Brevard Childs and the treasures of darkness

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Abstract

Contemporary biblical studies is populated by 'comparativists' and 'theological interpreters': scholars who read the Bible in the context of ancient artefacts, and scholars who read it in the context of Christian theology, respectively. These camps relate to one another mostly by feuding – or by mutual avoidance. The Old Testament theologian Brevard Childs is usually taken as a champion in the cause of theological interpretation, and so also as reinforcing one side of the disciplinary division. But under certain conditions, Childs also authorised the use of ancient artefacts ('the treasures of darkness') for reading scripture theologically. This article reactivates the latter possibility within Childs' interpretive programme, especially through two cases studies: the first by Childs himself, when he uses the Sargon Legend to interpret Exodus 2; and the second a reprise of Childs' procedure, using the Mesha Inscription to interpret 1 Kings 22.

Introduction

An observer of contemporary biblical studies could be forgiven for gaining the impression that 'comparativists' and 'theological interpreters' are like foes arrayed in battle camps, much as the Philistines and Israelites in the valley of Elah. With just such a simile, the Old Testament professor Christopher Hays once pled for a ceasefire between biblical interpreters of a philological concentration and those whose métier is more theological.[1] But even when such a truce is observed and active hostilities suspended, a regime of mutual non-interaction sets in. Theological interpreters do not often mention works from the ancient world or the scholars occupied with

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[1] Christopher B. Hays, 'Bard Called the Tune: Whither Theological Exegesis in the Post-Childs Era?', *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 4/1 (2010), p. 140. Cf. the simile of Iain Provan, according to which Childs 'reconcile[s] two sovereign nations' ('Canons to the Left of Him: Brevard Childs, his Critics, and the Future of Old Testament Theology', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 50/1 (1997), p. 28).

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them. On the other side, researchers interested in such artefacts do not customarily draw on examples of theological interpretation.[2]

The interpretive programme of Brevard Childs[3] – a giant among theological interpreters (or perhaps better, a David, on the simile above) – has usually been taken as reinforcing these battle camps.[4] Childs himself insisted that his doctoral students take Ugaritic, Akkadian and other Semitic languages.[5] But his students, so far as I know, have not shown the same commitment, and no wonder! Childs' own writings frequently criticise readings of the Bible that prioritise its ancient horizons, and Childs' confidence in such reconstructions receded as his career progressed.[6]

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[2] Some organs of the contemporary movement for 'theological interpretation of scripture' include the *Journal of Theological Interpretation* (Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, IN); the *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Craig G. Bartholomew (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005); and two commentary series: the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI) and the Two Horizons Commentary (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI). See also now Craig G. Bartholomew and Heath A. Thomas (eds), *A Manifesto for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016); and note discussion in the *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12/2 (2010). For an introduction to comparative scholarship, see Brent A. Strawn, 'Comparative Approaches: History, Theory, and the Image of God', in Joel M. LeMon and Kent Harold Richards (eds), *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Peterson*, SBLRBS 56 (Atlanta: SBL, 2009), pp. 117–42.

[3] Helpful introductions to Childs' interpretive programme can be found in Christopher R. Seitz, *The Character of Christian Scripture: The Significance of a Two-Testament Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), pp. 27–91; Philip Sumpter, 'Brevard Childs as Critical and Faithful Exegete', *Princeton Theological Review* 14/1 (2008), pp. 95–116; Sumpter, *The Substance of Psalm 24: An Attempt to Read Scripture after Brevard S. Childs*, LHBOTS 600 (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 7–56; Sumpter, 'The Trinity and the Canonical Process', *Theology Today* 72/4 (2016), pp. 379–97; Dennis T. Olson, 'Zigzagging through Deep Waters: A Guide to Brevard Childs's Canonical Exegesis', *Word and World* 29/4 (2009), pp. 348–56; Stephen B. Chapman, *The Law and the Prophets: A Study in Old Testament Canon Formation*, FAT 27 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), pp. 71–110. See also Childs' own works, especially *Introduction to the Old Testament as Christian Scripture* [hereafter IOTS] (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* [hereafter OTTCC] (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), and *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* [hereafter BTONT] (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992).

[4] See, *inter alia*, James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1999), pp. 38, 429–38. On the influence of Barr's criticisms, see Daniel R. Driver, *Brevard Childs, Biblical Theologian: For the Church's One Bible*, FAT II/46 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), pp. 41–60.

[5] Mark S. Smith, *Untold Stories: The Bible and Ugaritic Studies in the Twentieth Century* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), p. 154.

[6] On Childs' development, see Driver, *Brevard Childs*, pp. 14–21, 134–6; and Philip Sumpter, 'Comparison of Childs's Exodus and Isaiah Commentaries: Continuity and

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Informed commentators on Childs' programme acknowledge that he made a place for comparative data.[7] It seems, though, that this place was damned by faint praise: viable 'on the books', it has remained exegetically dormant. The interpretive momentum of Childs' students has gone elsewhere, with the consequence that Childs' approach is often perceived as inimical to a thorough-going engagement with comparative resources.

The burden of the present article is to reactivate this possibility within Childs' programme: of marshalling comparative evidences for the sake of theological interpretation.[8] As such, it extends Hays' call for irenicism, mentioned above. It aims to show the value of 'the treasures of darkness' for theological interpreters hereunto disinterested.[9] These interpreters are the article's primary audience; if it can also suggest Childs as an ally to more comparatively minded scholars, that is a boon. After all, the Philistine Ittai pledged his service to David the king (2 Sam 15:19–22), and David served for a time as a mercenary among the Philistines (1 Sam 27).

Childs and comparison

Brevard Childs was a theologian of the word of God.[10] God's self-revelation is the *sine qua non* of Childs' approach, and, as is well-known, Childs upholds the 'final form' of scripture as the premier 'vehicle' of God's 'revelation and

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Development' (paper presented at the 2014 International Meeting of SBL, Vienna). One need also only consult Childs' 'works cited' in earlier versus later publications to see that he put increasingly less interpretive stock in artefacts from the ancient world.

[7] See, above all, Don Collet, 'Hermeneutics in Context: Comparative Method and Contemporary Evangelical Scholarship' (forthcoming); also, Sumpter, 'Brevard Childs as Critical and Faithful Exegete', pp. 114–15.

[8] This article thus moves in a quite opposite direction from that of Iain Provan, who sought to 'follow Childs' logic further than he himself has been prepared to do' – i.e. by *decreasing* the importance of historical and comparative data within Childs' approach ('Canons to the Left of Him', p. 34). This article represents that 'canon to the left of him'.

[9] The phrase is the title of a classic work by the great Harvard Assyriologist, Thorkild Jacobsen, quoting Isa 45:3: *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

[10] On Childs' relation to Barth (and to dialectical theology more broadly), see Charles J. Scalise, 'Canonical Hermeneutics: Childs and Barth', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 47/1 (1994), pp. 61–88; Driver, *Brevard Childs*, pp. 89–93, 235–7; and, more critically, Barr, *Concept of Biblical Theology*, pp. 401–16. See also Childs' own reminiscences in his 'Karl Barth and the Future of Theology', in David L. Dickerman (ed.), *Karl Barth and the Future of Theology: A Memorial Colloquium Held at Yale Divinity School January 28, 1969* (New Haven: Yale Divinity School Association, 1969), pp. 30–9.

instruction'.[11] Childs was trained as a form critic and accepted that there were earlier, non-final forms preceding scripture's final shape. But relative to such forebears, Childs maintains that the biblical text in its received contours is the place at which the word of God is optimally available. This is not a historical or literary judgement, as if later (or the latest) contributors in the process of biblical composition were more accurate or more tasteful than their predecessors.[12] It is, rather, a thick, theological claim about scripture's place in the economy of God's gracious self-revelation – and the progressive character of that self-revelation to Israel.

John Webster's book on *Holy Scripture* can serve as a helpful point of entry and comparison with Childs in this regard. Like Childs, Webster works to situate scripture within a larger account of God's ways in the world. Webster argues that the doctrine of scripture needs to be grafted back onto doctrinal loci such as providence and sanctification. Providence, for example, 'speaks of the divine activities of ordering creaturely realities to their ends'. Scripture can then be construed as one such creaturely reality, uniquely ordered by God to its end of brokering God's self-revelation.[13] The concept of sanctification likewise addresses God's designation of creaturely realities to a new role in God's economy, but perhaps more than providence it secures their enduring *creatureliness*. Describing scripture as sanctified thus protects the integrity of composition as a human enterprise while also indicating God's 'annexation' of this process to God's economy.[14] Webster notes that the concept of sanctification offers the further benefit of including a 'horizontal' dimension; sanctification is not occasional or punctiliar, but ongoing and processual.[15]

This is as close as Webster comes in his opening chapter to citing 'Israel's history with God'.[16] And perhaps his omission occurred for fear of once more allowing the doctrine of scripture to collapse back into a mere rehearsal of its 'natural history'.[17] Yet it was a history – and a history more

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[11] *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* [hereafter *Exodus*] (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1974), p. xv. In his late commentary on Isaiah, Childs writes that the label 'canonical' has 'engendered major confusion', not least through its elasticity: *Isaiah: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), p. xii. For this reason the present article avoids the term wherever possible.

[12] Seitz, *Character of Christian Scripture*, pp. 49–53.

[13] John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 10.

[14] Ibid., p. 29.

[15] Ibid., p. 26.

[16] BTONT, p. 105.

[17] Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 19.

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particular than 'God' and 'creaturely realities' and 'human beings' writ large and generic – through which God curated scripture for the sake of God's self-revelation.[18] To quote Childs, '[t]he witness of Moses and the prophets, of the psalmists and sages, all arose *within Israel's history*'.[19] If Webster sits light to this particular history of God with Israel,[20] as an Old Testament expert, Childs makes it integral to his account of God's economy.

One aspect of Childs' emphasis on the history of God's life with Israel is his acknowledgement of its progressive character. That is, to use Christopher Seitz's phrase, the word of God 'gathered steam' in Israel.[21] God's self-disclosure to Israel did not arrive all at once; rather, God journeyed with a people over time and through the crises of their history such that earlier oracles inspired chain reactions of later reflection, reception and agglutination. Earlier stories attracted further episodes, grew into larger cycles and received editorial linkage to other complexes. The 'horizontal dimension' of God's life with Israel means that the final form of scripture is the place at which the word of God is optimally available, because it is there that we find it at 'full stretch'[22] – configured so as to gather up all its past unfolding and to render that accumulated depth accessible for all generations. As Childs put it:

> The reason for insisting on the final form of scripture lies in the peculiar relationship between text and people of God which is constitutive of canon. The shape of the biblical text reflects a history of encounter between God and Israel … The significance of the final form of the biblical text is that it alone bears witness to the full history of revelation.[23]

Seeking to hear the word of God from an earlier, reconstructed textual stratum is then to 'kick against the goads' of divine providence: wilfully to turn back the clock on the path of God's word through time by imagining

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[18] This is a theological redeployment of William Dever's well-known description of the Hebrew Bible as a 'curated artifact': *Recent Archaeological Discoveries and Biblical Research* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), p. 9.

[19] BTONT, p. 97 (emphasis added).

[20] For this criticism, see R. W. L. Moberly, 'What is Theological Interpretation of Scripture?', *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 3/2 (2009), p. 170.

[21] Seitz writes that 'later hands have a greater historical perspective, due to the sheer range of their awareness of the past, which is still unfolding at the time of early tradition-levels' (*Character of Christian Scripture*, p. 51).

[22] Brent A. Strawn, 'What Would (or Should) Old Testament Theology Look Like If Recent Reconstructions of Israelite Religion were True?' in Robert Miller (ed.), *Between Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology: Essays on Archaeology, History, and Hermeneutics*, CBET (Louvain: Peeters, 2016), p. 146.

[23] IOTS, pp. 75, 76.

oneself into a superseded frame of reference. In effect, it is like *trying* to put oneself in the place of the disciples of John the Baptist who confessed that they 'have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit' (Acts 19:2; or, *mutatis mutandis*, 'a completed Isaiah', or 'a stabilised Pentateuch').

And yet for all his insistence on the final form as the vehicle of God's word, Childs defends the usefulness of 'recovering a depth dimension within the canonical form of the biblical text'.[24] Childs supports the scholarly task of discerning the prehistory of the scriptural text insofar as this work aids in understanding the theological claim of the final form.[25] Just as one might consult earlier sketches of an artistic masterwork to appreciate its features more finely, Childs commends reconstruction of textual and traditional strata preliminary to the received form. Recovering earlier levels of tradition 'has its proper function within exegesis *only* in illuminating the final text'.[26]

Childs' own practice suggests that one key way of ensuring reconstructive work illuminates and does not eclipse interpretation of the final form is to isolate only the earlier stages of a tradition that eventuated in scripture. In other words, there were plenty of traditions and practices in ancient Israel. But not all were received and passed on as a word from God with an enduring claim on the community of faith. If in some quarters in ancient Israel the goddess Asherah was once worshipped as a consort of YHWH, no tradition that would become scriptural included this as normative: it did not gather steam, but ran out of it. To quote Gamaliel, 'it came to nought' (Acts 5:38, AV). Childs rules out the recovery of this kind of dead-ended 'tradition-historical trajectory', since it 'does not reflect actual layers within Israel's tradition, but is a critical construct lying outside of Israel's faith'.[27]

Childs criticises practitioners of comparative method for following just such a procedure. His objection to Frank Moore Cross is not that Cross busied himself with Ugaritic myths *per se*, but rather that he failed to direct his findings back towards expositing the scriptural text in its received form.[28]

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[24] BTONT, pp. 104–6, here p. 104.

[25] Of course, it is hard to know in advance what comparative work will or will not prove fruitful for illuminating the final form of scripture. Arguably, some historical scholarship undertaken with no intention of clarifying the theological achievement of scripture's final form has, in fact, under skilful interpreters, done just that, e.g. Benjamin D. Sommer's exegetical application of historical research on ancient Near Eastern cult statuary in his *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[26] *Exodus*, p. xv (emphasis added).

[27] OTTCC, p. 11.

[28] BTONT, pp. 102–3.

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Instead, by philological craft, Cross reanimated that which had come to nought (or never was): positing 'an original meaning [without] raising the question to what extent such a signification was ever actually heard within Israel' as God's word.[29] In fact, so long as comparativists retrace the *actual* path of the word of God – and thereby clarify the cumulative achievement of its final form – Childs welcomes their endeavour. For example, because Exodus 6:3 remembers their convergence, Childs himself offers a brief, developmental account of the divine names, an account that Cross would basically approve: ancient Canaanite *el* names became identified with the deity YHWH of the Mosaic tradition.[30] Childs also gives a qualified endorsement to the research of Werner Schmidt, who tells a story of YHWH's evolution similar to Cross', and uses comparative data from Ugarit to do it.[31]

These, then, are the concerns governing Childs' perspective on comparative scholarship: most importantly, it must fructify interpretation of the final form and, correlatively, delineation of scripture's prehistory must avoid importing 'a critical construct lying outside of Israel's faith' – i.e. asserting as interpretively crucial what was never heard as God's word in ancient Israel. It seems, however, that whereas the first concern drove Childs' programme from early on (from at least 1970),[32] the latter grew in importance to him over time. Childs became increasingly doubtful about the utility and feasibility of reconstructing strata lying aback of scripture's final form, not least because the scholarly temptation to *over*invest in pet historical speculations and to *under*invest in scripture's received form as arbiter of interpretation proved so strong.

Perhaps Childs himself in his earliest publications did not resist the temptation completely.[33] Nonetheless, other writings also from Childs' early career – like his Exodus commentary – belong to his corpus and demonstrate his distinctive interpretive programme, albeit in an intermediate phase. Here, as in later works, Childs investigates tradition-history only so as to appreciate the final form. But unlike in his later works, Childs is less guarded

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[29] Ibid., p. 102.

[30] Ibid., pp. 351–2.

[31] Ibid., p. 102. Werner Schmidt, *The Faith of the Old Testament: A History*, trans. John Sturdy (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), pp. 136–43.

[32] Driver, *Brevard Childs*, p. 15.

[33] Childs' early writings include *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament*, SBT 27 (London: SCM, 1960), *Memory and Tradition in Israel*, SBT 37 (London: SCM, 1962), *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis*, SBT 2/3 (London: SCM, 1967), 'The Enemy from the North and the Chaos Tradition', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 78/3 (1959), pp. 187–98, etc. These works read like a veritable catalogue of comparative materials.

in his stipulation that treating *only* of those traditions that were certifiably heard as the word of God in ancient Israel can help to gauge the progress of God's self-disclosure in Israel. At very least, Childs found a more constructive way of leveraging comparative materials – 'inert sherds' – for theological interpretation: he plied them as *indirect witnesses* to earlier layers of normative tradition.[34]

Textual criticism supplies a helpful analogy for understanding the uses to which Childs puts comparative data. As a discipline, textual criticism traditionally seeks to retrieve the most original form of a biblical text, especially by purifying it of later additions. If there are two Masoretic manuscripts and the later one has 'pluses' relative to the earlier, textual criticism weeds these accretions out. But another school of textual criticism does not seek a 'more authentic', earlier version; it evaluates the features of each manuscript, even the pluses of the younger, as interpretive data in their own right.[35] This latter corresponds to Childs' first and guiding principle for comparative research: one compares an earlier form of tradition with its successor in the final form not to gain purchase on a 'more authentic' version of the biblical text, but to understand the interpretive contribution of the final form in finer grain. 'Plus materials' of scripture relative to its earlier stages are not dross but a main point of interest.

But in textual criticism one need not only consult texts in the same lineage of manuscripts. One may also use versions – ancient translations – as *indirect witnesses* to an earlier form of the textual tradition. This is done by retroverting from the version to a proposed Hebrew *Vorlage*, an operation of disciplined speculation. To return to the opening simile, the David and Goliath story in the LXX is much shorter than in MT (1 Sam 16–18). No scene exists in the Greek, for example, of David taking food to his brothers.[36] From LXX Samuel, many scholars reconstruct a shorter Hebrew base text, in relation to which MT represents an expansion. This shorter version went unguessed from Masoretic manuscripts. In his earlier works, Childs embraces the use of comparative data for a similar operation: for retroverting by disciplined speculation from an ancient Near Eastern analogue to an earlier stage of biblical tradition – a stage that was, notably, unreachable from text-internal clues. Such a reconstructed stage is necessarily a 'critical construct lying outside of Israel's faith'.

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[34] *IOTS*, p. 73.

[35] Eldon Jay Epp, 'It's All about the Variants: A Variant-Conscious Approach to New Testament Textual Criticism', *Harvard Theological Review* 100/3 (2007), pp. 275–308.

[36] Emmanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 3rd edn (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2012), pp. 301–3.

The section below shows Childs working at his most comparative: in the second chapter of his 1974 Exodus commentary, itself an adaptation of a 1965 article.[37] As will be seen, Childs labours over the Akkadian Sargon Legend as an indirect witness to a possible *Vorlage* from which the biblical writer(s) in Exodus 2:1–10 departed. This comparison enables Childs to specify the 'transformation' which the biblical writers wrought on their source material (i.e. the pluses and expansions).[38] From the vantage of God's economy, that transformation represents not just human ingenuity but the effect of God's sanctification: when the God of Israel takes up the ancient Near Eastern story of a foundling destined for greatness and curates it for the sake of God's self-revelation, this – Exodus 2:1–10 – is the result.[39] The fruit of Childs' comparison between *Vorlage* and final form is a clearer articulation of the latter's theological meaning. The second section below reprises the same exercise, only this time using the comparative datum of the Mesha Inscription to clarify the theological achievement of 1 Kings 22. The end-goal of both demonstrations is, once more, to reactivate an exegetical possibility within Childs' interpretive programme in hopes of tempering the feud between many comparativists and theological interpreters.

The Sargon Legend and Exodus 2

The Sargon Legend was discovered in stages during several archaeological digs of the 1850s and 1860s; it was first published in 1870.[40] It is worth noting that, until this time, in all the long, long history of reading Exodus 2,

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[37] See *Exodus*, pp. 4–26, based on Brevard S. Childs, 'The Birth of Moses', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84/2 (1965), pp. 109–22.

[38] Childs uses 'transformation' in his section heading: 'The Transformation of the Tradition' (*Exodus*, p. 11). Philip Sumpter describes this process of transformation as *Sachkritik*; 'the final form of scripture mediates a "truer" witness to a reality more fragmentarily attested to at an earlier stage' (*Substance of Psalm* 24, p. 25). This term and Sumpter's analysis of it are helpful, but the accent of the present article is less on the *human* process of receiving (and reconfiguring) the word of God than on the role of that word in *God's* saving economy.

[39] For other, contrasting accounts of God's self-disclosure to Israel within its ancient Near Eastern contexts, pantheising rather than particularist, see Patrick D. Miller Jr., 'God and the Gods: History of Religion as an Approach and Context for Bible and Theology', in *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology: Collected Essays*, JSOTSup 267 (Sheffield: Sheffield, 2000), pp. 365–96; Matthew R. Schlimm, 'Wrestling with Marduk: Old Testament Parallels and Prevenient Grace', *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 48/2 (2013), pp. 181–92; and Othmar Keel, *Kanaan – Israel – Christentum: Plädoyer für eine 'vertikale' Ökumene*, Franz-Delitzsch-Vorlesung 2001 (Münster: Institutum Judaicum Delitzschianum, 2002).

[40] Brian Lewis, *The Sargon Legend: A Study of the Akkadian Text and the Tale of the Hero who was Exposed at Birth*, ASOR 4 (Cambridge: ASOR, 1980), p. 3.

interpreters had never had to reckon with the fact that the story of baby Moses in his reed basket had *an antecedent*. Not Origen, not Augustine, not Calvin: the challenge is unique to the modern era. Childs' 1965 article on the birth of Moses was published less than 100 years into Christian reflection on this *novum*. Hugo Gressmann, whom Childs' article cites as the most recent, important entry on the topic, wrote in 1913, a mere forty or so years after the Sargon Legend first came to light.[41] Our 'season of interpretation' has been understandably occupied with a new surfeit of historical issues.[42]

The Sargon Legend is the fictional autobiography of an Akkadian king, Sargon, likely written in the Neo-Assyrian period (eighth century BCE).[43] It tells in first person of how Sargon's mother, who was a priestess,

> [she] conceived me / in secret she gave me birth
> She placed me in a vessel of reeds / with pitch she sealed my hatch
> She gave me over to the river / which did not overwhelm (me).[44]

Baby Sargon is then found by 'Aqqi the water bearer', who adopts him and raises him. Because of the deity Ishtar's favour, Sargon later rises to become a mighty and conquering king.

Childs points out commonalities between this birth legend and Exodus 2: in both stories, 'a rejected child is exposed to danger, rescued, nurtured into manhood, and finally succeeds to a position of honor'.[45] In his article (though not in his commentary) Childs argues at length from other comparative data that several additional features of Exodus 2 are also traditional, including Moses' adoption as a foundling, his deliverance over to a paid wet nurse and his naming.[46] Childs notes that the Sargon Legend and Exodus 2 both paper over unknown or dubious parentage.[47] Gressmann made the further claim that Exodus 2 inherited from its *Vorlage* the threat to the child's life and a prophecy of his future greatness, but this Childs denies.[48] Nonetheless, even granting that the theme of threat is unique to the

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[41] Childs, 'The Birth of Moses', p. 110, pointing to Hugo Gressmann, *Mose und Seine Zeit: Ein Kommentar zu den Mose-sagen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913).

[42] Seitz, *Character of Christian Scripture*, pp. 85–91 and *passim*.

[43] On its genre, see Lewis, *The Sargon Legend*, pp. 87–123, and on dating, pp. 97–101.

[44] My translation.

[45] 'The Birth of Moses', p. 111; *Exodus*, p. 10.

[46] 'The Birth of Moses', pp. 110–15. The other comparative data are bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian legal texts known as *ana ittišu*.

[47] *Exodus*, p. 12. Childs writes of the Moses birth story that its ascription of Levitical descent to Moses compensates for the fact 'that it was unthinkable to speak of Moses as a foundling with unknown parentage'.

[48] 'The Birth of Moses', pp. 109–10, 116–18; *Exodus*, p. 10.

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biblical Moses story and not borrowed from its predecessor, what remains is a substantial range of characteristics shared between the Sargon Legend and Exodus 2.

To be clear, Childs is not claiming that Exodus 2 is directly dependent on the Sargon Legend, as if the writer of Exodus 2 had a copy of the cuneiform text before him as he wrote (though others have made that case).[49] Rather, Childs uses the Sargon Legend as an *indirect witness* to the tradition from which the biblical writer likely worked. His goal is not to sort out what is 'authentic' versus what is 'secondary' in the birth story of Moses. The 'plus materials' of Exodus 2 relative to its antecedent are exactly the point of Childs' interest: 'the purpose of studying the traditional material has been to provide a perspective from which to understand more clearly the newer, non-conventional elements of the chapter'.[50] These newer, non-conventional additions to the inherited story represent the contribution of the biblical text – indeed, the 'transformation' which it effected on the traditional materials.[51]

This transformation is theologically laden: to become an adequate witness of the God of Israel, it was necessary for Israel's authors to make certain modifications to the tradition of a foundling set loose on the water, adopted and grown to greatness. Theologically, from the perspective of *God's* work, God's 'annexation' of this ancient Near Eastern tale to God's self-revelation resulted in several additions and recalibrations.

Childs writes of the most important change:

> The common motif of the exposed child, who is rescued to become king, has been seriously altered. The simple 'rags-to-riches' motif is no longer applicable to Moses. He is not an unknown child who becomes king; rather the whole weight of the story has shifted. Moses is first 'exalted' and later returns to a position of humility by identifying with his people.[52]

'The weight of the whole story has shifted' – the Sargon Legend (or its lookalike from which the biblical author departed) represents the boasting of a self-made king, who rose from obscure origins and apprenticeship

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[49] Including Lewis, *The Sargon Legend*, p. 266.

[50] *Exodus*, p. 12.

[51] Ibid., p. 11. Childs criticises the biblical theology movement for 'concentrate[ing] on the elements of demonstrable distinctiveness' as 'a form of modern apologetic' – and yet his valuation of the newer and non-conventional (over the older and inherited) tends in the same direction: *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), p. 77.

[52] *Exodus*, p. 12.

to a lowly water-bearer to conquer vast territories.[53] But in Exodus, the birth story does not exemplify Moses' lowly origins so much as his initial privilege: he is adopted by royalty! And, as Childs observes, he subsequently leaves it behind. Instead of climaxing with the kingly prerogatives of its hero, Exodus *begins* with his kingly prerogatives – and then shows Moses following a different and non-kingly way: namely, the way of standing in solidarity with YHWH's people, Israel (2:11–15) and of hearkening to the command of YHWH (3:1–12).

As such, Childs rightly emphasises that the role of the birth story in the final, scriptural presentation is preparatory: Moses has been 'miraculously saved from destruction and prepared for a special mission'.[54] The full significance of Moses' rescue and preparation is yet future in the narrative.[55] But already in Exodus 2, Moses' greatness differs from Sargon's. Perhaps like Sargon's, his origin is suspect or unusual; but unlike the Akkadian conqueror, Moses' greatness has to do with his identification with the Hebrews and, in Exodus 3, with the call of their God, YHWH.

Childs in his corpus never draws lines overtly between the birth story of Moses and the larger 'canonical Moses' of the whole Pentateuch, but the two are ripe for connection.[56] Childs writes of the crucial importance of Moses to the final form of the Pentateuch: Moses is the literary guardian and guarantor of Torah from Sinai. 'The most important point to make', Childs says, 'is that Moses was assigned a unique role in Israel … as mediator of the covenant'.[57] Moses' *office* as mediator was singular because the divine revelation on Sinai that he mediated to Israel was also singular in its authority: 'he was the only means by which Israel knew anything about God to begin with'.[58] To the uniqueness of these two (Moses' office and the Torah Moses received) Moses' own *biographical* uniqueness makes a fugue: a reinforcing variation on the common theme.

Moses' singular *personal* story of rescue and adoption buttresses the singular theological authoritativeness of Torah from Sinai. Moses' birth story, as Childs observes, marks him out as special and destined for greatness.

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[53] Lewis, *Sargon Legend*, pp. 101–9.

[54] *Exodus*, p. 14.

[55] Ibid., pp. 12, 19.

[56] *IOTS*, p. 178, in opposition to the 'quest for the historical Moses'.

[57] *OTTCC*, p. 109. Cf. Jon D. Levenson, 'The Eighth Principle of Judaism and the Literary Simultaneity of Scripture', in *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993), pp. 62–81.

[58] Christopher R. Seitz, 'Isaiah and the Search for a New Paradigm', in *Word without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 125.

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And that specialness and greatness, as noted, has fundamentally to do with Moses' solidarity with the Hebrews and his call by YHWH. Moses' birth story thus serves as a fitting prelude to his unique role in the final form as covenant mediator. Childs' comparison with the Sargon Legend helps to bring these features of Moses' portraiture in the final form into sharper relief.

The Mesha Inscription and 1 Kings 22

The Mesha Inscription (henceforth MI) came to public attention in 1870, the same year the Sargon Legend was published.[59] A royal monumental inscription, it recites the exploits of a ninth-century BCE Moabite king in a dialect extremely similar to biblical Hebrew. Childs never commented on MI, and so the following section goes beyond Childs in at least that regard. It also goes beyond Childs in that it compares the final form of scripture with a reconstructed scenario in ancient Israel that Childs expressly rejects. And yet inasmuch as the following exercise reprises Childs' operation with the Sargon Legend, it cannot be said to be alien to his programme; anathema to Childs' own judgement, but different in scale and not in kind from Childs' own earlier procedure.

As with Childs' use of the Sargon Legend, the following section plies MI only so as to illumine scripture's final form. And like Childs' treatment of the Sargon Legend, it uses MI as an *indirect witness* to an earlier stage of the biblical tradition. In common with the mature Childs, it is alert to the danger of artificially reanimating what 'came to nought' and was never received as normative in ancient Israel. Nonetheless, it remains a retroversion by disciplined speculation – and the earlier situation it recovers was hardly knowable from the particular biblical text itself.

The use of MI as an indirect witness to an earlier form of scriptural tradition is more complicated than the Sargon Legend. The Sargon Legend directly underlies the biblical text, or (so Childs) closely approximates that which underlies the biblical text. This is not so for MI; no scholar claims that MI directly underlies or closely approximates any biblical text.[60] The manner in which MI attests a prior stage of biblical tradition is less direct: less formal

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[59] M. Patrick Graham, 'The Discovery and Reconstruction of the Mesha' Inscription', in Andrew J. Dearman (ed.), *Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab*, ASOR/SBL 2 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989), pp. 41–92.

[60] The same Moabite king, Mesha, whose voice MI records, does appear in the Bible (2 Kings 3), but in no way is the biblical chapter based on MI, and in fact the relation between the two texts is debated and fraught (e.g. Klaas A. D. Smelik, *Converting the Past: Studies in Ancient Israelite and Moabite Historiography*, OS 28 (Leiden: Brill, 1992), pp. 59–92).

and literary than with the Sargon Legend, and more *institutional*. MI gives indirect evidence about the institution of prophecy in monarchic Israel, and not about a literary precursor to the biblical text. It acts as an external confirmation of clues present within the Bible suggesting that prophets were (whatever else they may also have been) a part of the royal bureaucracy and an arm of the king's divinatory apparatus. Reconstructing the institutional *Vorlage* of a biblical text by using MI is more difficult and circuitous, more like retroverting to the Hebrew from the *targumim* or the Peshitta, versions standing at greater remove from their Hebrew base text than the LXX of the previous analogy.

In MI two oracles from the national deity Kemosh address the Moabite king, Mesha. This king, Mesha, sought to recover disputed territory in the Transjordan that had been lost to the Omri dynasty in Israel. Kemosh commands Mesha in two direct speeches to attack two places. Kemosh first commands king Mesha to 'Go (הלך), seize (אחז) Nebo from Israel' (line 14). Kemosh later commands Mesha to 'Go down (ירד), fight against (לחם) Ḥoronen' (line 32). Both times, an imperative of a verb of motion precedes an imperative of military action with a place-name as direct object. MI does not specify the human agents that mediated Kemosh's voice; they could have been technical diviners or non-technical intermediaries.[61]

Many of these same features of MI appear in 1 Kings 22, but overall, it is the *institutional role* of prophecy that runs parallel. Prophets in this biblical text function as part of the royal divinatory apparatus, offering supernatural intelligence to the royal war machine. The situation is comparable: the king of Israel, Ahab, and his vassal king Jehoshaphat seek to recover disputed territory in the Transjordan that had been lost to Aram. The kings enquire of the national deity, YHWH, by gathering four hundred prophets and asking if they should go (הלך) to fight against (לחם) Ramoth-gilead (22:6a). The prophets answer: 'Go up!' (עלה)' (v. 6b). 'My lord will give (it) into the hand of the king'. Later in the same chapter the prophets repeat and expand this oracle: 'Go up (עלה) to Ramoth-gilead and triumph (צלח); YHWH will give it into the hand of the king' (22:12). The court prophets mediate a single imperative verb of motion from YHWH, and, in the repetition of their oracle in 22:12, one followed by a place-name and an imperative verb.

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[61] See, respectively, Jonathon Stökl's discussion of royal prophecy in the Iron Age Levant (*Prophecy in the Ancient Near East: A Philological and Sociological Comparison*, CHANE 56 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 21–3); and André Lemaire, 'Oracles, politique et littérature dans les royaumes araméens et transjordaniens (IXe–VIIIe s. av. n.è.)', in Jean-Georges Heintz (ed.), *Oracles et Prophéties dans l'Antiquité: Actes du Colloque de Strasbourg, 15–17 Juin 1995*, TCRPOG 15 (Paris: De Boccard, 1997), pp. 183, 185.

This picture of prophecy corresponds to that revealed by other materials unearthed from the ancient Near East, especially the Neo-Assyrian prophecies. Like MI, these documents record prophetic oracles given in service of the royal divinatory apparatus: they encourage the king and often promise military victory.[62] These comparative data together suggest that – barring a historical aberration – prophecy in ancient Israel may have functioned similarly: as a part of the state bureaucracy, and so fundamentally supportive of it. This is not to say there weren't prophets in the ancient Near East – or in ancient Israel – who criticised the king.[63] But such criticisms were likely recuperative and system-immanent. The legitimacy of kingship remained intact.[64]

If this is true, then it suggests the 'plus materials' of 1 Kings 22 are in fact *the entire Micaiah story*, in which the court prophets are *false prophets* – and the true prophet, Micaiah, issues an oracle of doom: 'I saw all Israel scattered on the hills (נפצים אל־ההרים) like sheep without a shepherd! And then YHWH said, "they have no master. Let them return safely to their own homes"' (22:17).[65] Micaiah's prophecy, in context, foretells the death of Ahab in battle (22:29–38). But it anticipates not just the death of a single king but

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[62] Martti Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East*, WAW 12 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 97–177.

[63] Martti Nissinen, 'Das kritische Potential in der altorientalischen Propheti', in Matthias Koċkert and Martti Nissinen (eds), *Propheten in Mari, Assyrien, and Israel*, FRLANT 201 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2003), pp. 1–32.

[64] See Reinhard G. Kratz, *The Prophets of Israel*, trans. Anselm C. Hagedorn and Nathan MacDonald, CSHB 2 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), pp. 11–26; also Uwe Becker, 'Die Wiederentdeckung des Prophetenbuches: Tendenzen und Aufgaben der gegenwärtigen Prophetenforschung', BTZ 21 (2004), pp. 30–60. Against this, see Erhard Blum, 'Israels Prophetie im altorientalischen Kontext: Anmerkungen zu neueren religionsgeschichtlichen Thesen', in Izak Cornelius and Louis Jonker (eds), *'From Ebla to Stellenbosch': Syro-Palestinian Religions and the Hebrew Bible*, ADPV 37 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz in Kommission, 2008), pp. 81–115; and H. G. M. Williamson, 'Isaiah: Prophet of Weal or Woe?', in Robert P. Gordon and Hans M. Barstad (eds), *'Thus Speaks Ishtar of Arbela': Prophecy in Israel, Assyria, and Egypt in the Neo-Assyrian Period* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), pp. 273–300.

[65] Several commentators suggest that the 400 are not, in fact, *false* prophets, since YHWH deputised the 'lying spirit' by which they receive their oracle and the oracle itself is delphic, e.g. Hugo Gressmann, *Die älteste Geschichtsschreibung und Prophetie Israels*, 2nd edn (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1921), p. 280; Benjamin D. Sommer, 'Prophecy as Translation: Ancient Israelite Conceptions of the Human Factor in Prophecy', in Kathryn F. Kravitz and Diane M. Sharon (eds), *Bringing the Hidden to Light: Studies in Honor of Stephen A. Geller* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), pp. 280–3. But cf. Gerhard von Rad, 'Die falschen Propheten', *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 51 (1933), pp. 109–20, and Childs' remarks below on 1 Kings 13.

the suspension of kingship itself. Again, barring a historical aberration, this kind of oracle is hard to imagine in the ninth century when Ahab was king.[66]

What is not being claimed is that the text of 1 Kings 22 is literarily composite. The story of the four hundred prophets belongs together with Micaiah.[67] Rather, what is argued is that the chapter as a whole remembers an earlier institution of prophecy in Israel, and then it *condemns* and *supplements* its own historical past.[68] If, in an earlier era, the word of God came straight from the mouths of the official divinatory experts, the contribution of scripture's final form is to pass judgement on this simplistic state of affairs. National defeat falsified their recuperative message so that, in Reinhard Kratz's words, 'the seers and prophets of old were transformed into "false" prophets'.[69] By contrast, the hero of 1 Kings 22 is Micaiah, the dissident prophet of doom – who may represent an 'addition' relative to the historical practice of prophecy in the ninth century, but who became necessary to a literary presentation of prophecy that took up the insights gained from journeying with God through the crises of Israel's history. Micaiah is the 'newer, non-conventional element' – the 'transformation' the biblical writers wrought on their tradition.[70]

Childs rejects this reconstruction of Israel's religious history: he repudiates the (Wellhausian) view that an 'ideology of kingship' obtained in ancient Israel up until the time of the Assyrian threat when prophets first announced doom.[71] He criticises such a reconstruction precisely on

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[66] Cross-referencing Micaiah's oracle further indicates that it is a latecomer relative to pre-exilic prophecy: the exact phrase in 1 Kings 22, 'sheep without a shepherd' (צאן אשר אין־להם רעה), only occurs elsewhere in Num 27:17, a likely post-exilic text. A similar phrase (צאן ואין מקבץ) occurs in Isa 13:14, also post-exilic. Other references to a 'scattered flock' (פוץ + צאן) crop up in prophets of the exile or restoration (Jer 23:1; Ezek 34:6, 12; Zech 13:7; cf. also Jer 10:21). Nahum 3:18 is perhaps the closest analogue to Micaiah's prophecy, addressed to Assyria and clearly describing the destruction of the Neo-Assyrian kingship: 'Your shepherds have fallen asleep, king of Assyria! / Your officials are lying down / your people are scattered across the mountains (נפשו עמך על־ההרים)/ there is no one to gather them' (ואין מקבץ) (CEB). Nahum dates to the seventh century (or later), at least two centuries after Ahab.

[67] See R. W. L. Moberly, 'Does God Lie to His Prophets? The Story of Micaiah ben Imlah as a Test Case', *Harvard Theological Review* 96/1 (2003), pp. 16–18.

[68] Cf. Rannfrid Thelle, 'Reflections of Ancient Israelite Divination in the Former Prophets', in Mignon R. Jacobs and Raymond F. Person Jr. (eds), *Israelite Prophecy and the Deuteronomistic History: Portrait, Reality, and the Formation of a History*, AIL 14 (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2013), pp. 7–33.

[69] Kratz, *The Prophets of Israel*, p. 19.

[70] *Exodus*, p. 12.

[71] BTONT, p. 414. The two most important passages for understanding Childs' rejection of Wellhausen are BTONT, pp. 413–20, and OTTCC, pp. 145–53.

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the grounds that it depends overmuch on a 'critical construct lying outside of Israel's faith'. Its 'scientifically reconstructed history' is wholly 'etic' and discordant with 'Israel's own testimony' and Israel's own memory, according to which there never was a time when Israel lived before God oblivious to the possibility of divine wrath and desertion. And yet, as we have seen, Childs was himself capable – in his earlier days – of reconstructing an earlier form of biblical tradition through disciplined speculation: an earlier form to which scripture itself – Israel's own testimony and memory! – hardly give access. The text of Exodus 2 is as mute about a prior stage of the foundling story as 1 Kings 22 is about an earlier condition of prophecy when God's word through prophets was only recuperative. But in fact, unlike the proposed *Vorlage* of Exodus 2, the reconstructed scenario of 'sacral kingship' vacant of doom prophecy actually does count other biblical witnesses.[72] It is thus *not* like the worship of Asherah, which came to nought and never belonged to any of Israel's traditions that would become scriptural.

Childs himself refers to 1 Kings 22 twice: while discussing 'the Deuteronomistic Redaction', Childs lists Micaiah among the 'prophetic stories' that the 'Dtr. Writer' used as a source.[73] But the stories' provenance is not his focus. In his biblical theology and at greater length in his introductory treatment of Kings, Childs commends von Rad's essay on the crucial role these prophetic stories play within the message of the book of Kings, taken as a whole.[74] That message in the final form is pre-eminently *theological*: God's word of judgement pierces through lies and disguises with 'history-creating force' – even when its communicators are unworthy.[75] The

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[72] BTONT, p. 414. Consider the royal psalms, some of which preserve oracles of military victory (like the 400's) once spoken to Davidic kings, e.g. Ps 2:9, 110:1–3. Childs recognises that national defeat had falsified the immediate, historical sense of such promises: the tent of David lay fallen (Amos 9:11). In view of this historical disconfirmation, the royal psalms, like the oracles of the court prophets, stood in need of *supplementation*; only for them, it took a quite different form, prospective rather than retrospective, writing assurance into the future rather than doom into the past. Per Childs, the royal psalms were given 'an eschatological ring'. Their truthfulness was deferred to an ultimate, future ruler of David's line. '[A]t the time of the final redaction', Childs writes, 'when the institution of kingship had long since been destroyed, what earthly king would come to mind other than God's Messiah?' (*IOTS*, p. 516).

[73] BTONT, p. 158; *IOTS*, p. 289.

[74] Gerhard von Rad, 'The Deuteronomistic Theology of History in I and II Kings', in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, trans. E. W. Trueman Dicken (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), pp. 205–21.

[75] E.g. the initially compliant and so lying Micaiah (1 Kings 22:16), as well as the disobedient Judean man of God and the lying Bethel prophet (1 Kings 13).

psychology and the ethics of true and false prophecy are incidental to the theological demonstration that the final form emplots. Childs' words about 1 Kings 13 – another odd prophetic story involving untruthful prophecy – apply well to 1 Kings 22, too: 'the narrative is presented from such a theocentric perspective that it appears almost incomprehensible to rational reflection. All the ethical issues are simply by-passed. The story has to do with the fulfilment of God's word of judgment which will not tolerate any softening or compromise.'[76]

From the perspective of *God's* economy, the additions made by the final form of scripture to the earlier institution of prophecy don't just represent human ingenuity. The kind of prophecy featured in MI – and in similar, earlier layers of Israel's own tradition – made for an inadequate witness to God. It was too simple: God's faithfulness to Israel did not mean God's word would only ever be recuperative, or that God would always patronise the human kingship (at least in a straightforward, non-eschatological manner!). Rather, God's annexation of the common ancient Near Eastern phenomenon of prophetic oracles to God's self-revelation resulted in several adjustments thereto: namely, it expanded the repertoire of God's address to include oracles of doom on king and country. Comparison between MI and 1 Kings 22 helps to bring these theological features of scripture's final form into sharper relief.

Conclusion

The present article began with 'comparativists' and 'theological interpreters' arrayed for battle, and yet its burden, following Christopher Hays, was to foster some rapprochement between these parties. On the one hand, the modern 'season of interpretation' offers a glut of historical data, and comparativists have often used these resources in ways theological interpreters have not. To extend the opening simile, in David's day, 'no metalworker was to be found anywhere in Israelite territory … So every Israelite had to go down to the Philistines to sharpen their plowshares, mattocks, axes, and sickles' (1 Sam 13:19–20 CEB).

But on the other hand, it must be remembered that 'God made his ways known to Moses, and made his deeds known to the Israelites' (Ps 103:7 CEB) – which cannot be said of the Philistines. A corollary of this claim is that 'the divine revelation of the Old Testament cannot be abstracted or

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[76] *OTTCC*, p. 143. The Chronicler's expansion of the Micaiah story (2 Chron. 19:1–3) confirms the thematic parallelism of these two prophetic stories (1 Kings 13 and 22). There the Judean king Jehoshaphat, like the Judean man of God in 1 Kings 13, receives prophetic censure for associating with wicked northerners.

removed from the form of the witness which the historical community of Israel gave it' – a form which reached a certain literary fixity and finality.[77] Consequently, for all their all their technical know-how, attained with difficulty, and which Childs urged on his own students, the gifts of the comparativists must stand auxiliary to the goal of elaborating God's self-disclosure to Israel, gathered up and optimised in the final form of scripture. In other words: the treasures of darkness must 'be exposed to the light' – and, being so revealed, can then themselves 'become light' (Eph 5:13).[78]

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[77] OTTCC, p. 12.
[78] My thanks to Philip Sumpter for teaching me much of what I know about Brevard Childs, as well as for commenting on (and vigorously critiquing) multiple drafts of the present essay; thanks also to Don Collett and Brent A. Strawn for their feedback and insight, and to Claudia Kern for her wise comments and inspiration.