

Review of Mary Callaway's "Canonical Criticism."

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Callaway, Mary C. (1999). "Canonical Criticism." In Haynes, Stephen R.; McKenzie, Steven L. (eds.). *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application*. Westminster John Knox Press. pp. 142–155.

Summary

Callaway points out that, unlike other ancient writ, the biblical texts have been passed down throughout the centuries by communities which regard them as authoritative. She introduces canonical criticism as the study of how these texts functioned in their respective communities by both defining them and shaping their traditions. Canonical criticism developed as scholars such as Childs began studying textual traditions as they are rather than how they developed. This area of biblical study moves beyond redaction to reception of the text by certain communities. Canonical criticism aspires to uncover and explore the authoritative voice in a given final form of scripture within the context of the community that both received and preserved it by examining the ways in which the traditions of the community and its text helped shape one another. In canonical criticism, both hermeneutics and textual authority are limited to the boundaries of the canon itself, as each text is studied and understood only within its canonical context. Next, the author contrasts the accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 to illustrate that no one canonical text has authority which supersedes another. The authority of a certain text is only recognized by its place within the canon. To adequately interpret and understand Genesis 1 and 2, Callaway compares and weighs its details with other canonical texts in the Old Testament, harmonizing them theologically and thus postulating the motive of the author/redactor. Finally, she highlights several pitfalls to the practice of canonical criticism and defines it as a "hermeneutical key" used to limit the scope of theological interpretation of the biblical text while preserving a multiplicity of possible readings (p. 154).

Response

Callaway's article is the first I have heard of canonical criticism. While reading, I attempted to evaluate the method for both beneficial and faulty characteristics. First, it seems Callaway's approach can be useful to an extent in biblical studies and textual criticism. Comparing early occurrences of water, for example, with later ones in the canon can aid in our understanding of how illustrations were used and understood in biblical narrative, poetry, prophesy, etc. However, to link the waters of creation to the waters of Psalm 18 (esp. v. 16) requires much more than merely a claim by a scholar that one sheds light on the understanding of another. In this case, the interpreter is comparing two texts that are hundreds of years apart and from different socioeconomic and even cultural eras.

Additionally, Callaway seems to have settled on the theory that the development of the Old Testament canon began during the Babylonian exile, a liberal theory that is unfounded at best, and she exploits the argument that Genesis chapter 1 is at least apparently inconsistent with chapter 2 in order to raise the question she answers in her article. She exposes her presuppositions that in that she not only accepts that the two chapters are a “composite work” (148), but she also presupposes that the way in which the book was supposedly compiled is consistent with the JEPD theory. I fear that Callaway’s blanket acceptance of liberal scholarship (so-called higher criticism) in her approach to canonical criticism further solidifies previous source and redaction theories that cannot be demonstrated to be historically accurate. Thus, she builds her work on hypothetical foundations that are shaky at best.

Canonical criticism seems valuable within limits, but the reader and interpreter of Scripture must be careful not to treat the canon as a single literary work and provide a reasonable basis for any connections suggested between various canonical texts.