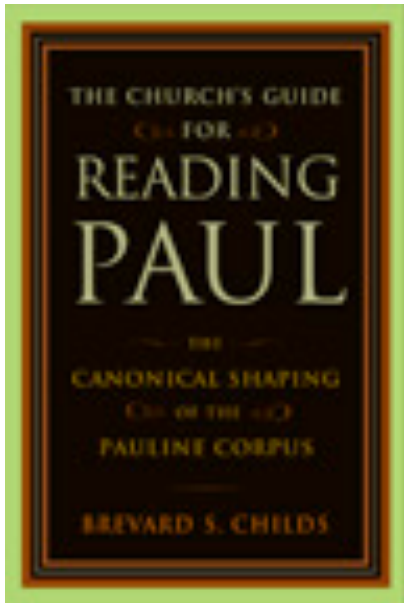


RBL 10/2009



Childs, Brevard S.

The Church's Guide for Reading Paul: The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008. Pp. xi + 276. Paper.
\$28.00. ISBN 9780802862785.

Paul E. Trainor
Lincoln Christian University
Lincoln, Illinois

Biblical scholarship has long recognized the occasional nature of the Pauline letters. The challenge has been to discover the center of Paul's theology even when the guild has limited that focus to the so-called "genuine letters." Brevard Childs enters the search for a Pauline center by suggesting that there are "exegetical and hermeneutical implications of canon for understanding in the context of the church" (3). He argues that exploring an exegetical understanding of Paul's theology from the formation of the New Testament canon and the entire Pauline corpus as handed down will guide modern readers to a richer and clearer center of his theology. In six carefully argued chapters, the late great biblical scholar challenges the majority view in Pauline scholarship that the historical Paul and his theology are known just from his undisputed letters (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, Philemon), while the disputed letters (Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus) diminish and domesticate Paul's theology, so that serious Pauline scholarship stirs away from including these texts from historical Paul inquiry. He never assumes strict Pauline authorship for the entire corpus; rather, he suggests that each letter needs to be interpreted as part of one apostolic collection.

Professor Childs begins by recognizing that the earliest extant form of Paul's letters are a corpus with a fixed order. In their canonical context, titles are given to the letters by an editor, resulting in an intertextual reading of a unified Pauline collection. This canonical shaping did not dismiss any historical particularity to his letters but served to enhance and universalize the tradition for the ongoing church. Modern historical criticism in its quest for the historical Paul produced a gap between it and the canonical Paul of the church. Childs sees this as a mistake; he does not disregard the search for Paul or the use of historical criticism but argues that the only Paul we have access to is the canonical one. Emphasizing that the two methods cannot be "fused or separated" (26), he outlines the challenges of continuity and discontinuity.

He next interacts with five modern scholars (Ulrich Luz, Richard Hays, Frances Young, Luke T. Johnson, Wayne Meeks) and their proposals for the problem of interpretation. This chapter is the most technical and challenging as Childs critiques and summarizes each of the methods discussed with an eye for compatibility with his emphasis on the Christian canon. Childs finds plenty to agree with among his select interpreters, but he finds his greatest disagreement with Wayne Meeks, his long-time colleague at Yale. Meeks's sociological history of religions approach serves as a prime example for Childs of the main hermeneutical issue in biblical studies since the Enlightenment. Specifically, "How does a modern reader approach the Bible when the traditional ecclesiastical traditions respecting its content and authority have been challenged by a host of new perspectives raised by critics standing outside of the prescribed circles of committed religious adherents?" (56). The purpose and shaping of an authoritative New Testament canon either is foundational in the development of early Christianity (Childs) or has no role (Meeks) in the understanding of early Christianity. That is the point for Childs: the very formation of the canon was an interpretive exercise "in which its anonymous apostles and postapostolic editors collected, preserved and theologically shaped the material in order for evangelical traditions to serve successive generations of Christians." (62)

In chapter 3 Childs suggests that there is a hermeneutical consequence in the order of the Pauline corpus, beginning with Romans and ending with the Pastorals. Romans serves as the introduction to the corpus and Paul's most comprehensive theological statement of the gospel, standing unhindered by specific congregational issues, hermeneutically serving the corpus as a "reformulation" of Paul's gospel treated in earlier letters. While the Pastoral letters express the passing of the torch to later generations of sound doctrine, Childs disagrees that they have altered the gospel from the earlier and undisputed letters of Paul. There is no engagement with a specific congregation and its specific issues; Paul is portrayed as the model teacher instructing his protégés to insure appropriation and treasuring of the gospel in the formulation of sound doctrine. This shift in the Pastorals

develops and finalizes the shape of the Pauline corpus. Paul does not pass on his apostolic office but rather his authoritative instruction as canon in a postapostolic church.

In chapter 4 Childs engages his canonical proposal in exegesis of eight theological probes. Here this biblical scholar demonstrates his own gift to the academy and the church, engaging in sophisticated exegesis of grand Pauline themes such as apostolic authority, justification, covenant, law, the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts, church leadership, Israel and the church, and the apocalyptic shape of Paul's theology. Childs's exegetical method does not assume Pauline authorship of all thirteen epistles but recognizes a collected corpus not devoid of tensions between singular works. Those tensions and all interpretative performance within the canonical context are executed in a historical and literary fashion in light of the theological role the particular witness maintains within the Pauline corpus. He suggests that interpretation must go beyond authorial intent to the reader's context and toward new questions raised by modern readers in the church. Each of his probes begins with a basic introduction to the exegetical and theological questions involved and an overview of the scholarly discussion, then moves to exegesis of relevant texts, and concludes with hermeneutical implications from his canonical approach.

In chapter 5 Childs takes up question of how the Acts of the Apostles and Hebrews developed and/or shaped the Pauline corpus. Contra Harnack's thesis, the Gospels and Paul's corpus are two independent lines of canonical development, both authoritative and early (late first century or early second century). Acts is primarily a historical account of the early church, not "fanciful tales" bearing witness to the canonical Paul "written to insure the unified witness of the Apostles and Paul." (231) Yet, two equally dangerous interpretive stances are to be avoided: (1) historical rationalism's acceptance of Paul's letters as historical and the simultaneous dismissal of any historicity in Acts; (2) the attempt to employ external evidences to harmonize all events in Acts with the Pauline corpus. Historical tensions exist, demonstrating the need for newer approaches. Hebrews was anonymously written, yet it contains some features that led to its association with the Pauline corpus. The reference to "our brother Timothy" (13:23) stands out. Nevertheless, debate surrounded the canonicity of Hebrews as distant from Paul among Greek-speaking church fathers. However, the high Christology and the centrality of the cross in what Childs describes as "expanded in terms of Christ's sufferings and priestly sacrifice" (248) led to its canonicity.

In the final chapter (6) Childs summarizes his argument and refines the implications of his study. Canon is to be understood in its broadest sense: "the process that received, transmitted, collected, and shaped" (253) the letters of Paul. Childs does not agree that historical Paul need remain elusive because of the so-called nature of the New Testament

itself. The canonical image of Paul is not a fictional caricature, he argues, but the historical process that transmits and shapes the gospel for the church.

The Church's Guide for Reading Paul is a rigorous engagement with Pauline scholarship both past and present. It should never be confused in any way by its title as a basic guide for the church. Childs challenges the academy to bridge the gap between itself and the church by embracing the canonical Paul's writings as the boundary for the academy to engage Pauline theology. This book is timely and needed in an era of renewed interest in the theological interpretation of texts by contributing to that endeavor and providing an interpretive method to guide exegesis.