A Sharp Break: Childs, Wellhausen, and Theo-referentiality

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◼ Abstract

Julius Wellhausen proposed a "sharp break" between ancient Israelite religion and early Judaism: for him, the eighth-century prophets were the "spiritual destroyers of old Israel" and the forerunners of early Judaism. The biblical theologian Brevard Childs rejected Wellhausen's reconstruction and insisted instead that "very strong theological continuity" characterized the development of Israelite religion from its outset. Numerous contemporary theological interpreters share Childs's perspective. However, a "Wellhausen renaissance" is currently underway in the study of Israelite religion and early Judaism. This situation poses an unresolved challenge for theological interpretation, at least of the kind that Childs advocated. The present article addresses this dilemma. It first inventories Childs's reasons for opposing Wellhausen's sharp break, which emerge from Childs's vision for scriptural "theo-referentiality." Secondly, it tests whether Childs's theological insights, the very same that led to his repudiation of Wellhausen, might accommodate Wellhausen's historical claim. The final result is to set Wellhausen and Childs, historical reconstruction and theological interpretation, in a noncompetitive relationship.

◼ Keywords

■ Introduction

Julius Wellhausen's *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* proposed that a "sharp break" marked the course of Israel's religious history.[1] At first, Israel looked much like its ancient neighbors, an Iron Age kingdom with a warlike patron god.[2] Then, according to Wellhausen, the eighth-century prophets broached this "paradoxical thought": the national protector deity, YHWH, could turn in wrath against his own nation, and only executing justice would ensure his favor.[3] These prophets were "the spiritual destroyers of old Israel"—sweeping away "the old popular half-pagan conception of Jehovah" and laying the theological groundwork for Deuteronomy, deuteronomism, and early Judaism.[4]

[1] The phrase is Brevard S. Childs's: "There is no evidence of a sharp break between a relationship established by natural bond and one of gracious election" (*Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992] 418; hereafter cited as *BTONT*).

[2] Julius Wellhausen: "The people of Jehovah on the one hand, and the people of Chemosh on the other, had the same idea of the Godhead as head of the nation" ("Moab," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* [ed. William Robertson Smith; 25 vols.; 9th ed.; Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1878] 16:533–36, at 535).

[3] Wellhausen: "A paradoxical thought—as if the national God were to cut the ground from under His own feet!" (*Prolegomena to the History of Israel* [trans. John Sutherland Black and Allan Menzies; 3rd ed.; Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1885] 471). The responsibility of eighth-century prophets like Amos for oracles of unconditional doom is now a subject of some controversy: e.g., Uwe Becker, "Die Wiederentdeckung des Prophetenbuches: Tendenzen und Aufgaben der gegenwärtigen Prophetenforschung," *BTZ* 21 (2004) 30–60. But see Reinhard G. Kratz on the continuing, if adjusted, viability of the sea-change Wellhausen envisioned between Israelite religion and early Judaism (*Historical and Biblical Israel: The History, Tradition, and Archives of Israel and Judah* [trans. Paul Michael Kurtz; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015] 197–203); also Uwe Becker, "Julius Wellhausens Sicht des Judentums," in *Biblische Theologie und historisches Denken: wissenschaftsgeschichtliche Studien aus Anlass der 50. Wiederkehr der Basler Promotion von Rudolf Smend* (ed. Martin Kessler and Martin Wallraff; Basel: Schwabe, 2008) 279–309, at 299–302.

[4] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 491, 485. On the prophets as "Wegbereiter des Judentums," see Becker, "Julius Wellhausens Sicht," 289–92, as well as Lothar Perlitt, "Hebraismus—Deuteronomismus— Judaismus," in *Deuteronomium-Studien* (FAT 8; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1984) 247–60. See also James Pasto on the Israel/Judaism distinction in the context of nineteenth-century German nationalization ("When the End Is the Beginning? Or When the Biblical Past Is the Political Present: Some Thoughts on Ancient Israel, 'Post-Exilic Judaism,' and the Politics of Biblical Scholarship," *SJOT* 12 [1998] 157–202); and relatedly, Walter Brueggemann and Davis Hankins, "The Invention and Persistence of Wellhausen's World," *CBQ* 75 (2013) 15–31; also Gillian M. Bediako, *Primal Religion and the Bible: William Robertson Smith and his Heritage* (JSOTSup 246; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997) 74–104. The brief description of Wellhausen above evokes two stages in the history of Israelite religion; in point of fact, Wellhausen posited three, corresponding to the literary strata of the Pentateuch: early, pre-nomistic, "heathen" religion (JE); the prophetic reforms encapsulated by Deuteronomy (D); and the idealistic and law-oriented religion of post-exilic early Judaism (P). See Aly Elrefaei, *Wellhausen and Kaufmann: Ancient Israel and its Religious History*

Wellhausen's *Prolegomena* threw the theological world of the late nineteenth-century North Atlantic into a furor. Journals sprang up to rebut the book's ideas. Heresy trials ensued when professors espoused its conclusions, and newspapers reported on the proceedings.[5] The devout German scholar Friedrich Delitzsch accused Wellhausen of "troubling the church of God."[6] Another, quite un-devout Friedrich—Friedrich Nietzsche—happily concurred: he read Wellhausen's book with great interest and paraphrased its argument in his own tellingly titled work *The Antichrist*.[7] So radically did Wellhausen's proposal depart from the Bible's own self-presentation that Delitzsch confided to a Scottish visitor, "if [Wellhausen's] conclusions be true, the Old Testament cannot in any distinctive sense be the Word of God."[8]

This judgment was hardly an isolated case in Delitzsch's day—nor is it in our own. A sense of competition between Wellhausen's reconstruction and the Bible's eligibility as "Word of God" persists. The biblical theologian Brevard S. Childs (1923–2007) presents one example of this persistence, and an influential one, given his founding role in the contemporary movement for "theological interpretation of scripture."[9] Childs's canonical approach grew out of critical research, and it stayed involved with its historical claims. Over against Wellhausen's "sharp break," however, Childs insisted—as a historical postulate—that "very strong theological

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in the Works of Julius Wellhausen and Yehezkel Kaufmann (BZAW 490; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016) 55–74; Herbert F. Hahn, "Wellhausen's Interpretation of Israel's Religious History," in *Essays on Jewish Life and Thought Presented in Honor of Salo Wittmayer Baron* (ed. Joseph L. Blau and Philip Friedman; New York: Columbia University Press, 1959) 299–308; John H. Hayes, "Wellhausen as a Historian of Israel," in *Julius Wellhausen and His* Prolegomena to the History of Israel (ed. Douglas A. Knight; Semeia 25; Chico: Scholars Press, 1983) 37–60.

[5] For a brief summary of the furor generated by the *Prolegomena*, see Brevard S. Childs, "Wellhausen in English," in *Julius Wellhausen* (ed. Knight) 83–88 and bibliography there.

[6] J. R. Smith, "Wellhausen and His Position," *The Christian Church: A Journal in Defense of Christian Truth* 2 (1882) 366–69, at 368.

[7] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist* (trans. Anthony M. Ludovici; Great Books in Philosophy; Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2000) 32–37. On the relation of Nietzsche and Wellhausen, see Friedemann Boschwitz, *Julius Wellhausen: Motive und Maßstäbe seiner Geschichtsschreibung* (Libelli 238; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968) 31–32; also Daniel Weidner, "'Geschichte gegen den Strich bürsten': Julius Wellhausen und die jüdische Gegengeschichte," *ZRGG* 54 (2002) 32–61, at 37.

[8] Smith, "Wellhausen and His Position," 368.

[9] For a survey of Childs's reception in English and German, see Daniel R. Driver, *Brevard Childs, Biblical Theologian*: *For the Church's One Bible* (FAT 2/46; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010) 35–101, as well as Dennis T. Olson, "Types of a Recent 'Canonical Approach,'" in *Hebrew Bible/The Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation* (ed. Magne Sæbø; 3 vols.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015) 3/2:196–218, at 216–18. For entrées to theological interpretation, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "What Is Theological Interpretation of the Bible?" in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 19–25; R. W. L. Moberly, "What is Theological Interpretation of Scripture?" *JTI* 3 (2009) 161–78. See also now *A Manifesto for Theological Interpretation* (ed. Craig G. Bartholomew and Heath A. Thomas; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).

continuity" characterized the development of Israelite religion from its outset.[10] Childs could sound almost like Delitzsch: "if Wellhausen [were] right . . . one could no longer meaningfully speak of [scripture's] canonical shape," and nor then of a theological approach such as Childs articulated.[11] With few exceptions,[12] practitioners of theological interpretation share Childs's—and Delitzsch's— sensibility.[13] *A Manifesto for Theological Interpretation* reads, for instance: "the validity of the Old Testament's witness depends on covenant as an early [and therefore continuous] institution in Israel."[14]

The present article accepts and takes up the goal of theological interpretation, and it even seeks to identify with the species of theological interpretation that Childs championed: one oriented towards the truthfulness of scripture vis-à-vis God

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[10] *BTONT*, 418. This continuity is what is most at issue in the present article (versus a "sharp break"). Childs lived downstream from Wellhausen and accepted several of Wellhausen's insights: he could agree that "[t]here is a radical newness to the prophets' message, a deeper plunge into the reality of God" (ibid., 175), and also that "in the period [after Moses's death] there is little sign that Israel was conscious of its relation to Yahweh being grounded on the elaborate system of law found in the present form of the Pentateuch" (ibid., 135). But he denied *lex post prophetas*: the prophets for Childs "assum[ed] the authority of Israel's ancient covenantal law" (ibid., 174). This basic disagreement with Wellhausen justifies the present article's rhetoric about Childs's "rejection" or "repudiation" of Wellhausen; see n. 1.

[11] Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 148; hereafter, *OTTCC*.

[12] Christoph Dohmen's revised dissertation, *Das Bilderverbot: seine Entstehung und seine Entwicklung im Alten Testament* (BBB 62; Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1985), late-dates the image ban while his other and later writings depend heavily on Childs's work; see also Driver, *Brevard Childs,* 60–64. For another apparent exception, see R. W. L. Moberly, "Theological Interpretation, Second Naiveté, and the Rediscovery of the Old Testament," *ATR* 99 (2017) 651–70, at 665–66.

[13] In his own generation, each of the figures whom Childs names as "the most avowedly confessional Old Testament scholars" (von Rad, Vriezen, Zimmerli, Wolff) shares with him a more continuous view than Wellhausen of the relationship between stages of Israelite religion ("Toward Recovering Theological Exegesis," *ExAud* 16 [2000] 121–29, at 123). Childs repeatedly and approvingly cites Zimmerli's 1963 Sprunt Lectures which argue, contra Wellhausen, that the prophets were not so much precursors to the law as its preachers—"messengers of the covenant" rather than theological revolutionaries (*BTONT*, 137, 175, 534, citing Walther Zimmerli, *The Law and the Prophets: A Study of the Meaning of the Old Testament* [trans. Ronald E. Clements; New York: Harper & Row, 1967]). Numerous contemporary theological exegetes concur with Childs that Israelite religion progressed rather more linearly into early Judaism, e.g., Stephen B. Chapman: "nothing comes from nothing, and it is inconceivable that a profound Persian-period Israelite faith did not have roots in the pre-exilic era" (*1 Samuel as Christian Scripture: A Theological Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016] 226); also, idem, "The Covenant God of Israel: Joshua 8, Divine Concession, and Jesus," in *Covenant and Election in Exilic and Post-Exilic Judaism: Studies of the Sofja Kovalevskaja Research Group on Early Jewish Monotheism, Vol. V* (ed. Nathan MacDonald; FAT 2/79; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015) 63–85; Brent A. Strawn, "What Would (Or Should) Old Testament Theology Look Like If Recent Reconstructions of Israelite Religion Were True?" in *Between Israelite Religion and Old Testament Theology: Essays on Archaeology, History, and Hermeneutics* (ed. Robert D. Miller II; CBET 80; Leuven: Peeters, 2016) 129–66; Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 240 n. 65.

[14] Craig G. Bartholomew and Matthew Y. Emerson, "Theological Interpretation for All of Life," in *A Manifesto* (ed. Bartholomew and Thomas) 257–73, at 263.

and engaged with critical judgments about history.[15] But the present article raises the very possibility that Delitzsch and Childs alike deny. It asks, "If Wellhausen's conclusions be true, might the Old Testament still be the Word of God?"

The question is productive on several counts. First, Biblical scholarship has moved on from Wellhausen in many ways, but the basic contours of his "sharp break" remain viable, and indeed a so-called "Wellhausen renaissance" is underway in the study of ancient Israelite religion and early Judaism.[16] The resurgence of Wellhausen's account in these quarters poses an unresolved challenge for theological interpretation. Second, even if biblical studies should trend away from Wellhausen, his thesis is still helpful to "think with"—not only because of its classic status, but because of how radically his version of Israel's history diverges from the Bible's own testimony.[17] Considering Wellhausen and theological interpretation also promises to yield mutual clarification: theological interpreters will know more exactly why and in what ways historical reconstructions matter to theological reading, and historians of religion may more richly appreciate the theological implications of their work.

Although its ultimate aim is constructive, the first step of the present article is diagnostic: it must determine why some theological interpreters—and in this case, Childs—reject Wellhausen's thesis.[18] The second, constructive task of the article

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[15] Roy A. Harrisville writes, "Childs's single, perduring theme is that of the [biblical] canon as vehicle to encounter with God" ("What I Believe My Old Schoolmate Is Up To," in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs* [ed. Christopher R. Seitz and Kathryn Green-McCreight; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998] 7–25, at 17).

[16] Christoph Levin writes: "[g]egenwärtig erleben wir eine Wellhausen-Renaissance" ("Die Entstehung der Bundestheologie im Alten Testament," in *Verheißung und Rechtfertigung: Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament II* [BZAW 431; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013] 242–59, at 244). See also the overview of Erich Zenger, "Die Bundestheologie—ein derzeit vernachlässigtes Thema der Bibelwissenschaft und ein wichtiges Thema für das Verhältnis Israel–Kirche," in *Der Neue Bund im Alten: Studien zur Bundestheologie der Beiden Testamente* (ed. Erich Zenger; Quaestiones Disputatae 146; Freiburg: Herder, 1993) 13–49, but esp. 13–26; Konrad Schmid, "Zurück zu Wellhausen?" *ThR* 69 (2004) 314–28; Uwe Becker, "Julius Wellhausens Sicht," 279–309, at 299–302. See also Reinhard G. Kratz, "Eyes and Spectacles: Wellhausen's Method of Higher Criticism," *JTS* 60 (2009) 381–402, at 400–402.

[17] On the productiveness and interest of comparisons, especially of nonadjacent entities, see Brent A. Strawn, "Comparative Approaches: History, Theory, and the Image of God," in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Peterson* (ed. Joel M. LeMon and Kent Harold Richards; SBLRBS 56; Atlanta: SBL, 2009) 117–42. Of course, the radicalism of Wellhausen's *Prolegomena* is relative; Niels Peter Lemche writes that "Wellhausen's reconstruction is not at all revolutionary . . . [it] may best be described as a critical or rationalistic paraphrase of the Old Testament tradition" ("Rachel and Leah, Or: On the Survival of Outdated Paradigms in the Study of the Origin of Israel," *SJOT* 1 [1987] 127–53, at 132).

[18] This selection of exemplars is somewhat artificial. But the monumental influence of these two figures within biblical studies makes them especially suited for comparison—a sort of duel of champions. Also, although they belong to wholly separate scholarly generations and to different theological climates, Childs wrote about Wellhausen's history of Israel at a uniquely opportune moment for the purpose of the present article. In Childs's era, the chief problem facing theological interpretation was historical. So, too, after a period of academic disfavor, Wellhausen's view was once more and freshly ascendant at just the time that Childs's career began. On the location of

is to test whether Childs's interpretive program—the very same that informed his repudiation of Wellhausen—might accommodate Wellhausen's historical claim.[19] The final result will be to set Wellhausen and Childs, historical reconstruction and theological interpretation, in a noncompetitive relationship.

■ Theo-Referentiality in Childs's Program

Childs rejects Wellhausen's "sharp break" because it violates his understanding of scripture's theological truthfulness. Before considering the exact dimensions of Childs's rejection, the following section describes the commitment to "theo-referentiality" that shapes it.[20] Walter Brueggemann once wrote that "it is my impression that in his most recent work, *Biblical Theology*, [Childs] attends to the problem of referentiality in a way that results in a God 'out there.'"[21] Brueggemann does not compliment Childs with this observation, but his impression is correct.[22] In *BTONT* and throughout his works, Childs affirms "the reality of an external, out-there-in-the-world, living God."[23] This theological realism is an indispensable component of Childs's interpretive program. Brueggemann also identifies another: namely, Childs's answer to the "the problem of referentiality" is that scripture refers

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Childs's "canonical approach" in the period of historical-critical hegemony, see Christopher R. Seitz, "The Changing Face of Old Testament Studies," in *Word without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 75–82.

[19] Once more (see nn. 1, 10), the historical point that the present article has in view is a "sharp break" in Israel's religio-historical trajectory; Childs accepts numerous other historical and literary claims made by Wellhausen, as any consultation of, for example, his Exodus commentary shows. The present article sets aside Wellhausen's pentateuchal criticism, which was less important to Wellhausen in any case (he famously called his literary criticism "a game of skittles"); see Kratz, "Eyes and Spectacles," as well as Rudolf Smend, "Julius Wellhausen," in *From Astruc to Zimmerli: Old Testament Scholarship in Three Centuries* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007) 91–102, at 95–96.

[20] I am indebted to Philip Sumpter for the neologism "theo-referential" (*The Substance of Psalm 24: An Attempt to Read Scripture after Brevard S. Childs* [LHBOTS 600; London: Bloomsbury, 2015] 151).

[21] Walter Brueggemann, *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World* (ed. Patrick D. Miller, Jr.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 133 n. 25.

[22] See Brueggemann's famous pronouncements on scriptural theo-referentiality—or lack thereof, e.g.: "I shall insist, as consistently as I can, that the God of Old Testament theology as such lives in, with, and under the rhetorical enterprise of this text, and nowhere else and in no other way" (*Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, and Advocacy* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997] 66). Other theologians have criticized these claims, e.g., Brent A. Strawn, "On Walter Brueggemann: (A Personal) Testimony, (Three) Dispute(s), (and on) Advocacy," in *Imagination, Ideology and Inspiration: Echoes of Brueggemann in a New Generation* (ed. Jonathan Kaplan and Robert Williamson, Jr.; HBM 72; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2015) 9–47, at 25–32. See Jaco Gericke's labeling of Brueggemann as a "crypto-atheist" ("A *Fourth* Paradigm? Some Thoughts on Atheism in Old Testament Scholarship," *OTE* 25 [2012] 518–33, at 524), as well as Davis C. Hankins, "Introduction," in *Walter Brueggemann, Ice Axes for Frozen Seas: A Biblical Theology of Provocation* (ed. Davis C. Hankins; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press) 1–19.

[23] Dennis T. Olson, "Zigzagging through Deep Waters: A Guide to Brevard Childs's Canonical Exegesis of Scripture," *WW* 29 (2009) 348–56, at 350; also idem, "Recent 'Canonical Approach,'" 209.

truthfully to the out-there-in-the-world God.[24] For Childs, God is living, active, and extra-textual, and scripture is God's faithful human witness, pointing like John the Baptist's finger in Grünewald's altarpiece.[25]

This much, theologically, Childs shares in common with many in the post-Barthian theological stream.[26] To be sure, it is unusual that Childs as a biblical scholar gives such prominence to terms more often used in systematic theology (witness, *Sache*, *res*).[27] But the unique profile of Childs's interpretive program has not yet come into view when only these two components are considered. The distinctiveness of Childs's approach lies in his way of situating these two key convictions—the extra-textual God and scripture as God's truthful witness—relative to the achievements of critical biblical scholarship.[28]

With most mainstream critical research, Childs accepts that scripture developed over a long period of time rather than emerging pristine and complete as if by an oracle. But his investment in the witness-function of scripture means that Childs insists—quite unlike most mainstream academic research—that at every stage of the traditioning process, God "made known his ways unto Moses, his acts unto the children of Israel" (Ps 103:7, KJV). That is, even as the traditions that eventuated in scripture grew and coalesced, they were true witnesses of the living God from their earliest levels.

An example will clarify what this claim entails. Childs agrees with Gunkel that the Abraham cycle in Genesis (Gen 12–25) formed out of several stories that once circulated independently of one another, each associated with a different

[24] James Barr calls Childs a "theological inerrantist," and this is accurate, so far as it goes (*The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999] 437). Childs would thus deny that biblical texts ever misrepresent their theological referent, as, for example, Rudolf Bultmann says of 1 Cor 15 (*Faith and Understanding* [trans. Louise Pettibone Smith; 2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1969] 1:66–94), or Terence E. Fretheim and Karlfried Froehlich say in their "Is the Biblical Portrayal of God Always Trustworthy?" (*The Bible as Word of God in a Postmodern Age* [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998] 97–111). On the issue, see Bernd Jaspert, "Sachkritik und Widerstand: das Beispiel Rudolf Bultmanns," *TLZ* 115 (1990) 161–82.

[25] This is an image beloved of Karl Barth. Childs does not cite it, though the vocabulary of scripture as "pointing" and "witness" is ubiquitous in his writings, e.g., "Scripture . . . points beyond itself to the reality of God" (*BTONT*, 721); see Driver, *Brevard Childs*, 137–59, and also Stephen B. Chapman, "Reading the Bible as Witness: Divine Retribution in the Old Testament," *PRSt* 31 (2004) 171–90, at 171–75.

[26] On Childs's relation to Barth, see Charles J. Scalise, "Canonical Hermeneutics: Childs and Barth," *SJT* 47 (1994) 61–88 and Driver, *Brevard Childs,* 89–93, 235–37, as well as Philip Sumpter, "Trinity and the Canonical Process," *ThTo* 72 (2016) 379–97. See also Childs's own reminiscences in "Karl Barth and the Future of Theology," in *Karl Barth and the Future of Theology: A Memorial Colloquium Held at Yale Divinity School, January 28, 1969* (ed. David L. Dickerman; New Haven: Yale Divinity School Association, 1969) 30–39. On how Childs misreads Barth, however, by pursuing an integrative biblical theology rather than seriatim exegesis, see Barr, *Concept*, 412–16, also 243–45.

[27] For comments on Childs's characteristic theological vocabulary, see Sumpter, "Trinity and the Canonical Process," 383–84.

[28] This section takes inspiration from Sumpter, "Trinity and the Canonical Process;" also idem, "Verbum: The Shape of Israel's Witness," in *The Substance of Psalm 24*, 12–32.

sanctuary in ancient Israel. The various protagonists of these once distinct cult stories gradually merged with one another to become the scriptural conglomerate, Abraham.[29] Theologically, however, the evolution of the Abraham cycle did not mean that its constituent stories became truer and truer relative to their divine referent; they did not progress from being less to more faithful vis-à-vis the God "out-there-in-the-world." The tradition grew (and ultimately found literary fixity in the final form of scripture) not in order to represent God more adequately—but because its already-adequate testimony continued to address new circumstances. Tradents merged their stories because they found that these stories kept speaking beyond their first contexts, and they sought to ensure that subsequent generations could clearly receive the abiding theological truth to which the earlier, disparate traditions bore witness.

This is, however, but one side of Childs's vision for scripture's theo-referentiality: the view from the "divine side," as it were. The "divinely-facing" meaning of theo-referentiality is the most important aspect of Childs's understanding of scriptural formation. But there is another: the view from the "human side." Childs held that the traditions lying aback of scripture were primordially theo-referential in the minds and hearts of the communities that preserved and curated them. Not only were the traditions theo-referential in that they told truthfully of the living God; they were also perceived as such by their tradents, and for that very reason handed on through the generations. The first, divinely-facing side of Childs's vision for theo-referentiality is hardly falsifiable, empirically, and is a matter for dogmatics. The human side of Childs's vision for scriptural theo-referentiality is, on the other hand, eminently corrigible, and a matter for historical investigation.[30]

The human side of theo-referentiality is what is at stake in Childs's use of the term *Kanonbewußtsein*, or "canon consciousness," as well as his phrase "canonical process": the recognition among the community of faith that their traditions mediated an authoritative word from God, and their practice of handing them on for that reason.[31] The process of scripture's formation was, humanly speaking, theocentric. Israel's tradents did not pass along their inherited stories, songs, and laws merely out of a desire to inculcate a new collective identity[32] or to resolve

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[29] *BTONT*, 125 on which, see Hermann Gunkel, *The Legends of Genesis: The Biblical Saga and History* (trans. W. H. Carruth; 4th ed.; New York: Schocken Books, 1975).

[30] Stephen B. Chapman observes, "Childs's insistence on the correctness of interpreting the Old Testament theologically is ultimately historically-grounded and not dogmatically-based" (*The Law and the Prophets: A Study in Old Testament Canon Formation* [FAT 27; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000] 47 n. 151).

[31] On Childs's inheritance of the concept *Kanonbewußtsein* from Isac L. Seeligman, see Driver, *Brevard Childs*, 173, although see also Don Collett's caution that Childs's concept descends from Otto Eissfeldt through Peter Ackroyd and Ronald Clements as well (review of Driver, *ProEcc* 23 [2014] 99–112, at 105); further, Chapman, *Law and the Prophets*, 20–23, 44–45 n. 36. On Childs's characteristic vocabulary, see Sumpter, "Trinity and the Canonical Process," 383–84.

[32] For example, Jacob L. Wright, "The Commemoration of Defeat and the Formation of a Nation in the Hebrew Bible," *Prooftexts* 29 (2009) 433–72.

priestly rivalries[33] or to overcome the trauma of displacement[34]—at least not principally.[35] These and many other human factors contributed to the formation of scripture; Childs acknowledges that the canonical process includes such factors ("no religious force is entirely isolated from so-called secular influences").[36] But still he maintains, as a historical premise, that "the decisive work in the formation of the canon emerged in the transmission of a divine word in such form as to lay authoritative claim upon the successive generations."[37]

Childs's phrase "in such form" is important here. The "final form" of scripture—a well-known emphasis of Childs's—extends and completes the canonical process described above: the recipients of various traditions in ancient Israel heard in them a divinely-given word, and so transmitted them to successors. But they did not pass the traditions along unchanged. They adjusted and updated them, e.g., by merging distinct cult stories into the Abraham cycle, or by supplementing and linking prophetic oracles. They did not make such changes because they discerned some theological deficiency in the traditions' prior, received form(s).[38] Rather, they streamlined the formal aspects of each tradition that would prevent it from serving as an enduring witness to God through all generations, i.e., its orality, or its obsolete points of reference.[39] A tradition's inadequacies were formal and not theological; changes made improved "its ability to do its job" and not its truthfulness.[40] The final, canonical form culminated this process of optimization. The superiority of the final form relative to its predecessors is neither historiographic nor theological per

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[33] E.g., James W. Watts, "Scripturalization and the Aaronide Dynasties," *JHS* 13 (2013) 1–15, http://www.jhsonline.org/Articles/article_186.pdf.

[34] For example, David M. Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

[35] One is reminded of Walther Eichrodt: "It is not national feeling but religion which should be seen as the soil in which Israel's bold expectation of the future grew to maturity. It was not because men wished to become a nation, or sought with sorrow a national status that had departed, that they ascribed to Yahweh a restoring action in the future. It was because they knew God" (*Theology of the Old Testament* [trans. J. A. Baker; 2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961] 1:501).

[36] *OTTCC*, 148; also Olson, "Recent 'Canonical Approach,'" 211.

[37] Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 60; hereafter, *IOTS*.

[38] This sentence perhaps registers disagreement with Philip Sumpter, who writes that "the later shapers of the received tradition . . . factored this growth in knowledge of the one [theological] referent into their presentation of the traditions which, in their opinion, only witnessed to this reality *in fragmentary form*"; or again: "the function of, say, the editor of a prophetic oracle, was to witness to the one reality of God for the community of faith by rendering that oracle *more adequate to its object* ("Trinity and the Canonical Process," 390 [italics added]).

[39] Childs: "basic to the canonical process is that those responsible for the actual editing of the text did their best to obscure their own identity . . . the original sociological and historical differences within the nation of Israel . . . were lost" (*IOTS,* 78). See also Chapman on "self-subsumption" (*Law and the Prophets*, 99–104).

[40] Sumpter: "the editorial work on the oracle functions to improve its ability to do its job by, for example, emphasizing one dimension and deemphasizing another, or adding a significant perspective in order to shape the reader's reception of a particular theme" ("Trinity and the Canonical Process," 390).

se—but functional.[41] The canonized text is uniquely "in such form" as to address the people of God in all the times and places they may inhabit.[42]

In sum, Childs's view of scripture as a truthful witness to God did not mean he took it as a uniformly accurate rendition of empirical history. And yet, for as much as he accepted historical-critical insights, Childs did not completely sunder the Bible's theological truthfulness from its purchase on reconstructable history.[43] In the words of Daniel Driver, "canon-consciousness [is] one place where the historian of religion and the theologian cannot help meeting."[44] In fact Childs's vision for the process of scriptural formation committed him to a specific range of historical-critical hypotheses and ruled out, as he thought, certain other reconstructions available to him: for example, Wellhausen's.

■ Wellhausen's Reconstruction and Childs's Rejection: Diagnosis

To comprehend Childs's rejection of Wellhausen, the previous section has outlined Childs's understanding of scriptural formation. But some account must be given of Wellhausen's own position—and its theological implications—to understand Childs's rejection as fully as possible. Such comments remain diagnostic only: they inventory Childs's opposition to Wellhausen before undertaking several prescriptions that would render it compatible with theological interpretation.

Childs's caption for Wellhausen's point of view—the titular "sharp break"—gets to the heart of the latter's historical claim. In a letter dated to 1879, Wellhausen wrote that already for ten years what had occupied his scholarship was "Judaism and ancient Israel in their oppositions."[45] This would remain Wellhausen's theme throughout his works on the Hebrew Bible: that there was a basic opposition—a

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[41] On the language of "optimization" in connection with Childs and the final form, see Collin Cornell, "Brevard Childs and the Treasures of Darkness," *SJT* 71 (2018) 33–51, at 35–41. For more on the superiority of the final form, see also Christopher R. Seitz, "Canonical Approach," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 100–102; also idem, *The Character of Christian Scripture: The Significance of a Two-Testament Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011) 49–53.

[42] The final form exercises a "critical function"—even a *Sachkritik*!—towards earlier levels of tradition in just this way: it clarifies prior strata for reception by the ongoing community of faith. "The effect of the canonical process was to render the tradition *accessible* to the future generation" (Childs, *IOTS*, 79 [italics added]); cf. Sumpter, "Trinity and the Canonical Process," 390. Only the final form "bears witness to the full history of revelation" in that it alone reflects the accumulated discernment of God's people about what features from the tradition's previous forms continue to speak truthfully of God (*IOTS*, 75).

[43] Barr thus exaggerates when he says, "Childs is stuck with two theories, a non-referential one for historical matters and a strongly referential one for theological matters" (*Concept*, 416).

[44] Driver, *Brevard Childs*, 283.

[45] Letter to Justus Olhausen of February 9, 1879 (*Julius Wellhausen: Briefe* [ed. Rudolf Smend with Peter Porzig and Reinhard Müller; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013] 55). On this opposition, see also Lothar Perlitt, "Hebraismus—Deuteronomismus—Judaismus," as well as the critical essays of Pasto, "When the End Is the Beginning?"; Walter Brueggemann and Davis Hankins, "The Invention and Persistence of Wellhausen's World"; and Bediako's subtle, postcolonial critique of Wellhausen's view of "primal religion" (*Primal Religion and the Bible*, 74–104).

break—between Israelite religion and early Judaism. Reinhard G. Kratz identifies this antithesis as Wellhausen's distinctive interpretive pattern.[46] Uwe Becker calls it Wellhausen's *theologiegeschichtliche Gesamtbild*, his "overall picture of theological development."[47]

Because Wellhausen's account of Israel's religious history has been rehearsed so often and so well, Childs's own brief summary will here suffice:

> In the earliest stage of its history Israel was related to Yahweh in terms of a natural bond, and not that of a legal pact. The story of the giving of the law at Sinai was actually a much later development which was projected back into the past once a new concept of law had developed. The major force for the change stemmed largely from the influence of the great prophets who broke [*nota bene*: sharply!] the natural bond of the old religion, and interpreted the relationship between God and people as based on ethical behavior. The actual term "covenant" (*bᵉrīt*) occurs infrequently in the eighth-century prophets, but arose in Deuteronimic [*sic*] circles in the seventh century in order to emphasize the idea that the covenant depended on conditions which might be dissolved through disobedience. Finally, according to Wellhausen, following the destruction of the nation, a full-blown priestly concept of Israel's relation to Yahweh as a people under the law emerged. This fifth-century Priestly system was then projected back into the earliest period and formed the bulk of the legislation of Exodus 25ff. and of Leviticus and Numbers. In sum, the prophets preceded the law, and the concept of covenant was a relatively late corollary of this historical development.[48]

Childs rejects this historical thesis because it offends against the two principal components of his program: the divine and human sides of theo-referentiality.[49] With regard to the first, divinely-facing side, Wellhausen does not absolutely

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[46] Kratz: "the opposition between the original beginnings of a religion or culture which grew up naturally and are still completely earthy, and the later stage, in which things have assumed an institutionally established, artificial, and dogmatic state" ("Eyes and Spectacles," 383).

[47] Uwe Becker, "Julius Wellhausens Sicht," at 299. I thank Philip Sumpter for suggesting the above translation.

[48] *BTONT*, 135.

[49] The two most important passages for understanding Childs's rejection of Wellhausen are *BTONT*, 413–20 and *OTTCC*, 145–53. To note, in these and other passages where Childs engages Wellhausen, it is never in isolation. Childs usually lumps Wellhausen together with his epigones such as Lothar Perlitt (esp. his *Bundestheologie im Alten Testament* [WMANT 36; Neukirchener: Neukirchener Verlag, 1969]), Ernst Kutsch (*Verheißung und Gesetz: Untersuchungen zum sogennanten 'Bund' im Alten Testament* [BZAW 131; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973]), or Ernest W. Nicholson (*God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1986]). Childs also refers to C. F. Whitley, "Covenant and Commandment in Israel," *JNES* 22 (1963) 37–48, cited in *BTONT*, 418. For convenience, the present article focuses more narrowly on Wellhausen himself, while keeping in mind that Wellhausen's present-day heirs advocate for an updated version of his proposal (e.g., Becker, "Julius Wellhausens Sicht," 299–302).

sever the Hebrew Bible from an "out-there-in-the-world, living God."[50] In spite of Wellhausen's famous resignation from a theological professorship,[51] Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, a classicist and colleague of Wellhausen's, recollects that "Wellhausen always remained a Christian and never ceased to pray the Lord Jesus to be his guest at every dinner. He also remained a theologian."[52] Some of Wellhausen's most dedicated disciples echo von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff's final point.[53] Rudolph Smend even argues that Wellhausen's *Israelitische und jüdische Geschichte*[54] contains many "materials and viewpoints" tending towards biblical theology, and that Wellhausen's formula, "YHWH the God of Israel and Israel the people of YHWH," serves as a convincing center for Old Testament theology.[55]

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[50] Zimmerli: "Wellhausen wanted to be a historian, and not a theologian. Nevertheless, he believed that through his historical studies he would contribute to the knowledge of God" (*Law and the Prophets*, 26).

[51] Wellhausen's resignation letter says that his teaching was making theological students unfit for ministry (Alfred Jepsen, "Wellhausen in Greifswald: ein Beitrag zur Biographie Julius Wellhausens," in *Der Herr ist Gott: Aufsätze zur Wissenschaft vom Alten Testament* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1978) 254–70, at 266.

[52] Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *My Recollections: 1848–1914* (trans. G. C. Richards; London: Chatto & Windus, 1930) 226.

[53] Lothar Perlitt, *Vatke und Wellhausen: Geschichtsphilosophische Vorraussetzungen und Historiographische Motive für die Darstellung der Religion und Geschichte Israels durch Wilhelm Vatke und Julius Wellhausen* (BZAW 94; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1965) 229–43; idem, "Pectus est, quod theologum facit?" in *Allein mit dem Wort: theologische Studien zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. Hermann Spieckermann; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1995) 256–62; Reinhard G. Kratz, "Auslegen und Erklären: über die theologische Bedeutung der Bibelkritik nach Johann Philipp Gabler," in *Johann Philipp Gabler 1753–1826 zum 250. Geburtstag* (ed. Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr und Christfried Böttrich; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2003) 53–74, at 66. Childs himself obliquely concurs (*BTONT*, 137). Smend quipped that Wellhausen had more biblical theology in his little finger than many professional theologians have in their hand ("Der Greifswalder Julius Wellhausen und die Biblische Theologie," in *Beyond Biblical Theologies* [ed. Heinrich Assel, Stefan Beyerle, and Christfried Böttrich; WUNT 295; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012] 3–18, at 18).

[54] Wellhausen, *Israelitische und jüdische Geschichte* (10th ed.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002).

[55] Smend, "Der Greifswalder Julius Wellhausen," 17. Smend develops the latter claim in more detail in his essay, *Die Mitte des Alten Testaments* (ThSt[B] 101; Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1970), reprinted in idem, *Gesammelte Studien, Band I: die Mitte des Alten Testaments* (BZET 99; München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1986) 40–84. Here Smend situates Wellhausen's formula against other proposals about the "center" of the Old Testament; see also Hans H. Schmid, "'Ich will euer Gott sein, und ihr sollt mein Volk sein': die sogenannte Bundesformel und die Frage nach der Mitte des Alten Testaments," in *Kirche: Festschrift für Günther Bornkamm* (ed. Dieter Lührmann and Georg Strecker; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1980) 1–26; and William McKane, "The Middle of the Old Testament," in *Covenant as Context: Essays in Honour of E.W. Nicholson* (ed. A. D. H. Mayes and R. B. Salters; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 261–83. Childs does not cite Smend's essay, although he does refer to Smend's related work on *Die Bundesformel* (ThSt[B] 68; Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1963), cited in *BTONT*, 138, 142, 425; and Smend's famous article on Karl Barth's "Nachkritische Schriftauslegung," in *Parrhesia: Karl Barth zum 80. Geburtstag am 10. Mai 1966* (ed. Eberhard Busch, Jürgen Fangmeier, and Max Geiger; Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1966) 215–37, cited in *IOTS*, 70.

Wellhausen took a definite view of divine revelation.[56] His sympathies lay wholly with Israelite religion in its primitive strata, an era during which it was "completely earthy." God spoke then "through humans . . . to humans. Not through letters, but through the spirit he revealed himself, according to the exigency and occasion of history; he did not yet make his testament, but lived, and his word was living."[57] Or again and elsewhere, Wellhausen wrote that history alone can be considered as a predicate of "the divine subject."[58] Lothar Perlitt directly addresses theo-referentiality in Wellhausen's thinking:

> The theo-referentiality [*Gotteszeugnis*] of history lay for Wellhausen in its *facticity*, in its process at once hidden and evident, which goes against a spiritualization or theologization of the "earthly nexus." Because one can apprehend God's actions in history not with the hands but only by faith, Wellhausen wrote the history of Israel in analogy to all history, as *profane history*, renouncing the possibility of tracing special "revelations" with the historian's tools . . . *Heilsgeschichte* is profane history with the eyes of faith.[59]

The profane history of the nation—and of its most energetic, individual actors—was for Wellhausen the only "transparency of the divine."[60] Consequently, Wellhausen thought that the ascendancy of the law and of book religion constituted a step away from the site of God's activity and self-witness. God's immediacy in the natural, spontaneous, and naïve religion of earlier times receded; Wellhausen spoke of "the Judaizing tendency to remove God to a distance from man," a tendency enacted precisely through the intermediation of scripture.[61]

At its best, then, for Wellhausen, scripture in its canonical form provides a veiled and indirect access to the kind of religion—and to the God—that Wellhausen embraced. Perhaps the stories of Saul and David, Ahab and Elijah, and the discourses of Amos and Isaiah that Wellhausen so enjoyed as a student comprise his "canon within a canon," given that they are where (in his view) the remnants of Israel's early and earthy mode of relation to God are least obscured.[62] But the fact remains: for Wellhausen, the traditions that became scriptural deteriorated in their witness function. Though initially more transparent to God, even these stories became

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[56] Perlitt's works are here indispensable. Childs penned a review of Perlitt's *Vatke und Wellhausen* and called it a "superb monograph" (*JBL* 84 [1965] 470).

[57] Wellhausen, *Israelitische und jüdische Geschichte,* 103; all translations from the German are my own unless otherwise noted. For the historical context of Wellhausen's antipathy to "book religion," especially with reference to Herder, see Elrefaei, *Wellhausen and Kaufmann,* 44–47; Perlitt, *Vatke und Wellhausen,* 15–24; but also and contrastingly Weidner, " 'Geschichte gegen den Strich bürsten,' " 39.

[58] Wellhausen, review of F. Baethgen, *DLZ* 9 (1888) 1321, cited in Smend, *Die Mitte,* 67. See also Zimmerli, *Law and the Prophets,* 26.

[59] Perlitt, *Vatke und Wellhausen,* 232.

[60] Perlitt, "Pectus est," 260.

[61] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena,* 79.

[62] Ibid.

congested with artificial concerns about *torah* observance.[63] This perspective runs directly counter to Childs's affirmation that scripture was a truthful witness to God from its earliest tradition strata onward to its textual *Endgestalt*.

But Childs's actual, express concern with Wellhausen's reconstruction looks in the opposite direction: not that scriptural traditions ran from more theologically truthful to less, but that on Wellhausen's hypothesis, the later (covenantal) understanding of Israel's relation to God wholly supplants the earlier generations' experience of God as being in a "natural bond." The problem, that is, is supersession. The word usually describes the privileging of a junior and successor religion relative to its antecedent; Wellhausen by contrast valorized the older form of religion relative to its aftercomer, early Judaism. But the theo-referential consequence is much the same: epochs within a single trajectory of religious development are set against one another to such an extent that it becomes impossible to treat them both as testimonies to the selfsame divine reality. If the later dispensation eclipses the earlier completely, they can hardly both be considered as truth-telling witnesses.[64]

So much for the divinely-facing side of Childs's objection to Wellhausen. In both *BTONT* and *OTTCC*, Childs is even more explicit about the way in which Wellhausen's history of Israel's religion offends against the human aspect of scriptural theo-referentiality. Childs alleges that Wellhausen makes basically non-religious forces the explanation for scripture's formation. It was not because the people of God heard in their traditions a true word from God that they passed them on, but because they "attempt[ed] to combat the threat to the religious identity of the nation in the crisis of the seventh century."[65] This is an essentially sociological motive and for Childs "a self-serving ideology."[66] In *OTTCC*, Childs writes:

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[63] Much the same applies to Wellhausen's view of Jesus and the canonical gospels: their abstract concepts and their textuality itself betray and do not faithfully mediate Jesus's own naturalness and individualism (e.g., *Einleitung in die drei ersten Evangelien* [2nd ed.; Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1911]; see Kratz, "Eyes and Spectacles," 385).

[64] Childs's resistance to Wellhausen's supersessionism can be fruitfully compared with his resistance to some recent, apocalyptic Pauline scholarship, on which, see also Don Collett ("A Tale of Two Testaments: Childs, Old Testament Torah, and *Heilsgeschichte*," in *The Bible as Christian Scripture: The Work of Brevard Childs* [ed. Christopher R. Seitz and Kent Harold Richards; SBLBSNA 25; Atlanta: SBL, 2013] 185–219). Childs repeatedly and disapprovingly plies the phrase "radical discontinuity" to describe (for instance) the way J. Louis Martyn relates law to gospel in the writings of Paul—the same vocabulary Childs uses of Wellhausen (*The Church's Guide for Reading Paul: The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008] 103). Childs's main concern in opposing Martyn is theo-referential—in the divinely-facing sense. Martyn's interpretation of Paul makes it impossible to treat the earlier, Mosaic law as an abidingly true testimony to the living God. In response, Childs insists that, even granting the newness of the gospel, the law must in some sense remain "the true voice of God"—because the same God who self-disclosed on Sinai acted decisively in Christ. Setting the dispensation from Sinai against God's work in Christ renders impossible their mutual reference to the selfsame divine reality—just as setting preexilic against postexilic does, in the opposite direction, on Wellhausen's account.

[65] *BTONT*, 416.

[66] Ibid., 415. For a subtle treatment of this issue of canon, power, and self-interest, see Chapman, *Law and the Prophets*, 93–110.

> If Wellhausen or Cross were right that the present form of the Old Testament reflects a completely artificial construct, and that the real forces determining the priestly institution [for example] were internal political struggles for power, then one could no longer meaningfully speak of a canonical shape . . . it runs in the face of a canonical understanding to assume that the present form of the text is merely a cover for the real political forces which lie behind it, or to posit that the later theological use transformed the tradition into something different in kind from the original secular function.[67]

Childs also lodges a different but related objection. He repeatedly accuses Wellhausen of "regard[ing] the covenant as a theological 'idea' . . . devoid of institutional roots."[68] Or, again, he suggests that Wellhausen's hypothesis lacks "a genuine historical context."[69] This charge would sound enigmatic except for Childs's frequent appeals in the same contexts to the advantages of form criticism, which "attempt[s] to ground covenant in a concrete sociological context of religious institutions, which has a warrant in all ancient cultures."[70] Childs alleges that Wellhausen's explanation of religious change is too abstract: prophets speak a new vision of God and his people, and somehow their theological breakthrough "catches." But it is unclear with whom or how. It is also difficult to explain, institutionally, how traditions that were not religiously authoritative for an ancient community *ab initio* would become so.[71] The Alt school on the other hand kept the question of *Sitz im Leben* in view, and so could give a more compelling account of how a tradition functioned as theologically normative, longitudinally, within an ancient community. Childs thus thought that Wellhausen's reconstruction defies what is known of ancient near Eastern societies as well as "modern sociological analysis of primitive cultures."[72]

Childs judged that Wellhausen's historical claims butt up against scriptural theo-referentiality, humanly considered. If the scriptural texts themselves prioritize the publication of divine instruction for a religious community, then it is poor historiography (not to mention sociology) to propose a completely different and alien explanation for their development—one that is flatly political, abstract, or overly invested in individual religious genius.

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[67] *OTTCC*, 148.

[68] *BTONT*, 136, 414.

[69] Ibid., 415.

[70] Ibid., 417.

[71] See also Strawn, "What Would (Or Should) Old Testament Theology Look Like," 146–51; Chapman, *Law and the Prophets*, 93–110.

[72] *BTONT*, 417. Childs brings up Alt as a counterbalance to Wellhausen in ibid., 135, 174. It is Childs's instinct as a historian more than as a theologian that motivates him in *BTONT* to isolate would-be examples of early, preexilic texts attesting a free and conditional relationship between God and Israel (ibid., 418); see also *OTTCC*, 149.

■ Three Routes: Prescription

The first task of the present article has been to identify the reasons behind Childs's rejection of Wellhausen. It has found that Wellhausen's version of Israel's religious history transgresses the two principal components of Childs's interpretive program: that scripture speaks truthfully about an out-there-in-the-world, living God, and that scripture emerged through a community's curation of their traditions because they heard in them an enduring word about God. Wellhausen understood scripture as (at best) a half-truthful witness to the living God. He also seemed to propose non-religious forces to explain scripture's development, forces that subsisted (as Childs thought) in abstraction from the long-term practice of religion on the ground.

The constructive question, remains, however, whether—over against his own judgment—Childs's program might still accommodate Wellhausen's historical claim about a sharp break in the history of Israelite religion. The second and creative task of this article is to test this possibility—a possibility that would allow for Wellhausen's history and the confession of the Bible as true testimony to God to obtain noncompetitively. The following sections pursue this test by three possible routes. These "thought experiments" involve re-reading both Wellhausen and Childs. The first section re-reads Wellhausen's sharp break; it does not seek to reduce the scale of the religious sea-change that Wellhausen proposed, but it re-envisions this change in light of Childs's canonical process. In other words, it bends Wellhausen towards Childs. The second section below revisits Childs's reasons for rejecting Wellhausen on historical grounds: it re-reads Childs to suggest that under certain conditions, Childs countenances significant religio-historical change. The third section re-evaluates Childs's reasons for rejecting Wellhausen on biblical grounds—in view of the Bible's own self-presentation. These two final sections in effect bend Childs towards Wellhausen.

A. Bending Wellhausen towards Childs

The first route towards a version of Childs's program amenable to Wellhausen's historical claim re-envisions the latter's sharp break—not to diminish its size but to refocus it, to identify its driving dynamic as theo-referential.[73] For all that the stark dividing line of *torah* separates ancient Israelite religion from early Judaism in Wellhausen's writings, Wellhausen maintains a religious continuity throughout all levels of tradition in the Hebrew Bible; his history is basically concerned with religion.[74] There was for Wellhausen no "conversion" (such as Childs feared) from

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[73] This is a point of continuity—namely, a community's transmission of a truthful testimony about God to another generation—that differs from other continuities within Wellhausen's thesis that Childs or Zimmerli might recognize and affirm: e.g., the founding role of Moses for Israelite religion (Zimmerli, *Law and the Prophets*, 25). What this section attempts cannot be found in Childs's oeuvre.

[74] Aly Elrefaei emphasizes this point (*Wellhausen and Kaufmann*, 197–211). So Wellhausen: "The foundation upon which, at all periods, Israel's sense of its national unity rested was religious in its character" (*Prolegomena*, 433).

initially secular, "vulgate" tradition and literature belatedly into "sacred literature."[75] Israel's stories, songs, and its laws—the lower-case *torah* tradition of everyday legal decisions and priestly instructions—were primordially religious. Wellhausen writes that in ancient Israel, even matters of "war and administration of justice were regarded as matters of religion."[76]

This may go some way towards satisfying Childs's outcry that "the real forces" driving Israelite religion on Wellhausen's hypothesis are political, or that the religious ideals of Israel are merely a "self-serving ideology." But reclaiming "religion" as the animating force in Wellhausen's history does not yet approximate Childs's vision of theo-referentiality, humanly considered. However, it may be that even Wellhausen's account of the sharp break in Israelite religion can be considered in terms of "canon-consciousness." On Childs's thinking, described above, recipients of Israel's traditions updated them out of recognition that, as a divinely-given word, they spoke truthfully to new contexts and future generations. In a similar way, Wellhausen argued that the prophets—"the spiritual destroyers of old Israel"—did not intend "to say anything new[;] they are only proclaiming old truth."[77] They received Israel's traditional theology of YHWH as "the head of the nation" as true and normative—but in order to sustain this belief in the eighth century and beyond, they radically revised it.

Wellhausen is clear that what galvanized Amos's theological vision was a looming historical event: "the dark cloud that threatened the horizon was plain enough—the Assyrians." And yet, although the events of history carved out space for these prophetic insights, it was not mere political savvy that produced the prophets' theological innovation.[78] What was at stake for Amos and other prophets of his time was their traditional faith in the supremacy and loyalty of their national deity, YHWH.[79] In the face of awesome Assyrian expansion,

> The prophets of Israel alone did not allow themselves to be taken by surprise by what had occurred, or to be plunged into despair; they solved by anticipation the grim problem which history set before them. They absorbed into their religion that conception of the world which was destroying the religions of the nations, even before it had been fully grasped by secular consciousness.

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[75] For example, K. L. Knoll, "The Kaleidoscopic Nature of Divine Personality in the Hebrew Bible," *BI* 9 (2001) 1–24, at 3–10.

[76] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 436.

[77] Ibid., 398; this translation is taken from Reinhard G. Kratz, *The Prophets of Israel* (trans. Anselm C. Hagedorn and Nathan MacDonald; CSHB 2; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015) 8.

[78] Cf. John Barton, "History and Rhetoric in the Prophets," in *The Bible as Rhetoric: Studies in Biblical Persuasion and Credibility* (ed. Martin Werner; Warwick Studies in Philosophy and Literature; London: Routledge, 1990) 51–64.

[79] Smend remarked: "[Wellhausen's] fundamental theme is belief: 'Yahweh, Israel's God, and Israel, Yahweh's people.' On that, the nation, its collective consciousness and its history all rest. This history is in essence religious history. Its great caesura was brought about by the clash with the Assyrian empire" ("Julius Wellhausen," 99–100).

> Where others saw only the ruin of everything that is holiest, they saw the triumph of Jehovah over delusion and error. Whatever else might be overthrown, the really worthy remained unshaken.[80]

The eighth-century prophets were politically engaged, and their preaching was self-serving in that it enabled Israel to survive where its neighbors like Moab faded.[81] But in the above quote from Wellhausen, it is not concern for Israel's survival that generated Amos's oracles and gave them force and power. The theological is not "merely a cover" for sociopolitical considerations. The theological is essential: Amos and his aftercomers were concerned for the name of their god. Would their deity share the fate of the gods of the nations, about whom the Rabshakeh taunted, "Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivvah?" (2 Kgs 18:33–34 // Isa 36:18–19, NRSV). These gods were defeated. But Israel's prophets "refuse[d] to allow the conception of Jehovah to be involved in the ruin of the kingdom."[82]

The content of Israelite religion dramatically changed. The new, "paradoxical thought" took hold, that the national god could turn against his own king and nation. But in terms of canon-consciousness, the newer idea of YHWH's special, conditional election of Israel emerged to protect the theological truth of the older and unassuming traditions of YHWH's natural, father-to-son solidarity with Israel. The latter outlook was not deficient so much as unable to continue "doing its job," theologically, in the changed conditions of the eighth century. Indeed, the same conviction that the God of Israel was their helper and benefactor served as the theological taproot for both the generation of Israelites living before the eighth century and those living after.[83] Childs himself seems almost to acknowledge this when he remarks that "in one sense, the theme of election is an extended commentary on Israel's basic conviction of being the people of Yahweh."[84]

The first route proposed here—of bending Wellhausen towards Childs—involves the human side of scriptural theo-referentiality. It brackets the divinely-facing side and mounts a case merely that something resembling canon-consciousness was at play in the sharp break that Wellhausen describes: the prophets reimagined Israel's inherited traditions exactly because they received them as truth-telling about God and so deserving of transmission to a new generation of the people of YHWH. They accepted YHWH's solidarity and supremacy and for that reason pioneered new theological ways of upholding these in the face of political collapse.

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[80] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 473.

[81] Wellhausen: "with all this similarity, how different were the ultimate fates of the two [Moab and Israel]! The history of the one loses itself obscurely and fruitlessly in the sand; that of the other issues in eternity" ("Moab," 535–36).

[82] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 474.

[83] This continuity is one reason why Smend advocates for the solidarity of YHWH and Israel as the center of Old Testament theology (*Die Mitte*). See McKane, "The Middle of the Old Testament," for a comparison of Smend's proposal with other twentieth-century accounts of Old Testament theology.

[84] *BTONT*, 426.

B. Bending Childs towards Wellhausen: Historical Considerations

A second route would bend Childs towards Wellhausen by showing that Childs's program already countenances significant religious discontinuity. This is an argument *a maiore ad minus*: if Childs already (though provisionally) accepts other forms of religio-historical rupture, then his approach might also then tolerate a Wellhausian breach between ancient Israelite religion and early Judaism.[85]

As it happens, Childs does work from a historical reconstruction featuring a large religious disjunction—namely, Alt's hypothesis about the "God of the fathers."[86] Alt argued that the *el* names in Genesis (El Bethel, El Shaddai, El Olam, El Elyon) were originally the titles of Canaanite deities. Later, when the proto-Israelite tribes entered the land, their religion, focused on the "God of the fathers," absorbed these Canaanite titles. Names that formerly evoked Canaanite deities came to be regarded as epithets of the nameless ancestral God. In a later, third stage, this God would become identified with YHWH, the God of Sinai. Childs adopts Alt's reconstruction. In his discussion of Alt in *BTONT*'s section on "Patriarchal Traditions," he notes that Alt's hypothesis "has shown serious signs of erosion."[87] But later in his section on "the Identity of God," Childs essentially paraphrases Alt's thesis, speaking of "an identification of Yahweh with the various *el* figures."[88]

Childs could make this ad hoc affirmation of Alt's hypothesis because Alt kept critical reconstruction and the Bible's own witness in dialectical relationship. That is, Childs's recognized that Alt's account and the Bible's vary from one another—not least in that the Bible's telling of Israel's past is theocentric while Alt's is thoroughly mundane. Although the "two pictures of Israel's history," critical and biblical, differ importantly, Childs preferred to keep them in a relationship of subtle overlap rather than absolute sequester.[89] This relationship of subtle overlap Childs described as "dialectical." He was unhappy with this adjective and regarded it as a stopgap.[90] Nonetheless, the worse decision, Childs thought, would be to posit "no

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[85] The language of provisionality (e.g., "ad hoc," "probationary") used in this article to characterize Childs's relationship to critical reconstructions reflects his (strategic) caginess about leaning on any one critical theory; see Philip Sumpter, "Comparison of Childs's Exodus and Isaiah Commentaries: Continuity and Development" (paper presented at the International Meeting of SBL, Vienna, Austria, July 6–10, 2014).

[86] Albrecht Alt, "The God of the Fathers," in *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (trans. R. A. Wilson; New York: Doubleday, 1967) 3–100.

[87] *BTONT*, 125.

[88] Ibid., 351. Childs does not cite Alt here, though his section bibliography includes Alt's work on the "God of the Fathers" (ibid., 358). This essay is cited in bibliographies for the following sections: "Patriarchal Traditions" (ibid., 128) and "Covenant, Election, and the People of God" (ibid., 420). See also the section in *OTTCC* entitled, "Revelation through the name" (38–39).

[89] Childs attributed this regrettable situation—of absolute sequester—to both von Rad and Wellhausen, albeit each in his own distinctive way. On von Rad, see *BTONT*, 102–3; on Wellhausen, see *OTTCC*, 148–49, as well as below ("Canonical Considerations").

[90] *BTONT*, 99.

relationship whatsoever" between scriptural testimony and historical retrieval.[91] The latter situation was unacceptable because it would reduce the "biblical witness to divine intervention in time and space [to] merely literary convention."[92] It would be too simple to say that Childs endorses Alt's theory because it paraphrases the Bible's own, emic account of Israel's past life with God.[93] But on Alt's thinking, at least the critical reconstruction was not "totally alien to the canonical construal."[94] Alt's theory preserved a relationship of subtle overlap; it did more justice to theo-referentiality in its human aspect. For these reasons, Childs approved it.

While accepting Alt's hypothesis, at least provisionally, Childs could also and at once repeat the Bible's own claim that the same God self-disclosed to the ancestors and to Moses: God "revealed himself to the Patriarchs as El Shaddai, El Olam, and El Elyon, but above all to Moses he made known his name as YHWH (Exod 3:15)."[95] But, at the same time, in spite of this dialectical convergence between critical and biblical pictures, the point cannot be lost that on the critical side, the historical process is that of distinct religions coming together.[96] The radicality of this fusion can be shown, for example, by James Loader's use of the same historical reconstruction as a paradigm for a Christian theology of the religions.[97] Loader writes of Alt's hypothesis:

> Yahweh did not only "infiltrate" other numina and take over their functions [,] but the historically preceding faiths of their fathers were different religions altogether . . . The Old Testament heritage of the church preserves among its host of themes the idea that the one true God can be known in religions that differ from its own.[98]

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[91] "It is fully inadequate to restrict the nature of the Old Testament's theological witness either by demanding absolute historical coherence or by positing in principle *no relationship whatever*" (*OTTCC*, 149 [italics added]).

[92] *BTONT*, 100. See also ibid., 204–6, for further remarks on the dead-end of moving entirely from *history* to *language* for interpreting the Old Testament.

[93] Childs introduces the contrast of emic and etic in ibid., 416. See also Sumpter, "Trinity and the Canonical Process," 8, as well as Petr Sláma, "Von richtiger Unterscheidung einer emischen und etischen Perspektive in neueren Theologien des Alten Testaments," *CV* 58 (2016) 388–400.

[94] *OTTCC*, 149. Compare Childs's preference for Gunneweg's reconstruction of the priesthood over Wellhausen's.

[95] *BTONT*, 351.

[96] Alt: "The religion of *'El* is obviously to be distinguished from that of Yahweh" ("The God of the Fathers," 11). Also, on the other hand: "from the very beginning [the "God of the fathers"] represents a quite different type of religion from that of the *'Elim*" (ibid., 29).

[97] James A. Loader, "'Theologia Religionum' from the Perspective of Israelite Religion—An Argument," *Missionalia* 12 (1984) 14–35; also, similarly, James S. Anderson, "El, Yahweh, and Elohim: The Evolution of God in Israel and its Theological Implications," *ExpTim* 128 (2017) 261–67, at 266–67. Childs would heartily object to Loader's procedure of making a reconstructed history of religions the theological norm rather than scripture's final form. But this is besides the present point. The striking thing is Childs's provisional acceptance of the same historical reconstruction that Loader cites.

[98] Loader, "'Theologia Religionum,'" 28, 29.

The point is, Childs embraces a religio-historical break of such size that it could be considered a paradigm for interreligious dialogue. Which, then, is the larger difference, the sharper break? That between the *el* religion of Israel's ancestors and Mosaic Yahwism in Alt's hypothesis, or that between ancient Israelite religion and early Judaism such as Wellhausen imagines? The first reconstruction involves the absorption of a different religion into Yahwism: deities that were once worshiped under their own titles—or under no title, as with the "God of the fathers"—came to be seen as identical to YHWH. The second reconstruction seems, comparatively, a more modest change: the same god, YHWH, is viewed at first as the natural, unconditional sponsor of the nation Israel and then later as Israel's free-willed and conditional elector. To Childs, it appeared historically (or even sociologically) implausible that a theology like the deuteronomists' would have utterly supplanted its forerunner. On the other hand, for Alt—and so, too, for Childs—Israel's forebears in faith were able to move from one practice of religion to a quite different one.[99] At least as a historian, then, this example shows that Childs could sometimes stomach a sharp break after all.

C. Bending Childs towards Wellhausen: Canonical Considerations

The section above has explained that Childs sought to keep critical reconstruction in a relationship of subtle overlap with the Bible's own account of Israel. Alt's hypothesis enabled Childs to affirm just such a dialectic between the two pictures rather than an absolute sequester such as he attributed to Wellhausen's religion-history. The preceding section has argued from the critical side of the paired accounts: Childs endorsed one critical reconstruction insofar as it ran parallel with the Bible. But that critical reconstruction in fact shared with Wellhausen's hypothesis enough religio-historical breakage to relativize Childs's historical objections to Wellhausen's sharp break. The section that follows argues, on the other hand, from the biblical side: that the Bible itself may narrate some sharp breaks. On such a basis, Childs's own logic of keeping the two pictures in a subtle relationship of overlap may then warrant a corresponding historical reconstruction like Wellhausen's. In other words, perhaps one could accept Wellhausen's *Gesamtbild* not merely

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[99] Critically for Childs's vision of theo-referentiality, humanly considered, Alt's religio-historical succession apparently did not disrupt the various tradents' belief in the truthfulness of their traditions vis-à-vis God: e.g., Alt's remarks on how "the same fundamental outlook and practice are simply carried on to a higher plane," as well as his famous statement about the "Gods of the fathers" as παιδαγωγοί leading to YHWH ("The God of the Fathers," 78, 80). The devotees of the *el* numina believed their stories told truthfully about God(s), and the devotees of the "God of the fathers" believed their stories told truthfully, and the early Yahwists believed the same—and the difference of dispensations did not prevent the community from affirming the reference of their traditions to the selfsame divine reality; for more on the theo-referential unity of varied biblical traditions, see Stephen B. Chapman, "Brevard Childs as a Historical Critic: Divine Concession and the Unity of the Canon," in *Bible as Christian Scripture* (ed. Seitz and Richards) 63–83, at 63.

on historical grounds, but on canonical ones: because "the Bible tells me so," or suggests something of the sort, at any rate.[100]

Scripture itself—in Exod 6:3—is aware of the historical discontinuity between the religion of the ancestors and that of Moses. This text reads: "I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty (*El Shaddai*), but by my name YHWH I did not make myself known to them."[101] And yet at the same time as it acknowledges discontinuity, the verse also vouches for theological convergence— at the level of referentiality to an identical "out-there-in-the-world God." [102] Because of scripture's own testimony to this theo-referential unity across different dispensations, Childs was able to subscribe to Alt's historical hypothesis. The scholarly reconstruction paralleled the canonical rendition, and the "two realms" coordinated into a subtle relationship of correspondence.

On the other hand, as Childs thought, scripture does not testify to a religious progression—or better, a turn of dispensations—that would parallel Wellhausen's historical reconstruction. There is no equivalent of Exod 6:3 for Wellhausen. God does not say to Ezra or to someone else from later in the story of Israel, "I appeared to David and Solomon as an unconditional benefactor deity, but as a jealous and destroying Lord I did not yet make myself known to them." No programmatic, inner-biblical recognition exists of an earlier stage of Israelite religion, a prior era of divine self-disclosure, when Israel's relation to YHWH resembled the national religions of its neighbors, and which was later transformed through the prophets. If this is the inner-biblical bar, the "emic" prerequisite for accepting a given historical reconstruction, then Childs was justified in rejecting Wellhausen's history of Israelite religion. As Childs writes in *OTTCC*, it seems that on Wellhausen's reasoning, the Bible's own self-presentation and memory about God's history with Israel diverges almost wholly from historical-critical reconstruction: "these are two separate realms which function fully independently of one another."[103]

However, it may be that Childs's resistance to biblical-theological proposals emphasizing divine repentance led him to deprioritize biblical texts that might have suggested a more complex and subtle relationship between "the two realms" of biblical testimony and critical reconstruction, even and also Wellhausen's reconstruction. When commenting on the work of Terence E. Fretheim, for whom

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[100] The allusion to the line from Anna Bartlett Warners's well-known children's song "Jesus Loves Me" is, of course, puckish—but also content-rich, especially given Stephen B. Chapman's coordination of the Old Testament witness to divine concession with the passion of Jesus Christ in idem, "Covenant God of Israel." See also, similarly, Collin Cornell, "Holy Mutability: *Religionsgeschichte* and Theological Ontology," *HBT* 38 (2016) 200–20, at 215–20.

[101] This translation is taken from *OTTCC*, 39.

[102] Christopher R. Seitz presents a quite different and innovative reading of Exod 3 and 6, one that seems to stand in tension with Childs's more customary critical interpretation ("The Call of Moses and the Revelation of the Divine Name: Source-Critical Logic and its Legacy," in *Theological Exegesis* [ed. Seitz and Green-McCreight] 145–67).

[103] *OTTCC*, 148.

divine repentance is a leading theological motif, Childs sounds a critical note.[104] To Fretheim's contention that "God changes in light of his relationship with the world," Childs says that "this depiction is not the way that Israel throughout all of its history understood God or interpreted biblical imagery."[105]

But this judgment seems premature. Take, for example, the recent chapter by Jean-Pierre Sonnet, entitled "God's Repentance and 'False Starts' in Biblical History."[106] Sonnet takes up and develops Fretheim's claim that the theme of God's repentance "appears at some of the key junctures in the canon . . . therefore, its role is very significant."[107] Sonnet organizes his discussion around three "dramatic divine changes" in the books of Genesis, Exodus, and Samuel, each featuring the verb נחם in *nifal* and corresponding to the institution of a covenant.[108] In the first, the flood story of Genesis 6–9, God "re-launches"[109] after the false start of destroying all life. In Exodus 32–34, God turns from the false start of destroying Israel and starting over with Moses. In 1 Samuel 15, God corrects the false start of the Saul dynasty. Sonnet observes that in each text, the sinfulness of God's human partner causes the false start, and God then inaugurates a new covenant to insure the relationship against future transgressions.

If Sonnet is correct, then contra Childs, Israel did indeed understand God as capable of making a false start and then course-correcting: "reversing direction," to use Sonnet's words.[110] In and of itself, Sonnet's article has nothing to do with Wellhausen's *Gesamtbild*. The two theses operate on distinct explanatory planes: Sonnet explains the Bible's own literary self-presentation while Wellhausen reconstructs the history of Israelite religion.[111] And yet for Childs, the two cannot be wholly separate realms, but must relate and intersect, even if dialectically—because

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[104] See, e.g., Terence E. Fretheim, "The Repentance of God: A Key to Evaluating Old Testament God-Talk," *HBT* 10 (1988) 47–70, reprinted in *What Kind of God? Collected Essays of Terence E. Fretheim* (ed. Michael J. Chan and Brent A. Strawn; Siphrut 14; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015) 40–57.

[105] *BTONT*, 357. Childs elsewhere writes more positively: "the Hebrew idiom of God's 'repenting of his resolve' retains the integrity of the divine will, but allows for decision and flexibility in relation to a genuine human history" (*OTTCC*, 53).

[106] Jean-Pierre Sonnet, "God's Repentance and 'False Starts' in Biblical History (Genesis 6–9; Exodus 32–34; 1 Samuel 15 and 2 Samuel 7)," in *Congress Volume Ljubljana 2007* (ed. André Lemaire; VTSup 133; Leiden: Brill, 2010) 469–94. On the related theme of divine concession, see Stephen B. Chapman, "Childs as a Historical Critic"; also idem, "Covenant God of Israel"; and idem, "Martial Memory, Peaceable Vision: Divine War in the Old Testament," in *Holy War in the Bible: Christian Morality and an Old Testament Problem* (ed. Heath A. Thomas, Jeremy A. Evans, and Paul Copan; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013) 47–67, esp. 61–67.

[107] Fretheim, "Repentance of God," 48.

[108] Sonnet, "God's Repentance," 470.

[109] Sonnet uses this word in ibid., 471, 472, 477.

[110] Ibid., 490.

[111] Though see Sonnet on "Genetic Hypotheses," in ibid., 480–82.

for Childs, what matters is scripture's theo-referentiality, including its "witness to divine intervention in time and space."[112]

The key, programmatic examples of divine repentance that Sonnet specifies do not constitute an inner-canonical parallel to Wellhausen's "sharp break." But they are suggestive. According to Daniel Driver, the historian of religion and the theologian cannot help meeting, and the place of their intersection is canon-consciousness. In this case, Israel passed on as an enduring word about God that at several crucial points in "Israel's history with God," God effected an about-face.[113] God said no to God's own past way of relating, damaged as it was by human sin, and set out in a new direction with "upgraded regulations."[114]

Admittedly, the false starts and divine repenting in the texts that Sonnet exegetes do not mirror the "sharp break" of Wellhausen's religious history. The Bible's own testimony is theocentric and offers an account of God's own decision-making. Wellhausen's oeuvre is historiographic and so is concerned with human forces and agents.[115] The texts of Sonnet's chapter attest to multiple events of divine course-correction, whereas Wellhausen indicates one definite, dramatic tidal change from Israelite religion to early Judaism. The divine repentance passages address perennial, intergenerational issues of human sin—violence, idolatry, and disobedience—but Wellhausen's reconstruction turns on a unique historical event, the advent of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the eastern Mediterranean.

Many of these same differences, however, apply to the Bible's own memory of different eras of divine self-revelation and Alt's hypothesis about the God of the fathers. These two may parallel one another more closely than the divine repenting of Sonnet's chapter and Wellhausen's religious history. Nonetheless, the Bible's testimony is theocentric and Alt's is not; he needs no living God to give his theory traction. Alt also multiplies stages in Israelite religion, when the text of Exod 6:3 authorizes only two eras in God's history of self-disclosure. Still further, Alt's hypothesis, like Wellhausen's, relies on time-specific cultural and historical factors; it is more time-stamped than the Bible's own witness. And this is the theory to which Childs lends his probationary acceptance, since it brings the "two realms" of critical historiography and biblical witness into a subtle overlap. It seems that if this were possible for Childs, it could also be possible for one of his interpretive successors—on canonical grounds and in light of Israel's own testimony—to embrace Wellhausen's historical claim about a "sharp break" between ancient Israelite religion and early Judaism.

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[112] *BTONT*, 100, continues: "At times Israel's confessional witness overlaps fully with common public testimony. . . . At other times there is virtually no relation."

[113] Ibid., 105.

[114] Sonnet, "God's Repentance," 476.

[115] For a pithy statement of this distinction, see James Barr, "The Problem of Old Testament Theology and the History of Religion," *CTJ* 3 (1957) 141–49, at 145; also Hermann Spieckermann, "'YHWH Bless You and Keep You': The Relation of History of Israelite Religion and Old Testament Theology Reconsidered," *SJOT* 23 (2009) 165–82; and Cornell, "Holy Mutability," 202–4.

■ Conclusion

After determining the reasons for Childs's resistance to Wellhausen, the present article has sketched three constructive routes towards a version of Childs's interpretive program that would accommodate Wellhausen's *theologiegeschichtliche Gesamtbild*. The first route identifies a theo-referential continuity in Wellhausen's thesis, even arguing that something like canon-consciousness motivated the innovation of the eighth-century prophets. The second route demonstrates one sizeable religio-historical discontinuity that Childs already (if provisionally) accepts, and it recommends that if this were possible for Childs as a historian, then a break like Wellhausen's might also be; Childs could evidently stomach sharp breaks. The third route explores whether there may be inner-biblical warrant for entertaining historical claims about a change of dispensations in Israel's religious history. It particularly considers important biblical witnesses to divine repentance. Said differently, "God made a sharp break—this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

These three routes together present a reckoning between projects in academic biblical studies: on the one hand, Wellhausen's resurgent history of Israelite religion and, on the other, the theological interpretation of scripture, and especially Childs's theocentric version of it. A sense of competition between these two has prevailed. To this sense, the present article suggested an alternative: it asked, "If Wellhausen's conclusions be true, might the Old Testament still be the Word of God?"

Answering this question has required some re-reading of both Wellhausen and Childs. Each appears in a less familiar aspect, Wellhausen in his theological dimension and Childs as a critical historian (even a sometime-sociologist). Reading each scholar in light of the other also silhouettes features of their proposals that have gone relatively unemphasized: the theological dynamic that Wellhausen builds into his account of the eighth-century prophets, or the significant disjunctions that Childs accepts into his critical reconstruction of early Israel. Such results are instructive beyond the present article's exercise, and beyond these two specific figures. They provide a detailed example of how two influential impulses in modern biblical studies intersect: how historical judgments and theo-referentiality remain ensnarled—if not, perhaps, rivaled.