Karl Barth's use and understanding of the Old Testament as word of God

Fisher, P. T.

K A R L B A R T H ' S

U S E A N D U N D E R S T A N D I N G

O F T H E O L D T E S T A M E N T

A S W O R D O F G O D

P. T. Fisher, Bedford

Synopsis

This thesis sets out to examine Karl Barth's thinking about the Old Testament and his use of its text in his work. To provide a context for this examination it is necessary first to review the movement of Barth's life and life's work with particular reference to those aspects (such as the rise of Nazism and anti-semitism) which carry direct implication for the biblical sphere.

The examination itself starts not with the Old Testament text as Barth uses it but with his doctrine of the Word of God, for it is in this doctrine that he describes the place and function of the Bible within theology. Here we see that the Old Testament is placed alongside the New, indeed inseparably tied to it, as one of the three forms in which God's Word may be discerned. This undivided scripture is expected to play a vital and normative role in the fashioning of dogmatic theology as the touchstone of authenticity.

There follow studies of selected passages of Old Testament interpretation from the whole range of Barth's published work. The aim of these studies is to disclose the actual qualities of his use of the text as compared with the dogmatic stance already examined.

In evaluating the material thus displayed it is argued that Barth's approach to the Old Testament, characterised by simplicity and high expectation, leads (for all its merits) to unwarranted distortion of the literature and neglect of its historical context.

In conclusion this evaluation is taken a step further in the judgment that these particular deficiencies relate to a central weakness in Barth's theology: a weakness arising from his desire for systematic unity and for the coherence of all aspects of theology in Christ. This coherence if it is to be disclosed at all in fallible dogmatics will hardly be expressed by any one theologian, however comprehensive and visionary his understanding.

INTRODUCTION

(1) Prefatory

In its title this study brings together three daunting terms: in their different ways the name of Karl Barth, the phrase 'Word of God' and the mention of the Old Testament may very well raise theological spectres. In introducing this study, therefore, it is as well to pause briefly over these three terms, and face, if not lay, some of the ghosts they may evoke. Having done this we shall turn to look at the purpose of their junction as the title and theme of this thesis.

Within a very few years of his death, the work of Karl Barth has already become the basis of a large critical corpus. In the English language alone the quantity and range of criticism is overwhelming, and its growth shows no signs of abatement. This critical industry does not, however, go hand in hand with a more widespread positive appreciation of Barth's theology. On the contrary, it appears to encourage the adoption of stock responses to his work among all but particular specialists in its study.

It is often suggested that Barth himself must be blamed for any inadequacies of critical response. Certainly the sheer volume of his writings militates against their ready and unprejudiced appreciation. Unless the student of modern theology devotes disproportionate time to their examination he is bound to depend on very selective reading of the original or on secondary sources - not always reliable. Apart from this problem of magnitude other factors, too, have lent their influence to impair the balance of assessment and criticism.

On the one hand there is a quality in Barth's theology which seems to demand complete acceptance, total discipleship. The dramatic tenor

of his early writing (the Commentary on Romans in particular) invited an unequivocal reaction; itself something of a trumpet call, it evoked heralds to pass on the message without reservation. As his theology developed some early disciples were bound to grow more critical, but for those who sympathised with his progress and those who later joined the journey the figure of Barth and his theological construction grew more and more awe-inspiring.(1) It is not easy to stand under the dome in St. Paul's Cathedral and shout, and in much the same way it is difficult for one who lives close to Barth's theology to raise significant critical questions. So for the truly sympathetic and thorough student of his work it has always been difficult to retain stringency of judgment.

On the other hand there is much in Barth's work to provoke the opposite reaction. For many readers the extent of his theology and the relentless quality it everywhere displays does more to annoy than to impress. It is, at the same time, avowedly a 'confessional' theology claiming to belong to a particular tradition of Christian teaching; as such it is likely to arouse hostility both among those outside the confession and those who claim it as their own, and no-one else's.(2)

---

(1) Among seemingly uncritical disciples of Barth we might instance, at an earlier date, contributors to Reformation Old and New, edited F. W. Canfield, Lutterworth 1947, and at a more recent date Jacques de Senarclens' Heirs of the Reformation, S.C.M., 1963, both London.

(2) Among unsympathetic critics witness J. Hamer Karl Barth, E.T. Sands & Co. 1962, Cornelius van Til The New Modernism, Philadelphia 1946, idem Barth's Christology, Philadelphia 1962, R. C. Reymond Barth's Soteriology, Philadelphia 1967, and Louis Bouyer The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism. A V Littledale Havrill 1956, London.

For any student whose hostility is aroused by the more obstinate qualities of Barth's theology it becomes difficult to temper sweeping criticism with any strain of understanding and appreciation.

It may be acknowledged, then, that extreme critical reactions are fostered by the very nature of Barth's theology. Nonetheless, if his work is to be more widely valued and the positive qualities of his thinking are to make a contemporary contribution, it has to break free from captivity to both extremes.(3)

In striving to realise this freedom the present study is focused on a deliberately restricted area of Barth's work. What such restriction loses in respect of the richness of the whole conspectus of his theology it may hope to gain in terms of a realistic and balanced judgment of its quality.(4)

The phrase 'Word of God' (to turn to the second term of our title) comes as near to touching the centre of Barth's theology as any three words could. In at once referring to the belief that God has expressed himself to men, the person of Christ as that expression, and a certain verbal and almost intellectual quality in God's self-expression this

---

(3) It is not implied that all criticism has been captivated by extremes vide eg the work of Henri Bouillard (Karl Barth Genèse et évolution de la théologie dialectique Paris Aubier 1957) or Hans Kung (Justification, E.T. London Burns Oates 1964), among Roman Catholics, e.g. Berkouver (The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth, E.T. London Paternoster 1956) among the Reformed Critics, and many of the English specialists, for example Colin Brown, T.H.L. Parker and H. Hartwell, all of whom shun the extreme in criticism.

(4) While clearly restricted in scope, the area of this investigation has the advantage of forming something of a cross-section of Barth's whole theology.

phrase gathers together the dominant characteristics of the theology.

At the same time the phrase remains one of limited currency. It has a vital place in the vocabulary of continental Protestant theology, but figures less prominently elsewhere. It follows that for many readers reference to the Word of God evokes a sense of the foreign and alien quality of work such as Barth's. The limited currency of this phrase, and many others like it, must be acknowledged; it remains a potent factor in the translations of Barth's work and forms a substantial barrier for many English readers. Nonetheless, as we have already suggested, particular expressions like this lead us into the heart of Barth's theology. If it is possible to enter into the language to which these expressions belong without forgetting one's native language then it can only be gain for the student.

In attending particularly to the Old Testament in this study we look to a matter which has commonly been, and generally remains, a theological embarrassment. While Christians still divide into a proportion (perhaps diminishing) who appreciate and read the books of the Old Testament and a proportion who do not, there are few in either camp who attempt to make sense of their position theologically. Under these circumstances the use, or abandon, of the Old Testament becomes a question of taste, or a question which goes altogether by default.

The figure of Barth stands out as that of a Christian who both makes use of the Old Testament and also attempts to account for its use within the terms of the doctrine of God's Word. Perhaps more important still, he makes use of it with obvious relish and enjoyment, in a way which seems to invite imitation. Once more we would hope to gain from the questioning investigation of such use and understanding of the Old Testament.

* * * * * * *

(2) Aims and Method

After this brief general look at issues raised by the terms of the study we come to define the specific aims under which it sets out. Ultimately a single purpose is in view, but in the fulfilment of this purpose it will be as well to explain the particular aims of each major section of the study.

The overriding aim of this thesis is the attempt to discover how far Karl Barth achieved a viable basis for using, and a valuable way of using the Old Testament, and in what particular respects he failed.

After the introductory material which forms this section the study divides into three main parts. The first is concerned to expose the whole area of Barth's doctrine of Scripture; in the first place with respect to the whole Bible, seen within the concept of the Word of God, and subsequently with respect to the Old Testament itself. In this section the essential material from the Church Dogmatics is usefully supplemented by smaller, more concentrated writings.

In the second major section we shall attempt to observe Barth 'in action' with the Old Testament, making concrete use of it within his writings. The intention here will be to cover as wide a range as possible both of parts of the Old Testament, and of ways of employing them. Here we shall attempt to reckon with some of the more significant uses outside the Dogmatics, as well as a cross-section within.

In the third section we shall face the questions which are fundamental to the purpose of this study. In looking for flaws in this area of Barth's work we shall be concerned with several issues: the interior consistency of his doctrine, the kind of demands that the doctrine makes on the text in its practical use, its adequacy to embrace the whole range

of Old Testament material, and so on. But at the same time as seeking to pinpoint its failings we shall endeavour to give some positive evaluation to this manner of use and doctrine.

In conclusion these particular issues and findings will be brought into relation with matters of wider concern. On the one hand, the particular strengths and weaknesses of Barth's work with the Old Testament need to be seen within a more general analysis of his qualities as a theologian. On the other, the implications of this narrow study for the wider questions about the use of the Old Testament must be indicated. We shall end then by making some tentative suggestions as to the path ahead indicated by this investigation in both its negative and positive aspects.

These four particular concerns within the overriding aim already described form the substance of this study. In addition, however, an investigation such as this requires some setting of the scene, without which the action might appear out of perspective. In the remainder of this introduction we shall try to outline the background to Barth's work, and the influences to which he was subject. We shall have an eye particularly to influences which relate to this facet of his theology. We shall also resume the main features of his growth and development as a theologian.

* * * * * * * *

(3) The Setting

The initial outburst of Barth's theology (most notably in the Commentary on Romans (5)) can only be fully understood and appreciated in

---

(5) Specifically on the publication of the second edition in 1921, Muenchen Christian Kaiser.

the light of its context in the history of theology. Here was a reaction against received and accepted manners in theology which astounded the Christian world by its boldness. From the first then the environment and the past are forces to be reckoned with in assessing Barth's work. The influence of this, the immediate historical context, continues to have its effect on Barth's later writing, but another more positive influence comes increasingly to the fore. This is the direct influence of ancient theological traditions, absorbed in the voracious reading of Barth's professorial years. Thus as a provocation to rebellion and as a gradual moulding force the theological past affected his theology decisively. And the areas of Biblical, and more specifically Old Testament, understanding were subject to these influences to a marked extent.

We must first recall the immediate background and environment in which Barth's theology was born, and the thinking against which he rebelled. In spite of parental pressure he chose Wilhelm Herrmann as his own teacher and guide in his later student years, and Herrmann himself looked up to Ritschl, though diverging from his theology to a degree. Both Ritschl and Herrmann found room in their theology for a sense of the objective in faith, where Schleiermacher, the giant figure who stands behind both of them dominating the nineteenth century theological scene, had looked only to the subject, man, and his experience. What Barth himself came to believe was that the object of faith, the God who has spoken to men, must be seen to turn round and take command of the process of faith and understanding: something which, most certainly, neither predecessor would allow.(6)

---

(6) For Barth's own view of Herrmann see 'The Principles of Dogmatics' in Theology and Church E.T. S.C.M. London 1962

Nor did either predecessor find a solid base for maintaining the authority of Scripture. Herrmann, as Barth himself has shown, (7) had the desire to attribute some real weight to Biblical authority, but not the framework of theological thinking to perform his desire. The result is a very slight evaluation of the Bible. Ritschl more particularly gave a subordinate place to the Old Testament over against the New; for though he saw the presuppositions of the New Testament faith of the Kingdom lying within the Old, he saw them as translated onto a quite different plane by Jesus (8).

The weakness in the understanding of Biblical authority here, however, and the restriction of the role of the Old Testament pales in comparison with the views of many of the liberal figures of nineteenth century theology. In his classification of religions Hegel had placed Judaism in a category quite separate from Christianity; while two radicals of the same era, Feuerbach and Schopenhauer, had both attacked Old Testament religion with vituperation. At the end of the same century and the beginning of the next the rejection of Jewish religion and its Scripture found another liberal advocate in the person of Harnack, the great historian of the Church, while in the hands of Friederich Delitzsch the theme took something of an anti-semitic turn (9).

This scanty outline serves only to show the degree to which the devaluation of the Bible in general, and the Old Testament in particular, found a home in the liberal theology which the young Barth inherited.

---

(7) Op cit P.269.

(8) See Ritschl Justification and Reconciliation E.T. 1902, London.

(9) I am grateful to J. W. Rogerson for the observation that this strain can be found at least as early as the eighteenth century in German Old Testament study.

When he rose in rebellion against the whole basis of this theology the new theologian was also rising against this strain within it.

As the new theologian grew older he read the Christian doctors of the past in a depth and breadth which might surprise some of his less attentive critics. This listening to the voices of the past, which bore fruit in innumerable small-print passages of the Dogmatics, had an influence on Barth's thinking which can easily pass unnoticed.(10) These voices, on the whole, need not concern us here, but we must make exception of the one which dominates all others: that of Calvin.

Throughout his life as a theologian Barth saw himself quite clearly as standing within the Reformed confession. It is more that likely, moreover, that the sense of his confessional allegiance was strengthened by the strange and formative experience of his years at Göttingen, as holder of a new and untried chair in a University dominated by Lutheranism.(11) However much weight we give this consideration, it certainly is true that the figure of Calvin came more and more to stand above all others outside Scripture as a guide in the paths of doctrine.

Calvin's understanding of the Old Testament is one of the distinctive facets of his theology. Setting aside the Lutheran contrast between Law and Grace, and the implications of that contrast in Biblical understanding, he maintained that the old dispensation differed from the new 'only in

---

(10) Though it has been clearly observed for example by T.F. Torrance Karl Barth: An Introduction to his Early Theology 1910-1931 S.C.M. 1962, London and H.U. von Balthasar Karl Barth Darstellung und Deutung Seiner Theologie, Koeln, 1951 with respect to the influence of Anselm.

(11) The contemporary position of Joachim Staedke at the University of Erlangen makes an interesting comparison. As a Reformed Professor in a Lutheran University he had to remain many years in the Philosophy Faculty.

respect of clearness of manifestation'.(12) He further distinguished the Old Testament from the New in terms of several 'differences of administration', but these distinctions do nothing to impair the standing which he gave to the Old alongside the New Testament as filled with the spirit of Christ. Within Calvin's theology as a whole this strong emphasis must be allowed its influence in the moulding of Barth's understanding.

Here then, in the liberal theological environment and the quite opposite influence of Calvin we have tried to pinpoint two important factors in the historical background to his work. The realm of historical influence is infinitely complex, and we have only touched its surface here. These brief glances, however, may serve sufficiently to remind us that in no aspect can we afford to look at the writing of Barth in a historical vacuum; with him, more than any other modern theologian, this is impossible.

* * * * * * * * *

(4) The Development of Barth's Theology

Barth's life was a long, and by academic standards remarkably eventful one. The fascinating events and subtle changes of direction which mark its course have been plotted by many writers, (13) and we need not repeat their work here. We shall, however, set out to recall the main stages of his development with particular attention to factors which may be influential in our area of study.

---

(12) Calvin's Institutes, Book II, Chapter 9.

(13) For example, H. Bouillard, C. Brown, T. H. L. Parker, T. F. Torrance op cit, Karl Barth by John Bowden S.C.M. 1971, H. Zahrnt The Question of God Collins 1969, both London.

We have already found cause to mention the environment of Barth's formative years as a theologian and the teaching which he himself accepted willingly enough in the latter part of his student life at university. It was in the subsequent years as a village Pastor (1912-1921) that the seeds of a fiercely independent outlook began to grow, their growth forced on by the pressures of the preaching ministry as a harsh reality; for this reality he found that his theological teachers had given him little helpful preparation, and he was forced back to his own resources. The writings that emanate from the later years in the parish of Safenwil and lead up to the young Pastor's astonishing change of station are marked by a distinctive tone; the tone is that of prophecy, sometimes a little harsh and shrill, always exciting in its sense of new demand and crisis.

The heroes of this stage of Barth's journey (whom he himself acknowledged) form a motley band, and a glance at them confirms clearly this sense of the character of his thinking. Partly through the influence of his friend Edouard Thurneysen (14) he came to value Dostoievsky's novels, with their strange, almost unearthly insight into the grace and forgiveness of God. Kierkegaard, the most strikingly individual figure of nineteenth century Christian thought, exercised a powerful influence, as the pages of the Romans commentary display. Less familiar to our ears are the names of the Blumhardts, father and son, and of Franz Overbeck. The elder Blumhardt was remembered for his demonstration of belief in the healing power of Christ, and for his emphatic proclamation of hope in the

---

(14) The closeness of their alliance can be judged not only from their correspondence but also in the two volumes of sermons published jointly God's Search for Man 1935, Come, Holy Spirit 1933, in which neither felt it necessary to distinguish the particular authorship of the sermons.

knowledge that 'Jesus is victor'. The younger underscored his father's emphasis on the earthly relevance of Christ's victorious kingdom, taking his faith personally into action as a socialist in politics. Overbeck made a still more unlikely hero: a Church historian who claimed to have no contact with Christian belief, and whose critical power was directed like an axe at the neck of late nineteenth century 'modern' theology.(15)

There was something of the prophet, and something of the voice in the wilderness about all these figures of the past and the present who so vividly caught Barth's imagination at this time. But those who argue the question as to which among them held most sway with the young theologian and Pastor are in danger of missing a crucial point. The prophetic message came to Barth's ears from another source, and with a strength more than equal to theirs. For he was discovering 'the Strange New World within the Bible' (16) even while he was following their diverse leads.

The principal writings which remain from the years in Safenwil show clearly how forcefully the matter of the Bible itself was making its impact on him. We have four lively addresses from this period in the collection originally published in Göttingen;(17) two of them are directly concerned with the Bible and its 'new world', the other two are permeated with Biblical quotation and understanding. At the same time we remember the consuming occupation of these years, again a directly Biblical work, the Commentary on Romans first published after many years' labour in 1918, and then completely re-worked for the 1921 second edition which made Barth's name internationally known.

---

(15) See Theology and Church S.C.M. 1962, pages 55-74, London.

(16) The title of the first address in the volume The Word of God and the Word of Man Harper and Row, New York 1957.

(17) Ibid first, second, third and last addresses.

We are bound to observe that the Bible we hear in these early years shares something of the quality of that cluster of individualists we mentioned above. It is a prophetic and at times apocalyptic Bible with an essentially 'strange' and surprising message. It is, moreover, a Bible in which the Old Testament is well to the fore.(18)

The characteristic note of these early years never disappears from Barth's theology, but it does recede somewhat into the background in the subsequent period. For the new professor (installed at Gottingen in 1921) is bound by the necessities of academic professionalism. He feels the pressure of the lecture room and the pressure of his colleagues' competence, and undertakes intensive reading to withstand both pressures. The figure to whom he turns at the very first is that of Calvin, and this movement is symptomatic of this stage in his life as a whole. During the time in Gottingen his mind began to conceive of a 'dogmatics' of his own, and he clearly thought of it in terms of comparison with Calvin's Institutes. (19)

During these years, too, he made an unexpected find; it took the form of a large book which Barth himself accurately described as 'dusty, unattractive, almost like a table of logarithms'. This was Heinrich Heppe's Reformed Dogmatics, a book which concentrates the theological learning of several centuries of Reformed thought. One among thousands of doctrinal works which passed through Barth's hands at this time this

---

(18) For example, ibid first and second addresses where although the Bible as a whole is under review, Old Testament allusions preponderate. We also find extensive quotation of the Old Testament in the Commentary on Romans.

(19) See T. H. L. Parker Karl Barth, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1970, page 61 and Revolutionary Theology in the Making, page 171, Epworth, 1964, London. K. Barth & E. Thurneysen

book is, again, symptomatic of the way he was being influenced as a theologian, and growing. For reading this tome he awoke to a new sense of the beauty of real dogmatics, the rewards of its patient, orderly and unpretentious progress. A reading of Romans would scarcely prepare anyone for this new departure.(20)

In these years of his life in German universities (at Münster and Bonn after Göttingen) we hear less of the Bible than at any other stage in his development. This is not to imply that Barth's estimate of the central authority and significance of the Bible had in any way altered, but rather that he was well occupied worrying the new bone. Furthermore, quite new considerations were beginning to enter the field of his thinking and to demand attention after the move from Gottingen. For these years saw the rise of National Socialism, and politics rapidly became a vital focus of concern for the theologian as for any thinking man.

But before the political issue had come to a head for Barth he had reached and passed the crucial point in his life's doctrinal work. The vague thought of imitating the Institutes had begun to take on reality, the bone of the Reformed dogmatic tradition had begun to yield its marrow. For while the initial attempt at a major dogmatic work had failed (at least in Barth's own eyes) (21) his subsequent rigorous rethinking, and his closely studied work on Anselm (22) had enabled a fresh and more satisfactory start to be made. The first half volume of the new

---

(20) See Karl Barth's preface to the English translation of Heppe's Reformed Dogmatics Allen and Unwin 1950, London.

(21) Christliche Dogmatik in Entwurf, vol.I Die Lehre von Worte Gottes 1927 München.

(22) Fides Quarens Intellectum Muenchen 1931, S.C.M. 1960, London.

Church Dogmatics made its appearance in 1932.(23)

We have already referred to the rising political tension. By this time the Church and theology were by no means exempt from the encroachments of Hitler's party, and though Barth waited thoughtfully for some time, in the Summer of 1934 he spoke out, stating his position in the theologically based argument of a powerful and influential pamphlet: Theological Existence Today.(24) In the pamphlet Barth left no doubt as to his position: he stood against the regime's interference with the Churches and against any form of 'German Christianity'; the Christian could acknowledge one leader alone, Jesus Christ.

The politically obedient 'German Christians' held an important mass meeting in Berlin in the following November, and among the speeches they heard was a violent attack on the Jewish Scriptures of the Old Testament. The event reminds us of the close interplay that must have been set up between Barth's doctrinal and Biblical work and the political developments of his society.(25)

In 1935 Barth reaped the reward of his political plain speaking and was ejected from his chair at Bonn and extradited; he returned to his native Switzerland, and after the failure of his appeal to the German authorities, accepted a new chair at the University of Basel, the city of his birth some fifty years before. The next weighty volume of the Church Dogmatics appeared in 1938 (C.D.I 2)

---

(23) In his Karl Barth - an Introduction to his Early Theology S.C.M.1962, T. F. Torrance studies the relationship of the work on Anselm to the genesis of The Church Dogmatics.

(24) Theologische Existenz heute Muenchen 1933, originally published in the journal Zwischen den Zeiten.

(25) The meeting was held on 13th November, 1934 and the speech given by a certain Krause.

There is a certain characteristic quality about the writings of this, Barth's second great period of productive work, in the nineteen-thirties. The tone is marked by a certain wariness, as it were whetting the defensive edges of his theological position. In his critical work on Anselm Barth is protecting his theology against its own previous lapses. The pamphlet Theological Existence Today and the other political writing which ensued disclose an essentially theological defence against the threat of National Socialism. More dramatic even that this latter was the way in which Barth fended off the threat (as he saw it) from a much less dangerous looking quarter, that of Emil Brunner's theology. For in 1934 he published, under the startling title Nein! his response to Brunner's attempt to allow a meagre place to natural theology in the approach to Christian faith.

In dealing with the first complete volume of the Church Dogmatics (the doctrine of the Word of God, parts 1 and 2) which date from this decade, we need to be aware of the same quality in Barth's writing. The need he seems to have felt to gird about his position on every side against the threatening possibilities of error which endanger it, gives to these books a tenor which is scarcely present in any of his other writings.

When we reach the beginning of the Church Dogmatics it is common for biographers of Barth to stop dividing his life and work into stages. The production of this great unfinished masterpiece lends an apparent uniformity to the thirty years of its writing. But change was in fact taking place through these climactic decades of his theology, as few would doubt. The difficulty is locating it when the whole is cloaked by the one black and white (or for the English reader black and gold) mantle of the 'Dogmatik'.

What we can quite clearly affirm is that the small, subsidiary works of the later years disclose a theologian subtly transformed from the Barth of the pre-war era. The famous essay on The Humanity of God, the delightful chapters of Evangelical Theology and the two series of sermons preached in Basel prison share a sense of relaxation and joy within the knowledge of God's grace. The emphasis, within a development with strong bonds of continuity (26) has shifted from one pole to another, from the prophetic cry of alarm to a calm note of assurance. We can also be clear, on looking back to the Dogmatics, that the new atmosphere begins to pervade the work even in the second volume. Making allowance for the subjects under survey we need not be surprised that the fourth volume (on the doctrine of reconciliation) breathes this air entirely.

While this delicate and gradual transformation is relevant to the particular questions of our study a further observation about these post-war years concerns us more closely. In the writing of the second volume of the Dogmatics (the Doctrine of God) Barth found himself face to face with the problem of election. Here he felt compelled to diverge from the teaching of Calvin to an unusual degree, and as he took his own path he felt, in the absence of this favoured support, under more compunction than ever to work strictly under Biblical authority. For this reason the long Biblical quotations and expositions which proliferate in the middle volumes of the Dogmatics are of particularly critical importance; they are by no means put there for fun or for theological good form, but are set down as the sole foundation of the theological development.

In concluding this short resumé of Barth's life as a theologian we must observe that the years of the Dogmatics were, by and large,

---

(26) As Henri Bouillard demonstrates in his Karl Barth, Aubier 1957, Paris.

theologically lonely years. At the outset the companionship of Emil Brunner was decisively put aside (though friendship was at least formally restored towards the end), and for three decades Barth was working in company with no major theologian. He does maintain the long established friendship with Thurneysen, however, and for purposes it is particularly interesting to note the close relation he feels (at least in 1942) to Wilhelm Vischer - an Old Testament scholar - and his work. We shall have opportunity to look at Vischer's work more closely later.

Most of the major developments in Barth's life are pleasantly unexpected, and so it is with the last we shall mention. As he grew old the theologian who had taken more trouble, perhaps, than any other to define his position over against Roman Catholicism found considerable and increasing pleasure in the relations which grew with their theology and theologians. Many Roman Catholics engaged in dialogue with Barth the patriarch, (27) and ultimately he was able to accept an invitation to travel to Rome and engage in discussions with theologians there.(28) This human melting (though not to be confused with a theological rapprochement) and the wry humour with which Barth himself recorded it, catches something of the ethos of his last years.

---

(27) For example Karl Rahner, Jerome Hamer, H.U. von Balthasar, Hans Küng.

(28) The event is described by Barth in his work Ad Limina Apostolorum, E.T. St Andrews Press, Edinburgh, 1969.

PART I

1 The Word of God

One of the most basic and consistent notes of Barth's theology is this: that we cannot even begin to know God. This was part of the strange and shocking message which burst on the world of Christian thought through the pages of the Commentary on Romans; God is essentially an 'unknown God'. And yet, by the power of a miracle this unknown and unknowable God speaks to man, and makes his word heard. This Word of God comes to man as something utterly new, outside the widest range of his human experience.(1)

If we take a chronological jump to the other end of Barth's writings we find less of the strange and the shocking, less of the dramatic paradox of that earlier position, but still the same fundamental note. This time, however, the rather abstract reference to the Word from beyond is filled by the content of a name, the power of the miracle is identified as the power of Christ. 'Apart from and without Jesus Christ', we read in the fourth volume of the Dogmatics, 'we can say nothing at all about God and man and their relationship with one another'.(2)

Here then, in the belief that God has broken the silence of man's deaf perceptions by his miraculous Word, is the very basis and presupposition of Christian theology for Barth. The place of the study of the 'Doctrine of the Word of God', at the outset of the Church Dogmatics stands as a constant reminder of this presupposition; without it neither faith nor the reflective work of the theologian within the community of faith would be possible.

---

(1) Romans E.T. Oxford 1968 see e.g. pp. 235-238

(2) C.D. IV 1 p.45

The centrality of this doctrine was aptly recognised by one of the earlier British critics of Barth. H. R. Mackintosh, in his study of Types of Modern Theology, gave a vigorous welcome to this 'new work' and, choosing from a range of current titles, characterised it as 'Theology of the Word of God'. He was writing just after the publication of the first part volume of the Dogmatics, and observing progress at that stage he comments that in the past 'Barth gave us, it may not unfairly be said, considerably less help than was desirable in identifying the content of the Word, in distinguishing what it was from what it was not'; things had improved, however, and 'in recent works he has made it plain . . . that the Word of God is Jesus Christ'.(3)

This Word of God, "Which became flesh and is called Jesus Christ", is the necessary ground of Christian belief. But it is more than this; it is exhaustive in its communication and leaves scope for no other 'words' about God to be heard. It is "itself and as such the (in every respect) perfect and insurpassable Word of God, the Word which exhausts and reveals our whole knowledge of God, and from which we must not turn one step, because in itself it is the fulness of all the information that we either need or desire concerning God and man, and the relationship between them, and the ordering of that relationship."(4) This powerful doctrine of the Word is the positive basis of Barth's rigorous exclusion of any 'natural theology', any theology which finds its source outside the biblical revelation in Christ. This exclusion has often been seen by Barth's critics as the most

---

(3) Op. cit. P.284. As early as 1926 in a lecture on Church and Culture Barth makes the explicit identification of the Word of God as Jesus Christ; see Theology and Church SCM 1962 p.335

(4) C.D.II 2 p.152 cf God Here and Now, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1964 p.12.

obstinately negative element of his thought - a partial misunderstanding for which his own initial outburst under the title 'Nein' must be held considerably to blame. In act, however, as Wolfhart Pannenberg has recognised, (5) it is the positive impact of God's direct self-revelation in the Word which more than anything else makes 'natural' avenues to faith unnecessary and even absurd for Barth.

We have seen that in his mature theology Barth defines the Word, which is so fundamental to faith and so complete in its revelation, simply by the name of Jesus Christ.(6) In the systematic exposition of this doctrine in the first volume of the Dogmatics, however, he makes the definition considerably more complex and expansive. The framework for this developed definition is threefold, for while the identity of the Word with the one Christ is absolute (7) its communication to us takes on a threefold form. First is the event of God's condescension, in which the Word becomes flesh and dwells among men; this is the primary form of the Word, and remains such, for Christ before the incarnation and after the ascension is eternally the Logos of God. Secondly, however, it is given to the human words of Holy Scripture to become the Word, to communicate the revelation which is Christ to men; so the Bible may properly be called simply 'the Word of God'. Thirdly, the proclamation of the Gospel to men in every age, based on Holy Scripture, is given by God the capacity to make his Word present; so the event of preaching (in the widest sense) becomes the final form of his Word.(8)

---

(5) W. Pannenberg Offenbarung als Geschichte Göttingen 1961 E.T. Revelation as History Sheed & Ward, London 1969

(6) See e.g. C.D. I 2 p.123

(7) C.D. I p.513

(8) C.D. I 1 pp.98-140

If we should feel, on seeing this brief abstract of the doctrine, that the threefold division of the Word makes for an artificial, almost cardboard theology, we recall an important compensating factor in Barth's theology generally, which he brings to the fore here in particular. This is his continual emphasis on movement and action as qualities in the field of Christian understanding. In none of the three forms should we think of the Word as a kind of static property or attribute. Rather a word is something spoken, something living, its interaction between man and man is always 'event'; and so it is with God's communication. We refer to the Bible and the proclamation based on it as the very Word of God when both of them are fused into the event, the movement, in which God reaches down to grasp man's heart and to awaken in him the reaction of faith. In this movement from God to man we know the Bible and proclamation for what they are: forms of the one Word.(9)

2 The Bible as Word

As we narrow the focus of our attention down from this whole area of the Word as a basic component of Barth's theology to the issue of the Bible as a form of this Word so we are bound to concentrate particularly on one definitive exposition of the matter. For in some three hundred pages of the first volume of the Dogmatics we are given a detailed study of Holy Scripture as the Word.(10) Other passages in the Dogmatics, however, help to clarify this exposition, and outside its weighty volumes we discover one particularly useful support. This is in the form of an essay under the title 'Twelve Theses on the Authority and Significance of the Bible', published in an English

---

(9) C.D. I 2 pp.512 and I 1 pp.104-106 and 122-124

(10) C.D. I 2 pp.457-740

collection of some of Barth's later addresses and papers 'God Here and Now'.(11)

It is clear from the brief survey of Barth's general doctrine of the Word that he can derive the Bible's status as sharing its name from one source alone. It is as testimony to Jesus Christ that the Bible is God's Word. When men allow themselves to forget this dependence of Scripture upon Christ they fall into danger: "The irremediable danger of consulting Holy Scripture apart from the centre". For the true authority of Scripture is established only when "Jesus Christ is seen to be the whole of Scripture, the one truth of revelation"(12)

More specifically the Bible amounts to a two-fold testimony to Christ. A testimony that looks forwards, from the Old Testament, and backwards, from the New.(13) With this two-fold testimony in mind Barth is fond of referring to the whole Bible as the 'witness of the prophets and apostles' - those who look forward and backward to Christ.

We have already noted Barth's emphasis on 'event' in the doctrine of the Word. With respect to the Bible in particular he uses this category to make it clear that it is only by the grace of God and through the ever renewed action of God's Holy Spirit that these words are equated with the one Word. He refuses to allow the absolute qualities of God himself to be localised in this human phenomenon, except as God wills it to be so.(14) But, while it is the divine action which makes the Bible the Word a human attitude is necessary

---

(11) See above, note (4), pp 45ff.

(12) C.D. IV 1 p.368

(13) C.D. I 2 p.683

(14) C.D. I 1 p.123

for the appropriation of the Word: it is the attitude of faith, itself the miraculous gift of the Spirit. For without faith and expectation in the approach to Scripture it can only yield offence.(15)

Having heard so much of the Bible's capacity, under the power of God, to speak his Word we may still ask why it is this particular writing, these two Testaments, which have the capacity. And we may question just how this Scripture's authority is claimed and upheld. To this question Barth gives a simple answer which he expresses in parable in the 'Twelve Theses': "Ask a child why, among many women, he calls this particular one his mother, and all he will be able to say will be only a repetition of the very thesis for which he has been asked the reason: 'But this is my mother'".(16)

The same understanding is expressed in another way by the statement that the Bible asserts itself, proves itself, to be God's Word. When in the latter part of the Dogmatics Barth deals with the position of Scripture as supporting the Community of faith he reverts to this same point: "That Scripture upholds the Community is not something that Christians can fabricate by their own Bible-lectures and Bible-study or even by the Scripture principle, but it is something that Scripture achieves of itself." Here we find ourselves within a logical circle, a circle within which the only possible statement about the Bible's status as Word is 'That it is true.' (17)

So far our examination of Scripture as God's Word to man seems to have implied only the individual's reaction in faith. Clearly, however, the recognition of these writings as Holy Scripture is more

---

(15) C.D. I 2 pp.506 f

(16) God Here and Now p.45

(17) C.D. I 2 pp.535 f

than the decision of the individual in faith. This recognition of the fact which God has brought about is the work of the Church. The Church acknowledges the canon of Scripture, she does not fix the canon, for the canon asserts and fixes itself, but she plays the part of faith in recognising the truth.(18) The canon, in its very decisiveness acts as a sign, saying to the Christian 'here are your marching orders' (19), and as the Church maintains the canon so she holds up an indication to the Christian that here he may expect to find Holy Scripture (20). This witness and sign-posting of the Church does not 'prove' the canon's authority to us, but leads us to expect to discover the proof in these writings themselves.

In view of the merely recognising function which Barth attributes to the Church of the early centuries with regard to the canon it necessarily follows that, in his understanding, this need not be the last word. The canon is not by definition fixed for ever, and there is the possibility of change. This possibility is something of a theoretical one, and the precise conditions for its fulfilment are not given. The basic condition, however, would be that some extra 'canonical' writing should assert and prove itself to be a vehicle of the Word of God.(21)

The clear emphasis that underlies all these elements in the understanding of Scripture is this: that power and priority belong to God, that the event of the Word's communication proceeds from him. It is in the interest of this emphasis that Barth does battle against the traditional concept of verbal inspiration.(22) The growth of this concept he describes as a 'freezing up of the connection between

---

(18) C.D. I 2 pp.473 f

(19) C.D. I 1 p.114

(20) C.D. I 2 p.479

(21) C.D. I 2 pp.473-481

(22) C.D. I 2 pp.514-526

Scripture and revelation', and its ultimate consequences he discerns in the declining valuation of the Bible whose status the doctrine intended to support.(23)

Against the doctrine which makes a 'paper pope' of Scripture Barth maintains the importance of the realisation that God is free, even in regard to these writings. This freedom, which is never expressed as more than a theoretical or latent quality, means that God could choose 'a new verbal form beyond the verbal form of Holy Scripture' for his use. 'He is not bound to it, but it is bound to Him.'(24) When he expresses this point in more detail Barth stresses that the description 'Word of God' when used of the Bible remains in truth a statement about 'the being and rule of God in and through the Bible' and can never become 'a statement about the Bible as such'.(25)

Barth further holds, in his stance over against the doctrine of verbal inspiration, that the divine communication of Scripture is always a miraculous event. In particular, it is miraculous in that it displays the power of God's Word to speak through the fallible words of men. Here, Barth claims, the advocates of verbal inspiration were again at fault in that they subtracted the divine miracle from the operation of Scripture. They lodged the authority and value of the Bible in the wrong place - in the mouths of men, who were prophets and apostles, but remained fallible men, and not in the mouth of God, the infallible one.

In the Dogmatics Barth takes this understanding of the human quality of the Bible so far as to talk of its 'vulnerability'. Indeed

---

(23) C.D. I 1 P.139 and I 2 pp.525 f

(24) C.D. I 1 p.157

(25) C.D. I 2 p.527

he states that 'At every point it is the vulnerable word of man'. The word 'vulnerable' is chosen with care, for it indicates the precise nature of Barth's standpoint, which is that the biblical authors were capable of erring. To say at this or that point that they did err, he maintains, would be to overvalue the infallibility of our own modern viewpoint. In spite of this reservation the capacity for error is a characteristic which he takes seriously; it extends, he allows, not only to the limits of the writers' secular understanding, but also to their religious and theological positions.(26) The capacity for error, the borrowings from contemporary cultures, the internal contradictions, these must be accepted 'if we are not to be guilty of Docetism' in our use of the Bible.

In this treatment of the human quality of Scripture Barth notes one particular distinction of the world-view of the two Testaments, held in common with 'all ancient literature'; this is their ignorance of "the distinction of fact and value which is so important to us, between history, on the one hand, and saga and legend on the other". This distinction he allows no ultimate significance, but he knows its hold on us. Where we find ourselves perplexed by the absence of the distinction in biblical literature "it may be a matter of simply believing the Word of God" whether in history or saga form.(27) At another point in the Dogmatics Barth refers to the exegete's need to 'push back' the distinctions between saga, history and so on when he has once recognised them

---

(26) C.D. I 2 pp 508-510 cf II, p 106

(27) C.D. I 2 p 509 cf III 1 p 82. Barth's concern for modern man's 'perplexity' in the face of the biblical confusion of history and 'saga' seems to diminish as he goes on.

in the text, and then to proceed with "tested and critical naivety" to respond to the kerygmatic sense.(28)

One more significant factor must be recognised with respect to the 'humanity' of Scripture: the particular human authors were themselves men of a certain time and place, and more specifically men of a certain race. In the light of current anti-semitism it is not surprising that Barth gave special attention to this point in the course of his consideration of Scripture (the relevant part volume, I 2 was published in 1938). This essential Jewishness of both Testaments is seen as the ultimate source of offence for all Christians - though only a latent or hidden source in many. Yet to enter fully into the Word of God as Scripture communicates it we need "in a certain and ultimately decisive sense actually to become Jews". Clearly this supposition demands a high degree of understanding, scientific investigation and sympathy with the history of this people, the setting within which the biblical texts were written. (29)

Here in outline we have seen the position which Barth gives to Holy Scripture within the doctrine of the Word of God. One pole of his understanding is fixed firmly in the recognition of God's power and activity: "The Bible is God's Word so far as God lets it be his Word, so far as God speaks through it". (30) The other pole stands in the human quality of biblical writing, bringing with it the realisation of the truth "of the miracle that here fallible men speak the Word of God in fallible human words".(31) The very centre of the understanding points us to the figure to whom both Testaments bear witness, for

---

(28) C.D. IV 2 p 478

(29) C.D. I 2 pp 510f.

(30) C.D. I 1 p 123

(31) C.D. I 2 p 529

"Holy Scripture is the word of men who longed for, expected, hoped for this 'Immanuel', and finally saw, heard and handled it in Jesus Christ". (32)

3 The Old Testament as Word

When we recall the considerable line of thinkers and theologians who confronted Barth with the repudiation of the Old Testament or its devaluation in contrast with the New we need not be surprised that he took the pains which he did to emphasise and reiterate his own stand against its repudiation. In fact there is a striking stress on the unity of the two Testaments and the status of the Old alongside the New throughout the pages of the Church Dogmatics and elsewhere.

It is Barth's contention that the New Testament grows out of the Old: "The New Testament witness to Jesus Christ, the Son of God, stands on the soil of the Old Testament and cannot be separated from it". (33) This position is significant enough, especially when it is accompanied by the requirement that the Christian born outside Israel's traditions must enter into them to understand his faith (34), but it still does not represent the full force of his emphasis in this area. For he does not speak only of the close relation of the two Testaments in this way, but of their very unity. (35) The two stand inseparably together, and it is impossible to divide one from the other "without at each point emptying and destroying both".(36)

---

(32) C.D. I 1 p 121

(33) C.D. IV 1 p 166

(34) C.D. IV 1 p 167

(35) C.D. II, pp 363 and III 2 p 615

(36) C.D. I 2 p 482

In maintaining this position Barth refuses to talk of 'two' of anything in the two Testaments. There are not two religions related to one another historically or even homogeneous, rather there is a "unity of revelation" between "so-called religions" in the Old and New.(37) In a similar way the communities of both Testaments are bound together, for in each case this people - one among others - is the people of God.(38) While the very title of the two parts of Scripture implies a distinction of 'Covenants' even here Barth talks of unity, in terms of the "bow of the one covenant which stretches over the whole".(39) Over the whole spectrum of biblical issues he is anxious to stress the same understanding, that the Old Testament is never "violated or emptied" by the New, rather it is "fulfilled", and this relationship implies the continued relevance of the Old for Christian faith.(40)

Clearly this powerful emphasis brings Barth's theology sharply up against a strong tradition of biblical interpretation. This is the view which categorises the Old Testament religion and faith in terms of 'Law' and sees it to stand in opposition, or at least contrast, with the 'Gospel' of the New. From the time of Luther himself this view has often held sway in the Lutheran tradition, and

---

(37) C.D. I 2 p 79

(38) C.D. IV 3 p 730

(39) C.D. IV 1 p 669

(40) C.D. III 4 p 309

there is no dearth of modern exponents to maintain it.(41) Indeed, present-day Lutheran criticism of Barth finds much of its meat in this issue.(42)

Barth stands alongside Calvin in his refusal to countenance the Lutheran antithesis of Law and Gospel, and whether we look with sympathetic or hostile eyes at his view of theirrelation to one another we should recognise in this matter a crucial aspect of his theology. It is a particularly crucial and interesting aspect for our attention in this study, in that it marks one of the major points at which the question about the use and understanding of the Old Testament links in with the vital questions about Barth's theology as a whole.

It is very nearly, but not quite, accurate to describe Barth's treatment of this matter by saying that he simply reverses the Lutheran understanding of the relation of Law and Gospel: putting the grace of God before his command, instead of the reverse. While this is certainly the tendency of his view, it is more typically expressed in terms of the Gospel's 'enfolding' the Law, or the Law's being wrapped around by the Gospel. A characteristic expression of the position comes in the second volume of the Dogmatics: "It is the Gospel which contains and encloses the Law as the ark of the covenant the tables of Sinai".(43)

---

(41) Bultmann expresses such a view in his own terms, see his essay "Prophecy and Fulfilment" in E.T. in Essays on Old Testament Interpretation, ed. Claus Westermann, SCM, London, 1963. In the light of modern research Luther himself is no longer credited with maintaining any single dichotomy between the Testaments. Among modern Lutherans H G Reventlow has made an interesting study of justification in the Old Testament (Rechtfertigung im Horizon das Alten Testaments, München, 1971.

(42) For example in the work of H Thielicke or G Wingren. Barth himself gives a fuller list in C.D. IV 3 p 370.

(43) C.D. II 2 p 511.

Barth is determined here (and in his determination he follows hard on the heels of Calvin, as before) that no wedge be driven through the works of God, no artificial distinction made between the way he acted at one time and the way that he acted at another. So it is that he declares the works of God towards Israel to have been always full of grace (as his works towards the new Israel) and his action in the New Testament to contain the demands of Law (as in the Old).(44) The witness of Luther himself (at least in one frame of mind) is claimed for this refusal to divide Scripture (45) and his own comparison of Holy Scripture to the seamless robe of Christ is quoted to his disadvantage, as illustrating the need to comprehend the unity of the Old and New in the Bible.(46)

At one and the same time Barth finds support for this unifying view in 'the best' of Luther's writing on the subject, and also laments the other side of his work and the ensuing tradition. It is wrong to regard the Old Testament as the classical document of a 'religion of works', for the Old, along with the new, contains the revelation which contradicts all religion.(47) Equally it is mistaken to find in Paul's teaching about the Law any evidence for the contrasting of Old and New: when he spoke of Christ as 'the end (telos) of the law' we must interpret his phrase in analogy to the rabbinic concept of the kelal - Christ is as it were the summing up of the law.(48)

---

(44) C.D. II 2 p 563

(45) C.D. I 2 pp 76-78

(46) C.D. I 2 p 484

(47) C.D. I 2 pp 310 f

(48) C.D. II 2 pp 244 f. cf IV 3 pp 370 f

All this emphatic argument might amount to little more than good germanic polemics if there were no centre of positive doctrine in Barth's viewpoint. But a centre there most decidedly is, and it lies in that place where the general theology of the Word would lead us to expect. For the centre of Barth's argument in the matter of the unity of the two Testaments is found in the person of Christ. More specifically it is found in the contention that Jesus Christ is as much the 'true object and content' of the Old Testament as of the New. The awareness of this truth comes to us only in the light of the New Testament, but in that light we come to see it as the truth, not as any flight of fancy, that Jesus was 'Lord of this history too'.(49) The knowledge of this true object of the Scripture of Israel enables the Christian, as against the exegete of the synagogue, to see the true significance of its words,(50) and the Christian interpreter will truly understand them if he makes the name of Christ the 'last word' in his exegesis.(51)

Barth sees the teaching of Jesus himself, in its use of the Scriptures of Israel, as carrying through the same understanding. For Jesus the Rabbi, while like other contemporary teachers in technical respects, was unlike them in his grasp of the Old Testament as essentially a book not of the past but of 'the present and future'. In his preaching that 'the time is fulfilled', Jesus is seen to realise that 'It is now at this point that there really takes place that which is declared' in the Old Testament.(52) The view of the New Testament writers is brought in alongside that of Christ himself to bear witness to the true understanding of the Old,(53) and a virtual 'cloud of witnesses' from Irenaeus to the Reformers is summoned to the same service.(54)

---

(49) C.D. III 2 p 476 (50) C.D. I 2 p 488 (51) C.D. II 2 p 366

(52) C.D. IV 2 p 199. Barth's view of rabbinic exegesis is, of course, a jaundiced and highly questionable one.

(53) C.D. I 2 pp 72-74 (54) C.D. I 2 pp 74-78

In one important passage Barth undertakes to express in some detail what is envisaged in the understanding that the Old Testament witnesses to Christ.(55) Here, having first bemoaned the failure of much current scholarship in this field to penetrate to the level of its real significance, he outlines three ways in which this Testament, too, speaks of Christ.

Firstly he sees it as witnessing to the revelation of God's act in covenant. This covenant comes in several forms within the Old Testament, but none of them can be regarded as the ultimate or essential covenant; for this is the covenant found in Christ. But the Old covenants do not only point to this latter in a general way, they indicate Christ the Mediator particularly in their own concern with God's mediators: Moses, David, and so on.

Secondly the Old Testament bears witness to the hiddenness of God, the dark aspect of his nature which comes to men in the form of judgment on unrighteousness. This hiddenness of God, and the resistance which men present to it in their waywardness, points to the ultimate manifestation of God's judgment, the occasion when his hiddenness is most truly found, at the crucifixion of Christ. For here we see God's taking the judgment upon himself, as he had always been doing in the concealment of the Old Testament.

Thirdly there is a more explicit way in which the Old Covenant relates to Christ. For in all its leading concepts there is an element of expectancy, of incompleteness, and even of explicit prophecy of his fulfilment. The themes of the 'people', the 'land', the 'temple', the 'king', these and others all look to their perfection in the New Covenant of Christ.

---

(55) C.D. I 2 pp 79-101

In so far as 'the synagogue' will not concur in this understanding of the true object and content of the Old Testament Barth maintains that their's is an incomplete and truncated interpretation. She is best depicted as on the Minster at Strasbourg as "the uncannily pitiful figure with bandaged eyes and broken lance".(56) As we shall observe in the detailed studies Barth contends on several occasions that without the discovery of the text's true object in the person of Christ it must remain aimless and pointless.(57)

Before leaving the consideration of the unity of the two Testaments we must advert briefly to one further passage of extended treatment. This passage comes late in the Dogmatics (in IV 3) where the narrative concerns the Prophetic office of Christ. Having set Christ as prophet over against the individual prophets of the Old Testament in their limitations Barth goes on to make a proviso. While no single prophet foreshadows Christ altogether, the prophetic witness of the whole Testament does form a prototype.(58) For in four ways it matches the office of Christ: it is prophetic in union with its history,(59) it is universal in its prophecy, it knows God's grace as a present reality, and it is mediatorial. Seen, thus, as a whole, the prophetic witness of the Old Testament matches that of Christ, and is properly 'messianic'.(60)

---

(56) C.D. I 2 p 101.

(57) For example in the expositions of C.D. II 2 pp 354 and the treatment of Ps 40:8 at II 2 p 605.

(58) C.D. IV 3 pp 52-72

(59) This is a somewhat cryptic expression of a point which even in Barth's lengthier treatment is very opaque.

(60) C.D. IV 3 p 65

4 Distinctions within the Word

Thus far, under the heading of 'the Old Testament as Word' we have set out Barth's explanations of the unity of the two parts of Scripture. We come now to examine his understanding of the factors which distinguish the Old from the New within the embracing concept of the Word.

When Barth first comes to consider the distinctive character of the Old Testament it is in terms of 'time' that he does so. The matter of time is one of the interesting minor preoccupations of the Church Dogmatics, and in relation to Biblical doctrine the theme finds a particular statement. Barth sees that the truth 'God reveals Himself' is equivalent to saying 'God has time for us'; this time, the time of Jesus Christ and of 'fulfilment', has a special quality above our 'fallen' human time. The special quality is shared by the times of the Biblical witnesses: on the one hand the expectation time of the Old Testament, on the other the recollection time of the New.(61)

In the third volume of the Dogmatics Barth reverts to the matter of time, and in dealing with Leviticus 25 describes what he sees as the 'time-consciousness' of Old Testament man: "Not the consciousness of indefinite time, but that of the time of an era destined to culminate in another, and therefore the explanation of a coming time, the end and new beginning by which the present time with its limitation is already illuminated and relativised, being drawn and controlled by it as though by a powerful magnet".(62)

---

(61) C.D. I 2 pp 45

(62) C.D. III 2 p 457

So the Old Testament is seen as marked by a quality of expectancy, and in this quality is perceived the factor which lifts its time above "the other times in the time area ante Christum natum".(63) As such it retains a distinct identity which is not simply swallowed up by the New Testament and its time of recollection.(64) Barth expresses a parallel understanding of the relation of the Testaments when he talks of "the difference and unity between promise and fulfilment, between the announcement and the actual coming of the kingdom"; this statement arises, strangely enough, in consideration of the prevalence of polygamy in the Old Testament.(65)

In claiming that Christ is the "true object and content" of both Old and New Testaments Barth does go on to make some allowance for distinction between one and the other. It is in line with the language of expectation and fulfilment when he describes Christ's activity as "incarnandus in the Old Testament and incarnatus in the New", as it is when he speaks of Christ as essentially "the coming one" in the former. (66) In a slightly different vein he refers to the name of Christ as "concealed under the name of Israel" in the Old, and "revealed under his own name" in the New. As we have seen before (p 33 above) the idea of the Old Testament as holding a secret truth only disclosed in the New is a recurrent emphasis in Barth's treatment of this matter.(67)

Of all the statements of the distinctive relation of the Testaments one in particular is favoured by Barth. This is the reference to the Old Testament as 'the prophets' and the New as 'the apostles'. So,

---

(63) C.D. I 2 p 70

(64) C.D. I 2 p 54

(65) C.D. III 4 p 200

(66) C.D. I 2 p 720

(67) See for example C.D. III 2 p 299

typically, in an essay in Theology and Church dating from as early as 1925 he speaks of the Church "witnessing to the revelation - and that witness is in the form of confirming the prophetic message of the Old Testament and energising the New Testament apostolic word".(68)

We would suggest that all the expressions of the unity and differentiation of the two Testaments reviewed so far fit into a consistent picture. The emphasis in this picture falls heavily on the side of the identity and inseparable relation of the two. The statements which distinguish the Old Testament as 'expectant', 'secret' and 'prophetic' clearly have the force only of marking differences of approach towards the one Christ whom both Testaments attest. There are, however, some stray passages in the Dogmatics whose force seems stronger, or at least other, than these, and we must briefly note them.

In one interesting passage in the third volume of the Dogmatics the suggestion is made that for the Old Testament witness the concern is primarily with "an all-powerful Word which has been declared", while that of the New is characterised by "an all-powerful act which has come to pass". This hint receives (so far as we are aware) no significant development elsewhere in Barth's writing, but taken in conjunction with the other 'stray' viewpoints it may suggest an unconscious wavering in his otherwise firm identification of the essential content of the Testaments.(69)

Rather more decisively out of tune with the main line of understanding are the suggestions that the Old relates to the New Testament

---

(68) Theology and Church p 363 cf C.D. I 2 pp 716 f

(69) C.D. III 3 p 181. It may be as well that this hint is no more developed since it is difficult to see where it would have led.

as 'the question correctly put' relates to 'the answer correctly given', or that it expresses a 'nevertheless' which the New Testament transforms into a 'therefore'.(70) Both these quotations would serve better to illustrate the basis of Bultmann's view of the Old Testament than Barth's normal position.(71) The same might well be said of a statement in the fourth volume: "The Old Testament is the indispensable lens by which we can read in the mirror of the Son of God who and what we were before Him and without Him - men of sin . . .".(72) Bultmann would undoubtedly manage the sentence without reference to "the mirror of the Son of God", but we may question how far this would alter its significance (as indeed we shall later find occasion to do).

We need to exercise a little caution in the use of these somewhat unexpected statements, chosen out of a work of great length and complexity. Nonetheless we cannot but make ourselves aware of their presence, and the possibility that they should carry influence beyond their number. The point at issue is clearly not that we should use private detection to display Barth as guilty of inconsistency. Rather, in observing these casual, almost unconscious, expressions we may find clues to possible weaknesses within the scope of Barth's doctrine of the Bible as Word.

With this in mind we notice one further quotation. Here Barth still claims that the Old Testament points towards fulfilment, but maintains that "The one in whom God reconciled the world unto himself, in whom the barrier was lowered and hostility ended, has not yet appeared and is not yet named in the Old Testament sphere".(73)

---

(70) C.D. I 2 p 120, III p 379.- the kind of usage for which Barth has / particular fondness

(71) See, for example, Bultmann's essay cited above (note 41)

(72) C.D. IV 1 p 502

(73) C.D. II 2 p 425

5 Concluding Note: Scripture and Dogmatics

In this chapter we have looked in summary at Barth's theology of the Word of God, and the place of the Old and New Testaments within that theology. The critical questioning of his doctrine in this area will be undertaken later, in the light of the ensuing detailed studies. Meanwhile, we must pause to mention the way in which Barth sees the work of the Dogmatic theologian as relating to the Bible; put another way, to see what function he believes Scripture ought to fulfil in a 'Dogmatics'.

The innocent reader, on opening the initial volume of the Church Dogmatics to discover Barth's understanding of the Dogmatic task is likely to be surprised. For he finds dogmatics defined principally in terms of a critique, a test. The test is imposed on the Church's proclamation, and the norm against which her proclamation is tested is God's Word. In concrete terms that means that dogmatics must be "the critical inquiry as to the agreement of Church proclamation, not with any norm of human truth or human value . . . nor with a standard of divine truth already known by the Church herself . . . but with the revelation attested in Holy Scripture".(74)

It is clear that Scripture plays the normative role in this process. Indeed, another way of describing the 'formal task' of dogmatics is this: "it is first a call to the teaching Church to hear, that is, to listen to Jesus Christ as attested in Holy Scripture".(75) If the dogmatician is to issue this call he must himself be a listener, one who works in attentive obedience to the Word of God in Scripture. This is not to say that dogmatics is equivalent to exegesis - which is a

---

(74) C.D. I 1 p 304

(75) C.D. I 2 p 802

special task in itself. But the dogmatic theologian relies upon the work of exegesis, and being continually concerned with Scripture himself will often take up himself 'the immediate and detailed work of exegesis'. (76)

When he comes, inevitably, to grips with the task of exegesis the dogmatic theologian will look to the Bible in faith, in the knowledge and constant expectation that God's own Word is here, and he will look not for facts behind the text but for the message of revelation expressed in both the content and the form of the text.(77) He will expound the Bible in its true humanity, with regard to the historical setting, the particular time and place of its origin, but he will not stop short at this 'historical' level of understanding, but seek beyond and through it to hear the Word of revelation it speaks.(78)

Barth believes that the very attempt at interpretation depends in the first place on the sure knowledge that Scripture is innately self-explanatory, endowed with a natural clarity or perspicuitas - or rather given this quality in the movement of revelation by God's Spirit.(79) Ultimately, he states, "these writings, as God's Word in human words expound themselves, are in themselves . . . everywhere perfectly clear and transparent".(80)

And yet we have a part to play as mediators between Scripture and other men and as human interpreters. In the first place we must

---

(76) C.D. I 2 p 821

(77) C.D. I 2 pp 492 cf God Here and Now p 54

(78) C.D. I 2 pp 466

(79) God Here and Now p 52

(80) Ibid

approach this task in subordination to the Bible: our own world of thoughts and feelings must be placed as it were at its feet. In the act of interpretation we should realise three basic stages. First we observe and 'make sense of' the words before us, looking at them in their historical context and gathering their full sense within that context. Next we reflect on the text as significant for ourselves. In this part of the process (a process which Barth makes clear is not in practical reality divided into temporal stages as this might suggest) we inevitably bring our own 'philosophy' or mode of thought to bear upon the text. This element of our own humanity is not to be shied away from, but acknowledged and controlled: the philosophy must remain the servant of Scripture and not become its critic, and the conclusions of our reflections - influenced by our own modes of thought - must be recognised as provisional, or as hypotheses. The last aspect of interpretation is the appropriation of the text, or its assimilation. Here our aim is for the Word which the Scripture speaks to us to become 'our very own', and to enter into the roots of our thought and action.(81) In this whole process of exegesis the interpreter must allow Scripture to 'lift him out of himself'.

With this conspectus of the relation of the dogmatic theologian and interpreter to the Bible as Barth sees it in mind we shall leave the general view of the relevant statements of doctrine and turn towards the concrete use of Old Testament Scripture.

---

(81) C.D. I 2 pp 710-740 gives us a close study of the exegetical process on these lines.

PART II

Studies in the Use of the Old Testament

In the ensuing studies of Barth 'in action' with certain passages from the Old Testament we shall attempt primarily to sketch an outline picture of the actual exegesis, then to point and underline any matters of particular significance within the exegesis as a whole, and finally to comment on the nature of the exposition and its place and influence in the surrounding narrative. While we shall enter questions and criticisms in point of detail here, the fundamental questioning of Barth's effectiveness in exegesis and the validity of his methods will, again, be held over to the next chapter.

1 Genesis - chapters 1 and 2

In the first part of the third volume of the Church Dogmatics Barth enters upon the doctrine of creation, apparently with some trepidation.(1) Very soon the demands of 'the theological principle' which he accepts 'without rival' lead Barth to plunge into an exposition of the first two chapters of Genesis, an exposition which runs to some three hundred pages of the volume. Most often, as is well known, his method of working in the Dogmatics is to 'show his biblical workings' in passages of small print distinct from the main lines of the argument which are carried forward in the larger print of the remaining text. Here, however, he forsakes this common method and furnishes exegesis of Genesis in both larger and smaller print, generally giving the latter over to points of technical and historical detail and the former to the fundamental interpretation. In the following summary we shall note the matters of particular significance in both areas.

---

(1) Preface to C.D. III 1 p IX

In the first section of the present part-volume (III 1) Barth has submitted that insight into the reality of creation is possible only in terms of faith, specifically of faith in Jesus Christ; our very sense of the reality around us would have no secure basis were it not for the self-declaration of God the Creator to men. Through knowledge of Christ we come to know his Father as Creator, for Christ is the very Word by which God created and sustains the world.(2)

The following section (S41) contains the whole of the exegesis of the two traditions of creation in Genesis chapters one and two. It opens with the assertion of the understanding that they are at once 'historical' and 'pre-historical' and so can be regarded neither as simple 'objective history' nor as pure 'myth', (which for Barth stands at the opposite extreme to 'objective history'). Rather than either of these descriptions the appropriate term for these narratives is 'saga', doing justice at once to their historical and supra-historical dimension. This pre-historical history of creation is not to be set apart from the remainder of the Old Testament since it forms an integral part of the Covenant history which is THE history forming the goal and aim of all creation.

The fundamental message of the first creation narrative (found in Genesis 1:1 - 2:3) is summed up in the title of the second division of this section: 'Creation as the external basis of the Covenant'. For the message of this narrative is that creation, though not itself a part of the Covenant, is essentially its presupposition. The detailed exegesis follows.

---

(2) C.D. III 1 pp 3-41: no page references will be given for the remainder of this section.

Gen. 1:1 The primary insight given is that all things stand under the pure
1:2 creativity (the bara') of God. In the act of creation God passes over and excludes the possibility and threat of chaos, he puts it behind him so that it remains hereafter only as a frontier of 'that which is', as a threat with no positive being of its own. As he divides the 'darkness of untruth from the light in which alone his
1:3ff works can take place' God sets up a sign for men of his faithfulness.
1:6ff He overcomes the menace of the waters by the ordering of his solid firmament; this menace that he thus contains is destined at the very last to disappear altogether (Rev. 4:6) when the threatening
1:9ff waters become a placid 'sea of crystal'. In the work of the third day God again demonstrates his faithfulness to man as he averts the menace of the water, making for a sphere of existence and a 'table'.
1:14ff The heavenly lights are created essentially to be servants, they should be given no special status of their own, for they shine to repeat to man the message of God's light for him. In the creation
1:20ff of birds and fishes we are shown the power of God to give life even in the unfamiliar spheres of air and water.
1:24ff The account of man's creation shows him as distinctive yet not apart from his environment - for he is made on the same day as the beasts of the earth. The divine soliloquy with its plural form of speech (v 26 'Let us make man . . .') commands our attention. It indicates that man is to be a true counterpart to God by virtue of his confrontation and relationship (as male and female). In this confrontation and relationship he answers to the nature of God himself as he who is not solitary. Man's creation in this condition, as male and female, is to be a paradigm of all that God does with him. Among the beasts man is to be primus inter pares, he, no less than they, depends on God's continued blessing for his procreation. The

image of God among men - which has the form of confrontation one with another - will find its fulfilment in the second Adam (who is truly the first, or primary) - Jesus Christ; he will take up the Christian community into his perfect imaging of God (Col. 1:15ff). Before the fall creation means peace between the creatures; man remains a vegetarian, at peace with the beasts, until later (Gen. 9:3). But Eden must not be understood as a dream-like paradise or golden era, for the fullest perfection of life we must await the
2:1ff end. The rest of God (the act of the seventh day) indicates his satisfaction with and good intention for this very creation - the one here created and no other. God offers his rest to man for him to share. In this rest given to man to share we can see the true beginning of man's history in relation to the gracious God, so it is properly the beginning of his week.

Barth understands the second saga (Genesis 2:4b-25) as presenting a new angle, without contradicting the first. Its message is summed up, again, in the title of this division: 'The Covenant as the internal basis of Creation'. For it compels us to see that God's love is at the bottom of his creative work - that is to say, Jesus Christ is at the bottom of it. Where the former saga spoke of creation as the pre-condition of the Covenant, this speaks of the Covenant as the inner dynamic of creation.
2:4bff We notice immediately that God is known here under his name as the Covenant God - Yahweh Elohim. Once again, as in the former account, when man is created he is both like and unlike the beasts, his distinction is marked by the particular directness of God's contact with him, but like them he is formed from the dust. In this saga the role of water is reversed; now it is the dry and fruitless dust which threatens, while the water represents the fructification which

the earth always requires from God. Something of the same symbolism is to be seen in Ezekiel chapter 37.

2:8ff The garden of this saga is neither an imagined Elysium nor a clearly located place, it is real but geographically indefinite. Within it the tree of life, standing at the centre, represents the centrality of dependence on God as the source and sustenance of all life. The other tree stands for God's power of distinction, the power which man cannot maintain for himself and which God mercifully upholds for him. Man, for his part, is given the freedom to confirm God's proper superintendance of this realm of distinction. The story of life in this garden might seem to be no more than a grand illusion were it not for the truth that its possibility has been realised in Christ.

2:18ff Here a clue from the first saga is picked up (1:27) developed and clarified. In the account of the inspection and naming of the animals we see man's choice at work, rejecting these as counterparts for himself since he requires a being at once distinct from himself and yet the same. Woman, who fulfils this condition, is at once the free creation of God (made not only without man's aid, but while he sleeps) and also man's choice. From now on man is incomplete alone, man and woman rightly exist together in a proper order, she deriving her glory from him. So long as they depend freely on God and not on themselves they are without shame in their relationship. The saga does not envisage their relationship in terms of procreation - as does most Old Testament narrative of the man-woman relationship - but speaks with a voice like that of the Song of Solomon. It speaks erotically, as of the pure relationship of the Covenant, an end in itself. This quality of pure relation is characteristic of the beginning and end of God's history with man, but not the 'fallen middle'. Real understanding of this

passage can come only when it is seen in the light of Ephesians 5:25ff, where the pure Covenant relationship is realised in terms of Christ (the firstborn of all creation) and his Church.

At this point Barth's continuous examination of the Genesis sagas comes to an end. Subsequently in this volume of the Dogmatics there is a regular reference to these texts, but no more major exegetical points arise. The continuation of the second Genesis saga, in the subsequent narrative of Adam and Eve (chapters 3 and 4) does not receive the same extended exposition as do the first two chapters either here or elsewhere in the Dogmatics.

* * *

From the whole scope of the exposition we have summarised we shall pick out three points of particular importance for closer attention.

Very early on in his exposition Barth happens upon a major crux interpretum in the form of the 'waste and void' (tohu wa-bohu) of Genesis 1:2. The difficulty of this verse centres on the question whether the chaos described in these words is a state in some way preceding God's creative work, or whether it is the first preliminary stage in that work. The first possibility Barth rules out (although acknowledging that the writer might be familiar with such a concept from the myths of Babylon) on the grounds that the Old Testament knows nothing of the concepts of creation which underlie it, which are, moreover, ruled out by the force of the initial 'bara''. The second is clearly impossible in view of the preceding verse which refers to the immediate creation of 'heaven and earth' with no preliminary act of 'partial creation' - which would in any case fall outside the seven day scheme.

In the face of this exegetical quandary, in which Barth finds neither of the traditional lines of interpretation possible, he sets out a third

understanding which he feels avoids the impasse. This we have already touched on in brief (p 45 above). It is suggested that the verse is concerned with "the possibility which God in his creative decision has ignored and despised, like a human builder when he chooses one specific work and rejects and ignores another."(3) In the verse we are given 'a portrait, deliberately taken from myth' of a world which God 'left behind' in creation; or again it is an evocation of the 'nothing' which is destroyed in creation.(4)

This threatening possibility, this 'nothing', Barth sees as left behind and destroyed by God. And yet, in the time to come, man will make the amazing and foolish effort to recall this 'non-reality'. And so in his disobedience to God and his true creation man will find in this 'ugly realm' a certain absurd and shadowy reality, a shadowy but very real power. (5)

With the development of this interpretation of the chaos of Genesis 1:2 we are still left with a further difficulty. The third clause of the verse speaks of God's Spirit 'hovering' over the deep. How are to make sense of this strange reference? Firstly Barth rejects the translation of the Hebrew here as 'wind' rather than 'Spirit' of God; for the verb (rahaph) suggests the movement of a bird rather than a wind, and there is nothing else to imply or support the presence of a wind of God in the passage. The verbal implication of a bird's 'hovering' or 'brooding' over the deep leads many to think in terms of the myth of a world egg in creation. But all that follows discloses a concept of creation which altogether contradicts such an idea. At this point Barth takes up a reference

---

(3) C.D. III 1 p 108

(4) ibid

(5) C.D. III 1 pp 108-110

in Gunkel's commentary, while scarcely agreeing with the main lines of its interpretation. Gunkel states that the 'spirit' of this verse has no inner connection with the creator God, and Barth takes the point up in viewing the Spirit here as 'a caricature' of the true Creator: for within the sphere of this absurd and rejected world "even the Spirit of Elohim would have been depicted in this clause, for it belongs to the very nature and essence of such a sphere that in it even the Spirit of Elohim is condemned to the complete impotence of a bird hovering or brooding over shoreless or sterile waters".(6)

This understanding of the Spirit as representing a god with no relation to the God of Israel rounds off Barth's evocative and highly original exegesis of this verse; we shall return later to its critical consideration.

The second matter for our more careful attention in this exposition centres on the concept of the image of God, and it arises in Barth's interpretation of 1:27 in the first saga and 2:18-24 in the second. In this area he is concerned to steer with the greatest possible care in avoiding a number of avenues which he sees as culs de sac. So the study of this theme is thorough and precise.

Barth acknowledges the help of two interpreters, who were also friends and contemporaries, in reaching his own view of these passages. W Vischer (7) was of assistance in indicating the general lines of understanding, but Dietrich Bonhoeffer took the matter a good deal further.(8) A reading of

---

(6) C.D. III 1 p 107

(7) In his work Das Christuszeugnis des Alten Testaments 1934, E.T. Lutterworth, London, 1949.

(8) In Schöpfung und Fall, E.T. Creation and Fall, SCM, London, 1959. It may also be worth noting a hint of this line of interpretation in Schleiermacher, On Religion, E.T. London, 1893, p 72.

Bonhoeffer's book discloses the surprising extent to which his exposition and Barth's (written some ten years later) run along parallel lines over the whole creation narrative, but the agreement of the two is particularly striking at this point. Bonhoeffer saw man's freedom as the essential quality of likeness, or analogy, to his Creator; it was in this freedom that the image of God could be discerned. But this freedom is more precisely defined "by the fact that creature is related to creature. Man is free for man, male and female he created them". So it follows that in speaking of the image of God in man, and the analogy of man to God we must speak of an 'analogia relationis' not an 'analogia entis'.

With the exception of the general concern with man's 'freedom' we recognise most of Bonhoeffer's expository insights as echoed in the exegesis in the Dogmatics. Barth (as we have outlined above, pp 45f) draws attention to the close association of the phrase "male and female created he them" with the idea of the image (the same association is found again at Genesis 5:1f). It is a matter of astonishment to him that this juxtaposition in the text has so commonly been neglected, and that commentators have looked anywhere but here to find clues as to the significance of the image. For him this juxtaposition suggests that the proper location of the image is not in any 'primitive' idea of physical likeness to God (though this kind of thinking might have been present at some stage in the growth of the saga), nor in the position of authority and responsibility given to man within the created sphere, nor indeed in any 'interior' quality of man above the rest of creation. Rather Man's existence in confrontation is the key to his likeness to God, and this confrontation is epitomised in the primary relation of man and woman.(9)

---

(9) C.D. III 1 pp 181-206

This unique confrontation in man - unique because it is the only form of differentiation among men, while the beasts are all divided variously 'after their kinds' - amounts to an analogy with the nature of God the creator who is not a lonely God, but has within himself a 'genuine counterpart'. (10) Yet we would be mistaken to understand the analogy as subsisting within man himself, as a quality of his being; rather it emerges in man in relationship with his neighbour and with God. It is not a characteristic apparent to ordinary anthropology, moreover, for it discloses itself only to the eyes of faith. It is hidden from men altogether, indeed, until they see the true representative of God's image in Christ, who came as, above all, one living in confrontation with his fellow men: 'the man for others'.(11)

The understanding which Barth develops with reference to Genesis 1:27 as to the image of God he further fills out in exegesis of 2:18-24 in the second saga. Here, as we have noted (above p 47), emphasis is laid on the incompleteness of man while he lacks his proper 'helpmeet', and the part which is played by the choice of man within the sphere of the creativity of God in recognising and accepting woman as his true partner. Once again, the picture presented by the text is seen as falling into place only under the light of the New Testament's manifestation of Christ.(12)

The third matter which engages closer attention is one of narrower compass than the questions of chaos and of the image of God; but in a small way it comes to play a rewarding role in the Dogmatics. The exegesis we turn to now is that of the first three verses of the second chapter of Genesis: the description of God's rest which concludes the former saga.

---

(10) C.D. III 1 p 183

(11) C.D. III 1 pp 191ff cf III 2 pp 219ff

(12) C.D. III 1 pp 288ff

Barth's first concern in the interpretation of these verses is to stand firmly against the LXX reading in verse two. This reading ('sixth' for the MT 'seventh') implies, logically enough it seems, that the work of creation was in fact 'completed' on the day of man's creation, the sixth day, while the seventh was the ensuing day of God's rest. Barth, however, is keen to press the recognition of the seventh day as having its own 'action', in the form of God's ceasing to work, completing it in this way, and confronting the six day's labour.

The rest of this seventh day, moreover, must not be judged on the level of anthropomorphic tiredness, as though God needed to relax, in the mind of the biblical writer. Rather it is a sign of God's true satisfaction with the creation as it stands, in particular with the final work of creation - man. More specifically this day of rest reveals two aspects of God's nature. First his freedom, in that he is free to limit his activity, not entangled in some necessity of creation. Secondly his love, in that God reveals here that he has found the object of his love and will find time for this object.

The qualities which are expressed in this seventh day are also given by God to men, to share within their own limitations the same freedom and love. And as men observe their own sabbath rest they are reminded of God's grace as the beginning of all life. For in the Genesis saga itself the day of rest is not given to creation as the last day, but as the very first day of its life. Thus in making the Sabbath the first day of the week the early Church was only fulfilling the intention of this original ordinance. In Genesis, as in the Church of the Resurrection, the day of rest stands before all the works of man as a sign of the precedence of God's grace: the true order of Gospel before Law.(13)

---

(13) C.D. III 1 pp 213-228

We must now step back from the closer view of this exegesis to see the treatment of Genesis chapters one and two, and of these particular issues within it, in the setting of the Dogmatics as a whole. Our intention here is to discern what function the exposition of these chapters is actually being made to serve in the train of Barth's theology.

The first matter for remark in the context of this wider view is the powerfully seminal nature of the exposition. Two of the points on which we have focused seem, in particular, to be the origin of vital and growing themes in the theology of the Dogmatics; or, if they are not themselves the origin, they stand close to it.

The concept of das Nichtige, 'nothingness' as the English translation renders it, has little place in the first two volumes of the Dogmatics, or indeed in any other of Barth's earlier works. At the very most we might detect a slight hint of the specialised use to which he presses this peculiarly German word in one reference in the second volume.(14) In the Genesis exposition, and more specifically the exposition of Genesis 1:2, the concept makes only the most fleeting appearance,(15) but the groundwork for its subsequent development is laid in the understanding of the threat of chaos. In the succeeding part of the volume we find more reference to the terminology of das Nichtige, but we are still taken somewhat aback on opening the third part (III 3) to find that it has assumed a commanding position as the key concept in the understanding of evil.(16) In this commanding position it remains to the end of the Dogmatics as we have it.

---

(14) C.D. II 1 p 590

(15) C.D. III 1 p 108

(16) C.D. III 3 pp 289-368 God and Nothingness.

For our purposes it is particularly important to observe that this concept, when it comes to the forefront of attention in the Dogmatics, arrives in company with the language and thought of Genesis 1:2, and of Barth's exposition of it. The theme clearly does arrive in this company, both implicitly and explicitly,(17) and so we are confirmed in the impression that the biblical exegesis played a seminal part in its development.

To say this is by no means to suggest that we have here the solitary root of this whole concept. Barth himself makes clear, in a long passage of digression, that an understanding of evil in these terms had been undertaken by Julius Müller and Schleiermacher in the past, and that the contemporary thought of Sartre and Heidegger added a further dimension to its understanding. Each of these, however, comes under severe criticism from Barth, and their views are examined as much for the purpose of refutation as to acknowledge debt.

As a further reservation it is as well to remember the general warning: post hoc, non ergo propter hoc. Here, as elsewhere, the arrival of a new theme or concept on the scene may owe more to the dictates of the theological timetable than to any other influence.

With these reservations in mind, however, the impression remains that the study of Genesis in the Dogmatics acts as the seed bed for the growth of the theme of das Nichtige.

The second growing point has, again, received attention already as an important facet of the exposition: it is the study of the image of God based on Genesis 1:27. The development of this theme in terms of the confrontation of man and woman and the place of relationship in the true life

---

(17) C.D. III 3 pp 289ff and 352

of man includes Barth's statement of the analogia relationis, the understanding of man's likeness to God in terms of his being not alone but in fellowship.

In studying Barth's work in the nineteen-thirties, immediately before the emergence of the Church Dogmatics, T F Torrance has shown what a crucial part his study of Anselm played in paving the way for the second, successful attempt at large scale doctrinal writing. Specifically he points to the concept of analogy as providing the key to unlock the dogmatic door, affording, as it did, a framework of reliability to work within. The Roman Catholic critic Hans Urs von Balthasar in his treatment of Barth's theology gives a position of similar importance to the growth of the concept of analogy as the basis for building the Dogmatics.(18)

While the observations of these critics are accurate with respect to the change in the mode of thinking which affects Barth's theology it would be misleading to conclude that the language of analogy comes to the fore at the outset of the Dogmatics. For through the whole of the first two volumes the word analogy - or more accurately its Latin form analogia - is used almost always disparagingly. The use here is within the phrase 'analogia entis' which Barth employs to characterise a basic tenet of Roman Catholic theology as he sees it; it refers to a correspondence between the being of man and that of God who created him which enables man in some degree to know God. Such a correspondence, with its implication, in his opinion, of a capacity in man to encompass God and ultimately to control him, Barth rejects altogether. In his own discussion of the knowability of God he keeps the capacity to make God known firmly within the grasp of God's own Word, and cautiously refers to its being 'lent' to man in the miracle of faith.

---

(18) In Karl Barth, Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie, Cologne 1961

Thus when we reach the Genesis exposition it is to hear for the first time the term analogia used with positive force. The need to make exegetical sense of the critical phrase "in our own image and likeness" was certainly the occasion, and possibly the stimulant, for a wholly new progression in Barth's theology. To pinpoint more exactly the degree and kind of change which is involved it is interesting to note a short passage in the first part volume of the Dogmatics.(19) Here Barth is striving to define the basis of our assurance in knowing God through his Word, and striving to define this without crossing the thin line which divides off the dangerous area of the analogia entis. Here he goes so far as to speak of "an anology, a similarity, for all the dissimiliarity involved in the difference between God and man, a 'point of contact' - now we may use this concept too - between God and man".

But it is here that the thought ofthis earlier stage diverges from that of the Genesis exposition. This 'point of contact', Barth goes on to affirm, is known as the 'image of God' in man; but now rather than putting forward a positive understanding of the image he turns to attack Brunner's view of it in his book Gott und Mensch. So far as this view is concerned, he says "as a possibility for God proper to man qua creature the 'image of God' is not only, as we say, with the exception of some remnants ruined, but annihilated". Barth here seems to accept that there was such a human 'point of contact' in man as first created by God, but that it was utterly lost in the fall. The knowability of God for the Christian now is a restoration of the 'lost point of contact', a restoration performed by God's act of reconciliation in Christ and only realised within the sphere of faith in that reconciliation.

---

(19) C.D. I 1 pp 273f

The vital observation to be made about this passage is that in it the 'image of God' is understood as a point of radical discontinuity in man's relation to God. In and after the exposition of Genesis 1:27 in the third volume of the Dogmatics the case is altogether altered. The imago Dei - now rightly understood in Barth's eyes - is an enduring point of continuity in the whole history of God's dealings with man from creation to redemption. So just as the image of God never stood for some ideal unfallen man with the capacity to know God in his solitary grasp equally it cannot be said that the true image was lost or broken at any stage: certainly the Old Testament itself knows of no such loss.(20)

In this concept of the image, developed in the light of the Genesis saga itself we surely have, as Henri Bouillard has recognised, a new element in Barth's thought.(21) Here for the first time concepts of confrontation and relationship come to the fore in the Church Dogmatics, and from this stage (III 1) onwards they are seldom far from the centre of the stage. Here will be found one of the keys to the understanding of Christ and his reconciliation: he is essentially the man for others and the man for God, living in perfect relation to both. Here, too, will be found a key to human self-understanding - undertaken in the light of Christ - and to Christian ethics.

From this examination of two important themes it would appear that these two chapters of Scripture and their exegesis play a very positive role in their theological context. From the treatment of Genesis 1 and 2 there arise changes in Barth's theology, elements which are new and even surprising within the pages of his own work, and also points of general theological originality.

---

(20) C.D. III 2 pp 323f

(21) Henri Bouillard Karl Barth, Genèse et évolution de la théologie dialectique, Aubier, Paris, 1957, Volume II

2 Leviticus chapters 14 and 16

If it was with some trepidation that Barth approached the doctrine of Creation in the scheme of the Dogmatics it could not be with greater anxiety than that which arose in prospect of the doctrine of the Election of God, within the scope of the second volume. Here for the first time in the Dogmatics Barth feels compelled to diverge clearly and substantially from the direction of Calvin's thought and to strike something of a solitary course. He holds the Bible responsible for driving his theology into this divergence from honoured precedent, and it is to the detailed exegesis of the Bible that he turns for support: "It is because of the rather critical nature of the case that I have had to introduce into this half-volume (viz II 2) such long expositions of some Old and New Testament Passages".(22) The passage of exposition which we shall examine is thus only one chosen out from a number of comparable examples.

From the outset Barth lays stress on the understanding that the doctrine of election is nothing other than 'Good News', that "its function is to bear basic testimony to eternal, free and unchanging grace as the beginning of all the ways and works of God".(23) Our knowledge of this election which is the "best word we can hear" derives from Jesus Christ, who is both the electing God and the elected man in himself. The truth of God's electing grace which we discover in Christ is this: that God has chosen to take upon himself the rejection which man's rebellion has incurred, and to give to man the joy of sharing in his own glory.(24) Thus the knowledge of God's election brings assurance and good news to all men, to every individual; but the means of witnessing to the whole world this joyful knowledge of Christ is

---

(22) Preface to C.D. II 2, p X

(23) C.D. II 2 p 3

(24) C.D. II 2 p 94

the Community which is itself elected or chosen out by God. This community once took the form of Israel, and now takes the form of the Church.(25) In both its forms the community stands in the place of mediation between the election of Christ and that of individual men.(26)

The message of election which the Church mediates to the individual tells him that his own attempt to live in isolation from God is not only mistaken but also based on misunderstanding. In Christ it is clear that the possibility of life in isolation from God is no longer a possibility for man, for God himself has made it void.(27) To the individual man who lives in the 'as if' of isolation from God the knowledge of election holds out the possibility of transformation, of change to a life lived in the reality of God's justification; the individual who meets this possibility can carry on regardless and continue to live in falsehood, but he cannot annul God's choosing and change the reality itself.(28)

At this point in the development of his doctrine Barth pauses to look back at the classical Reformed doctrine of predestination and to pinpoint the fault which he discovers in it. He then, in the section with which we are concerned (chapter 35:2) confronts us with the question 'What is it that makes individuals elect men?' The answer is found not in any quality of the elect as individual people, but in the nature and purpose of God, who is himself individual, and chooses men out in particularity. The chosen man is differentiated from others by his witness to the truth of the relationship of love between himself and God. The other, however, cannot be separated off as standing outside this love of God or his will for relationship, but

---

(25) C.D. II 2 pp 195ff

(26) C.D. II 2 p 196

(27) C.D. II 2 pp 315-318

(28) C.D. II 2 p 321

only as witnessing to it by their disobedience, where the elect witness by their obedience. In that both witness to God's will and his grace, both belong together in Christ. The elect look back to the person of Christ and remember that his grace is the only basis for their escape from rejection by God; the others look to him and see in him alone the possibility of deliverance from God's wrath, indeed the certainty of that deliverance.(29)

On the basis of this understanding of election Barth directs our attention to the person of Christ as disclosing the true nature both of elected man and rejected man. And it is here that exposition of the Old Testament enters the field, for - "In this connexion we have to consider in greater detail the witness to Christ in its first and basic form as prophecy and announcement; the witness to Christ in the Old Testament".(30) In the first place Barth recalls the many pairs of characters who stand opposed to one another in the patriarchal stories of the book of Genesis, from Cain and Abel to Perez and Zerah, and who display both the contrast and the solidarity between the election and rejection of God.

We are then introduced to "an unusually eloquent reminiscence of the conspicuously differing choices of Genesis" in two sets of ritual instruction from the book of Leviticus, found in chapters 14 and 16. Barth suggests that the key to the understanding of the sacrificial law of the Old Testament lies in the perception that these rites are "signs and testimonies" of the significance of the history of Israel in which they are set, that they point to the intention of God which determines that history and indicate it with great precision.

---

(29) C.D. II 2 pp 340-354

(30) C.D. II 2 p 354

The first of these sets of ritual laws is concerned with the cleansing of a 'leper' (NEB man with a malignant skin disease); it involves the use of two birds, one of which is killed, and the other of which is dipped in the blood of the former and released. The second is the better known of the two, dealing with a part of the ceremonial for the day of Atonement; here two goats are employed, the first goat is killed and its blood sprinkled about the sanctuary, the second is sent away into the wilderness after the transgressions of Israel have been confessed over its head.(31)

In examining these two ritual descriptions more closely Barth points first to the common features of both. In each case the two creatures employed are identical, and the selection of one for one purpose and the other for another is inscrutible and "is really made by God himself". In each case one of the animals is used and the other is not, a feature which like the first indicates the character of the ceremonies as commentary on the history of Israel as a "history of differing choices". Further, both rites are concerned with purification, not a purification which they themselves effect, but one being brought about by God.

These points of correspondence between the two ceremonies are, however, only to be understood in the light of their differences. The apparent points of correspondence have in fact different significance in the two rites. This claim Barth amplifies as follows.

In the ritual of the day of Atonement the former of the two goats, that which is killed, is the animal of positive importance and use. The second goat, the 'goat for Azazel', while remaining alive in fact symbolises by its

---

(31) Leviticus 14:49-53 and 16:1-22

fate the very "essence of desolation, indeed of death itself". Yet both the "useful" and the "useless" animal are "placed before the Lord" in the rite, both belong together, and the useful animal, the type of elected man, must recognise in the other a mirror of itself, and an image of the proper fate from which God delivers.

In contrast to this pattern Barth maintains that the rite described in Leviticus 14 "runs in exactly the opposite direction". The positive importance, the type of elected man, here rests with the second animal, the bird which is not killed but released. The second bird is released in the open field, and expresses in its freedom the freedom of the healed leper. This release and freedom is made possible, however, only by the sacrifice of life itself in the form of the life of the other bird: "The one has necessarily to die in order that the other may live".

Held once again together the two sets of ceremonial illuminate one another. The purpose of election is manifested in the freedom which is given to the non-elect. The 'wealth' of the chosen one consists in the sacrifice and pouring out of his blood on behalf of the other: "He becomes poor in order that the other, the poor, may become rich through his poverty". The goodness of God towards the non-elect too is illuminated by the picture of the second bird which is heir to "the resurrection for whose sake the elect must go to his death".

Barth sees in these two rites a double mystery or "inscrutability". The first is this: that we do not know the death or the life with which these ceremonies deal. We do not know the death which is God's work, a sacrifice which works to the benefit of others; nor do we know the extremes of life - either the life of total desolation, the wilderness life, nor the life of release and freedom. These pictures of life and death transcend the limitations of the form of life and death which we ourselves know. So it is that they have to be exemplified in 'pictures', in the language of the ceremonial law.

The second inscrutability lies in the fundamental unity of the two rites. All four figures in the ceremonial are witnesses to the one grace of God, and yet it is impossible to hold the four together, to "recognise ourselves simultaneously in both the one and the other" ritual law. The ceremonial laws speak with a necessary duality, like the duality of the figures of Genesis, of Cain and Abel and so on, but they seek to testify to a unified truth. By this inscrutable quality, as by the former, the rites point beyond themselves.

Barth sees the 'riddle' of this double mystery as presenting the reader of the Old Testament with a clear choice, a choice which he expresses in three categories. First that the true subject to which these types point is yet to be shown to us. Second that their true subject does not exist, that they point into a void. Thirdly that their true subject is known in the person of Jesus Christ. "The choice between these . . . possibilities is not an exegetical question; it is a question of faith".

If, faced by this choice, we give the positive answer that these rites point towards Christ we shall be following ancient Christian exegesis of the passages. But Barth maintains that he has deliberately held the name of Jesus Christ back in his exposition, rather than follow the mode of the older expositors: "preferring to let the Old Testament text, which could not utter his name, speak by and for itself". But this exegesis has itself brought the reader to an enigma. The enigma does not have to be solved by reference to Christ, it may have no solution at all. But in faith in Christ the realisation that these texts speak ultimately of him becomes "not merely possible but even necessary". "How can we believe in him", Barth asks, "and ignore the subject of which they speak, or suppress the final word of their exegesis, namely the designating of their subject, and therefore the naming of the name of Jesus Christ?"

It is Barth's contention that every elect individual in the Old Testament is a witness to and type of Christ, and so it can be said that "Jesus Christ is each of the four creatures in Leviticus 14 and 16"; in him the truth of election to which the figures of the Old Testament bear fragmentary witness finds its fulfilment and unification. Thus Calvin's exegesis of Leviticus 16 is upheld, for Christ is at once both the spotless lamb sacrificed, and him upon whom the sins of the world are laid. In the same way, as the one who was "delivered for our offences and raised again for our justification" (Romans 4:25) Christ contains both aspects of the ritual of Leviticus 14. For Christ is in himself both the elected and the rejected of God.

In concluding his study of these two passages Barth faces again the challenge of critics who oppose this Christological interpretation: "Those who think they must reject this as the final word in exegesis of Leviticus 14 and 16 must either undertake to prove another and better final word in explanation of these passages, or they must admit that they do not know of any, and therefore that ultimately they do not know to what or to whom these passages refer".

The extended series of Old Testament expositions at this juncture is concluded by reference to the figures of Saul and David in the books of Samuel, and to the narrative of I Kings 13.

* * * * * * * * *

The exposition of these two passages from Leviticus, though detailed, is in length only a fraction of the treatment of Genesis 1 and 2 which we first examined. It follows that fewer points in the exegesis press for our more exact attention, and that its significant features are largely encompassed by the outline we have already given. It remains here only to focus on two matters of detail in Barth's treatment.

In the first place we note Barth's characterisation of the sacrificial regulations as 'signs and testimonies'. It is aswell to quote the precise words in which he expresses this definition. "We can understand the law for both these rites (and the sacrificial law of the Old Testament generally) when we perceive that sacrifice accompanies the history of Israel (as does prophecy in its own manner) as a sign and testimony of the divine intention which underlies it and guides it to its goal, and therefore of the meaning of the events and sequences of events in which this history proceeds".

According to this view Old Testament sacrifice is related closely and integrally to the history of Israel. The relation is not simply that supposed by many Old Testament students - where the historical dimension is seen as grafted on to a cultic tradition whose roots may be elsewhere. Rather the relation is at the deepest level, since the sacrificial law provides an interpretative key and explanation of basic patterns in the recorded history. This explanatory relationship is seen as comparable to the interplay of prophecy and history.

When it is seen in this interpretative role the sacrificial law is able to play a further part in Barth's exposition, as forming a bridge between the figures of the patriarchal narratives and the figure of Christ. Taking alone the 'double series' of figures in the narrative of Genesis which Barth detects it would be difficult to envisage the relationship in which Christ stands to them, as fulfilling their shadowy realities. When, however, the understanding of their character is yoked to the category of sacrifice this category provides a familiar typological link between the old and the new, between the patriarchal election and that of Christ.

Here, then, we observe that Barth characterises ritual laws as witnesses to the significance of Israel's history, and that this characterisation provides him with a link in the chain between Old and New Covenants.

The second matter of detail to which we attend concerns Barth's definition of these two ritual laws as concerned with purification. That both are concerned in their separate ways with the processes of purification is itself evident enough, but it is further specified that "the rites as such do not complete but attest a purification which has already taken place, is still taking place, and takes place again. Neither the priest nor Aaron, but God is its author". Here again the aspect of testimony and witness in the rites is emphasised, the claim that these witness to God's purposes for the whole of Israel being supported by the observation that the people who take part in the actual rite of purification do so as 'no more than a spectator, as it were, of the actions which represent this purification. These actions ignore him as the principal and are concerned exclusively with the creatures'. Thus for the individual participant the cultic acts hold up a kind of picture of God's ultimate intention not only in respect of himself, nor as a result of his own actions, but "in the objectivity of the mighty acts of God".

The force of these statements is clearly to raise the cultic events considered here above the level of the particular and to indicate their status as tokens of God's eternal purpose: the purpose fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Once again Barth is at work revealing, or building, bridges between the Old and New Testaments. In this interest we observe that he points our attention always to the 'highest common denominator' of the passage in question.

* * * * * * * * * * *

As we step back to look at this exegetical passage in the context of the whole flow of the Dogmatics and to discern its role and influence we must first remark, once again, its relative modesty. Where the exposition of the Genesis sagas stood alone and very much to the fore these two rituals from Leviticus take their place in a series of Biblical illustrations

(including those from the patriarchal narratives and that of David and Saul) relating to the same theme - that of 'The Elect and the Rejected', which is itself but one step on the long path of the seventh chapter of the Dogmatics.

The interest and usefulness of this passage for our purposes is precisely this, that it exemplifies a kind of exposition of the Old Testament which plays an unobtrusive but recurrent part in the development of the Church Dogmatics. Further, by reason of its unobtrusiveness the precise nature and validity of this exegesis could well slip by unexamined.

In categorising the manner of Barth's use of the Genesis sagas (above pp58ff) we suggested that Scripture and its interpretation held here a seminal position, forming the growing point for new themes and developments and almost taking the initiative in the dogmatic process. The same could certainly not be said of the passage now in view taken on its own. The interpretation of Leviticus 14 and 16 is one Biblical thread woven into the whole fabric of the doctrine of Election expressed in chapter seven, and a thread which appears when the pattern of that doctrine is already fairly clear. Alongside many other exegeses of the Old Testament (32) and of the New (33) we observe this passage lending support and confirmation to the line of doctrinal argument; giving it, as it were, the stamp of authoritative approval. In establishing the Biblical base of this doctrine Barth makes use not of Old Testament passages, but of several from the New, in particular John 1:1 and 2 and Romans chapters 9 to 11.

Having said in general that the role of the Old Testament here is supportive we need, however, to note more precisely the nature of its support. Here we are brought up inevitably against the category of typology. All the

---

(32) C.D. II 2 pp 55-58; 102; 341ff; 343f; 354-409

(33) C.D. II 2 pp 60; 95; 99; 101; 102; 106; 117f; 202-205; 213-233; 240-259; 421-449; 459-506

passages from the Old Testament brought forward in this section (pp 354-409) are seen as in some measure foreshadowing Christ, and it is from this quality as being types of what is to come that they take their authority to support and confirm the dogmatic understanding.

As 'types of what is to come', moreover, the passages which Barth uses accommodate themselves to a very old and well-established pattern of relation between the Old Testament and Christ: the pattern of prophecy, priesthood and kingship.[3] As so often with Barth, this pattern is not at first evident, but comes to light when we remark that the last example he uses (from I Kings 13) is from the realm of prophecy, the previous example (of Saul and David) from that of kingship, and the passage we are presently studying (from Leviticus) from that of priestly ritual. The conformity of these examples to this pattern is made the clearer when we recall that Barth links the patriarchal figures whom he instances with the Leviticus rituals, rather than educing from them a direct foreshadowing of Christ (see above p 61). In noting this instance of the threefold pattern we may recall at the same time that the whole of Barth's Christology in the fourth volume of the Dogmatics falls under these three heads, or offices - though again it is not immediately evident.

When he has thus linked these Old Testament passages to the person of Christ by means of this threefold typological pattern Barth uses them, in effect, to reinforce and fill out the picture of Election in Christ which compromises the heart of this volume. Barth indeed introduces these Old Testament illustrations in terms of witness to Christ: "the witness to Christ in its first and basic form, as prophecy and announcement; the witness to Christ in the Old Testament" so that from the start it should be clear that he intends them to cast quite direct light on the figure of Christ and its significance. It is only as they cast this light, in fact, that the passages

can contribute anything to a true doctrine of election, since for Barth it is only in Christ that we see a real picture of elect and rejected man.(34)

---

(34) The concept of the three offices of Christ (Prophet, Priest and King) occupies a significant place in Calvin's Christology (Institutes, book 3) and, interestingly, is still found as the pattern of Emil Brunner's exposition of the doctrine (Dogmatics volume 2, chapter 11).

3 Illustrations of the Sloth of Man

For the third of these examples of Barth's use of the Old Testament in the Dogmatics we take a series of brief expositions which are found in the course of the Doctrine of Reconciliation (IV 2), employed to illustrate the 'Sloth of Man'. The subjects of these four expository sections (35) are varied, and the manner and length of their treatment also varies; nonetheless they share a common function within this section of the Dogmatics and witness together to a further aspect of Barth's use of the Old Testament. In order to call attention to the salient features of these four we shall need only a brief examination of each.

At every stage of the Church Dogmatics the figure of Jesus Christ dominates the scene, but it is in the fourth volume that the lines of this figure are systematically drawn together into a Christology. By one of the fascinating and paradoxical laws of Barth's theology the same volume contains the most systematic treatment of the sinfulness of man; for it is a fundamental assertion of the Dogmatics that our condition as men can only be known as it were by reflection back from the image of Christ. Through this whole volume, then, Barth proceeds by a succesion of antitheses. In the section with which we are concerned here he sets the man of sin over against Christ as the Son of Man who has been exalted.(36) In the light of this Royal Man the man of sin is seen as in drastic need of 'exaltation', as essentially mediocre, trivial and 'slothful'. It is under this term 'sloth' that Barth chooses to categorise this whole range of human sin, and the four examples from the Old Testament serve to illustrate this range from their diverse points of view.

---

(35) C.D. IV 2 pp 424ff; 445ff; 464ff; and 478ff

(36) C.D. IV 2 paragraphs 64 and 65

The first point of reference taken from the Old Testament is that of the 'fool', a character who is constantly present in the Wisdom literature. Barth uses this figure in illustration of the aspect of man's sloth which stupidly refuses to accept the freedom to know God and his Word. Having outlined, by quotation, some of the leading characteristics of the fool in the Wisdom literature he tries to determine to whom within contemporary society the label was intended to apply. These were not, he suggests the qualities of some particular class or group within Jewish society, but rather of the whole social life of a decadent Israel, "in its later stages". Indeed there are none who remain untainted in some degree by foolishness, by this sign of decadence. Ultimately, as Ecclesiastes 9:3 implies, folly is "the concern of every man as he is revealed in the divine judgment". So that "the picture of the fool is the mirror of the merited rejection held out to all men - a rejection from which there is no escape except by the gracious election of God, by the mighty Word of God which calls and chides". The man who thinks himself wise should find no room for self-congratulation here.(37)

Alongside this outline picture of the 'fool' of the Wisdom literature Barth sets a study of one in particular; the figure of Nabal (whose very name means 'fool') in I Samuel 25. In the story of this chapter we are presented with this incarnation of folly confronted on the one hand by David, the bearer of God's own promise, and on the other by Abigail, his wife and the very type of wisdom. The ill-matched husband and wife display their respective qualities by their reaction to David, 'the Lord's anointed'. Nabal, on his side, fails to see "Yahweh's own presence and action" at work in this young warrior, and so precipitates serious trouble for himself. Abigail, for her part discloses her wisdom in "the fact that she knows Yahweh and therefore knows David",(38) and good fortune is the outcome of her action.

---

(37) C.D. IV 2 pp 425ff (38) C.D. IV 2 pp 428f

In the contrast of these two is displayed the nature of man's sloth as stupidity, the blind refusal to realise the knowledge of Himself and his word which God proffers.

Barth turns now to a second aspect of human sloth, the refusal of man to live as 'fellow-man', his chosen isolation and inhumanity. He turns, too, to another area of the Old Testament, the prophetic book of Amos. Here our attention is called to distinctive marks of Amos's work, which make sense of his own dissociation from "the prophets" (Amos 7:14), the marks of direct compulsion, of unequivocal judgment and of attention solely given to man's inhumanity. In this last respect above all he displays the insight that "the affair of God is the affair of man"; and more particularly, "the affair of the fellow-man who is so severely and constantly hurt by man".(39)

At this point we are given a brief analysis of the historical circumstances of Amos's period and the world within which he prophesied, with Martin Noth's 'History' cited as authority. Seeing him in this setting Barth identifies the prophet's attack as directed truly against the oppression of the poor, not merely archaic, and against the cult not for syncretism but for its friendly relation with oppressive injustice. For Amos, Barth concludes, "God has no other answer to the inhumanity of man than that it can only be, and has already been rejected like his stupidity. God would have to be unfaithful to himself and to the covenant with man which he has made in his covenant with Israel, if he were to withdraw or even weaken this answer. He maintains the covenant by placing the inhumanity of man under his merciless denunciation and the judgment which remorselessly engulfs it". Hence Amos warns that the coming day of the Lord will be "darkness and not light".

---

(39) C.D. IV 2 p 448

The third aspect of man's sloth in this analysis is seen as the refusal to accept the God-given possibility of man's living at peace within himself, in a perfect relation of body and soul. The key word in describing this facet of human sin is 'dissipation', and the biblical instance by which Barth chooses to illustrate its nature is given again in the chronicle of David's life. On this occasion, however, the figure of David stands no longer for the archetypal 'chosen one' of God, but rather for the transgressor, for the instance in question is that of David and Bathsheba, in II Samuel 11.

This notably unheroic incident seems so out of character with the greater part of the story of David's rise and reign that Barth suspects that it "was supplied by another source in the redaction of the Book of Samuel, especially as it is not to be found in the corresponding passage in I Chronicles 19:1 - 20:3". He sees the story, indeed, as marking a turning point in the narrative and understands it as intended "simply to prove that David too shares in the unfaithfulness of Israel to Yahweh, and thus stands with Israel (although not destroying his faithfulness) under the judgment of Yahweh".

Here, then is the picture of an elect man who contradicts his calling, who becomes involved in an inevitable succession of evils and so falls into the "sphere of the wrath and judgment of God". As such, however, there is nothing peculiar about David, rather the charge under which he falls "is a charge and burden which rests on all Israel and every man".

Finally, in this catalogue of man's slothful sin, Barth points to the refusal to accept freedom from fear of the limitation within which man's existence stands, fear of the frontier of death. The refusal to accept freedom, as God offers it, from this fear expresses itself in care and anxiety. A care which, in its turn seeks to hide under cover either of activism or exaggerated passivity. Our attention is drawn in this instance to an

illustrative passage which seems at first glance unlikely. The source is in the thirteenth and fourteenth chapters of the Book of Numbers, where we read of the first spying out of the promised land set in train by Moses from Paran.

Before outlining the essential elements of these chapters Barth pauses to make "a short hermeneutical observation which applies in retrospect to the three preceding excursi as well" (viz those we have examined above). His concern here is to define the word 'history' as used in reference to the biblical examples employed in this chapter of the Dogmatics.(40) The term, he explains, "is to be understood in its older and naive significance in which - quite irrespective of the distinctions between that which can be historically proved, that which has the character of saga and that which has been consciously fashioned, or invented, in a later and synthetic review - it denotes a story which is received and maintained and handed down in a definite kerygmatic sense". While the biblical narrative may be "taken to pieces" by the separation of strands of 'saga', 'true history' and so on, to attain a true understanding these distinctions must be "pushed again into the background" (or indeed never made) so that the whole can be seen in its intended totality.

The totality Barth then goes on to expound, describing the "purpose" of these two chapters of the Book of Numbers as "to show how dreadful and dangerous is the retarding role played by evil anxiety in the transition of Israel from the wilderness wanderings to the promised land as an action in the history of salvation". This purpose might reflect a later, backward-looking view of these events, but it may be equally true to the contemporary attitude of Israel.

---

(40) C.D. IV 2 pp 478f see above p 28

We are then reminded of the main features of the narrative of these two chapters. The people of Israel are standing on the borders of the promised land, the land which is already, by the grace of God 'their land'. The twelve spies who are selected and sent by Moses are to act as witnesses to the reality of God's promise "to remind the people of its content and certainty". But instead of faithful witness to the divine promise there now comes an "invasion of anxious care", which so overcomes the twelve spies that far from encouraging the people by their witness they can only attest their own fear. This anxiety calls forth a still greater anxiety in the whole people, leading to the panic-stricken and insane damand to return to the land of Egypt.

In the face of this absurd rejection of God's promise and election of his people the voice of true and obedient response is not silenced altogether. For Moses and Aaron fall on their faces before the people as if invoking the power of Yahweh who alone can deliver them from their foolishness. And two of the witnesses, Joshua and Caleb, remain faithful to their calling - and nearly pay dearly for their faithfulness. When human anxiety and its outcome seems about to triumph catastrophically the Lord himself appears bringing judgment and pardon, thanks to the intercession of Moses. The story's end, however, "is on a dark and unconciliatory note". The people's sudden access of confidence cannot erase the consequence of their guilt, and they suffer defeat, the ark alone being mercifully preserved.

* * * * * * * * * * *

We shall not stop to enlarge upon any points of detail in these expositions, but proceed straight away to examine the distinctive character and function of their treatment.

The first matter we may note here is that the biblical exegesis plays something of a subordinate role, in that it is conformed to the pattern already developed in this part of the Dogmatics. As has often been pointed out, through the whole Dogmatics Barth displays a concern for almost geometric balance in his writing; this lends a quality to the work which can either infuriate or delight the reader.(41) Nowhere is this same quality more apparent than in the three major parts of the fourth volume, where the examination of Reconciliation displays itself in a threefold exposition of the person of Jesus Christ. There is, in particular, a step by step parallelism between the first and second parts of this exposition (chapters XIV and XV of the Dogmatics) which is fascinating to observe. The equivalent section to that which we have been examining in the previous chapter (XIV) undertakes an analysis of man's sin in terms of the 'Pride of Man', and this section is divided, in just the same way as that on the Sloth of Man, into four heads. In each of these four heads a quality of man's sin is exposed as the reverse of a positive quality revealed in the person of Christ - almost exact correspondence existing between the four divisions in each chapter.(42)

The biblical illustrations which have been our concern are subsumed to this fourfold pattern and incorporated as fitting illustrations of each point. Here we are at the furthest extreme from the character of the Old Testament reference in the doctrine of creation, where biblical exposition appeared to be the stimulating and guiding factor.

---

(41) On first acquaintance the Church Dogmatics appears a very loosely structured work, but on closer inspection there prove to be underlying patterns - like that of the three-fold examination of a topic - at every turn.

(42) cf C.D. IV 1 pp 413-478 and IV 2 pp 403-483

The illustrative function of these expositions influences to some degree the manner in which they are worked out. Thus it is clear that certain characters and features in the passages are picked out and given closer attention on account of their relevance to the aspect of man's sloth under review, while other elements fall very much into the background. So it is that the lengthy dialogue between Moses and the Lord in Numbers 14 passes almost unnoticed, and the famous parable which Nathan tells in II Samuel 12 is taken for granted.

Having seen that these particular Old Testament passages have about them the quality of 'visual aids' for Barth's doctrinal argument we can further note and underline the fact that they are used to illustrate the sinful state of man. These are examples of that sloth which is thrown into contrast by the revelation in Christ, a characteristic which ought to become impossible for those who follow Christ. It is interesting to note that Barth uses illustrations from the Old Testament in both the parallel sections of chapters XIV and XVI in dealing with other aspects of human sin. We might wonder here whether there is any necessity for the illustrations to be biblical, or whether their derivation from the Old Testament is not virtually 'accidental', but there is no doubt that Barth used this source with some deliberation. The fact, however, that he is able to make use of the Old Testament in this particular manner is suggestive. It leads us on to question that aspect of Barth's biblical doctrine which minimises the distinctions between Old and New and emphasises their community of goal, as we shall see subsequently.

With this we conclude the detailed study of Old Testament expositions in the Church Dogmatics, having attempted to give a fairly representative selection of such expositions. Broadly we have seen the Old Testament invoked and expounded in three ways: normatively, typologically, and illustratively, and seen the emergence of certain pressing questions in each case. To complete this chapter of detailed study we now turn to look briefly at some of Barth's biblical use outside the Church Dogmatics.

4 Use of the Old Testament outside the Church Dogmatics

There is no doctrinal examination of the status of the Old Testament nor any sustained exposition in the shorter writings of Barth which can stand on a par with the material of both sorts within the Dogmatics. The specifically biblical writings are all devoted to New Testament books,(43) and much of the brief outline doctrinal writing affords too little space for lengthy biblical quotations or exegesis.(44) If this statement of obvious fact begins to suggest something of a blank and profitless picture in the present section the impression should quickly be righted by the recognition that many of the shorter works witness to a powerful awareness of the Old Testament and that a notably high proportion of the published sermons are founded on Old Testament texts. Nonetheless there is about this use a sporadic quality which makes the detection of any firm tendencies and the drawing of generalised conclusions difficult. The following observations will consequently have something of the nature of soundings taken at various points in the chronology of Barth's writing.

* * * * * *

We have already referred to the prophetic note which characterised Barth's sources of inspiration and his own writing in the earliest public phase of his theological development (above, p11). The point comes over dramatically enough when the reader opens the collection of early lectures and sermons assembled under the title 'The Word of God and Word of Man' (45), and finds as the opening words of the first address a quotation from Isaiah: "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness . . .". The same reader, in the light of Barth's later expressions, may be considerably surprised to see the ensuing sentence: "This is the voice of our conscience, telling us of

---

(43) ie Romans, Philippians, A Shorter Commentary on Romans

(44) eg Dogmatics in Outline, Evangelical Theology, Credo, etc.

(45) E.T. D Horton, Harper, New York 1957

the righteousness of God". The theme of the address is "The Righteousness of God", and in spite of the unexpected dignity given to man's conscience here there is much in its theological standpoint which bears the same stamp as Barth's later work. In particular, the idea of God's righteousness is developed in strong contrast to the aspirations and would-be righteousness of men; to symbolise these aspirations Barth uses the image of the tower of Babel. The building of this tower he discovers to be the key to many human endeavours, not least his religious life; in each case the building is founded on misunderstanding and fated to collapse, since the only righteousness is God's own: that of the "Wholly Other" (46) before whom man can only be utterly humble.

The tone of this exciting early work of Barth clearly and authentically echoes that of Old Testament prophecy in its attempt to recall man to the truth of God's incomparable majesty and grace. But where this may be true of the writing's distinctive ethos, it cannot be maintained that any real expository use of the Old Testament is made here. The opening quotation from Isaiah seems to be employed as much for its dramatic timbre as for its specific content, a content which is not touched upon, let alone developed, in the ensuing address. It might not be too severe to suggest that at this stage Barth half-consciously cast himself in the role of Isaiah's 'voice'.

Equally, when we examine the way in which the story of the tower of Babel is employed in this address (47) it becomes clear that there is no rigorous attempt to extract precise significance from the biblical passage, no actual exegesis - whether in the pages of the address or hidden behind them. Rather the central feature of the story is set out and used as a powerful symbol of the false endeavour which Barth is indicting; the image of the tower acts as

---

(46) op cit p 24 (47) ibid pp 14ff

a focussing point for the mind's eye and helps to give clarity and force to the argument that is being sustained.

The use of this story from the Book of Genesis (11:1-9) in this earliest of Barth's published addresses makes interesting comparison with the exposition of the same passage at rather greater length in the Church Dogmatics (III 4 313ff). The later exposition, while it has a marked polemical quality about it, carries much more sense of attentive listening to the very words of the text than is born in the early writing, the conclusions are correspondingly more subtle.

To observe these characteristics of Old Testament usage in 'The Righteousness of God' is not necessarily to charge Barth with its misuse. The intention is rather to point out what might be termed the accidental quality of this use: the texts to which Barth refers here are clearly not dynamic or even controlling influences on the theological argument; the driving force seems to spring in some way from within the writer himself, and the biblical reference is swept into the powerful current of thought and feeling.

This last assertion may appear not a little rash when we see that the succeeding contributions to this early volume are entitled "The strange New World within the Bible" and "Biblical Questions, Insights, and Vistas". Clearly the element of biblical discovery figured very largely in the incubation of Barth's 'New Theology', as he himself and many critics have affirmed (cf p 8). In particular the influence of his study of the Letter to the Romans could hardly be overestimated at this stage. In this connection, however, we may also recall that many critics - not necessarily antagonists - of the Commentary which finally emerged from these years of study have called attention to the same sense of dynamic force which does not derive entirely from the text itself. The Bible was undoubtedly the medium through which Barth's new theological insights emerged, and it is equally without

doubt that these insights were largely generated in the dialogue of his mind with Scripture; gradually this medium was to exert more and more a shaping influence on the message which actually emerged. At this stage, however, we witness the sparks which fly from the contact of Barth and Bible.

This interpretation of the relationship between the early theology and the Bible (the Old Testament in particular) as essentially a dramatic but non-exegetical interplay is given further support by the second of the two addresses of 1916: "The Strange New World within the Bible".(48) Here we are struck immediately by two points. First by the daring of the young preacher who sets out to open a window on to the whole scene of the Bible, no single book or single theme but the whole 'world' within it. Second by the prominent place occupied by the Old Testament in this scene.

In the first few pages of this address the reader is taken on a 'whistle-stop tour' through the Bible. We glimpse Abraham, Moses, Gideon, Samuel, Elijah and the prophets after him, are shown the point of climax in him who says "I am the resurrection and the life", and given a glance at the repercussions which follow him -"Then the echo ceases. The Bible is finished". Then Barth addresses himself to the question of the meaning of this world we have glimpsed: "What is the significance of the remarkable line from Abraham to Christ?" The fundamental answer which is given to this question is that this world is God's world, and that he is its significance; once again there is heavy emphasis on the 'otherness' of this world of God's, its transcendence of the categories of History, Morality or Religion. For our purposes, however, the primary interest is not in Barth's conclusions but in his manner of reaching them. Particularly we must notice his readiness in this address to treat of Abraham and Christ in one breath, to see them in one line, and generally to work with 'the Bible' as an apparently simple unit. It would be

---

(48) ibid pp 14ff.

absurd to suggest that Barth is here working in ignorance of the complexity of the Biblical material, or in any naive misapprehension of its nature. Rather he is quite deliberately avoiding the drawing of any line - however feint - between the two Testaments.

This deliberately unitive treatment is especially clear when Barth comes to ask whether the Bible is a book of 'Morality'. Here all the illustrations brought forward to deny this possibility are taken from the Old Testament, although it is asserted generally that the New cannot answer to this description either. On the basis of these illustrations of Biblical 'immorality' Barth concludes that "The reality which lies behind Abraham and Moses, behind Christ and his apostles, is the world of the Father, in which morality is dispensed with because it is taken for granted". Here above all the young theologian throws himself open to criticism as failing to recognise or allow for distinctions between one part of the Bible and another. But Barth here was waging war much too fiercely on the traditions of 'liberal' treatment of Scripture to pause in consideration of self-defence. The Old Testament particularly served the argument of the otherness of God's world and its distinction from the highest achievements of man's endeavour, and Barth did not overlook its usefulness.

The following address, on "Biblical Questions, Insignts, and Vistas", shares the characteristics of its predecessor in terms of the broad handling of Scripture, although dating from some four years later, after the publication of the first edition of The Epistle to the Romans. Barth's approach is notably less bold, his attention given more closely to the particular force of the New Testament witness, and the relation of the two testaments expressed in terms of fulfilment; but fundamentally the same emphasis on otherness, and the same close integration of the Old and the New remains. Equally, we still

find ourselves dealing with a biblical theme without specific biblical exposition, indeed with only intermittent reference to particular instances.

No theologian could examine the Letter of Paul to the Romans without being brought up against the Old Testament and the question of its relationship with the New. The prominence of the question of 'the Law' and the abundance of quotation of the Old Testament in the Letter bring both these questions to the attention of the commentator. At the same time, a New Testament commentary is not the forum for detailed exegesis or discussion of the Old Testament, and we would scarcely expect to find such treatment there. In Barth's famous commentary (49) the Old Testament is never far from the page, whether in quotation or allusion; more than this, however, many of its readers have detected that prophetic ethos to which we have already referred as colouring the whole picture of its interpretation. It is in keeping with this impression that Barth quotes with approval in the commentary the dictum of Luther: "He who hath this Epistle in his heart, hath in him the light and power of the Old Testament!"(50)

In its specific references to the Old Testament the Commentary fulfills the expectations created by our previous observations. If Paul provides occasional opportunity for those who would relegate the Testament of the Law and the Prophets to a level well below that of the New, (51) Barth takes no use of the opportunity. Once again we find everywhere a close integration of the two Testaments and a determination to interpret the Old Testament witness on the highest possible level. By way of example we may note his treatment of the quotation from 'Moses' (Leviticus 18:5) in Romans 10:5 "For Moses describeth

---

(49) We refer here to the Commentary in the form of the Sixth edition, as translated by Edwyn Hoskins (Oxford 1968).

(50) op cit p 422.

(51) eg when taken in isolation Romans 10:4 can be seen in this way.

the righteousness which is of the law, when he saith that the man which doeth these things shall live thereby". Here, Barth claims, "Moses . . . does not merely represent a law which is no more than a human work, and which of itself has no further significance", but rather a law whose performance is an "impossible possibility of miracle, of existentiality, of faith, in fact, of God". The promise held out by God to the man who performs the law is a possibility "which is messianic and eschatological". When Barth sums up with the words "this is what Moses means" the reader may remain still in some uncertainty, since the language and direction of argument in this passage is by no means explicit. Nonetheless, it is clear that Barth credits to the statement in Leviticus - or to Moses - an understanding of Law and its performance on the same level of subtlety as Paul's (or indeed, or Barth's own interpretation of Paul's).

The integration of the two Testaments is inevitably most clearly expressed in the exegesis of 3:31 - 4:8, where the faith of Abraham is cited and the question whether the law is made 'of none effect' is put and answered. Here Barth suggests that Abraham is brought forward as something of a test case for the question of the law. What is at issue, he maintains is whether or not the revelation of God in Jesus is "the meaning and substance of the whole history of religion". Put in another way, "Jesus would not be the Christ if figures like Abraham, Jeremiah, Socrates, Grunewald, Luther, Kierkegaard, Dostoievsky remained, contrasted with Him, merely figures of past history, and did not rather constitute in Him one essential unity;". The business of these verses includes, then, the proving of the claim: "Before Abraham was, I am", the ratification of the point stated by Overbeck, "The Old Testament did not, in the ordinary sense of the word "precede" Christ. Rather it lived in Him". The proof of the claim is discovered essentially in the phrase "Abraham believed in God"; by it is revealed Abraham sharing in that "vacuum and limitation encompassed by miracle and by paradoxical impossibility" which is faith,

and which "because it is void of human content . . is guaranteed by God as his righteousness". The same is true of the figure referred to in Psalm 32:1ff, "Here once more is the miracle of faith" which is always the same miracle, and always a "sign-post to the Resurrection".

So it is that "the law is established", that Christ's claim and Overbeck's statement are vindicated. For: "What is true of Abraham is therefore true also of the anonymous figure portrayed in the 32nd Psalm. Both are witnesses of the Resurrection, and both live by it. As independent historical figures apart from Christ, they are incomprehensible. They are the types of that life of his which is prolonged longitudinally throughout the whole extent of time".

Here we find stated in less guarded language the kind of unification of the Old and New Testaments which we have already heard about in our review of the Church Dogmatics. There are, however, two interesting points of difference between the view that manifests itself here and that which is systematically worked out in the Dogmatics. Firstly, it is clear that beyond the simply unguarded quality of Barth's writing at this stage there is a distinct and significant lack of subtlety in the approach to the Old Testament. We recall that in the later understanding of the Dogmatics Barth surely maintains that the Old Testament bears witness to that which is to come, that the name of Christ is, as it were, written into it; but he adds that the name is 'concealed' in this Testament, to be revealed in the New, that the witness is essentially an expectant one, and so on. We would hardly expect a complex statement of differentials such as these in the context of the Commentary, but the absence of any hint of awareness leads us to accuse the fiery Barth of this era of drastic oversimplification. The charge is one he might well have acknowledged subsequently himself.(52)

---

(52) As, in effect, he did in The Humanity of God, E.T. Collins, London, 1967, pp 34ff, see also How I Changed My Mind, Edinburgh 1969.

A second and rather more unexpected difference between the attitude of this and that of the later period is disclosed in the treatment of Abraham already outlined. This difference concerns the relationship of Old Testament and non-biblical figures to Christ. The unprepared reader might well prick his ears up at the mention of that strange congregation said to "constitute one essential unity" in Christ: "Abraham, Jeremiah, Socrates, Grunewald . . ." (see above p 85), with its free mingling of heroic figures from in and out of the Bible. He might react in the same way to the mention elsewhere (53) that a similar faith to that "impossible factor" in which Abraham was given to share, "appears on the borderland of the philosophy of Plato, of the art of Grunewald and Dostoevsky, and of the religion of Luther". The kind of interrelation which seems vaguely to be suggested here is given a little more definition in the commentary of the third chapter (vv 21f). Here Barth is stressing the fundamental nature of God's righteousness, in which "every promise is fulfilled". This righteousness, he affirms, "is the meaning of all religion, the answer to every human hope and striving and waiting . . .". So it follows that "Wherever there is an impress of revelation - and does anything lack this mark? - there is a witness to the Unknown God . . . ".(54)

So it seems to be implied that there is no fundamental distinction between the status of Old Testament history and religion, and its leading figures, and the status of at least some extraordinary extra-biblical leaders. This view would certainly find no endorsement in the pages of the Church Dogmatics. Equally, however, it is probable that Barth did not intend this conclusion to be drawn in the Commentary on Romans. At various points in the Commentary he refers to the distinctiveness of the Jew, and at one point in particular (in commenting on 3:14ff) he seems virtually to contradict the suggestion we have

---

(53) Romans p 141.

(54) ibid p 65

observed; here he sets over against one another "Gentiles which have not the law", whose "lives and their experiences of history are not stamped by revelation; and they have no impress of it to guard", and those who have the law and "are stamped with the impress of the true and unknown God".(55)

Whatever the precise truth about Barth's intention in this matter, it is clearly the case that the Commentary on Romans does not lend itself to calm and objective analysis of detail. If it did, it might well be at the cost of that fervent and dramatic quality which gives the work such distinctive authority to this day. In conclusion we may add that the use of acutely paradoxical formulas, like 'the knowledge of the unknown God', which figure so prominently in the writing of this period, makes it very difficult for Barth to classify the process of revelation with anything like the subtlety he was to exercise in later, more temperate work.

* * * * * * * * *

From the time of the Romans commentary onward Barth's theological writing generally becomes less directly biblical (56) and so affords us (aside from the Dogmatics) little material for this part of the study. There is one important further area of his work, however, which we can hardly overlook in this review: that of the published sermons. Barth's doctrine of the Word of God in its form of proclamation (see above, p 21) demands that the sermon be a specifically biblical form of address, and it is clear that in his own preaching he always respected this demand. At the same time the study of the sermons ought to contribute significantly to the assessment of Barth's biblical doctrine, since by his own definition the dogmatic theologian labours for the benefit of the Church's proclamation and sees the fruits of his work in the purity and vitality

---

(55) ibid p 65

(56) Although we do have the two slim Commentaries on Philippians (1927) and Romans (1956)

of that proclamation.(57) Here, as much as anywhere, should be the proof of the pudding.

From the range of published sermons we shall here select instances from both early and late on in Barth's career as a theologian. The former derive from the two collections of sermons published jointly by Barth and his one-time fellow pastor Eduard Thurneysen;(58) they date for the most part from the 1920's. The latter (sermons first preached in the 1950's and 60's) are among those delivered to the prisoners of Basel gaol, where the senior professor exercised an occasional and evidently happy ministry.(59)

Our particular concern is with Barth's Old Testament preaching: it is worth pausing a moment to note the fact that he does preach on the Old Testament, and to record how much he does so. In the volume 'Come Holy Spirit' (first published in 1924) there are twenty-five sermons from the pens of Barth and Thurneysen: of these six are based on Old Testament texts; three of these Old Testament sermons have been identified as Barth's work and there is only one ('The New Time' Ecclesiastes3:11) (60) whose content hints faintly that it is not. Among the eighteen sermons in the subsequent collection (God's search for Man 1935) only three find their text in the Old Testament, and none of these can definitely be attributed to Barth. When we turn to the later volumes, however, the Old Testament figures rather more prominently: precisely half of the texts in 'Call for God' are taken from each Testament. Analysing

---

(57) C.D. I 1 pp 79ff. Evangelical Theology, an Introduction, Collins, London, 1965, p 43.

(58) Come Holy Spirit and God's Search for Man T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1933 and 1935; it is difficult to distinguish the particular authorship of each sermon (but see T H L Parker: Karl Barth, Michigan 1970, pp 118ff where some guidance is given.)

(59) Deliverance to the Captives and Call for God SCM, London 1959 and 1965

(60) The text itself fits uneasily beside the general outlook of Barth's Romans, as do some parts of the exposition, for example p 43.

a little more carefully it emerges that Isaiah and the Psalms are at every stage the foremost books of the Old Testament, though not to the exclusion of others.(61)

Towards the end of the first sermon in the 1924 collection we read these words: ""Lift up your heads O, ye gates!" . . . Verily more is expressed here than mere human command and human wisdom. Here Jesus Christ is speaking, the Son of the living God." Here, then, is that immediate relating of Old Testament words to the incarnate Word, Christ, which we have seen in Barth's doctrine of Scripture. The same immediacy underlies the expository method of all these sermons. It has been justly remarked that Barth's preaching at this stage is not strictly expository:(62) there is no methodical and patient unwrapping of the (often lengthy) texts with which the sermons open. Nonetheless, the scriptural words are made to speak very directly to the hearer, to address him with authority. In this respect there is no discernable difference between the words of Old and New Testaments, between the 'great But' which Barth underlines so forcefully in Proverbs 16:2 and the instruction of Jesus in Matthew 6:25 - "Be not anxious". Thus it comes as no surprise when the sermon on another passage from Proverbs (18:10) proceeds directly from the words of the text "The name of Jehovah is a strong tower" to the consideration of the Lord's prayer and its first petition:"Hallowed be thy name"; there is no question but that the name of the Lord is one and the same for the people of Israel and for the Church.

The same characteristic directness in the application of words and phrases from the text to the hearer finds a more negative expression: we are never familiarised in the sermons with the context of the biblical words, whether their

---

(61) Notably there are two sermons based on texts from Proverbs in Come Holy Spirit both by Barth.

(62) T H L Parker op cit p 119.

historical or their literary context. The particular words of the text simply stand on the authority of "the wisdom of the Bible".(63) Nothing leads us to consider whether the words of Psalmist or Prophet are written for any other audience than that which now hears them, unless we make exception of a few words at the conclusion of the sermon on Isaiah 60:19-20;(64) this question of the setting of the text evidently does not exercise the preacher.

In the later sermons we find no change in this fundamental respect. Indeed, the positive aspect of this characteristic is specifically expressed in one of the sermons in 'Gods's Search for Man' - "Let us from the very beginning bear in mind that the story of paradise, as every Bible story, is written very distinctly for men of today".(65) The text of the Old Testament speaks of Christ, and since it speaks of him it speaks directly to the man of today; this is the clear import of these sermons and of the quite uncomplicated manner in which they apply the words of prophet, psalmist or wisdom writer to the present human situation. The same direct and straightforward relation is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in one of the more recent Basel sermons, preached on Easter Day 1961. Here Barth takes his text from Isaiah (54:7-8): "For a brief moment I have abandoned you, but with great mercy I will gather you . . . ", and proceeds without any ado to interpret the verses in terms of Good Friday and Easter Day. "That", he writes of the words of Isaiah, "is the Easter message" . . . "the Easter word that we may now hear". In this respect, then, we find little variation between the Barth of 1924 and the Barth of 1961; only we might add that the fundamental simplicity of the process of proclaiming and applying Old Testament Scripture to the contemporary congregation (its simplicity in Barth's eyes) stands out more clearly in the more economic and compact form of the later preaching.(66)

---

(63) Come Holy Spirit p 13

(64) ibid p 66

(65) God's Search for Man p 94

(66) To realise the change in style between the early and later sermons it is particularly instructive to compare the 1961 sermon on Isaiah 54:7-8 with one in the volume Come Holy Spirit on the same text. The language of the earlier sermon is altogether more rhetorical and, one is tempted to say, pretentious, but the (P.T.O

The quotations we have so far evinced witness to the ease with which Barth the preacher moved between the Old Testament text, the Gospel of Christ and the position of the contemporary hearer. The same ease can be illustrated by example from most of the sermons under review. In both the early sermons on texts from the book of Proverbs we see the ground between the Testaments traversed several times. With respect to 'the Great But' of Proverbs 16:2 ("but the Lord weighs the spirits") Barth has this to say: "For the Bible does not say the same thing over and over again, but it does say this one thing again and again: But the Lord weigheth the spirits. This is the same thing the Bible says on other pages: But he who dwelleth in the heavens shall laugh, he shall have them in derision. . . . But my words shall never pass away . . . But he was wounded for our transgressions and because of our sins was he smitten . . . But Christ is raised from the dead and has become the first-fruits of them that slept . . .". This catena of quotations is only a concentrated expression of the sweeping range which characterises the sermon as a whole. In the following sermon entitled "The Name of the Lord" (Proverbs 18:10) the range of biblical reference is no less, but added to it is a more obvious reference to the time and situation in which Barth was preaching;(67) indeed the freedom with which this sermon moves from one frame of reference to another does a good deal to confuse the underlying simplicity of theme. The mastery of straightforward exposition which Barth had attained in his theological maturity (so well exemplified in his 'Evangelical Theology: an Introduction') ensures that there is no hint of confusion in the Basel sermons: here the transitions between the time of the prophets, of Christ, and the present are made more deftly and more briefly. Awareness of the contemporary scene is shown less by explicit references than by recurrent images and turns of phrase - like the

---

(67) This sermon has been identified as one of Karl Barth's (by T H L Parker, op cit p 119). Barth's reference to the contemporary scene (in Come Holy Spirit pp 25 and 33) is explicit but not detailed.

idea of the telephone call in the sermon headed 'Call me' ('call me in the day of trouble' Psalms 50:15). The relation between Christ and the Old Testament words, too, seems to emerge more fluently: as when the 'hands' of the text from Psalm 31:15 ('My time is secure in your hands') are finally identified in the sermon as the hands of the crucified Christ.(68)

With the passing of years Barth expressed with increasing facility his abiding sense of the unbroken continuity between the words of the prophets, the words of the Apostles and the word to be proclaimed today. This much is clear and hardly surprising. But there is rather more than merely stylistic change to be observed. There is a change in the whole 'tone of voice' with which the Old Testament speaks through the sermons. In the earlier years the note is challenging and often unsettling, as the very texts and titles imply: 'Open Wide the Gate', 'But the Lord weigheth the spirits', 'Paradise Lost'. The sense of the later sermons, however, is essentially of 'comfortable words', words of assurance and hope typified by the first of the collection 'Call for God': 'The Lord Who Has Mercy on You'. This transformation, one expression of the general change in the ethos of Barth's theology (see above, pp 16ff), is not only of homiletic interest; it is of more general importance for this study since it suggests that apparently similar approaches to the Old Testament can be seen within Barth's own work to yield substantially different results.

Before turning from the study of the sermons we must take note of one which affords exception to the general pattern of Old Testament preaching which we have outlined. Among the later sermons that based on Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant (31:33) presents the relation between Old and New in a different light from other contemporary or previous expositions. Here Barth sets out the distinction between the law which says 'you must' and that which says 'you may', and identifies this latter as the law God wishes to 'write in men's hearts'.

---

(68) Call for God pp 30ff and 40ff.

Until God has bestowed the freedom of this permissive law even hi own law comes to men 'sharply and violently and terrifyingly', it is 'shrouded in a dark cloud'. It is God's wish that the cloud should be torn aside and the law of freedom seen for what it is and we can see him do this very thing in the Passion of His Son: 'In this (the Passion) story the new and true covenant became visible; here is the covenant between God and us as God intends it, wills it and establishes it, in which 'You shall!' is no longer heard'. This, he concludes is 'the story of our release'.

Read in the abstract this interpretation of the words of Jeremiah is surely unexceptionable and rewarding. Read in the context of Barth's normative statements about the Old Testament and the New, about Gospel and Law, it creates a tension, at least by implication. For while it is not unusual for him to talk of the 'concealment' of Christ and his covenant in the Old Testament, over against the complete disclosure of the New, Barth does not generally allow that there is such a menacing quality about the Old form of the covenant, nor that its subjects stand in need of release.

At the most this last instance amounts to a subtle and partial exception to the normal handling of Old Testament texts in Barth's preaching (indeed the form of the exposition is in no way exceptional in this instance). The norm we have observed consists in interpreting the words of the Old Testament with direct reference to Christ and direct authority for the contemporary Christian. The impression gathered here might be summed up by saying that the distinction between the Old and New Testaments in homiletic use is reduced to a minimum - to the extent that the difference is often scarcely noticeable.

PART III

A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

In the two preceding parts of this study we have looked first at the doctrinal structure which Barth builds to contain his understanding of the Old Testament, then at a broad cross-section of examples of his practical exposition or use of the text. With this whole range of material in mind we come now to attempt some critical evaluation: to assess (in the words of the introduction) how far Barth has achieved a viable basis for using, and a valuable way of using the Old Testament, and in what particular respects he has failed. We begin this assessment by taking a deliberate risk; the risk of setting out first some of the distinctively good qualities in Barth's doctrine and practice - its strengths. The danger here is that the assembled virtues of his position should seem to cast a defence about it and exclude penetrating criticism. The hope that we set against this is that an honest examination of its merits will both set the scene for a balanced conclusion and also leave the ensuing pages free for a thoroughgoing critique.

1 Strengths in Barth's Theory and Practice

The fact that this study is practicable itself rests on a certain strength in the position which Barth maintains: that is to say, he is a theologian whose work - almost alone among his contemporaries' - actually makes room for the appreciation and use of the Old Testament in a significant degree. This fact, if no other, emerged clearly from the last section of this work. We have now to define more exactly the nature of this fundamental quality of Barth's Biblicism.

The first positive characteristic to which we call attention is that of expectancy in the approach to the Old Testament, as indeed to the whole of Scripture. Here it is that God himself will speak, so we are led to expect by Barth's threefold doctrine of the Word. So it is that he describes the very condition of

exegesis as being the thankful remembrance of having heard God's Word here, and the continual expectation of hearing it anew.(1) It is with this this hopefulness that Barth requires the expositor to look at all Biblical words, not just those that suit his predisposition, to look at the words of 'the prophets' as at those of 'the apostles'. Another facet of the same basic characteristic is expressed in the concept of 'subordination' to the text. The principle contained here is that the interpreter must always take his stance 'at a certain point below Scripture' as he seeks to explicate it, as knowing that the Word to which he listens is Jesus Christ himself.(2)

This special, if traditional, quality of Barth's understanding of biblical use bears fruit in a number of profitable ways. In the first place, as our selective survey has illustrated, it enables Barth to make use, and often fruitful use, of passages and parts of the Old Testament which are commonly overlooked or little used. The narrative of the spying out of the promised land from the Book of Numbers is a case in point. In these chapters there are a number of 'mythical' features (as Barth himself acknowledges) which tend to discourage the interpreter from 'taking the passage seriously', and to confine himself at most to finding some amusement in the narrative and explaining it aetiologically. In the exposition of the chapters as we reviewed it Barth was not deflected by these features from an attentive interpretation which credited the narrative with a significant message.

In much the same way the reader of the Dogmatics will be surprised quite regularly by the way in which unexpected Old Testament passages are allowed to speak with a voice not heard before. To take examples at random, in C.D.III, 3 he will find a study of Judges 13, in III, 4 an extended treatment of Ecclesiasticus 38 (3), and in IV, 1 a series of exegetical studies of psalms, including

---

(1) God Here and Now p 54.

(2) C.D. I 2 pp 715ff.

(3) which Barth might call 'biblical' only with reservation.

Psalms 32 and 51. To return to the passages examined in the last part of this study, of the two rites from Leviticus quoted in C.D. II, 2 that for the day of Atonement (ch 16) is well known and widely employed, but the ritual of chapter 14 which is linked with it is likely to be unfamiliar to most readers.

The expectant and 'subordinate' stance which Barth adopts at least to a notable extent in practice as well as theory thus enables the use of fresh and generally obscure biblical material. It also, as we have suggested, helps to prevent the a priori ruling out of material as for one reason or another theologically useless. With respect to this, the long exegesis of Genesis 1 and 2 in C.D. III, 1 is repeatedly concerned to give weight to forms of expression and concepts which were made light of as 'primitive' or 'patently absurd' by older scholarship,(4) which he accuses of 'laughing like Sarah'. Here, as elsewhere, Barth's high doctrine of the Old Testament scriptures demands that the text be allowed to speak with authority whether its voice appears naive or mature to the critic.

In the approach to Scripture it was one of Barth's prime objectives to release the power of the Word from bondage to human subjectivity - the subjectivity of the critic and his contemporary fashions. The concept of a subordinate and expectant relationship to the text finds its main purpose in serving this end. By this approach the opportunity for Scripture to act as God's instrument of correction and change in theology should be enhanced; for as Barth expressed it himself the interpreter needs to be 'lifted out of himself' by the words of the text, and all hindrances to that purpose are to be avoided. Among the strongest of these hindrances he would reckon the critic's hubris, or confidence in his own 'philosophy' over against the significance of the text of Scripture.(5)

---

(4) C.D. III 1 pp 124f

(5) C.D. I 2 pp 715-722

We have observed and underlined several points at which change and correction seem to have been wrought in Barth's theology at least in part by the influence of Old Testament exposition. Notably we could call to witness the influence of the Biblical prophetic message on the earliest phase of his work, or that of the major exposition of the creation 'sagas' at a much later date in his development (above, pp 54ff). With instances such as these in mind we might see here another positive characteristic of Barth's position. It would be wise, however, not to claim too much for this particular aspect of his Biblical approach: over against the examples just instanced we shall subsequently be looking at cases where the influence appears reversed and theology changes interpretation.

In view of this it seems that Barth's concept of subordination, of the 'surrender of autonomy' to the text, is not completely successful in achieving its object. We shall look later at the cause of this limitation. Here, in enumerating the strengths of his stance, we can say this much: that Barth saw plainly the constant danger of a critical 'take-over' of the text and phrased his Biblical and exegetical doctrine to avoid it. In his expository practice there is a corresponding freedom and power in the exposed text, not consistently but to a significant degree.

In examining the interplay of exposition and doctrine in this way we are led towards another positive characteristic of this view and use of the Old Testament; this is the quality of immediate relationship between the text and its exegesis and the formulation of dogmatic theology. The concept of dogmatics as the process of testing the Church proclamation against the Word in Scripture (see above, pp 40ff) implies such a direct relationship, in which the text, whether of Old or New Testament, is able to speak directly to the contemporary expression of doctrine. In this way we have seen the dual symbolism of the rituals from the day of atonement and the cleansing of a leper applied to the formulation of the doctrine of election, and, in the previous example, the interpretation of Genesis 1:27

('in his own image' . . .) related to the whole range of ideas in the doctrine of man.

It is not strictly true to assert that this relation of Scripture and Doctrine is immediate for Barth, for his understanding does not allow Scripture simply as Scripture to be the arbiter of Doctrine and Proclamation. Rather it is as witnessing to Christ that the biblical text has authority in this sphere, so that the figure of Christ stands almost as intermediary between Scripture and its application to Church Doctrine and Proclamation. In practice, however, the witness of Scripture (including Old Testament Scripture) to Christ is assumed to such an extent that there is no sense of processing or mediating in the use of the text.

We have noticed the same directness in the use made of Scripture in the sermons. Here, again, the points we have just observed are relevant. The principle which lies behind the practice of preaching about the Passion and Resurrection from the words of Isaiah is that of the presence of Christ (though unrevealed) in the prophetic Testament. But in the sermon itself the principle is assumed and the words used with as much directness as if this had been their original reference.

This positive quality which we are underlining may well have negative concomitants; at this stage we are concerned simply to exhibit the strength of a view which enables the Old Testament to integrate so directly into the processes of doctrine and preaching

* * * * * * * * *

The second broad characteristic which we enter on the positive side has at first a distinctly negative sound; it is Barth's refusal to allow any dichotomy in the works of God or the witness of Scripture to those works. The particular form of this refusal, as it affects us, is as we have already noted: the view of Law as enfolded within the Grace of God, not as a separate and prior category

(see above, p 30). This is a facet of Barth's mature theology (6) which observably carries through into his exegetical practice, and which bears fruit there in at least two particular ways.

The first we may describe as the emancipation of the Old Testament. Put more precisely this a freeing from the necessity to which the Old Testament is very often subjected of witnessing to an inferior, legalistic and primitive faith, as against that of the New. The outcome of a rigid distinction between the Covenant of Law and of works, and that of Grace is inevitably an interpretative treatment of the former which is always finding fault, discerning legalism or other shortcomings of faith in the most innocent of contexts. Without holding to such a rigid classification many theologians remain heirs to the 'fault-finding' exegesis of the Old Testament.

One result of Barth's belief that Jesus Christ is 'Lord of this history too,' and that the Old Testament witnesses to the Grace of God found in him, is that its text is given the freedom to speak in harmony with that of the New. By way of example we may instance the story of Nabal in I Samuel 25 (see above, p 72). In the interpretation of this narrative David is seen as epitomising the man who bears the promises of God, his anointed one, and Abigail, the wife who contrasts so vividly with her husband, is seen as the embodiment of wisdom, particularly in her recognition of the true nature of David. Here there is no need for reservations as to the quality of her character and witness - her 'good understanding' and 'beautiful countenance' - since God's grace is seen as expressed in her wisdom. The resulting exegesis is one which draws out the nobility and power of the narrative.

Another instance of the same emancipation of the Old Testament is provided in a fascinating way towards the end of the Church Dogmatics. Here (in IV, 3) Barth has come to deal with the third line of his Christology (that which encom-

---

(6) cf Romans where this facet is by no means clear.

passes the 'prophetic office' of Christ) and speaks of man as confronted by 'The True Witness' in the person of Jesus Christ. To develop this aspect of the nature of Christ he chooses to reflect not on any part of the New Testament, but on the book and person of Job. As he puts it himself: ' . . . in preparing the theme of this section, I first read Job and some of its many expositors, and then considered the subject and its development in the light of the text'. Obviously in the course of his treatment Barth marks the distinctions between the True Witness and the figure of Job, but he still uses this Old Testament character to illuminate the nature of the witness and as 'a type of the true witness'.(7)

The other benefit which follows from the refusal to see the Old Testament as over against, or inferior in kind to the New is a less prominent one. It amounts simply to the fact that Barth's own view of the Old Testament Scriptures is broadly similar to that of the New Testament writers. There are, clearly, differences of manner and emphasis between one and another of the New Testament books in point of the use of the Hebrew Scriptures. Nonetheless, the fact may be granted that in every case these Scriptures were heard to speak with the same voice of God which spoke in Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:1f) and to have direct authority for the Christian believer. Barth is clearly conscious himself of sharing something of the 'apostles'' own understanding of the Old Testament and the manner of its relation to Christ.(8) In pointing to this broad conformity we do not, of course, envisage it as 'proving' the correctness of Barth's view, but simply as being a point of virtue.

* * * * * * * *

The third general characteristic of Barth's approach to Scripture to which we call attention as a point of strength is its dynamic quality. More precisely, this dynamic quality consists in the context of movement, of Divine action within

---

(7) C.D. IV 3 pp 383ff

(8) eg C.D. II 2 pp 362ff, 388ff

which he sees the Bible as set. The human and fallible words of Scripture become the very Word of God by his free decision and the action of his Spirit, both filling them and awakening the needful response of faith in the reader.(9) In characterising his doctrine of Scripture so clearly in this way Barth was anxious above all to avoid what he termed the 'freezing up' of the connection between Scripture and Revelation which he saw as occurring in the traditional doctrine of inspiration.(10) Such a solidifying made it impossible to retain a true judgment of the human quality of the biblical literature and brought with it a kind of scriptural Docetism. Once more we shall look in this setting at two results of this characteristic.

The first result is a powerfully practical one. Through escaping from the old doctrine of inspiration Barth also escaped from many of the biblical preoccupations of its adherents. His exposition was set free for more profitable exercise. An outstanding case in point is the great exposition of the opening chapters of Genesis. Here it may well be that some issues are wrongly sidestepped, more important, however, are the issues which are avoided with great benefit. Most basic is the freedom of the exposition from the need to argue the merits of these chapters over against the descriptive work of evolutionary science: there is no sense of the last ditch stand against modernity which tends to colour any treatment of this area from the 'fundamentalist' biblical viewpoint. Another aspect of this freedom is witnessed by the ready acceptance of the disparate nature of the two accounts of chapters 1 and 2, which acceptance enables Barth to elucidate the interdependence and complementary nature of the two.

In this area no biblical theologian can escape censure altogether, and Barth escapes very little. On the one hand his Calvinist brothers of the right wing accuse him of selling out to faithless modern criticism, on the other many fellow theologians charge him with not taking scientific criticism seriously enough in

---

(9) See above, p 23

(10) C.D. I 1 p 139 I 2 pp 514ff

his treatment of Scripture.(11) We shall attempt to weigh the merits of both cases later, but wish now only to underline this sense of freedom to deal with fundamentals which arises from the particular quality of Barth's biblical understanding, with its combination of the ready recognition that biblical words are utterly human and the emphasis that God will always take up these very words as his own Word. Exegesis, then, can always be expectant, but need never be nervously defensive.

A second result of the dynamic dimension of Barth's view is to militate against the isolation of the work of the biblical scholar or the 'biblical theologian'. It is clear from the discussion of this subject early in the Dogmatics that the work of detailed exegesis is seen to belong particularly to the biblical specialist and not to the dogmatic theologian,(12) but the dogmatic theologian will stand in the closest possible relation to the exegete and his work and will "Often enough" indeed "have to hark back to it directly, thus taking up again the immediate and detailed work of exegesis".(13) In point of fact, as we have seen, Barth himself is often unwilling to accept the work and interpretation of exegetical specialists, and 'harks back' to the detailed study of the text. Whether or not, however, he places insufficient trust in the specialist's work it remains true that in theory and in practice he stands for a close and lively interrelation of 'biblical studies' and dogmatics.

This close coördination helps to prevent the growth of an introspective and, in the worst sense, scholastic biblical scholarship - a phenomenon with which the English student particularly may feel some familiarity - and equally to avoid the formulation of a 'biblical theology' which merely contents itself with the enthusiastic re-statement of themes and concepts discovered in the critical study of

---

(11) Compare, eg, the judgment of Klaas Runia (Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture) and that of Heinz Zahrnt (The Question of God).

(12) C.D. I 2 pp 820f.

(13) C.D. I 2 p 821.

Scripture. For Barth both these possibilities are ruled out by the belief that the Bible is truly understood within the movement between the Revealed form of God's Word and its form as the Proclamation of the Church, a movement in which God takes up the vulnerable words of human witnesses and speaks through them. To cut the Bible off either at the one end, from the proclamation of the Church and the dogmatic inquiry which tests it, or at the other, from the one who is himself the revealed Word, is patently absurd.

* * * * * * * * * * * *

In this review of some of the positive virtues of Barth's approach to the Bible, and more specifically the Old Testament, we have looked in the main at benefits which appear in the actual handling of the text. In closing this review, however, we may underline some of the positive qualities in Barth's biblical doctrine simply as doctrine.

One property of this doctrine which may well be hidden rather than manifest in the many pages of the Church Dogmatics is that of fundamental clarity and simplicity. For all that, like every other aspect of Barth's doctrine, it is expressed through a great multitude of words, with many reservations and the rejection of countless alternatives, the basic shape of his understanding of Scripture is clear and straightforward. This is true primarily because, again like every other aspect of his theology, it is entirely centred on the figure of Christ. As we have already made clear (above p 23etc) it is in witnessing to Jesus Christ that both Testaments find their significance and their unity one with another.

We need not imagine that there is any great novelty in the adoption of this Christological centre as the pivotal point of biblical doctrine,(14) but we may appreciate that here, as in many aspects of traditional Reformed doctrine, Barth's treatment is marked out by its consistent and thoroughgoing working out of the principle.

(14) Classically expressed in Luther's dictum 'Universa scriptura de solo Christo est ubique' (Luthers Vorlesung über den Römerbrief 1515/1516 ed. Johannes Fricker, on Romans 15:15f).

Closely allied to this essential simplicity of the doctrine is another attribute - consistency. This consistency might best be expressed by saying that the doctrine of Scripture 'fits', like a jig-saw puzzle piece, into the whole picture which Barth's theology draws of the activity and nature of God as revealed to man. This quality of 'fitting in' is symbolised by the integration of the doctrine of Scripture into the total exposition of the doctrine of the Word of God. Equally we might call to witness the way in which the biblical doctrine fits with the consistency of God himself, who is 'without variation', and whose self-communication to men is not fickle, but amounts to the same Word differentiated only by the degree of manifestation. While it may be in our nature to question any form of expression which is 'too tidy', or 'suspiciously orderly', in theology as elsewhere, it must be granted that it is no part of the dogmatic theologian's task to be inconsistent, and so recognise here another positive strength of Barth's position.

The last point for our present attention is this: that the doctrine we have examined is congruous with the general practice of the Christian Church, in respect of the recognition of the Canon of Scripture, and attempts to make sense of it.(15) Barth's discussion of the Canon of Scripture is interesting in itself, with its contention that the Church's role here was and is a purely subordinate one and that, theoretically at least, the Canon remains capable of expansion; here however, we are concerned only to point to the congruity of his understanding of Scripture with the fact of the Canon.(16)

To illustrate this point by contrast we can consider the position of a doctrine of Scripture which lays emphasis in the Old Testament on the saving acts of God in history which prepare the way for the great saving act of the New Testament. Such a view can hardly avoid, in practice, relegating a certain part of the Old Testament canonical literature to an inferior status.

---

(15) Leaving aside, of course, the question of the status of the books of the 'Apocrypha'.

(16) Barth's discussion of the Canon is found in C.D. I 1 pp 115ff, I 2 pp 473-481 and 597-603.

Within Barth's view we may discover preferences and prejudices about one or another part of Scripture, but the doctrine itself points us to the Canon, as a whole, as the place where 'we have actually to expect Holy Scripture' - where we look expectantly to see witness born prophetically or apostolically to Christ. There is, moreover, a strongly pragmatic element in his doctrine of Scripture which is relevant at this point. This element is expressed in terms of the 'self-asserting self-attesting' power of Scripture (17) which forms the 'logical circle' of biblical authority (see above p 24). The Canon, for its part, is the measure of this self-assertion of Scripture, the Church's recognition of the authority of these books.(18)

Here then is a doctrine of Scripture marked by simplicity and consistency, both in relation to the whole spectrum of dogmatics and in relation to the practice of the Church. It supports a form of exposition which is characterised by a certain profitable expectancy and subordination in the approach to the text of the Old as well as the New Testament, by the refusal to imprison the Old Testament within the category of 'Law' or any other radical inferiority, and by its understanding of a living relationship between the text, the Revelation of God's Word and the proclamation and dogmatics of the Church. All these points we indicate as marks of the effectiveness of Barth's understanding and use of the Old Testament.

* * * * * * * *

2 Some Weaknesses of Barth's Theory and Practice

Most of the defective or weak points which we shall attempt to locate here are related closely to the factors we have just examined as virtues, and it may assist the interests of clarity if we begin by following roughly the order of the last section, setting in each case the negative points over against those positive ones. The balance is, of course, by no means perfect.

(17) C.D. I 2 p 535

(18) C.D. I 1 p 120

A Strains and Stresses

The first quality we noted as expectancy in the approach to the Old Testament text. Here a helpful analogy may be drawn with the upbringing and education of a child: to expect too little of the child may be not only to underestimate but also to stultify possible achievements; too high an expectation, on the other hand, could lead to severe strain and distortion of personality - the stresses of the attempt to meet expectation.

So we must consider whether Barth's concern for Christological conformity leads him to pitch his assumptions as to the nature of the Old Testament too high, to enter upon its exegesis with exaggerated aims, and to play Procrustes with the text in order to realise them.

We are, of course, by no means the first to consider this question in relation to Barth's use of Scripture; among those who have done so before the figure of Emil Brunner stands well to the fore. In the second volume of his own 'Dogmatics' Brunner determines that the starting point for the doctrine of creation must be found in the New Testament, not in the Old, since - "Even the most intelligent exposition of the Old Testament story of creation which is offered as the basis of the Christian doctrine presents modern man with numerous difficulties, which cannot be removed by the most bold attempts at allegorising the narrative". (19) Here Brunner clearly has Barth's work in mind (as he makes explicit in a footnote), as he has further when he goes on to say that - "It is true that a Christological exposition of the Old Testament narrative of creation may, to some extent, fill the gap" (viz the gap as to the point of creation) "but only at the cost of using arbitrary and forced methods of exegesis". Later again Brunner refers to this facet of BarthIs exposition as his "allegorical method", necessitated by the use of the Genesis sagas in direct relation to the working out of Christian doctrine.

(19) Emil Brunner, The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption, Lutterworth, London, 1952, p6.

In raising this question specifically in relation to the narrative of creation Brunner is in fact broaching a wider question touching on Barth's general use of the Old Testament: the question whether the figure of Christ and the stuff of Christian doctrine can be found here by the interpreter without doing violence to the text. Here, however, we are well placed to take up Brunner's accusation at the point at which he makes it; that of the Genesis creation traditions. We shall examine them, as Brunner himself does not, for signs of the forced and arbitrary methods which are said to be involved in the exegesis.

Very early on in Barth's exposition we run into controversial territory. In dealing with the 'waste and void' of Genesis 1:2 (see above pp 48ff) he suggests an original interpretation in terms of an evil 'possibility' which God passes over in deciding for the good reality of creation. This interpretation, as we have already indicated, bears fruit in the development of a general understanding of evil in terms of the rejected possibility, the 'nothingness' which continues irrationally to threaten man. We are not concerned here with the wider validity of this whole concept of evil, but with the specific question of the way in which it is derived from the text of Genesis 1:2.

At this point we can only have recourse to the words at issue and look again at them, familiar as they are:

> 1 In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. 2 And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. 3 And God said Let there be light: and there was light. (trans. from Church Dogmatics)

In these verses of intense significance the second verse presents particularly concentrated problems, as in the teasing phrase tohu wa-bohu (waste and void). We have already seen something of the dilemma which led Barth to adopt his own interpretation here (above p 48), and the reality of that dilemma cannot be denied. It is difficult to see, however, what positive basis can be found in this

text for the concept of God's passing over or rejecting the initial chaos. It might certainly be granted that the images of this second verse stand isolated in the context of the chapter as a whole - they appear 'passed over' by the remainder of the narrative - but this is hardly justification for attributing the same rejection to the creator God.

The nub of the critical issue here is reached with the last phrase of the verse: 'And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters'. For while the phrase raises new questions as to the significance of the verb and the process of creation hinted at by it a link does seem to be clearly established between the deeps of chaos and the activity of God the creator - whose Word performs the ensuing acts. Sustaining his thesis, however, Barth feels compelled to deny any resemblance between this 'Spirit' and the true God (see above, p 50). For Barth there can be no deviation from the idea of the pure Word of God as absolutely creative, and this 'Spirit' of this 'God' assumes the form of a caricature of the real creator, befitting the chaos in which he moves.

It is at this point that the plausibility of Barth's interpretation of the passage breaks down. This is not to say that it is impossible to view the Spirit of God referred to here as a surd element in the narrative, belonging to some other vision of creation; this in itself is fully credible.(20) What stretches credibility is Barth's attempt at once to treat these images (of chaos and the Spirit) as inimical to the main bent of the narrative and to see them in their context as forming a congruous whole, doctrinally consistent. In order to follow Barth in his reading of the passage as a whole we have to turn upside down our understanding of the God about whom we read in the space of a few words. Too much, it may be said, is expected of the reader, just as too much is expected of the text.

---

(20) Barth quotes Gunkel as regarding the concept of the spirit as 'an originally allogenic theory' and many subsequent scholars would echo that opinion.

Barth felt driven to adopt the interpretation of this verse we have outlined because of his dissatisfaction with the alternatives he saw. The alternative interpretations of the phrase 'waste and void' imply either that there was some matter in existence before the beginning of God's creative work, or that there was some preliminary stage in the creative process. In either case there is a theological inconsistency: on the one hand with the principle of creatio ex nihilo, on the other with the principle of creation by the pure Word of God. Both of these principles are of great importance to Barth, and he will not sacrifice them to the exigences of the text or of its critical interpretation. We cannot avoid the conclusion that Barth here allows the interests of dogmatic purity or consistency to dictate the terms of his exegesis, rather than, as he would suppose, the text doing the dictation.(21)

If, then, we are here bound to accept Brunner's contention of 'forced and arbitrary methods of exegesis' we ought at the same time to beware of generalising too speedily from this particular. We may take another point at which this question of forced exegesis arises in the exposition of Genesis 1 and 2: the concept of the image of God. Here it has been suggested that the repeated sequence of the phrases 'let us make' and 'male and female', upon which Barth's particular line of exegesis is largely based, is no more than accidental. Words, it is claimed, which occupy a merely incidental place in the text are being forced to take up a crucial and highly significant role against their nature.(22) Here we can jump to no quick conclusion; the question is a delicate one balancing on the nice judgment as to whether certain words in the text are by nature 'incidental' or vital keys to their context. Clearly the words are there, and the plural and double reference they make has not to be imported into the text arbitrarily. On balance there seems no more reason to reject Barth's employment of these phrases in the text than to reject, for example, the attribution of great significance to the Word or speech of God as the instrument of creation - a characteristic of a

(21) C.D. II 1 p 604, III 2 pp 146ff.

(22) D Cairns, The Image of God in Man, SCM, London, 1953.

great many expositions of the text. Here, then we find little reason to uphold the accusation made against this exegesis.

The picture presented here, and indeed in a more general conspexus of the exposition of Genesis 1 and 2, is not one of indiscriminate wrenching of the text. Rather we find arbitrary exegesis just at those points where doctrinal considerations meet the text at a tangent, or more precisely where the text seems to hold out the threat of sabotaging doctrinal neatness. When we recall the observations already made about the powerfully seminal influence of certain aspects of the Genesis exposition it becomes apparent that the total picture is a complex one. Within it we see at certain points the biblical Word acting as a positive influence, corrective and determinative, on the shape of dogmatics; at other points the relation seems to be reversed, and the Word appears hamstrung by doctrinal considerations. Any one-sided description - in terms either of forced exegesis or of the unbridled authority of the Word - is inadequate to the facts of the matter.(23)

In looking for traces of the distorting effect of Barth's peculiarly high valuation of the Old Testament we have so far examined only the Genesis exposition. Elsewhere, however, a similar pattern emerges. In approaching Leviticus 14 and 16 Barth makes the demand (or at least has the expectation) that these chapters will give colour and clarity to the Christian doctrine of Election with which he is concerned. The characteristic mark of this doctrine as he expounds it through the whole of the same part-volume (II 2) is that in Christ the work of God's right hand and that of his left, election and non-election, are seen to lie within the same gracious and loving purpose. This embracing of the two opposites, then is to be found within the ritual descriptions of these chapters (as we have seen above, pp 41ff).

(23) In making his criticisms Brunner clearly has wider considerations in mind than we have so far dealt with; he is questioning the whole endeavour of 'Christological exegesis' as we shall do ultimately.

To find this double structure in the exegesis of these two passages, however, Barth appears, once again, to become arbitrary in two respects in particular. In the first place his exegesis has to be highly selective to reveal the characteristic pattern which is at issue. The reader of the Church Dogmatics who did not at the same time take the precaution of following the passages in Leviticus themselves might well not realise that the points which receive emphasis in the exposition are woven into a much wider and more complex structure of ritual in the descriptions of these two chapters. For Barth finds no place for the ritual cleansing and shaving, or the offering of two lambs which accompany the purification rite described in Leviticus 14 (vv 8-25) nor for the young bull and the ram for a holocaust which are offered in conjunction with the two goats of the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:3-11, 27). In attending to the aspects of these ceremonies which appear in the context of his doctrine to be significant Barth is able to leave on one side a large portion of the text - without making the degree of selectivity at all clear to the reader. The resulting exposition gives a seriously over-simplified view of the text and of the rites it describes.

The second trace of the arbitrary hand in this treatment has already been briefly hinted at (above, p 67). Barth is concerned to emphasise that the rites he describes are not means of purification but witnesses of it, illustrations, as it were, of the eternal activities of God. The position which he takes up here might well be tenable as an understanding of the function of the Christian sacraments in the Church, but in relation to these rituals of the Old Testament world it requires more justification than Barth is able to give. With respect to the purificatory ceremonies for the cleansed leper his bold statements are particularly questionable: here there is every indication that (against Barth's claim, II 2 p 358) the rites do indeed complete the purification (note for example verses 4, 8, 20, 32 of Leviticus 14); it is certainly not the case, moreover, that the actions of this rite 'ignore' the leper himself (C.D. ibid) who is sprinkled with the blood of the sacrificed bird and has a good deal else to do in the ceremonies.

It is in minutiae such as these than we can discern the strain and distortion of the text which result from the excessive and over-pitched demands that Barth makes upon it. When called upon to typify the Christian understanding of election the descriptive texts of Leviticus do not prove entirely happy at the task, as in some degree the chapters of Genesis were shown to be pained by their high calling.

We can illustrate the same point once more with reference to the illustrations of the sloth of man, particularly that of the 'fool' taken from the wisdom literature (see above p 72). It is Barth's belief that this figure of the fool illustrates the 'merited rejection' which would be the lot of every man but for the gracious election of God. He maintains, moreover, that this figure, even within his original context, was not intended to refer only to a specific group of people but to a situation within which even the so-called 'wise' found themselves.(24). In support of this Barth points to passages in the prophetic books and certain of the Psalms, but from the distinct wisdom literature itself he quotes only Proverbs 22:15 and Ecclesiastes 9:3; these passages and the tenor of Barth's argument generally are scarcely sufficient to override the powerful impression conveyed in so much of the wisdom literature that the wise count themselves very much as distinct from the fool. Once again we sense that Barth will scarcely allow the Old Testament to say anything less than Christian or lower than his own expectations of it, whatever it strives with its own voice to express.

Earlier in this study we have emphasised the character of Barth's approach to Old Testament Scripture as that of expectant and subordinate listening. Our contention here is that the expectation can take on such quality and strength as to interfere with the listener's hearing and so come to effectively cancel out his attempted subordination. This process can take place where expectations are high as well as when they are low, and Barth's exegesis does not escape it altogether.

---

(24) C.D. IV 2 pp 424ff.

At the same time we may point out that it has required attention to detail to reveal the signs of stress in his actual exegesis, and that falsification and distortion appear by no means as wholesale characteristics of his work with the Old Testament.

* * * * * * * * *

We noted (above, p 94) as a virtue the fact that Barth refuses to cut Old and New Testaments in two, to categorise the one, negatively, as 'Law' and the other, positively, as 'Grace'. This refusal has certainly attracted more reproof than approval, and is often seen in relation to a 'basic flaw' in Barth's whole theology, particularly by critics of a Lutheran stance. It is natural enough that Barth's uncompromising rejection of the sequence of Law and Grace should arouse antagonism in the Lutheran camp, but it would be wrong to dismiss the questions posed on this issue as merely 'denominational', particularly when they are voiced by theologians such as Gustaf Wingren and Helmut Thielicke and find an echo in the work of the Reformed critic G C Berkouwer.

The question raised in various manners by these, and other, critics asks whether Barth's refusal to sever the works of God does not ultimately amount to the removal of the whole historical dimension from Christian theology, and the creation of a 'Christian monism'. Usually the question is asked in terms of the dogmatic adequacy of Barth's position, but before turning to this issue we shall inquire as to the adequacy of his position in relation to the use of the Bible. Expressing the question metaphorically we ask first whether the determination to integrate and hold together the acts of God in both Old and New Testament does not amount to a papering over of the cracks which are disclosed by a realistic exposition of the biblical material.

It would, of course, be misleading to suggest that Barth conceals every indication of disparity between the form of the Old Testament and that of the New.

We have already noted some of the distinguishing marks which he points out (above, pp36 ff). Among these marks of distinction we called attention to a few instances where the contrast appeared to be unusually underlined, as when Barth refers to the Old Testament as the 'lense' by which we are enabled to see (by reflection from the Son of God) our unChristian nature as 'men of sin'. The few statements of this sort evidently leave ample room for the kind of uncomfortable and seemingly sub-Christian realities which Old Testament study reveals; (25) but they are well away from the norm of Barth's understanding. Normally it is fair to say that he describes the disparity in terms which make no distinction of quality but only various distinctions of degree (e.g. the degree of manifestation or of secrecy, the degree of expectancy, etc.).

Correspondingly, in his actual use of the Old Testament text Barth inclines to overlook elements of apparent contrast with the New. This point comes particularly to the fore in relation to the moral difficulties raised by certain passages in the Old Testament. In this area Barth displays considerable insensitivity; his own position seems to be determined largely by opposition to the views of a previous generation of scholars (indeed several generations) for whom these moral difficulties , and ideas of moral progress, were very prominent.(26) By way of reaction Barth's writing displays little sense of any difficulty at this point. Certainly in dealing with the indident of David and Bathsheba (27) the repulsiveness of David's actions is clearly displayed, but in this instance the failing is unusually central to the narrative. Elsewhere the disturbing events of the

---

(25) The particular statement just referred to also provides an interesting context for the way the Old Testament is used by Barth in his 'Illustrations of the sloth of man' (C.D. IV 2).

(26) Such opposition may be detected in the slightly exaggerated stance Barth adopts in dealing with morality in the Old Testament in the early essay on 'The Strange New World within the Bible' (The Word of God and the Word of Man, pp 38ff)

(27) C.D. IV 2 pp 464ff.

Patriarchal narratives (28) the cruel terror which is the means of Israel's deliverance from Egypt,(29) or the narrow and bloodthirsty nationalism which marks much of her subsequent history (30) stand among a great many strands of the Old Testament whose questionable morality passes by unremarked in Barth's treatment.

This virtual refusal to acknowledge the spasmodic nastiness of the Old Testament text is in itself of small consequence, but more than this it is a pointer to a more significant shortcoming. It points to Barth's tendency to rub out the stigma of the 'Old' of the Old Testament, a tendency which can have the less happy effect of removing something of the 'New' from the New Testament. The suspicion of this failing in his Biblical approach is given some weight by conjunction with a passage of the Church Dogmatics in which he treats of the prophetic role of the Old Testament as a whole.(31) Here he first maintains that none of the prophets of the Old Testament presents 'a true type or adequate prefiguration of the prophecy of Jesus Christ' as an individual figure; but he goes on to maintain that the whole complex of the history of Israel can be 'unconditionally compared' to the prophetic person of Christ. Barth expounds this quality of the history of Israel in terms of four characteristics, in an exposition which is far from easily followed. These four characteristics he lists as follows: that the Old Testament is 'prophetic in company with its history', it is 'universal', it speaks 'on the basis of God's reconciliation' and it is 'mediatorial' in character. Here we shall concentrate attention only on the second of these four qualities which the Old Testament is said to share with the Christ of the Gospels: the characteristic of universality. The contention that the Old Testament as a whole speaks prophetically not of Israel alone, but of Israel among all nations, indeed of her mission to all the nations, is upheld by a long catena of quotations, many of them from the Psalms and second Isaiah. These serve to demonstrate clearly

(28) C.D. II 2 pp 354 f.
(29) e.g. C.D. II 2 p 220
(30) e.g. C.D. II 2 pp 366 - 388
(31) C.D. IV 3 pp 52-72

enough the presence of a universal theme intertwined with many others in the whole scope of the Old Testament. It is by a questionable step, however, that Barth carries this theme over from a characterisation of certain writers or passages within the Old Testament to a characterisation of the Testament seen somehow 'in toto'. An equal number of passages might well be evinced to display an exclusivist characteristic within the Old Testament,(32) but this would be no justification for qualifying the whole body of literature by this term.

We seem here to catch Barth in the act of selecting that which is most Christian about the Old Testament and importing its qualities to the whole. This is the process by which he conceals real distinctions, and our suspicion that this is done to the detriment of the fresh and radically 'new' quality of the New Testament is confirmed by a passage from this study of universalism in the Old Testament: 'For the rest, in comparing the Old and New Testament witness, can we really avoid the impression that the former is richer, more explicit, more patent and more emphatic than the latter in relation to the problem of the universalism of the covenant, the glory of God and the salvation of man as this is envisaged from the very first and therefore also in respect of the implied missionary task?'(33) To answer 'yes' to Barth's rhetorical question though quite a likely response would be to do less than justice to the distinctiveness of the New Testament in this area: for whether its witness be thought more 'emphatic' or less than that of the Old Testament, in reality the whole theme of God's purpose for mankind is treated in a manner which admits no simple comparison (least of all equation) between the two.

The impression given by both the critical points raised so far may well be that Barth's understanding of the Old Testament is at fault largely through being pitched too high, through the refusal to accept many of the limitations of its text and the determination to find only that which is best within it. We have now

(32) Passages such as Leviticus 18:24ff, Ezra 9, Zechariah 8:1-8 and Zephaniah 2:5-11 are a few among many which taken in isolation might display such a character
(33) C.D. IV 3 p 60.

to recall, however, that this high valuation of the Old Testament is maintained only by virtue of its relation to the figure of Jesus Christ, who is himself the sum total of God's Word to men. Often this relation of the text to Christ remains very much in the background of Barth's use and interpretation, but from time to time it has to be made explicit. We are then struck by a paradoxical sense that what seemed an over-assessment has a quality of under-assessment about it, a quality lent by the continual stress on the impossibility of the words of the Old Testament finding an adequate significance on their own without the aid of a Christo-centric interpretation.

Most of Barth's longer expositions of Old Testament passages find their conclusion in reference to the final manifestation in Christ; to see this method of working particularly clearly exemplified, however, we may study the assembly of expositions in Church Dogmatics II 2 (pp 354-409), part of which we have already reviewed (above, pp 59ff). In turn Barth looks at the witness of the Patriarchal stories of Genesis, the rites described in Leviticus 14 and 16, the figures of David and Saul, and the narrative of I Kings 13 (the story of the man of God from Judah and the old prophet from Bethel); and as he surveys each in turn he draws from each the same conclusion: seen on its own each narrative poses an insoluble riddle.(34) The obscurity or riddle of each narrative Barth expresses in terms of the 'subject' of the text; the question as to whom, or to what, it refers. In respect of the stories of Saul and David he asks: "Do these passages have a subject which is still unknown to us, as to the Jewish reader? Or are they void in themselves because they have no subject at all?", and answers that rather than either of these two possibilities the truth lies in the New Testament understanding, that their subject is 'Jesus Christ'. To anyone who is unable to accept that these passages find their meaning in the figure of Christ he holds out the challenge: "let them show us a better key to the problem of the elect king of the Books of Samuel!"

---

(34) See above pp 63 ff.

There is a deeply unsatisfactory strain running through this whole repeated argument; it derives from the unexamined assumption that the narratives of the Old Testament require a 'subject' to have meaning, that they are in essence problematic and require the solution of fulfilment in Christ before they can be read with equanimity. In the first place this assumption flies in the face of the evident fact that passages such as these have for many centuries been given exegesis and found edifying without the dimension of Christian understanding. Secondly, it has the drastic effect of making the exegete discover, or even fabricate, obscurities and puzzles within a text which by no means parades them. Worst of all, it has secretly the effect of robbing the narrative of a vital quality of actuality and reality. The centre of gravity in the story of the Judean man of God and the prophet of Bethel is shifted from the story of I Kings 13 to the figure of Christ, where that story finds its ultimate meaning, but as it shifts it leaves behind the story's essential quality of having happened there and then, of being recorded at that time in that book; the 'facts' of that story and its recording lose their significance as they become pointers, or clues in the puzzle.

So it is that to some extent, under the influence of this powerful Christological hermeneutic, the whole historical dimension of the Old Testament crumbles in Barth's hands; not because he discredits the genuine historicity of recorded events (which he often maintains), but because he relates them so much more firmly to the figure of Christ than to the circumstances of their occurrence, conception or recording that those circumstances cease, in the end, to matter.

To this fundamental observation we must add the much slighter observation that Barth mistakenly claims that his initial exegesis allows the Old Testament text to 'speak by and for itself', without the obtrusion of the Christological interpretation; (35) for inevitably, though the name of Christ is excluded from the exposition, belief in his presence rules the selectivity and emerging pattern of it from the beginning.

---

(35) C.D. II 2 p 364

As we come to consider Barth's attitude towards modern historical criticism of the biblical text it must be with this last critical point clearly in mind; for it is in relation to this matter that his attitude falls into place for the reader. As we have already noted, in this area he has come under attack from both flanks, on the one hand as a deserter from the classic Reformed doctrine of inspiration and from a fundamentalist biblical approach which has become linked to it by some writers,(36) on the other hand as one who hides from the unavoidable implications of modern criticism.(37) More surprisingly, a recent student has added somewhat to the confusion of the critical picture by maintaining that historical criticism in fact plays a deep and significant role in Barth's theology, and a beneficial role, too.(38)

In so far as we can draw conclusions from the study of Old Testament use, it appears that none of these various opinions meets precisely the truth of Barth's position here. Certainly we cannot maintain that he plays the ostrich in the face of the historical critic. To dismiss this possibility we need only recall his treatment of the message of Amos,(39) where the evidence for the historical context of the prophecy is closely examined, or the continual strand of reference to critical commentaries which runs through the long examination of the Creation stories of Genesis. Whatever Barth did with historical criticism of the Old Testament literature he did not attempt to disregard or pass over it. Equally, however, our evidence does not suggest that he was ever carried by the critical movement into any extreme of scepticism, or any uncompromising rejection of traditional lines of interpretation. In the Genesis exposition the great majority of references to the work of Delitzsch and Gunkel are made for purposes of refutation, and at times they are dealt with almost jokingly.

---

(36) See for example a lightweight study of Barth's Soteriology, by R L Reymond, Philadelphia PA 1967, p 21 and passim.

(37) See for example John Bowden's short study Karl Barth, SCM, London, 1971, pp 114ff.

(38) So F-W Marquardt writing in Karl Barth, Die Kirchliche Dogmatik:Registerband, Ed Helmut Krause & alii, Zürich, 1970.

(39) C.D. IV 2 pp 478f.

A particularly illuminating passage in this connection is that where Barth deals with the critical questions raised by the narrative of Numbers 13 and 14 (see above, p 75). Here he acknowledges the validity of the critical attempt to dissect and analyse the narrative into its component parts and sources, to qualify part as 'myth' and part as 'true history', but the acknowledgement is not much more than a nod. Subsequently Barth does not trouble to engage in any such 'taking to pieces' for himself, nor pay any further heed to any critic who might. He chooses to proceed in 'naivety' as he himself terms it, but whether that naivety is 'tested and critical' as he claims, or has merely paid lip-service to those qualities we may well doubt. Again, when he comes to the exegesis of the Book of Job as a type of Christ the 'True Witness' he readily 'takes for granted' the 'fairly generally recognised hypotheses' which attempt to deal with the literary problems it poses, but then bearing these in mind he presses on with the comment: 'At some time and by some person all this came to be seen and understood as the unity which it now constitutes in the Canon'. Hereafter the critical hypotheses are of little significance in the exposition.

The truth which emerges from these instances is that from Barth's expository standpoint the historical critical questions appear neither particularly threatening nor markedly significant, by and large they cease to matter; and they do this for the reason we have already outlined. For all the discussion of the question of history, of saga and myth, Geschichte and Historie, the actual business of historical critical examination ceases to matter for Barth's exegesis because the centre of attention is elsewhere; the centre of interest is on the relation of Old Testament words to the one Word of God. With this concern at the centre, interest in the exact sources, points of origin and manner of growth of the text becomes perepheral, and we need not be surprised to discover in Barth's approach to this field a sense of wondering what all the fuss is about.

The belief that Barth sees the historical-critical area of concern as peripheral is further supported by the observation that the scholars with whom he

chooses to debate are often of a past generation. We notice quite frequently the names of Delitzsch, Gunkel and Gressmann, very occasionally those of Eichrodt and Noth. Certainly in his work on the Book of Job he seems to have taken more extensive care to make contact with a newer generation of scholars, but nowhere do we find any evidence that Barth is concerned to follow the train of thought of scientific biblical criticism beyond its earlier stance.

Notably, the contemporary Old Testament theologian whose work Barth took most seriously, and whose assistance he himself acknowledged,(40) was Wilhelm Vischer. Vischer's attitude to the Old Testament, like Barth's does not preclude scientific questioning of the origins and nature of the text. It has as its main emphasis, however, a truly Barthian stress on the Word of God speaking through the Prophets, and he openly sets out to expose the witness of the text to Christ.(41) Quite undeniably Vischer stands wholly apart from the mainstream of modern Old Testament scholarship, and his position helps to clarify Barth's own in this respect.

* * * * * * * *

Before drawing together these threads of criticism we must stop briefly to question Barth's understanding of the exegetical process itself, an understanding which we outlined in the second part of the study (p 41). Here a prominent stress is laid on the 'perspicuitas' of Scripture, the capacity of the text to make itself clear. In describing in detail the process of exegesis (42) allowance is made for the part inevitably played by the 'philosophy' of the interpreter, all that which he brings with him to the text, but the total picture remains defective in at least two respects.

---

(40) C.D. II 2 p x

(41) W Vischer, The Witness of the Old Testament to Christ vol I, Lutterworth, London, 1949, for example p 17: 'The writings of the Old Testament no less than those of the New are for all who seek Him signs and tokens of the Son of God who was born in a manger . . .'

(42) C.D. I 2 pp 710-740.

In the first place Barth appears to be unaware of the influence of the selective process in the work of biblical interpretation. The point at which he gives weight to the personal world-view of the exegete is in the heart of the expository process, but this element brings its influence to bear much earlier than this. In the very primary stage, when the theologian is in the act of lighting upon some particular passage, and within that passage upon some particular words, here the whole world of preconceptions and prejudices of the interpreter is already at work, taking up, as it were, a dialogue with the matter of the text as a whole.

The reality of this pre-selective process can be illustrated on two levels. First we can observe the tendency to work predominantly with certain books of the Bible, or with certain sections of books. We have already seen that Barth's use of the Old Testament is fairly comprehensive in range, indeed we have deliberately chosen to study passages which show him at work with a wide variety of biblical texts. Nonetheless, within this wide range there are very distinct signs of preference. Through the Dogmatics as a whole, as also in the published sermons, we find particularly extensive use of the books of Genesis, the Psalms and Isaiah (more especially the chapters known as Second Isaiah). The later books of the Pentateuch, on the other hand, with the Wisdom literature and certain of the Prophetic books find only an occasional place. The tendencies revealed here are neither very surprising nor alarming, but they do add some colour to the suggestion that at the earliest stage a form of automatic selection is taking place - a process which the theologian does not appear to recognise himself.

On a more detailed level we have previously noted the selective quality of the exegesis of the Leviticus passages, where integral parts of the text are virtually overlooked; a similar process may be seen at work in the exposition of Numbers 13 and 14. To some degree the tendency could be discovered in most of the exegetical work we have reviewed. Again there is nothing shocking or disreputable about the choice of parts of a passage as significant rather than other parts, it is an integral part of the normal pattern of exegesis. But it is a part in which the influence

of personal subjective considerations is likely to be particularly decisive, and hence there is need in the kind of constructive exegesis which is Barth's concern for some real awareness of this consideration. This awareness he does not manifest.

The second defect which we maintain vitiates Barth's understanding, and indeed his practice, or the exegetical process concerns again the meeting in this process of the human philosophy and the Scriptural Word.(44) He readily accepts that a human system of thought will necessarily be brought to bear on the text, and further that such a system, or philosophy, has an essential part to play. The limits of this role, however, he hedges about with many restrictions, and it becomes increasingly clear that the part is passive and markedly passive. The deliberately narrow and lifeless conception of this role is clearly intended to defend the freedom and supremacy of the biblical Word, and its power to speak significantly to us. The importance of preserving and guarding this power and freedom must not be minimised, but we can question whether it is best preserved on the basis of a conception of the human subjective role in exegesis which is illusory.

The conception proves to be illusory firstly on the evidence of Barth's own biblical work. If we turn our mind's eye back to the early work on Romans and try to consider the forces and influences that must have been actively powerful in the genesis of its dramatic message we can clearly not alot a merely passive role to to the human 'philosophy', the contemporary climate and ethos, and many other elements which might be termed subjective.(45) This is not to deny the overriding power of the biblical text speaking with commanding authority in dialogue with these elements. If we think in terms of Barth's later exegesis, undertaken at a time when he would consider himself to have outgrown this degree of subjectivity

---

(44) C.D. I 2 pp 727-736

(45) Indeed some critics seek to discover the mainspring of Barth's theology in reaction against the ethos of his immediate past - as L Bouyer who concludes that 'The God of Barth is but the exasperated negation' of the 'God of Ritschl' (The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism, Littledale Hawill, London, 1956, p 223).

the signs are notably less apparent; but the concept of passivity is still not adequate. The exegesis of the image of God in Genesis 1 and 2 can only be understood realistically as the outcome of a constructive dialogue in which the writings of Bonhoeffer, Vischer and other theologians, the philosophy of Martin Buber, and the whole current of Western thought about inter-personal relations each had influence. On a more traditional note, the typological exegesis of the Leviticus rituals is scarcely conceivable without the knowledge of Barth's familiarity with the tradition of biblical interpretation and in particular the work of Calvin.

In all these instances the elements of the interpreter's thought-system is not adequately described in terms of the hypothetical and subordinate part which Barth ascribed to it, as a kind of sleeping partner in the business of exposition.

We may take further issue with Barth in this matter: for his insistent deprecation of the human and personal contribution to exegesis is not only unjust to the realities of the process, it is also restrictive to the freedom of God's Spirit. In opposition to rigid doctrines of scriptural inspiration Barth vigorously asserts the freedom of God in relation to the text,(46) but this freedom clearly does not extend to the matter of exegesis itself where all that the expositor brings with him to the text is assumed to be godless and to require subjugation if God's Word is to be heard. It is, of course, no easy matter to frame a doctrine of Scripture and its interpretation which makes allowance for a positive contribution from human philosophy without seeming to give free licence to distort the text. The attempt has to be made, however, if the shortcomings of Barth's doctrine are to be avoided and the continuing labour of exegesis seen as something more than a one-way conversation with the Spirit of God over a more or less faulty receiver.

---

(46) C.D. I 1 p 157.

PART IV

In the preceding section we have examined a kind of balance sheet of Barth's doctrine and use of the Old Testament, in which distinctive points of gain and loss can be observed. In essential outline the account contains four items. The first concerns the stance adopted towards the Old Testament, characterised by expectations which can become exaggerated and a surrender of autonomy which might be more potent if it were more realistically defined. Next is the marked unifying tendency of his biblical work which, at its most extreme, seems to deny any fundamental point of distinction between Old and New Testaments. Third is the integration of Old Testament exposition in the whole process of movement by which God's Word is 'spoken' in Christ, received and proclaimed by men and tested dogmatically, an integration which harbours its own risks. Last is the deep simplicity of his hermeneutic, a virtue which may well lapse into naivety in its weaker moments.

Having made this critical appraisal it is now important to go beneath and beyond it; beneath it to discover the fundamental source (or sources) of the inadequacies in Barth's position, beyond it to point towards more constructive conclusions for the student of doctrine and the Old Testament. These are the intentions of this concluding part of the study.

1 The Heart of Barth's Biblical Doctrine

On examination the distinctive elements of Barth's use and understanding of the Bible prove to rest upon one underlying quality: that of unity, or the drawing together of disparate parts. This quality is plainly apparent in the refusal to divide the two Testaments in any substantial way, equally it can be seen in the drawing together of the three forms of the Word of God (see above, p 21) and the parallel drawing together of the exponents of biblical criticism, doctrine and preaching. The same unitive thrust makes for an understanding of exegesis which is truly simple, or even one-sided and is also at the root of the particular stance

which Barth takes up and recommends towards the Old Testament, since expectancy towards this body of literature and its interpretation is only a reflection of its oneness with the Gospel literature which is, in turn, united with Christ himself.

In speaking of Christ as the centre of the unitive influence which pervades this aspect of Barth's theology we express the point in a manner probably more acceptable to the theologian himself. For he was ready and keen to assert that all his theological thinking sought to be Christological, to find unity in the ultimate truth that 'Jesus is victor', but by no means as happy with the concept of a unitive or triumphant principle such as G C Berkouwer discerned in his work.(1) Whether Barth succeeds, as he himself believes, in relating the whole of his theology to the personal figure of Jesus, the incarnate Word, or whether it is a 'Christ-principle' or theological principle which in fact draws the threads of his theology together it is, in either case, clear that unity is a keynote of his whole work.

The contention that Barth's theology is essentially simple appears to be belied quite emphatically by the complex and extensive form in which it has found expression. His notorious volubility as a theologian (acknowledged with some humour by Barth himself (2)) hardly looks like the evidence of underlying unity. And yet it is the earnest desire to follow through a theology of God's Word, a Christologically thought-out theology, with the utmost rigour in every branch of dogmatic thinking which makes the Church Dogmatics the detailed and ponderous work that it is. At the same time it is true that Barth's distinctive theological viewpoint can be expressed quite fully in a brief compass, when the demand for compression is made; the credal books 'Dogmatics in Outline', 'The Faith of the Church' and 'Credo' as well as the short study of 'Evangelical Theology' all bear witness to this capacity of his theology, and so to its essential simplicity.(3)

---

(1) C.D. IV 3 pp 173ff.

(2) See Karl Barth in Antwort, Zollikon-Zurich 1956, p 895, quoted in How I Changed my Mind, Edinburgh 1969, p 14.

(3) In some 150 pages Dogmatics in Outline (E.T. of Dogmatik im Grundriss) achieves the most effective concentration of Barth's mature theology; although even here much of the distinctive quality of the full Dogmatics is inevitably lost.

The use of the terms 'unity' and 'simplicity' in reference to this aspect of Barth's work does not carry with it any clear judgment for or against the characteristic (unless they are inferred to be compliments). The point has, however, been made the basis of severe judgment by several critics, some of whom characterise his theology as 'monistic' (in the case of Berkouwer "Biblical Christian Monism"). The substance of this charge (which is, of course, differently expressed by different critics) contains two essential elements. One is that Barth's Christological 'monism' devalues the vital historical and human dimensions of Christian faith, making for a belief in which there is no sense of the 'step by step' working out of salvation through the epochs of human history and only a diminished sense of the importance of man's response to God in that history. The other is that the concept of a dramatic conflict in which God is opposed by dynamic forces of evil effectively disappears from Christian doctrine.(4) The second of these critical assertions is of great intrinsic interest, but it is the first which relates more particularly to the present study and which deserves closer attention here.

A straightforward and lively expression of this accusation against Barth is given by Heinz Zahrnt, who gathers together the thoughts of several original critics in his study of Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: (5) -

"No one will object to the way Barth draws together the beginning and end of the whole historical process in Jesus Christ. But the question is whether in Barth it is still a matter of an historical process: does he present anything in history as still happening?

"For how can anything still happen when everything has already 'happened' in eternity? The eternalisation of the divine revelation necessarily leads to an abstract pietism. The basing of the events of salvation upon a timeless event in the perfect tense results for Barth in an irreparable loss of concrete historical reality.

(4) This point of view is expressed with particular force by Gustaf Wingren, Theology in Conflict, Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh, 1958, pp 108ff.

(5) The Question of God, Collins, London, 1969, p 113.

"He no longer sees the revelation of God as a drama enacted between God and man, full of tension and change, with moments of progress, moments of retrogression and turning points, with gradations, phases and epochs, but only as 'enlightenment' about an event which has long since taken place. Historical perspective disappears in the dimension of eternity. Virtually no other theology talks so much about events, happenings and history as Barth's, but there is virtually no theology with so little action, because all the action has already taken place in eternity".

The touch of journalistic panache with which Zahrnt presses home this argument serves to highlight the question which is of vital importance in relation to the Old Testament. The point here is not merely that Barth concentrates all his theology into a form of Christology, but that the form of Christology on which he concentrates is essential ethereal, dealing more in terms of the pre-existent and eternally present Christ than of the Christ incarnate. It is the all-embracing power of this kind of 'Christomonism' which is said to rob Barth's theology of the awareness of real fleshly history.

The glaring omission from Zahrnt's critique is, of course, detailed evidence for such broad conclusions. If he were called upon to adduce specific quotations to support the charges it might prove quite difficult, for, in fact, this kind of judgment of Barth's theology expresses more a generalised 'feeling' about his work as a whole than a precise and measured assessment of its content. The same could be said of much further comment along the same lines, as when Henri Bouillard asserts that his version of the history of salvation doesn't touch ground -"Barth la suspend en l'air, pour ainsi dire" - or when P Althaus refers to the "epochlessness" at the heart of his theology.(6) Judgments of this sort are inevitably difficult to pin down, even when made in the context of a detailed study, and yet such judgments need to be made and evaluated if a critique is to be more than parochial in extent.

---

(6) P Althaus, Gebot und Gesetz, Gütersloh, 1952, p 25.

In the subject matter of this study we have a test-bed for this critical issue. Here we can observe how far it is true that Barth allows the unifying thrust of his theology to work to the exclusion of authentic elements in the biblical material; we can see whether, in this particular, his version of the history of salvation is attenuated or ethereal. To some extent these questions have indeed already been faced and answered more or less explicitly, so that we have now only to draw out and clarify conclusions.

In the early verses of St Mark's Gospel those who are witnesses of the ministry of Jesus are recorded as saying in astonishment: 'What is this? A new teaching?' The reader of Barth's Dogmatics comes to the particular consideration of the incarnation and the work of Christ with no such feeling. To him the figure of Christ has already been disclosed and pointed out a hundred times in every aspect of the foregoing doctrine. More specifically the figure of Christ has been delineated within the varied patterns of the Old Testament, from the very moment of creation onwards; for we have seen that it is Barth's general (indeed almost universal) practice to expound an explicit relationship between the narratives and characters of the Old Testament and the person of Christ. Here then we have to acknowledge that our study of Barth's use of the Old Testament reveals a real weakness in his approach to the New. We are bound to concur to this extent with the judgment of Helmut Thielicke, who refers to the loss of the sense of uniqueness, the once-for-all quality of Christ's coming and atonement.(7)

The belief that the birth of Christ inaugurated a radically new era in the history of God's dealings with men is quite fundamental to the New Testament itself, finding particularly powerful expression in certain of Paul's letters (as in Galatians, for example). The inevitable complement of this emphasis is a more negative stress on the death or passing of the previous order: if Christ brings freedom it is to men who were held in bondage (Galatians 5:1). This simple observation

---

(7) Theological Ethics, Black, Edinburgh, 1968, Volume I pp 98ff.

need not be limited to the biblical history; in day-to-day participation in human history we experience the same superceding of past events by present and know that the possibility of new beginning rests on the partial death or rejection of the past. There is no room for any measure of this passing or rejection of the old in Barth's view of the biblical history, since every event is given its ultimate explanation and significance by reference to the 'telos' of the history, Christ. Indeed each part of the old history is seen as containing within it the new, every part of the so-called Law is truly secreting Gospel. So the whole body of Old Testament Scripture stands permanently alongside the New not affording any pattern of contrast or background of shadow by which its light is defined, but rather shedding less brightly the same beams.

This evaluation of the Old Testament is by no means foreign to Christian faith or the New Testament; we need only recall the words of Matthew 5:17ff ("Think not that I came to destroy the law or the prophets . . .") to realise this. At the same time this concept of a positive relation between the Testaments, of a continuum, stands in tense proximity to a more divisive view. The tension that exists between these two positions (one which declares the originality and uniqueness of the Christ event, the other maintaining the consistent purpose of God) is expressed in the tortuous reasoning of Paul's treatment of Law, particularly in the Letter to the Romans. This tension is not a quality of Barth's biblical theology, or his parallel theology of Law and Gospel, where the demand for unity and basic simplicity of doctrine leads to the development of one position and the neglect of the other. This neglect allows us to forget the decisive newness of the action begun in Christ's birth and attenuates Barth's theology as a whole.

So far we have contended that when all the events of biblical history are drawn into so close a relation to the event of the Incarnation that axial point loses its unique and fresh quality in the history. Ironically Barth's attempt to subject every aspect of his doctrine to Christology does an injustice to the biblical figure of Christ. We now come to reiterate that there is loss to the material

of the Old Testament itself as well (see above, pp 117ff); the Old Testament loses a vital historical dimension when subjected to Christological interpretation as Barth subjects it.

The question of history in relation to Barth's theology, with which we now find ourselves involved, is a delicate one, and we enter into it with caution. First it must be emphasised that the main point at issue is not to do with historicity, with the question whether events recorded in the Old Testament actually happened in the manner in which they are narrated; Barth's stance on these issues of historicity is usually far from radical, he often appears to presume on the factual reliability of accounts which other theologians would treat sceptically. But this does not prevent doubt arising as to the truly historical nature of the Old Testament as we find it in Barth's theology. In fact, quite the contrary: the general tacit acceptance of the historicity of events and the minimal concern with the niggling and down to earth questions of historical criticism breeds an air of carelessness in the matter of history which is no doubt the reverse of his intention.

The 'vital historical dimension' which we miss here is not, then, dependent on the naive defence of the historical accuracy of the biblical narrative; it is dependent, however, on the readiness to acknowledge and discern the way in which each perikope discloses its origin, growth and absorption into the narrative in relation to particular settings in Israel's history. Barth is unwilling to grapple with this particularity, and the way he avoids its demands is never clearer than in his idiosyncratic treatment of 'saga' as a biblical form (see above, p 44). This category comes into play with reference to the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2, where Barth does not maintain a simple 'fundamentalist' understanding (treating the chapters as plain historical records) nor allow that the narratives can be classed as myths, instead he defines them as sagas hoping to enshrine in this classification the belief that they communicate a certain 'pre-historical history (praehistorische Geschichte)'. Through this device Barth escapes the more glaring illogicalities of a 'plain history' approach, but at the same time he evades the

questions implied by the category of myth: for a myth though timeless in reference is not timeless in origin and development but betrays relation to specific circumstances. In employing the concept of the myth Barth would have been faced with these historical questions, but in the coining of a distinctive type of saga he freed himself to talk broadly of History without having to soil his hands in the unearthing of precise evidence.

The same evasion of the truly historical questions raised by the Old Testament text is displayed in most of the other expositions we have observed. In treating the book of Job and the story of the Israelite spies in the land of Canaan we have already noted that Barth gives the merest nod in the direction of modern critical investigation. In both cases he is concerned with the exposition of the mature text for the good of theologian and preacher but the sacrifice of critical discrimination which he makes is a costly one; it leads towards a one-dimensional view of the Old Testament in which the whole complex of history and commentary appears to be set down simply in order to prefigure and contain in secret pattern the shape of the complete revelation in Christ. And when the unveiling of this hidden correspondence with Christ becomes the main preoccupation of the Old Testament expositor (as it becomes for Barth) and the contextual questions about the historical influences surrounding the growth of the narrative recede, then we grow uncertain as to whether this is human history at all: it begins to look more like a useful divine prologue to the real action, something resembling the dumb show which Hamlet's players so helpfully mounted before the drama itself took the stage.

In expanding this criticism we are still trying to circle round the central point of diagnosis suggested at the beginning of this chapter: the weaknesses we have tried to underline in respect of the unique quality of the Christ event and the particular historical character of the Old Testament are both functions of the powerful unitive force at work in Barth's whole theology. The intention to draw all theological lines together so that they meet at the point at which the Word

becomes flesh is basic to the purposes of the Church Dogmatics; in the very first volume by expounding the threefold doctrine of the Word of God as the foundation of Christian dogmatic thought Barth provides the theological geometry which makes this drawing together a possibility. The basic message of this doctrine is that the proclamation which awakens and expresses faith, and the biblical documents of Old and New Testaments are both aspects of the one reality most concisely indicated by the name Jesus Christ; both share in his title as the one Word of God. Once this presupposition is laid down it follows inevitably that every avenue of theological inquiry must find its end in Christ.

The deficiencies which we have studied do not arise through any failure to adhere to this 'theological geometry' on Barth's part, quite the reverse. The more rigorously he carries through his purpose and relates all words to the one Word the more pronounced these weaknesses become. The shortcomings of Barth's biblical work have to be traced back to a point of origin within the doctrine of the Word of God itself: this was the place from which the present study set out, and we must return to it to conclude the critical analysis.

Any critical treatment of Barth's doctrine of the Word as a whole deserves a lengthy and detailed exposition in accordance with the importance and precision of the doctrine itself. Here, however, such detail is out of place and we can afford only a concise judgment. In making this judgment it is useful to compare Barth's doctrine with that of an eminent contemporary, Paul Tillich. In his theology the concept of the Word has none of the vital significance which it carries in the Church Dogmatics, but though it figures only marginally it offers a valuable contrast. Where Barth develops a trinitarian doctrine of the Word of God Tillich speaks of some six different meanings of the term,(8) and among them describes the fifth in this way:

---

(8) Systematic Theology, Nisbet, London, 1968, Vol I pp 174ff.

"Fifth, the term Word is applied to the document of the final revelation and its special preparation, namely, the Bible. But if the Bible is called the Word of God, theological confusion is almost unavoidable. Such consequences as the dictation theory of inspiration, dishonesty in dealing with the biblical text, a 'monophosytic' dogma of the infallibility of a book, etc., follow from such an identification." This meaning of the term Word of God finds a unity with the other meanings which he designates under the one title 'God manifest': "manifest in himself, in creation, in the history of revelation, in the final revelation, in the Bible, in the words of the church and her members."(9)

We have seen that Barth makes the identification of Bible and Word much more readily than this (and with only very slight reservations) and also that he strives vigorously to exclude the dire consequences which Tillich posits. The difference between the two theologians, however, runs deeper than the issue of how readily they term Scripture 'Word of God'; there is a fundamental difference in the way the term itself is used and understood. This difference is revealed by Tillich's references to the 'meaning' of the term: he clearly regards it as an expression within the traditional theological vocabulary with a variety of significance in various contexts - a variety not always appreciated by those who have employed it. In Barth's use, by contrast, the phrase seems to have more of a substance and life of its own; we have seen him employing it as something of a key concept, unlocking and disclosing the hidden relationships within theology. Although he asks many questions about the nature of this Word of God he asks few semantic questions, he gives little consideration to the ambiguities of the language itself.

The same point has been made in a more generally critical manner by James Barr:(10) "Writers like Bultmann and Barth, alike primarily interested in

---

(9) ibid p 177.

(10) The Semantics of Biblical Language p 277 Oxford 1961.

philosophical-theological problems, seem (in their writings on hermeneutics at any rate, whatever their practice elsewhere) not to see semantics as a part of linguistics and semantic functioning as an immediate effect of any dealing with language; thus they have some idea of a rather mechanical grammatical or philological procedure, . . .' The criticism which Barr here directs towards Barth's view of the hermeneutic process can equally be directed towards the doctrinal expression on which this view is based - that of the Word of God.

There is one point at which the question of meaning becomes particularly important in this area, this is the point at which Christ is identified as the Word of God. This identification, arising directly out of the Prologue to John's Gospel, is subtle and idiosyncratic. Barth acknowledges just as readily as Tillich that it demands a more than narrowly verbal understanding of 'Word', and is far from being a mere expression of the sum of Christ's teaching. But Barth does not go on from there to acknowledge that there may be special difficulties in trying to use this very subtle and particular version of the expression in the same breath as more direct and obvious versions. The identification of Bible and Word of God, while hardly the simplest of linguistic uses, is still much less dependent on special theological and cultural considerations than is the concept of the Word in 'Logos Christology'. And yet Barth will slip from one category to another within his threefold doctrine of the Word with alarming ease, as if in each instance the same term were being used in the same way, when in reality the distinctions beneath the surface are as important as the likeness above.

Disregarding these awkward questions of meaning as he does Barth is able to use the concept of the Word of God to secure that overall unity which we have suggested is basic to his mature theology. But the connection made in this way, however satisfying schematically, proves to be a short-circuit. With respect to Christology it results in a heavy emphasis on revelation and communication in the Incarnation, to the detriment of other important categories. With respect to biblical interpretation, at least in the Old Testament, it enforces a closer identity

with the Gospel of Christ than the text itself can comfortably afford.

If this criticism of one fundamental aspect of Barth's theology has any accuracy we find ourselves led on to a further question. Is the quality of cohesion and systematic unity which he strives after in fact out of the reach of human dogmatics, however Christian and inspired? May not Barth, for all his protestations of engaging in a theologia viatorum in fact be attempting to write a theologia comprehensorum, a theology in which the ultimate disclosure of the unity of all things in Christ is treated as an accomplished reality?(11) Certainly this is the conclusion which many subsequent theologians have drawn. Heinz Zahrnt, in the critique we have already quoted suggests that Barth is "peering into the script destined for the persons of the Trinity, and sometimes one even feels that he is prompting them", and many contemporary theologians indicate the same sort of feeling graphically by espousing humbler and more limited objectives in their work.(12)

This is also the conclusion to which the present study points. Our observation of Barth's use and understanding of the Old Testament has shown that there is a price to be paid for the majestic doctrine of God's complete self-revelation in Christ, the doctrine of the one Word of God, when its implications are worked out with the rigour Barth employs. For all the gain in theological richness and breadth which arises from the use of the Old Testament in dogmatic work there is real loss in terms of the accurate perception and evaluation of the qualities of its text. This loss, in its turn, is a loss to dogmatics itself, since an Old Testament which has to be stretched and emaciated to fit into the dogmatic straightjacket can no longer make its distinctive contribution to the story of salvation.

(11) When Barth speaks of this traditional categorisation of theology (in C.D. II 1 p 209) we are left, interestingly enough, with some uncertainty as to whether he reckons there to be any real distinction between knowledge 'by faith' and 'by sight'.

(12) No truly comprehensive work of 'Dogmatics has appeared since Tillich's Systematic Theology, and the intense and sustained interest in fragmentary statements of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's seems to be almost symbolic of the more tentative and inconclusive tenor of contemporary theology.

So we find ourselves returning an equivocal answer to the questions from which this study set out. We have seen that, in respect of the Old Testament, Barth's mature theology is both comprehensive and courageous; he brooks no limitation in the endeavour to put the riches of the Old Testament at the disposal of Christian dogmatics. But this boldness is not entirely well judged, for here, as in other areas of his theology, we are aware that he seeks to comprehend too much too easily. The unity of Old and New, the relating of the prophetic word to the contemporary words of the Christian theologian - these achievements do not altogether carry conviction, since the Old Testament which emerges from these processes bears too little resemblance to that which we know through the work of current critical specialists. Moreover, in attaining this unity Barth has looked suspiciously like a magician rather than a theologian: the concept of the Word of God taking on something of the nature of the all-powerful wand rather than the interpretive tool.

Thus we are finally led to comment on Barth's way of working as much as the content of his work. And here the characteristic which demands attention is the apartness, almost isolation, in which he laboured. The evidence suggests that, in later years at least, Barth's closest working companion was Mozart, and exquisite though that companionship was it could hardly replace that of the theological peers from whom he distanced himself so decisively.(13) Acting on the highest conscious motives Barth pursued a lonely theological course and turned to contemporary scholarship more often in attack (albeit generous-hearted) than in friendship; this is particularly the case in the realm of biblical work. One might imagine that his own doctrinal emphasis on the 'analogia relationia', with its positive stress on the godliness of man in relationship with his fellow-man, would have made him wary of such solitude.

---

(13) See, for example How I Changed My Mind p 41 Edinburgh 1969

As it is, we need not be surprised to discover in Barth's stance as a theologian a monumental singularity which is the counterpart of the monolithic quality we have observed in his theology. And since we are concerned with faults which we have traced to that quality it may be worthwhile looking at the issue of the theologian's stance and his relationship with his contemporaries in seeking to reach more positive conclusions.

If the study and exegesis of the Old Testament is to be carried on in fruitful relationship with the continual re-statement of Christian doctrine it can no longer be so because one man performs both tasks. The rapid and complex development of scientific biblical study makes such a polytechnic approach impossible. Further, we have seen in Barth's case how the isolated scholar is tempted into doing less than justice to one or other of the aspects which he attempts to yoke together. If there is a way of escape from these limiting factors it must be by way of closer co-operation and interaction between scholars in different fields of theological specialism. This conclusion leads us directly to the concept of academic teams - a concept which might bring a wry smile to the face of many contemporary scholars. The tradition of academic work at least in modern history, is individualistic and not encouraging to close interrelations between or within disciplines. Nonetheless, it seems a just inference from our study that a closer degree of partnership among theologians in their work is unavoidable if the benefits of current progress in learning are not to be confined to their compartments of origin and if the attempt to relate the parts to a greater whole is not to be resigned.(14) Whatever the characteristic failings of Karl Barth's work it stands as a majestic denial of any such narrowness or timidity in theology.

---

(14) A lively English tradition of co-operation between theologians in different areas is exemplified in a number of influential essay collections, most recently one by Cambridge scholars (Soundings ed. Alec Vidler, Cambridge 1962, note especially the comments in the introduction pages xf.); this co-operation has, however, seldom been long lasting or deep in its penetration of specific issues.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(A) Works by Karl Barth

Ad Limina Apostolorum An appraisal of Vatican II (ET by K R Crim) Edinburgh St Andrew Press 1969

Against the Stream Short Post-War writings 1946-52 (Ed. R Gregor Smith) London SCM 1954

Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum (ET by Ian Robertson) London SCM 1960

Call For God: New Sermons from Basel Prison (ET by A T Mackay) London SCM 1967

Church Dogmatics (ET edited by G W Bromiley & T F Torrance) Edinburgh T & T Clark

I 1 The Doctrine of the Word of God. Prolegomena part 1 (ET by G T Thomson) 1936;

I 2 The Doctrine of the Word of God. Prolegomena part 2 (ET by G T Thomson and H Knight) 1956

II 1 The Doctrine of God. Part 1 (ET by T H L Parker, W B Johnston, H Knight and J L M Haire) 1957

II 2 The Doctrine of God. Part 2 (ET by G W Bromiley, J C Campbell, Iain Wilson, J S McNab, H Knight and R A Stewart) 1957

III 1 The Doctrine of Creation. Part 1 (ET by J W Edwards, O Bussey and H Knight) 1958

III 2 The Doctrine of Creation. Part 2 (ET by H Knight, G W Bromiley, J K S Reid and R H Fuller) 1960

III 3 The Doctrine of Creation. Part 3 (ET by G W Bromiley and R Ehrlich) 1960

III 4 The Doctrine of Creation. Part 4 (ET by A T Mackay, T H L Parker, H Knight, H A Kennedy and J Marks) 1961

IV 1 The Doctrine of Reconciliation. Part 1 (ET by G W Bromiley) 1956

IV 2 The Doctrine of Reconciliation. Part 2 (ET by G W Bromiley) 1958

IV 3 The Doctrine of Reconciliation. Part 3 (vols 1 and 2) (ET by G W Bromiley) 1961 and 1962

IV 4 The Doctrine of Reconciliation. Part 4 (Fragment) 1969(ET by G T Thomson)

Christmas (nine meditations) (ET B Citron) Oliver & Boyd Edinburgh 1959

Come Holy Spirit: Sermons by Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen (ET G W Richards etc) T & T Clark Edinburgh 1934

(A) Works by Karl Barth (continued)

Credo: The Chief Problems of Dogmatics with Reference to the Apostle's Creed (ET by J S McNab) London Hodder & Stoughton 1936

Deliverance to the Captives: Sermons from Basel Prison (ET by M Wieser) London SCM 1961

Dogmatics in Outline (ET by G T Thomson) London SCM 1949

The Epistle to the Philippians (ET by J W Leitch) London SCM 1962

The Epistle to the Romans (ET by E C Hoskins) London OUP 1933

Evangelical Theology An Introduction (ET by G Foley) London Collins 1965

The Faith of the Church A Commentary on the Apostle's Creed (ET by G Vahanian) London Collins 1959

Fragments Grave and Gay (ET by E Mosbacher) London Collins 1971

God Here and Now (ET by P M van Buren) London Routledge & Kegan Paul 1964

God's Search for Man: Sermons by Karl Barth & Eduard Thurneysen (ET by G W Richards etc) Edinburgh T & T Clark 1935

The Holy Ghost and the Christian Life (ET by R B Hoyle) London F Muller 1938

How I Changed my Mind Edinburgh St Andrew Press 1969

The Humanity of God (ET by J N Thomas and T Wieser) London Collins 1967

The Knowledge of God and the Service of God (ET by J L M Haire and I Henderson) London Hodder & Stoughton 1938

Die Lehre vom Worte Gottes: Prolegomena zur Christlichen Dogmatik Muenchen Christian Kaiser 1927

Natural Theology (comprising Nature & Grace by E Brunner and the reply No! by Karl Barth) (ET by P Fraenkel) London Geoffrey Bles 1946

Revolutionary Theology in the Making (Barth-Thurneysen correspondence) (ed J Smart) London Epworth Press 1964

From Rousseau to Ritschl being the translation of eleven chapters of Die Protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert. (ET by B Cousins and H H Hartwell) London SCM 1959

A Shorter Commentary on Romans (ET D H van Daalen) London SCM 1959

Theology and Church (Shorter writings 1920-1928) (ET by L P Smith) London SCM 1962

The Word of God and the Word of Man (ET D Horton) New York Harper Row 1957

(B) About Barth and His Theology

Antwort: Karl Barth zum Siebzigsten Geburtstag am 10. Mai 1956 Zollikon-Zuerich Evangelischer Verlag A G 1956

H U von Balthasar: Karl Barth Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie Koeln J Hegner 1951

G C Berkouwer: The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth (ET by H R Bower) Grand Rapids Michigan Wm B Eerdmans 1956

H Bouillard: Karl Barth (3 volumes) Paris Aubier 1957

L Bouyer: The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism London A V Littledale Havril 1956

J Bowden: Karl Barth London SCM 1971

C Brown: Karl Barth and the Christian Message London Tyndale Press 1967

E Brunner: The New Barth Scottish Journal of Theology vol IV pp 123-135 1951

G W Bromiley: Evangelical Quarterly vol XX pp 135ff 1948

F W Camfield (ed): Reformation Old and New London Lutterworth Press 1947

AB Come: An Introduction to Karl Barth's Dogmatics for Preachers London SCM 1963

J D Godsey (ed): Karl Barth's Table Talk S J T Occasional paper no 10 Edinburgh Oliver & Boyd

J Hamer: L'Occasionalism théologique de Karl Barth; étude sur sa méthode dogmatique Paris Desclée de Brouwer 1949

H H Hartwell: An Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth London Duckworth 1964

J F Konrad: Abbild und Ziel der Schöpfung; Untersuchungen zur Exegese von Genesis 1 and 2 in Karl Barths K D III 1. Zürich 1967.

H Kung: Justification The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection (ET by Collins, Tolk & Grandskon) London Burns & Oates 1966

H R Mackintosh: Types of Modern Theology London Nisbet 1937

Hugo Meynell: Grace versus Nature London Sheed and Ward 1965

T H L Parker: Karl Barth Grand Rapids Michigan Wm B Eerdmans 1970

N W Porteus: in Expository Times, vol 43 pp 341ff 1932

R Prenter: Die Einheit von Schöpfung und Erlösung zur Schöpfungslehre Karl Barths. In Theologische Zeitschrift 1946 Basel.

(B) About Barth and His Theology (continued)

R L Reymond: Barth's Soteriology Philadelphia Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company 1967

S P Schilling: Contemporary Continental Theologians London SCM 1966

J de Senarclens: Heirs of the Reformation (ET by G W Bromiley) London SCM 1963

H Thielicke: Theological Ethics vol I (ET) London A & C Black 1968

P Tillich: Perspectives on 19th and 20th century Protestant Theology London SCM 1967

C van Til: Barth's Christology Philadelphia Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company 1962

C van Til: The New Modernism Philadelphia Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company 1946

T F Torrance: Karl Barth, an Introduction to his Early Theology 1910-1931 London SCM 1962

G Wingren: in Evangelical Quarterly vol 21, pp 265ff 1949

R White: in Theology, vol 74 no 612 1971

H Zarhnt: The Question of God London Collins 1969

(C) General

B W Anderson (ed): The Old Testament and Christian Faith New York Herder & Herder 1969

J Barr: Old and New in Interpretation London SCM 1966

J Barr: The Semantics of Biblical Language Oxford 1961

J Barr: The Bible in the Modern World London SCM 1973

D Bonhoeffer: Creation and Fall (ET) London SCM 1953

D Cairns: The Image of God in Man London SCM 1953

W Eichrodt: Theology of the Old Testament (ET by J A Baker) London SCM 1961

A G Hebert: The Authority of the Old Testament London Faber & Faber 1947

E Kraeling: The Old Testament since the Reformation New York Harper 1955

S Mowinckel: The Old Testament as Word of God New York Abingdon Press 1959

D E Nineham: The Use of the Bible in Modern Theology Manchester The John Rylands Library 1969

(C) General (continued)

M Noth: The Laws in the Pentateuch and other Essays (ET by D R Ap-Thomas) Edinburgh Oliver & Boyd 1966

G von Rad: Old Testament Theology (ET by D M G Stalker) Edinburgh Oliver & Boyd 1962 and 1965

J K S Reid: The Authority of Scripture London Methuen 1957

W Vischer: The Witness of the Old Testament to Christ (ET) London Lutterworth 1949

C Westermann:(ed): Essays on Old Testament Interpretation London SCM 1963

G E Wright: God Who Acts London SCM 1952