism is that background studies are highly speculative. It has already been acknowledged that it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine the original reader or date of writing for the gospels. Moreover, the purpose of the gospels is largely deduced from the writing itself and extra-biblical information about locations may not be helpful. Regarding this criticism, Michael Gorman correctly observes, "Texts are often the product of specific occasions, composed to address certain needs, and neglecting these contexts is more perilous than the risk of making mistakes in our historical reading." The speculative nature of background studies must be admitted. It is indeed true that background studies provide only general information about the historical setting of the gospels. Yet, two points must be made. First, knowledge of the past, especially the ancient past, is filled with gaps so that historical conclusions tend to be speculative and probabilistic. This is a difficulty not only for background studies of the gospels but for historical studies in general. Second, some knowledge is better than no knowledge. It is better to have a general time period of writing than no historical context at all. The little we know about the

²⁰ Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, 14. Craig Keener likewise warns, "if we do not know anything about the original culture, we may sometimes assume that we do not need any background for a passage when in fact it would dramatically affect the way we read the text," in Craig Keener, *The IVP Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1993), 30.

²¹ Michael Gorman, *Elements in Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001), 67.

Evangelists is better than interpreting an anonymous writing. In fact, without some background information, the interpreter is left with an isolated text whose meaning is polyvalent.

Another criticism of background studies is that the text is used only as a window into the world of the author. This is problematic because preoccupation with the historical referent can distract from the determination of the textual meaning. ²² It must be clearly stated that knowledge of the referent is not the same as understanding of the meaning. For this reason, background studies should not be used as an end in themselves, but rather as a means to end, namely, a better understanding of the author's intended meaning. Garland rightly observes, "The goal of discovering the so-called background of a text is to make as clear as possible what it says in its historical context." More will be said later on the necessary role of background studies in gospel interpretation.

WHAT IS CANONICAL CRITICISM?

Rise of Canonical Criticism

In the 1960s, there was growing dissatisfaction with historical criticism. The discontent was twofold. First, historical critical methods dissected isolated biblical texts with little concern for the broader literary context. Second, historical criticism showed little interest in the authoritative nature of the canon for Christian communities, past and present. It is this later concern that was first addressed by Childs in his 1970 book, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*. Historical criticism, according to Childs, provided little help in bridging the gap between the ancient text and the modern Christian community. In fact, the historical critical method drove a

²² The phrase "textual meaning" is synonymous with historical meaning and author's intended meaning. See Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, 132-151.

²³ Garland, 350.

²⁴ Brervard Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970).

wedge between the two. For Childs, the canonical meaning is more important than some hypothetically reconstructed original meaning. Moreover, the meaning is not to be found in the historical referent of the text but within the canonical context of the text. To get beyond the impasse created by historical criticism, Childs proposed a canonical approach. The details of this approach would be fleshed out in his 1979 book, Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture.²⁵ In this book, Childs argues for a dialectical relationship between canon and community, in which Israel influenced the canon while the canon influenced Israel. Important for Childs is the concept of canonical shaping whereby the community of faith selected, shaped, and ordered authoritative writings. For Childs, it is this editorial work that became authoritative for the community of faith in the past and has the potential of becoming authoritative for the community of faith in the present. Around the same time as Childs' work, James Sanders likewise argued for the centrality of canon in biblical interpretation. In his 1972 book, Torah and Canon, Sanders coined the phrase "canon criticism" to describe his method. 26 In 1984, he opted for the title "canonical criticism."²⁷ Childs prefers the title "canonical approach," to describe his method. Others have characterized his method as canon exegesis or theological hermeneutics. It has become common place, however, to group the methods of Sanders and Childs under the rubric of canonical criticism. To complete his approach to canonical criticism, Childs wrote, The New Testament as Canon (1986).²⁸ The method of canonical criticism presented in this book is described in the next section.

Method of Canonical Criticism

²⁵ Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

²⁶ James Sanders, *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972).

²⁷ James Sanders, *Canon and Community* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

²⁸ Brevard Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), xv.

Childs begins The New Testament as Canon by surveying the history of canon studies since the time of the Reformation. The Reformers, according to Childs, understood the NT as a collection of divinely inspired apostolic writings. With the Enlightenment, critical methodologies attempted to strip away the theological accretions from NT writing to recover the original form. This historical criticism assumed primitivism, the belief in a time of pristine origins before theological embellishments corrupted the text. For these methods, the earliest tradition alone is authoritative. Later, the History-of-Religions School would challenge the distinction between canonical and extracanonical writings. For critical methodologies, the canon was seen as an impediment to interpretation.

Childs is unwilling to give up two hundred years of critical scholarship and return to a pre-Enlightenment understanding of the Bible.²⁹ Nonetheless, for Childs, critical methods have proven themselves inadequate for interpreting the Bible. First, the attempt of these methods to reconstruct the pre-history of the text is highly speculative. 30 In fact, more time is spent on the hypothetical reconstruction than the actual interpretation of the text. Yet, we can only be certain about the final form of the text, i.e., the form incorporated in the canon. Second, critical methods are too concerned with historical referents. Theological truth, according to Childs, cannot be measured by the correspondence theory of truth.³¹ Childs, in fact, rejects the notion of referentiality in which the meaning of a text is found in the historical referent. Childs writes, "Often the effect of postulating a specific, concrete referent is to destroy those very canonical features by which the message is rendered in its unique form."³² Childs thus replaces historical referentiality with canonical referentiality, i.e., a kind of intertextuality that limits the interplay of

²⁹ Ibid, 35. ³⁰ Ibid, 50.

³¹ Ibid, 36.

³² Ibid, 51.

texts to the canonical writings. Third, historical criticism cannot do justice to the Bible's canonical function in Christian communities, both past and present. "The critic presumes to stand above the text, outside the circle of tradition, and from this detached vantage point adjudicate the truth and error of the New Testament's time-conditionality. In contrast, the canonical interpreter stands within the received tradition, and, fully conscious of his own time-conditionality as well as that of the scriptures, strives critically to discern from its kerygmatic witness a way to God which overcomes the historical moorings of both text and reader." In other words, modern readers must adopt the canonical perspective if they hope to understand canonical texts. The claims of neutrality and objectivity by historical criticism, according to Childs, are unattainable. In spite of this shortcoming, Childs does not want to dismiss critical methods. What is needed, according to Childs, is a method that embraces the conclusions of historical criticism but also takes seriously "the confessional stance of the Christian faith for which the sacred scriptures provide a true and faithful vehicle for understanding the will of God." South the sacred scriptures provide a true and faithful vehicle for understanding the will of God."

Important for understand Childs' canonical approach is his threefold definition of canon. Childs affirms the traditional understanding of canon as a fixed body of sacred literature. To this he adds a second definition, namely, the particular theological construal of the tradition. That is, the theological interpretation of NT writings as they were shaped and collected by early Christian communities. Childs' third definition of canon is the interpretive activity of modern Christian readers. Childs assumes the first definition but his primary concern is with the second definition

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³³ *The New Testament as Canon*, 51-52. Stephen Fowl compares Childs' approach to the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer. He writes, "At this point, Childs and Gadamer are in agreement. One must stand within a tradition for understanding to take place," in "The Canonical Approach of Brevard Childs" *The Expository Times* 96 (1985): 174.

³⁴ The New Testament as Canon, 37.

and its implications for the third. In other words, the process of canonical formation demands a canonical approach to interpretation.

Childs challenges assumptions about the development of the NT canon. Some scholars assume that the NT canon resulted from the decision of fourth century church leaders to establish a list of authoritative writings. Childs argues that even though the term "canon" was not used until the fourth century, the canonical process developed as early as the second century. Childs points out that by 200 C.E. the four gospels and a Pauline corpus were circulated as authoritative in the church. "Canon consciousness thus arose at the inception of the Christian church and lies deep within the New Testament literature itself. There is an organic continuity in the historical process of the development of an established canon of sacred writings from the earliest stages of the New Testament to the final canonical stabilization of its scope."35 Childs thus uses the word canon to describe the entire process in the formation of the canon, a process which began by the middle of the second century.³⁶ For Childs, the selection and shaping of the NT writings took place in the context of worship.³⁷ For the early church, the NT canon became a "living vehicle through which the Lord of the church continued to address his people."³⁸ Elsewhere, Childs writes, "The very phenomenon of a canon provides a basic warrant for inferring that the material of the New Testament was shaped toward engendering faith and did not lie inert as a deposit of uninterpreted data from a past age."³⁹

Childs believes that the canonical process cannot be separated from the formation of the NT writings because these writings were influenced by the early Christian communities. These tradents not only copied the NT writings but they reinterpreted them to address their situations.

³⁵ Ibid, 21.

³⁶ Ibid, 24-25.

³⁷ Ibid, 31.

³⁸ Ibid, 29.

³⁹ Ibid, 51.

They felt free to select, order, and reinterpret these writings to meet their needs. By tradents, Childs means the transmitters of tradition. For Childs, the tradent is neither the transmitter of oral tradition nor the redactors of the gospels. Rather, the tradents are the scribes who copied NT writings while at the same time reinterpreting these writings for their Christian communities. Carl F.H. Henry offers this insight: "Childs stresses this activity of incorporating textual interpretations in connection with copying the text between A.D. 50 and A.D. 125. At times the process involves intentional change or reconstrual, not to falsify but by adding a specific theological dimension to promote a canonically approved view." For Childs, these theological accretions are not to be dismissed as is done in other critical methods. Rather, these accretions, or theological insights, become normative by their inclusion in the canon. Textual criticism, according to Childs, should not attempt to reconstruct the autographs of NT writings. Instead, it should identify the form of the text that was incorporated into the canon.

Other critical methods, according to Childs, have demonstrated this type of editorial work earlier in the tradition. For example, form critics have demonstrated that even the oral tradition was influenced by a later high Christology. Similarly, redaction criticism has shown that Jesus' sayings were freely interpreted and applied to new situations. Childs appears to have identified a fourth *sitz im leben* ("situation in life"), namely, the situation in the life of the scribes and Christian communities to which they ministered. Childs believes that it is in this situation that the NT writings become stabilized and normative.

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⁴⁰ Carl F.H. Henry, "Canonical Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal" *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 8 (1990): 94.

⁴¹ The New Testament as Canon, 26.

⁴² Ibid, 23.

⁴³ Source and redaction criticism focus on the third *sitz im leben*, the situation in the life of the Evangelist. Form criticism is interested in the second *sitz im leben*, the situation in the life of church during the transmission of oral tradition. Jesus Research is concerned with the first *sitz im leben*, the situation in the life of Jesus.

For Childs, the relationship between canon and community is dialectic. "At the heart of the process lay a dialectic move in which the tradents of the developing New Testament were themselves being shaped by the content of the material which they in turn were transmitting, selecting, and forming into a scriptural norm. Central to the canonical process was the concern to render the occasional form in which the gospel was first received into a medium which allowed it faithfully and truthfully to render its witness for successive generations of believers who had not directly experienced Christ's incarnation and resurrection."44 In other words, as the early Christian communities shaped the sacred writings, these writings shaped the communities.⁴⁵

In some ways, Childs implies a providential process in the formation of the NT canon. Henry observes that Childs "connects divine providence with the community of faith's whole process of transmission, selection, addition and interpretation that issues in the canonical text."46 Yet, Childs does not believe that the process of canonical shaping was infallible. In spite of the fallibility of the process, Childs is convinced that "God continues to reveal his will through this vehicle, earth-bound and fragile in its very nature."⁴⁷

Childs acknowledges that rival interpretations of the gospel competed with each other during the first two centuries. Nonetheless, he believes that the theological interpretations of the early church did not continue to evolve but instead became stable and solidified in the NT writings. It is these writings and their normative interpretations that became authoritative for the church. "I would argue that there is a basic continuity between the early stages of the New Testament's formation and those theological forces which finally effected an authoritative

 $^{^{44}}$ The New Testament as Canon, 22. 45 Ibid, 25.

⁴⁶ Henry, "Canonical Theology," 94.

⁴⁷ The New Testament as Canon, 44.

canonical collection."⁴⁸ Long before the fourth century, according to Childs, the emerging NT established a context for the proper interpretation of NT writings.

Childs believes that during the formation of the canon a fixed context was established for interpreting the NT writings. Childs believes that the canon's normative function was, in fact, the establishment of this fixed context.⁴⁹ The theological motive for establishing the context was not to solidify the author's intended meaning. Rather, the canonical context was intended to make the gospel message trans-historical, i.e., transcend its original historical setting. Childs writes, "A chief motivation lying behind the canonical process was in rendering the tradition in such a way as for its message of the gospel to be accessible to every succeeding generation of Christians."⁵⁰ Thus, for Childs the canonical context replaces the original context as the proper context for interpreting the NT writings. As a result, the canonical writings are interdependent. In fact, it is through their intertextuality that they render a specific theological message. It is this message, found in the final canonical form, that is ultimately authoritative. "Essential to the process is a hermeneutical function which structure occasional writings of varied historical and geographical background into such a form as to allow them to perform a particular role in the life of every succeeding generation of the faithful."51 In this way, the Bible becomes for modern believers the revelation of God's present and enduring will.

But, what about authorial intentionality? Childs favors canonical intentionality, which is the theological interpretation of the NT writings given by the early church. These interpretations "often transcended the earlier stages of its growth." For Childs, the theological function served by NT writings was often different from the original situation of these writings. In other words,

⁴⁸ Ibid, 26.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 39.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 40.

⁵¹ Ibid, 25.

⁵² Ibid, 32.

the canonical meaning is not the same as the author's intended meaning.⁵³ "The *skandalon* of the canon is that the witness of Jesus Christ has been given its normative shape through an interpretive process of the post-apostolic age."⁵⁴ Childs does allow for a variety of theological voices in the NT writings within a prescribed limit.⁵⁵ The value of critical methods is that they allow modern interpreters to identify these different voices.⁵⁶ For Childs, however, the plain meaning of the text is the canonical meaning, i.e., the normative meaning given to the text by the community that canonized it. In this way, the canon provides the sufficient context for interpreting NT writings.

HOW IS CANONICAL CRITICISM INADEQUATE?

Inadequate for Evangelical Hermeneutics

While canonical criticism has value for biblical interpretation, by itself it is inadequate for an Evangelical hermeneutic. A stumbling block for Evangelicals will be the rejection of authorial intent. Henry correctly concludes, "Childs must dismiss the priority of historicogrammatical interpretation insofar as he considers authorial intention not decisive for exegesis." As shown earlier, Childs replaces authorial intentionality with canonical intentionality. For him, the author's intended meaning is either inaccessible or unimportant. Childs believes that the authority of the NT is rooted in the intentions of the tradents to formalize a normative canon. But, Evangelicals have a long history of commitment to authorial intent. ⁵⁸ It

⁵³ Ibid, 49.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 28.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 28-29.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 50.

⁵⁷ "Canonical Theology," 82.

⁵⁸ In part, this is due their commitment to divine inspiration. John Oswalt states, "Canonical criticism posits that inspiration resides in the community rather than in an author...However, the Bible does nto speak to us of inspired communities. Rather, it speaks of inspired individuals speaking to the community," in "Canonical Criticism: A Review from a Conservative Viewpoint," *JETS* 30 (1987): 322. This concern is echoed by Henry:

is this commitment that led to the development of the Grammatical Historical method of biblical interpretation. It was believed that through a careful study of the literary and historical components of the text that the author's intended meaning could be discovered. A commitment to authorial intent also implied that the modern reader was looking for the single meaning that the author intended to communicate. Characteristic of Evangelical hermeneutics, Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard write, "We assume that the writers or editors of the Bible intended to communicate to all people in the same way. Thus, for the most part, they intended their words to have only one sense. They may have encoded their message in metaphor, poetry, allegory, or apocalypse, in addition to the more straightforward techniques, but they selected appropriate ways to convey their intended meaning. The historical meaning of these texts remains the central objective of hermeneutics." Whether called the historical meaning or the textual meaning, the determination of the author's intended meaning has always been the goal of Evangelical hermeneutics.

Another difficulty for Evangelicals is the dismissal of historical referents by canonical criticism. Childs believes that the study of historical referents distract from the meaning of the NT. Instead of historical referentiality, Childs prefers canonical referentiality. This is a form of intertextuality that limits the interplay of texts to the canon. In describing Childs' approach, Oswalt writes, "The shape of the canon is determined more by the interplay of ideas than by a confrontation with God in history. This has the effect of bringing us very near to Bultmann's concept of 'verbal reality,' a world where meaning is completely cut loose from fact." This is

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[&]quot;An ecclesiastically commended authoritative text is hardly the same as an authoritative divinely-inspired text," in "Canonical Theology," 99.

⁵⁹ Klein, Blomberg, Hubbard, p. 132. In his book, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, Osborne devotes two appendices (approximately 50 pages) to the defense of authorial intent.

⁶⁰ "Canonical Criticism," 319. In agreement, Carl F.H. Henry writes, "Evangelical scholars by contrast insist that insofar as redemptive acts are declared to be historical they are historically investigatable," in "Canonical Theology," 101.

problematic for Evangelicals who believe that Christianity is a historical religion. The gospels, for Evangelicals, are about real people and actual event. More importantly, we believe that God truly broke into time and space in the person of Jesus Christ. From all indications, the Evangelists wrote their gospels to provide a historical record that served evangelistic purposes. Osborne rightly states, "Since Christianity is a historical religion, the interpreter must recognize that an understanding of the history and culture within which the passage was produced is an indispensable tool for uncovering the meaning of that passage."

Inadequate for Gospel Interpretation

Canonical criticism is inadequate for gospel interpretation for at least two reasons. First, communication does not occur in a historical vacuum but within a specific historical context.⁶³ A particular author writes at a particular time to address the particular issues of a particular audience. Fee and Stuart refer to this as historical particularity: "But because God chose to speak his Word through human words in history, every book in the Bible also has historical particularity; each document is conditioned by the language, time, and culture in which it was

⁶¹ See, for example, Luke's prologue (1:1-4). Even John's gospel is not void of historical concerns. See Raymond Brown, *The Gospel according to St. John* (Anchor Bible, 1966).

⁶² Osborne, 127. In a similar fashion, V. Philip Long observes, "The problem with some modern literary approaches to the Bible is that they tend to dismiss historical questions as either uninteresting or illegitimate. But to bracket out forever or to banish historical questions is to do an injustice to the biblical literature," in *The Art of Biblical History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 153.

⁶³ The incarnation is often used as an analogy for the enculturation of Scripture. Keener writes, "Indeed, God is so involved in the multicultural matrix of history that he did not disdain to step into it himself. The ultimate enculturation of his Word occurred when the Word became flesh, as the prologue of John (1:1-18) declares. Jesus did not become a cultureless, amorphous, genderless human. He came as a first-century Jewish man, with unique chromosomes and physical features, just as each of the rest of us is unique. His cultural specificity does not mean that he was not for all of us; it means instead that he could better identify with all of us as a particular person" (p. 26). Likewise, J. I. Packer and Merrill Tenney state, "As God's climactic revelation took the form of an historical human life--the life of Jesus Christ, God's incarnate Son--so His entire revelation, first to last, took an historical form. What Scripture gives us is an interpreted record of that historical revelation. And though the truths that God taught are timeless in the sense of being universally true, they are not timeless in the sense of being fully understandable out of their historical context," in *Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1980), 12.

originally written."⁶⁴ So, gospel texts, like all texts, have historical particularity. To emphasize the importance of historical context, Anthony Harvey introduces the concept of the constraints of history. ⁶⁵ By historical constraints, Harvey means that there cultural limitations on conventions. In other words, writers who wish to be understood must submit to the literary and cultural conventions of their day. There simply are no ahistorical means of communication. And, if communication is historical, then the study of historical contexts is imperative.

When authors write, they assume a shared body of knowledge with their readers, knowledge that was common to that time period or knowledge based upon personal interaction. 66 While Albert Bell calls this shared body of knowledge, "cultural assumptions," 67 Gorman identifies it as the "presuppositional pool" between author and reader, 68 and Osborne refers to it as "historical intentionality, in which the author assumes certain shared information with the original readers." 69 Regarding this intentionality, Malina and Rohrbaugh observe, "The New Testament was written in what anthropologists call a 'high-context' society. People who communicated with each other in high-context societies presume a broadly shared, well-

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⁶⁴ Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 17. Elsewhere Fee and Stuart write, "It simply makes a difference in understanding to know the personal background of Amos, Hosea, or Isaiah, or that Haggai prophesied after the exile, or to know the messianic expectations of Israel when John the Baptist and Jesus appeared on the scene, or to understand the differences between the cities of Corinth and Philippi and how these affect the churches in each," 22.

⁶⁵Anthony Harvey, Jesus and the Constraints of History (London: SCM Press, 1982).

⁶⁶ McKnight, 27. McKnight writes, ""Background considerations are necessary if the student is to uncover elements in the text that were simply assumed by the first-century writer and his audience in order to understand the intention of the author as made known in the text. By the original author and his readers, this knowledge was shared; due to historical distance, this information is arcane to us. And there is much the Gospel traveler will need to know in order to be a perceptive visitor in that world."

⁶⁷ Albert Bell writes, "Every written document--whether a piece of graffiti on a wall or a prize-winning play--has certain cultural assumptions built into it. Those assumptions affect an author's choice of theme, vocabulary, images, and every other aspect of one's writing. It is important to emphasize this because authors assume their readers will be familiar with the culture which underlies their writing," in his book, *Exploring the New Testament World* (Nashville: Nelson, 1998). 2.

⁶⁸ Gorman writes, "We also want to discover the common cultural beliefs and values—the presuppositional pool, as some have called it—that authors and hearers/readers of the original text would have brought to their production of and encounter with the text," 67.

⁶⁹ Grant Osborne, 127.

understood knowledge of the context of anything referred to in conversation or writing."⁷⁰ Only rarely do the Evangelists explain their socio-historical context, and this typically occurs when they know that their reader has need for explanation. For example, both Matthew and Mark describe Jesus' debate with the Pharisees over the issue of unclean hands. Mark alone provides a parenthetical comment: "The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers, and kettles" (Mk. 7:3-4). Mark appears to add this cultural explanation to aid his reader in the interpretation of his gospel. ⁷¹ Even John finds it necessary to explain the response of the woman at the well to Jesus. In a parenthetical comment, John writes, "For Jews do not associate with Samaritans" (Jn. 4:9). For a Jew living in Palestine, there would be no need to state the obvious. John's explanation suggests that he is writing to those who live outside of Palestine. If Mark and John provided cultural explanations for their first century audience, how much more is needed by modern readers?⁷²

Authors not only assume a shared body of knowledge, but they write from their cultural perspective to an audience who shares that perspective. This socio-historical perspective determines much of what an author writes and how they write. In other words, both content and form are influenced by the socio-historical perspective of the author. Regarding this, Hanson

gift devoted to God" (7:11). It seems reasonable to assume that Mark provided this additional information so that his reader would understand this passage.

⁷⁰ Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 11. ⁷¹ Another example of a parenthetical comment in Mark's gospel is his explanation of Corban, "that is, a

⁷² Craig Keener states, "But if we start merely from our own culture's assumptions, we stand as much chance of misreading the Bible as reincarnationist Hindus do" (Keener, 4). In agreement with Keener, Packer and Tenney write, "Without some historical study a vast amount of the meaning of Scripture gets lost. Not that a man who has no historical aids to Bible study cannot understand the Word at all; on the contrary, its saving message is spelled out so often and so clearly that only the spiritually blind can miss it. But with historical aids one will understand Scripture much more fully than one could otherwise," 12.

and Oakman observe that our modern Western perspective is vastly different from the perspective of the first century Palestinian Jews who wrote the gospels.⁷³ Hanson and Oakman provide numerous examples of differences between the socio-historical perspective of the Evangelists and modern Western readers: resident foreign army, agrarian, patronage/clientage, household slavery, kinship, honor/shame, group orientation. Unfortunately, modern readers are rarely privy to this perspective. Garland comments on the importance of knowing this perspective for interpreting the NT: "Much of the basic story of the New Testament would be incomprehensible if the reader did not posses some knowledge about the ancient world, its beliefs, practices, and political history."⁷⁴

The second reason that canonical criticism is inadequate is because the goal of gospel interpretation is to determine the author's intended meaning through the author's use of shared literary conventions in a particular historical context. A valid interpretation is one that has explanatory adequacy i.e., the ability to adequately explain the exegetical evidence (i.e., historical context, literary context, literary conventions). The interpretation should be plausible for the author and original reader. A careful study of the historical context establishes boundaries of possible meaning. As Fee and Stuart observe, "A text cannot mean what it never meant." Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard similarly state, "The correct interpretation of a biblical

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⁷³Hanson and Oakman write, "While all these methods of study are important, it is fundamental to recognize that the biblical texts convey meanings derived through a specific culture and particular social arrangements. For the most part, ancient documents refer to their contemporary social systems only indirectly. They assume that their readers share their world and know what they mean by patron, what sort of taxation is in effect, or how a certain faction fits into the social matrix. Our difficulty as modern, Western readers is to relate meaningfully to documents that are the products of a radically different world in terms of institutions and values. We do not share important social understandings with the writers of these texts. Because our social and cultural experiences do not match those of the biblical authors, we can be seriously misled about what they mean," in K.C. Hanson and Douglas Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 4.

⁷⁴ David Garland, 349.

⁷⁵ Fee and Stuart, 26.

passage will be consistent with the historical-cultural background of the passage." If an interpretation lacks historical plausibility, then it must be rejected. McKnight is convinced that the neglect of background studies will lead to "anachronistic and misleading" interpretations." Background studies, in fact, help to correct some popular misconceptions. For example, even though we have Good Samaritan laws in our country, a good Samaritan would have been an oxymoron to a first century Palestinian Jew. Another example is Jesus' reference to the eye of needle. Contrary to popular belief there is no archaeological evidence to support the view that the eye of the needle was a narrow entrance into the city of Jerusalem. From all indications, it was a literal eye of a needle.

Readers--whether modern or ancient--bring their context to the interpretation of texts. James Jeffers correctly notes, "If we try to make sense of the Bible with no knowledge of the people who wrote it, those who read it and the society in which they lived, we will be inclined to read into the Scriptures our own society's values and ideas. This would be a major mistake since our culture is very different from that of the ancient Romans." The reader's context includes their presuppositions and preunderstanding. While a presupposition is any belief that a reader assumes to be true, preunderstanding is the totality of their presuppositions on a particular topic. Every reader has presuppositions; no one is a *tabula rasa* ("blank slate"). Readers approach texts with personal issues and concerns. They also are historically and culturally conditioned. Complete objectivity (neutrality) is an illusion. The problem with presuppositions is that they can sometimes skew an interpretation. There are two ways in which presuppositions negatively

⁷⁶ Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, 172. Elsewhere, they write, "To the extent that we enter the world of the biblical setting, we can grasp the meaning of the passage. An interpretation that accurately corresponds to the original setting best represents the text's intended meaning" 183.

⁷⁷ McKnight, 28. McKnight concludes, "Interpretation which is not anchored in background studies will be historically insensitive and, therefore, simply wrong. Christians who neglect background information are in danger of denying the time-conditioned nature of revelation, both in the event and in the text," 28.

⁷⁸ James Jeffers, The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), 11.

influence interpretations: modernizing and eisegesis. Modernizing is where modern readers interpret the gospels from a modern perspective. For example, why did Joseph need to divorce marry if they were only engaged? Did Matthew audit the tax reports of his clients? Was Jesus a Calvinist or Arminian? A Democrat or Republican? These questions are clearly anachronistic, i.e., reading back into the ancient text a modern perspective. Eisegesis is where the modern reader reads into the gospel text their own personal issues and concerns. The text is treated like an ink blot, which was randomly formed so that any interpretation offered reveals more about the interpreter than about the ink blot. Reader's should be aware of their own presuppositions so that they do not bias their interpretation. To the best of their ability, readers should bracket, or at least be aware of, their presuppositions and read the text as objectively as possible. In historical studies, this is called "sufficient detachment." Beyond awareness of presuppositions, the reader may wish to adopt the presuppositions of the author. This type of sympathetic reading allows the modern reader to better understand the author's message from the author's perspective.

WHAT IS THE PROPER ROLE OF BACKGROUND STUDIES?

Informed Preunderstanding

Background studies should not be used as an end in themselves. The end should be valid interpretation with background studies being one of the means of attaining this. The contribution of background studies is that they help the modern reader better understand the historical context of the author so that their interpretations are more sympathetic and nuanced. The opposite is equally true. If modern interpreters neglect the historical context, they are likely to read their own context into the gospels. Keener correctly observes, "Our own backgrounds and the

⁷⁹ See C. Behan McCullagh, *The Truth of History* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 129-133.

information we start with affect the categories and associations we bring to a text—consciously or unconsciously. By contrast, getting more of the ancient readers' background helps us to read texts more as they would have read them."80 Rousseau and Arav offer this principle: "The fewer the data, the more theories!"81 There will indeed by gaps in our understanding of the historical background of the gospels. That is simply the nature of history, especially history of the ancient world. But, why ignore the information that we do have? The gaps created by the absence of this information will surely be filled with modern perspectives rather than ancient ones. Albert Bell writes, "It is not necessary to understand the culture fully to benefit from reading the document, but having even a degree of insight into the culture can enrich one's reading significantly and help to guard against erroneous interpretations."82

Complimentary Role

There are a lot of different methods of biblical interpretation. Some fall under the rubric of historical methods, such as historical criticism (e.g., source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism) and background studies. Others fall under the rubric of literary methods, such as structuralism, narrative criticism, and canonical criticism. Exegesis is both historical, considering the historical setting of the gospels, and literary, studying the shared literary conventions of the text, e.g., genre, grammar, and words. Canonical criticism is not a bad method of interpretation, unless it is used in isolation of background studies. A better method is to use canonical criticism in conjunction with background studies. These two methods should be allowed to play a complimentary role. Regarding this complimentary role, Klein, Blomberg, and

⁸⁰ Ibid, 27.

⁸¹ John Rousseau and Rami Arav, Jesus & His World: An Archaeological and Cultural Dictionary (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 1. ⁸² Albert Bell, 4.

Hubbard write, "This is our point: we welcome literary methods for they enable us to understand and appreciate the Bible's literary dimension. But in using literary methods we cannot abandon the text's historical moorings. We insist that the 'historical' focus provides the best avenue to a legitimate 'literary' reading. We do not want an either-or-approach." The combination of a historical and literary approach appears to be the best approach to gospel interpretation, given the nature of the gospels themselves.

⁸³ Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, 104.