

KARL BARTH'S EARLY HERMENEUTICS: A CRITICAL APPRECIATION

Introduction

This paper will explore the early hermeneutics of Karl Barth, particularly as these can be discerned through a close reading of his 1917 address, “The Strange New World within the Bible,”¹ and the first three prefaces to his *Römerbrief*, or commentary on Paul’s epistle to the Romans.² Of course, some would regard this project as bordering on an exercise in futility. David Jasper, for example, after a brief analysis of the topic, declares that in a certain sense “there simply *is* no hermeneutic in Barth’s program.” He goes on to compare Barth to a character from John Steinbeck’s novel, *East of Eden*, “who insists that the Bible is not there to be understood, but to be read and listened to.” He concludes by telling us that Barth restored “to the Bible its ancient authority [while] bestriding all concerns of culture, ancient or modern.”³

¹ This address is often dated to autumn 1916. See, for example, Douglas Horton’s editorial note in Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 28. But Donald Wood points out that the date was confused in an early publication of Barth and Thurneysen. According to Wood, the address was actually delivered at Thurneysen’s church on Tuesday, February 6, 1917. See Donald Wood, *Barth’s Theology of Interpretation*, Barth Studies Series, ed. John Webster, George Hunsinger, and Hans-Anton Drewes (Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 4, n.11.

² Although Barth eventually wrote six prefaces to succeeding German editions of his *Römerbrief* between 1918-1928, as well as a preface to Hoskyns’ English edition in 1932, it is really only the first three prefaces (written between 1918-1922) which are relevant for the purposes of this paper. In these prefaces Barth not only makes some very important hermeneutical statements, but also responds to some of the criticism he received after the publication of the first and (largely rewritten) second edition of his commentary. In this paper, I will be relying on the translations found in Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933).

³ All of these quotations can be found in David Jasper, *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 101.

What can we say about Jasper's analysis? It certainly represents *one* way of dealing with the hermeneutics of Karl Barth. But I think it's the wrong way. Contrary to Jasper, therefore, I will argue that (properly understood) there *is* a hermeneutic in Barth's program, that it's *not* dismissive of appropriate historical and cultural concerns, and that it *is* most definitely concerned with understanding the biblical text. Indeed, Barth's all-consuming passion (even obsession) was to correctly *understand* the testimony of Scripture. It's what drove him to write the thousands of pages of dogmatic theology, biblical commentary and exegesis, sermons, letters, and essays for which he is rightly famous.

Of course, none of this means that Barth got everything right. What theologian (aside from Jesus) ever has? Nor does it mean that his views are beyond criticism. They most certainly are not. Nevertheless, I personally believe that there is much of value to be gleaned from a study of Barth's perspective. And thus, as we embark upon our study, we should balance the image of Barth which Jasper offers with a very different image supplied by Donald Wood. Wood suggests (correctly in my opinion) that we should look at Barth "not only as an astonishingly confident and creative reader of scripture, but as a theologian who thought deeply about what it means to read well the classical texts of the Christian tradition."⁴

"The Strange New World within the Bible"

This address is important for a study of Barth's early hermeneutics because it "contains Barth's only sustained public reflection on biblical interpretation between the start of the war and the publication of the first *Römerbrief*."⁵ The lecture was delivered in the church of his close friend, Eduard Thurneysen, in February 1917. Barth begins with a series of questions: "What is there within the Bible? What sort of house is it to which the Bible is the door? What sort of country is spread before our eyes when we throw the Bible open?"⁶ Immediately he

⁴ Wood, *Barth's Theology of Interpretation*, ix.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶ Karl Barth, "The Strange New World within the Bible," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 28.

launches into a brief rehearsal of some of the significant encounters between God and man recorded in the pages of Scripture. In rapid-fire succession he describes God's encounters with Abraham, Moses, Gideon, Samuel, Elijah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, before zeroing in on the person of Jesus Christ and His command to "Follow me!" He briefly recounts Christ's miracles and claim to be "the resurrection and the life," and then swiftly concludes his survey with the missionary enterprise of the early church and some statements from Paul and John. "Then," he says, "the echo ceases. The Bible is finished." And he once again asks, What is the meaning of all this?⁷

At this point Barth makes his first hermeneutically significant statement of the sermon:

The Bible gives to every man and to every era such answers to their questions as they deserve. We shall always find in it as much as we seek and no more: high and divine content if it is high and divine content that we seek; transitory and 'historical' content, if it is transitory and 'historical' content that we seek—nothing whatever, if it is nothing whatever that we seek. . . .The question, What is within the Bible? has a mortifying way of converting itself into the opposing question, Well, what are you looking for, and who are you, pray, who make bold to look?⁸

What is the meaning of this statement? And how does it help elucidate Barth's early hermeneutical reflections? Barth seems to conceive of the Bible as a very unique and peculiar sort of book. As Wood observes, Barth doesn't view the Bible as a "passive object of interpretive scrutiny, still less the simple product of the act of interpretation." Instead, the Bible "stands over against the interpreter, giving answers to questions as it will."⁹ Indeed, it might even be more accurate to say that the Bible stands over against the interpreter, giving answers to questions as *God* will.¹⁰ For as John Webster has noted, Barth's reading of Calvin revealed to him an

⁷ Ibid., 28-32.

⁸ Ibid., 32.

⁹ Wood, *Barth's Theology of Interpretation*, 7.

¹⁰ Bruce L. McCormack, "The Being of Holy Scripture Is in Becoming: Karl Barth in Conversation with American Evangelical Criticism," in *Evangelicals & Scripture : Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics*, ed. Vincent Bacote, Laura C. Miguélez, and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 66.

explanation of interpretation which viewed “the reading of Scripture not as a spontaneous human action performed towards a passive and mute textual object, but as an episode in the communicative history of God with us . . . God, we might say, is not only textual content but also the primary agent of the text’s realization before us.”¹¹ Or as McCormack succinctly observes, in Barth’s view Scripture is “a witness of revelation which itself belongs to revelation.”¹²

Barth formulates a rather complex interplay between the reader of Scripture, the freedom of God to interact with such readers, and the Bible as His primary means of doing so—or *not* doing so, according to His will.¹³ But when God decides to show up, and to graciously reveal Himself to a particular reader through the testimony of Scripture, then “the reader of scripture is confronted by the Bible in an event that corresponds to the divine-human confrontations of which the Bible speaks.”¹⁴ In other words, when God shows up, the reader occupies a position *similar to* the very men whom Barth describes as encountering God at the beginning of his sermon. The reader thus finds himself confronted by the very same God who appeared to Abraham, Moses, Gideon, and Elijah! Clearly, the Bible occupies a unique and significant place in the developing theology of the early Barth.¹⁵

Although it’s not developed in this essay, Barth would later view the apostles and prophets as men uniquely “*empowered*” by God,¹⁶ through “the event of inspiration,”¹⁷ to

¹¹ John Webster, “Reading the Bible: the Example of Barth and Bonhoeffer,” in *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 93; cited in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “A Person of the Book? Barth on Biblical Authority and Interpretation,” in *Karl Barth and Evangelical Theology: Convergences and Divergences*, ed. Sung Wook Chung (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 53.

¹² McCormack, “The Being of Holy Scripture,” 68.

¹³ Wood, *Barth's Theology of Interpretation*, xii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁵ In this regard, see in particular Vanhoozer, “A Person of the Book?.” Also of importance is G. W. Bromiley, “The Authority of Scripture in Karl Barth,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005).

¹⁶ McCormack, “The Being of Holy Scripture,” 67.

¹⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley, 2nd ed., vol. 1/1: *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936), 115.

reproduce the revelation of God’s Word “in human words and thoughts.”¹⁸ Although phrasing the issue in this way may make some evangelicals a bit nervous, McCormack is insistent that once we have correctly grasped Barth’s view of “the ontology of Holy Scripture,”¹⁹ “it is perfectly legitimate to say (quite simply) that the Bible *is* the Word of God.”²⁰ And while God remains ever free to *reveal* or *hide* Himself (as He sees fit) from those who read His Word, nevertheless, Barth seems to think that we are more likely to encounter the Almighty if we approach the Bible in genuine humility, faith, and reliance upon the grace of God. It’s in this spirit that he makes his second hermeneutically significant statement of the address:

There is a river in the Bible that carries us away . . . away from ourselves to the sea. The Holy Scriptures will interpret themselves in spite of all our human limitations. We need only dare to follow this drive, this spirit, this river, to grow out beyond ourselves toward the highest answer. This daring is *faith*; and we read the Bible rightly, not when we do so with false modesty, restraint, and attempted sobriety . . . but when we read it in faith. And the invitation to dare and to reach toward the highest, even though we do not deserve it, is the expression of *grace* in the Bible: the Bible unfolds itself to us as we are met, guided, drawn on, and made to grow by the grace of God.²¹

The importance of reading the Bible in faith (and the detriment posed to our understanding by unbelief) is emphasized later by Barth as well: “It is because of our unbelief,” he says, “that even now I can only stammer, hint at, and make promises about that which would be opened to us if the Bible could speak to us unhindered, in the full fluency of its revelations.”²² As we’ll soon see, Barth views *unbelief*—not the lack of some scholarly methodological

¹⁸ Ibid., 113.

¹⁹ McCormack, “The Being of Holy Scripture,” 63.

²⁰ Ibid., 68. According to McCormack, Barth conceived of the ontology of Scripture in terms distinct from, and yet analogous to, the hypostatic union of God and man in the person of Jesus Christ. He thus elaborates on Barth’s view of Scripture in these words: “The will of God . . . as expressed in the giving of the Bible to the church, is that it *be* Holy Scripture, the word of God. And this will was and is realized in and through a union of God’s Word with the human words of the prophets and apostles—a union that is not a hypostatic union but that stands in a certain analogy to it” (69).

²¹ Barth, “Strange New World,” 34.

²² Ibid., 48.

approach—as the *primary* culprit in our failure to rightly understand the Bible.²³ It is when we come to the Bible in simple faith, daring to grow out beyond ourselves to the highest answer, that we can expect the Holy Scriptures to “interpret themselves in spite of all our human limitations.” Indeed, it is the Scriptures themselves that invite us to such a faith. And when we dare to respond to this invitation, “the Bible unfolds to us as we are met, guided, drawn on, and made to grow by the grace of God.”²⁴ The Bible, after all, is the Word of God. It would thus be the height of unbelief, not to mention irrationality, to imagine that we could ever find a more qualified instructor in the Word of God—than God Himself! Can the historical-critical method really hope to compete with God’s actually meeting us in the text and unfolding its riches to us? Barth doesn’t think so!

Barth next launches into a discussion of other prominent answers to the question, “What is in the Bible?” In particular, he addresses those who claim to find *history*, *morality*, and *religion* in the Bible.²⁵ While Barth readily grants that there is a measure of truth to each of these answers, he nonetheless thinks that they are all fundamentally misguided—and for very similar reasons. It will thus be sufficient for our purposes to merely describe how he deals with the answer of “history.” While Barth acknowledges that some may claim to find “history” in the Bible—and he doesn’t deny this is so—he nonetheless maintains that “the Bible meets the lover of history with silences quite unparalleled.”²⁶ He goes on to write, apparently of the historical-critical approach to the Bible, that “some men have felt compelled to seek grounds and explanations where there were none, and what has resulted from that procedure is a history in itself—an unhappy history into which I will not enter at this time.”²⁷ In Barth’s view, such a

²³ By phrasing the issue in this way, I hope it’s understood that Barth was not *opposed* to such scholarly methodological approaches. He just didn’t think they were the most *important* component of good biblical interpretation.

²⁴ Barth, “Strange New World,” 34.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 34-43.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁷ *Ibid.* See also Wood, *Barth's Theology of Interpretation*, 10.

procedure is virtually doomed to miss the most important answer the Bible offers as to *why* a particular event happened the way it did; namely, the intimate involvement of *God* in the affairs of this world. “The decisive cause is *God*,” Barth reminds us.²⁸

Of course, to attribute the cause of some historical event to *God* is not the sort of answer that a historian (at least, *as* a historian) is going to be content with, nor is it one that he can “meaningfully assimilate.”²⁹ Barth realizes that his views are going to be unpalatable for some. Nevertheless, he says, “we may not deny nor prevent our being led by Bible ‘history’ far out beyond what is elsewhere called history—into a new world, into the world of God.”³⁰ As he later contends, “the Bible, if we read it carefully, makes straight for the point where one must decide to accept or to reject the sovereignty of God. This is the new world within the Bible . . . One can only believe—can only hold the ground whither he has been led. Or not believe. There is no third way.”³¹ Wood insightfully observes that “the attempts to read the Bible merely historically, morally, or religiously are attempts to manufacture such a third way, attempts to ‘seek our way out’ of this situation in which we are placed as readers by the Bible. And as such they are, in reality, instances of unbelief.”³² He concludes his discussion by citing this lecture as “early evidence” for Barth’s ability “to construct a fundamental critique of a range of hermeneutical strategies by exposing them as commonly implicated in unbelief and just so critically inattentive to the text.”³³

Having now examined Barth’s essay, let’s take a moment to briefly review. Jasper had argued that in a certain sense, “there simply *is* no hermeneutic in Barth’s program.” But as

²⁸ Barth, “Strange New World,” 37.

²⁹ Wood, *Barth's Theology of Interpretation*, 8.

³⁰ Barth, “Strange New World,” 37.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

³² Wood, *Barth's Theology of Interpretation*, 9.

³³ *Ibid.* Interestingly, and also of significance, Barth concludes his discussion of the three inadequate responses, which end with a consideration of “religion,” by observing, “It is not the right human thoughts about God which form the content of the Bible, but the right divine thoughts about men. . . . It is this which is in the Bible. The word of God is within the Bible.” See Barth, “Strange New World,” 43.

our look at his “New World” lecture has shown, Barth was already giving careful attention to such issues as early as 1917. Of course, what makes his hermeneutical reflections so interesting (as well as unusual and distinctive), is that they arise primarily out of his *theological* reflections on the nature of Scripture. Since the Bible is the Word of God, it is unique among all other books. And for this reason, *biblical* hermeneutics cannot be precisely the same as *non-biblical* hermeneutics³⁴—for God encounters us in the Bible in a way that is not true of other books. While God sovereignly and freely determines the time and place of such encounters, we are nonetheless more likely to be favored with His appearance if we approach the Scriptures with an attitude of humility, faith, and dependence on God’s grace. In Barth’s estimation, such *theological virtues* are ultimately more important for rightly understanding the Bible than some humanly-constructed hermeneutical methodology. For when we approach the Bible in humility and faith, it will then unfold to us its riches “as we are met . . . and made to grow by the grace of God.”³⁵ Of course, it doesn’t follow from this that Barth is *opposed* to scholarly methods of biblical interpretation, or that he thinks they have no value. In fact, he believes such methods are both important and necessary. But they are matters of *secondary*, and not *primary*, importance. Thus, contra Jasper, there *is* a hermeneutic in Barth’s program, a hermeneutic that is consciously aimed at *rightly understanding* the Bible. But it’s also a hermeneutic that is keenly aware of the difficulties in doing so—apart, that is, from availing ourselves of the biblical admonitions to humility, faith, and reliance upon the grace of God.

The First Preface to Barth’s *Römerbrief*

Paul, as a child of his age, addressed his contemporaries. It is, however, far more important that, as Prophet and Apostle of the Kingdom of God, he veritably speaks to all men of every age. The differences between then and now, there and here, no doubt require careful investigation and consideration. But the purpose of such investigation can

³⁴ As Henry observes, “Barth’s hermeneutic refused to recognize the distinction . . . between general hermeneutics and theological hermeneutics. For Barth, the only interpretation of the Bible which meets the demands of critical scholarship is a theological interpretation.” See David Paul Henry, “The Early Development of the Hermeneutic of Karl Barth as Evidenced by His Appropriation of Romans 5:12-21” (Ph.D. Diss., Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, 1983), 380-81.

³⁵ Barth, “Strange New World,” 34.

only be to demonstrate that these differences are, in fact, purely trivial. The historical-critical method of Biblical investigation has its rightful place: it is concerned with the preparation of the intelligence—and this can never be superfluous. But, were I driven to choose between it and the venerable doctrine of Inspiration, I should without hesitation adopt the latter, which has a broader, deeper, more important justification.³⁶

Thus begins Barth's remarkable preface to the first edition of his commentary on Paul's epistle to the Romans—a book which, unbeknownst to Barth at the time, was destined to ignite a revolution in twentieth century theology. As David Mueller observes, “this book marks the beginning of Barth's break with the anthropocentric and cultural Christianity of theological liberalism.”³⁷ Before looking at the scholarly reaction to Barth's commentary, however, we must first take stock of just what it is that he is claiming in this first preface.

Analysis of the Text

In the first place, we must be careful to observe (as far too many of Barth's early reviewers did not) that Barth does *not* reject the historical-critical method as one of the necessary tools for a careful interpretation of Scripture. He says explicitly that the differences between Paul's time and ours “require careful investigation and consideration.” He declares that the historical-critical method “has its rightful place.” And he describes it as “concerned with the preparation of the intelligence,” which “can never be superfluous.” While it is true that he ultimately regards the differences between Paul's day and ours as “purely trivial,” and says that if he *had to choose* between the historical-critical method and the doctrine of inspiration, he “should without hesitation adopt the latter,” nevertheless, he concludes his comparison by observing that “fortunately,” he is not “compelled to choose between the two.”³⁸ In other words, while Barth clearly believes that the doctrine of inspiration is more important than the historical-

³⁶ Karl Barth, “The Preface to the First Edition (1918),” in *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 1.

³⁷ David L. Mueller, *Karl Barth, Makers of the Modern Theological Mind*, ed. Bob E. Patterson (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972), 23. In a certain sense, of course, this “break” had begun even earlier, for it can already be discerned in “The Strange New World within the Bible,” and other such publications of that time. Nevertheless, it was the first edition of Barth's *Römerbrief* that made his break with theological liberalism a much more “public” affair.

³⁸ All of these citations can be found in Barth, “Preface to First Edition,” 1.

critical method for rightly understanding the biblical text, he nowhere rejects the latter—and indeed, explicitly affirms its usefulness.

As an aside, it's important to understand that when Barth refers to “the doctrine of inspiration,” what he actually has in mind is something quite similar to what we would call “illumination.” That is, “the doctrine of inspiration,” as Barth is here using the phrase, is meant to refer to that *present* work of the Holy Spirit on the heart and mind of the reader, which enables him to correctly understand and receive the Word of God in the Bible.³⁹ This is what Barth means when he later claims, in the same preface, that “the doctrine of Inspiration is concerned with the labour of apprehending, without which no technical equipment, however complete, is of any use whatever.”⁴⁰

At any rate, once we understand what Barth is saying, and particularly that he is not rejecting (but even affirming) that the historical-critical method has a “rightful place” in biblical interpretation, it seems once again evident that Jasper has unfairly misrepresented Barth by characterizing his hermeneutical approach as dismissive of appropriate historical and cultural concerns.⁴¹ One need only read the first paragraph of Barth's preface, part of which is even cited by Jasper,⁴² to see that *none* of his accusations are true.

But there are other things which we must also notice in Barth's first preface. For example, he refers to Paul as a “Prophet and Apostle of the Kingdom of God.” Now this, to be sure, is a rather strange way of referring to Paul. Nevertheless, I am personally not convinced, as Eberhard Jüngel insists, that such a designation would have been “completely unthinkable” to Paul.⁴³ Paul did, after all, refer to himself as an “apostle” often enough (Rom 1:1; 11:13). And in

³⁹ For more on this, please see Bromiley, “The Authority of Scripture in Karl Barth,” 290-93. See also Vanhoozer, “A Person of the Book?,” 50.

⁴⁰ Barth, “Preface to First Edition,” 1.

⁴¹ Jasper, *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics*, 101.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 100-01.

⁴³ Eberhard Jüngel, *Karl Barth, a Theological Legacy*, trans. Garrett E. Paul (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 71.

the opening verses of Romans, the very text which Barth was commenting on, he links his own ministry with that of the prophets by describing himself as one “set apart for the gospel of God—the gospel he promised beforehand through his *prophets* in the Holy Scriptures” (Rom 1:1-2 NIV; emphasis mine). Furthermore, as an ambassador of Jesus Christ, who was commissioned by God to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, a message which he received through a *revelation* of Jesus Christ Himself, it would not be wholly inappropriate to call himself a “prophet”—especially since he had clearly been commissioned to speak on behalf of God.⁴⁴ And if all of this is so, then it would not be “completely unthinkable” for Paul to refer to himself as a “prophet and apostle of the kingdom of God,” especially when he had been uniquely commissioned by God to call people into His kingdom! Be that as it may, however, it *is* true that this is not the way Paul actually refers to himself in his letters. So why does Barth do so in the preface to his commentary?

Before we attempt to answer this question, we must first take a look at another intriguing statement which Barth makes in this preface. He describes himself as expending all of his interpretive energies in this commentary “in an endeavour to see through and beyond history into the spirit of the Bible, which is the Eternal Spirit.”⁴⁵ What exactly is Barth driving at in *this* statement?

We have seen that Barth recognizes the historical and cultural differences between Paul’s day and ours, and that he believes the historical-critical method has a role to play in helping us navigate through some of the issues raised by these differences. Nevertheless, notes Wood, Barth “refuses to accept that the recognition of such distance precludes the recognition of an even more fundamental unity binding the modern reader to the ancient writer.”⁴⁶ This fundamental unity, he suggests, can be found in Barth’s language about “the kingdom of God

⁴⁴ In this regard see, for example, 2 Corinthians 5:20; Romans 1:5; 11:13; Galatians 1:12; Ephesians 3:1-12.

⁴⁵ Barth, “Preface to First Edition,” 1.

⁴⁶ Wood, *Barth's Theology of Interpretation*, 13.

and the eternal Spirit.” He explains his point this way:

Because the kingdom of God stands over against every actual or ideal culture, the differences between cultures must be viewed as merely relative. . . . Therefore, Paul, ‘as a prophet and apostle of the Kingdom of God’ necessarily bears a message that applies ‘to all men in all ages’. Similarly, if the eternal Spirit stands over against history . . . then the nearer or farther historical distances that are bound up with cultural differences are to be viewed as relative distances within one history.⁴⁷

This analysis strikes me as fundamentally correct. Since the Bible is a Spirit-inspired text, it would make sense to believe that the Spirit would want to bear witness with the reader’s spirit, thereby helping her understand (and receive) the things of God recorded in the text.⁴⁸ By doing so, the Spirit would make readers of *different* times and places in some sense *contemporaries* of the original authors (both human and divine). In this way, the ministry of the Holy Spirit would go a long way toward helping us bridge the historical and cultural gap between the original author and his later readers. Of course, such a peculiar linking of the original author with a later reader, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, would be a phenomenon unique to the Bible. We could not claim a similar linkage for other, non-inspired texts. Nevertheless, it *would* be a crucially important factor to consider in the case of *biblical* interpretation. And this, I think, is precisely what Barth is driving at in his statement about the “Eternal Spirit”—an interpretation which will receive further confirmation when we look at the preface to the third edition of his *Römerbrief*.

Thus, by reflecting on Barth’s language about the kingdom of God and the eternal Spirit, we can see that Barth’s hermeneutical approach to the biblical text is actually *superior* to that of most of his contemporaries—who *only* had regard for the historical-critical method. Barth, of course, was willing to grant this method “its rightful place” in helping to elucidate the meaning of the text. But unlike many of his peers, he also had regard for explicitly biblical and theological notions like the kingdom of God and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, notions which supplied him with far more powerful resources than his theologically liberal colleagues for

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ See, for example, John 14:26; 16:7-15; Romans 8:16-17; 1 Corinthians 2:10-16.

“rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15; KJV).

Reactions to the First Edition

So how did the theological community react to Barth’s commentary? As one might expect, it received both positive and negative reviews. Emil Brunner had generally positive things to say. He agreed with Barth that “we do not need any arts of modernization in order to apply the Letter to the Romans to our present-day spiritual and religious situation.” Rather, he said, Paul’s letter “applies itself as soon as . . . one has pushed through from a mere outward understanding of the words—for which modern science offers us splendid means—to an understanding of the content.”⁴⁹

But not everyone shared Brunner’s sentiments. Adolf Jülicher, for example, while commending Barth’s book “as a model . . . of edifying exegesis,”⁵⁰ nonetheless saw his preface as “presumptuous,”⁵¹ and viewed his rather dismissive attitude toward the historical-critical method as nothing short of scandalous. As Gary Dorrien observes, “It was appalling to Jülicher that Barth, a graduate of Marburg, explicitly privileged the doctrine of biblical inspiration over historical criticism.”⁵² Jülicher describes Barth as a man at war with himself, struggling unsuccessfully with two incompatible viewpoints.⁵³ In the end, he chides Barth for his “holy egoism” and warns him that “he who despises the past . . . can surely not demand that a product

⁴⁹ Emil Brunner, “*The Epistle to the Romans* by Karl Barth: An up-to-Date, Unmodern Paraphrase,” in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, ed. James M. Robinson, trans. Keith R. Crim, vol. 1 (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), 70.

⁵⁰ Adolf Jülicher, “A Modern Interpreter of Paul,” in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, ed. James M. Robinson, trans. Keith R. Crim, vol. 1 (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), 74.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁵² Gary Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology: Theology without Weapons* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 55.

⁵³ Jülicher, “A Modern Interpreter,” 78. See also Jüngel, *Karl Barth, a Theological Legacy*, 71. Here Jüngel observes that, for the theological liberals of that day, “Anyone who claims that he does not have to choose between the historical-critical method of biblical study and the old doctrine of inspiration has already, as far as that day’s historical-critical method is concerned, decided against the former and must therefore be a biblicist or a pneumatic.”

of the past—as the Letter to the Romans most surely still is—should become alive for him.”⁵⁴

But Jülicher was not to have the last word, for Barth would take the opportunity afforded in the preface to his second edition to “make a defense” to his critics.

The Second Preface to Barth’s *Römerbrief*

Analysis of the Text

After alerting us to the fact that this book “has been so completely rewritten that . . . no stone remains in its old place,”⁵⁵ Barth then turns his attention to responding to his critics. He has been charged with “being an ‘enemy of historical criticism’” (6). But this, he says, is simply false. He has “nothing whatever to say against historical criticism” (6). He recognizes its value and says that “it is both necessary and justified” (6). Nevertheless, he argues, it will only take one so far in understanding a text like Romans. And this, he thinks, is something that those who practice the historical-critical method have all too often failed to see. He complains about the superficiality of the commentaries produced by those adhering exclusively to this method (6). And he claims that scholars like Jülicher are well aware of just “how insecure all this historical reconstruction is, and upon what doubtful assumptions it often rests” (6).

Turning specifically to the work of Jülicher, Barth maintains that he “keeps to the mere deciphering of words as though they were runes. But, when all is done, they still remain largely unintelligible” (7). Worse still, says Barth, he is far too quick to dismiss a difficult statement of Paul as “simply a peculiar doctrine or opinion” of the apostle (7). But how can a method such as this ever do anything more than merely get us started on a commentary? “The whole procedure,” claims Barth, “assuredly achieves no more than the first draft of a paraphrase of the text and provides no more than a point of departure for genuine exegesis” (8). In contrast

⁵⁴ Jülicher, “A Modern Interpreter,” 81.

⁵⁵ Karl Barth, “The Preface to the Second Edition (1921),” in *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 2. Subsequent references to this addition, at least in this initial summary of its contents, will occur in parentheses in the body of the paper.

to this rather pale view of the interpretive process, Barth sets forth a more robust perspective:

Intelligent comment means that I am driven on till I stand with nothing before me but the enigma of the matter; till the document seems hardly to exist as a document; till I have almost forgotten that I am not its author; till I know the author so well that I allow him to speak in my name and am even able to speak in his name . . . (8).

Indeed, so far removed is Barth from Jasper's characterization that he even goes on to write that, for him, "the question of the true nature of interpretation is the supreme question" (9).

For this reason, we cannot fail to consider a very peculiar statement which Barth also makes about his broader hermeneutical views. Responding to those who have described his interpretive method as "Biblicist," Barth declares that he has "no desire to conceal the fact" that his method, "which means in the end no more than 'consider well'—is applicable also to the study of Lao-tse and of Goethe." Not only so, he says, but he can also not deny that he should find "considerable difficulty in applying the method to certain . . . books . . . in the Bible" (12). What is going on here? Doesn't this statement call into question everything I have written regarding Barth's view of the uniqueness and authority of the Bible? How are we to interpret such a strange and surprising statement?

Some might think that Barth is simply giving in to the pressure of his critics. But this seems very unlikely, especially when one considers how he takes these critics to task for what he regards as *their* inadequate views. Others might think that Barth is simply being inconsistent. But this seems improbable as well. His preface is a carefully crafted piece of work in which he's not only attempting to introduce the text to new readers, but also respond to his critics. Given the circumstances, it seems highly unlikely that Barth would have made such an egregious blunder. But if this is so, then how are we to explain such an odd admission?

Jüngel interprets Barth as advancing a "general hermeneutic" which nonetheless admits of a particular theological application. "The general hermeneutical rule," he says, "instructs the interpreter to be open to the particular and peculiar subject of the text."⁵⁶ This is essentially the meaning of Barth's "consider well." Thus, if one is considering Lao-tse or

⁵⁶ Jüngel, *Karl Barth, a Theological Legacy*, 77.

Goethe, one would want to be open to the particular subject-matter of *their* texts, and if one is considering Paul's epistle to the Romans, then one would want to be equally open to *its* peculiar content. But everyone should agree that the content of Romans is *different* from the content of Lao-tse and Goethe. Jüngel recognizes this, of course, but he still claims that it was not Barth's "intention . . . to distinguish the biblical texts from others"—particularly as this concerns the doctrine of inspiration. Rather, he argues, "the spirit of the subject matter inspires—that is how Barth's unique version of the dogma of inspiration can be formulated. But it must be applied to all serious texts."⁵⁷ Is Jüngel's analysis correct? Is this really what Barth was trying to say?

In one sense, yes, but in another sense, no. It's true that Barth held that "the spirit of the subject matter inspires," but we must remember that "the *spirit* of the Bible . . . is the Eternal *Spirit*."⁵⁸ And this, of course, is definitely *not* true of any other text! As usual, Wood seems to strike the appropriate balance: "The peculiarity of Barth's position is his characteristic movement from the specific claim that *God speaks to sinners in the Bible* to more general considerations regarding the importance of patient engagement with the tradition . . . as well as other texts past and present."⁵⁹ If this is correct, then Jüngel's interpretation must be partly in error. For not only did Barth believe that "the spirit of the Bible" was unique, but in addition, as we've already seen, he also believed that the authors of Scripture were uniquely "empowered" by God,⁶⁰ through "the event of inspiration,"⁶¹ to faithfully record God's revelation "in human words and thoughts."⁶² And since this sort of divine "empowerment" and "inspiration" is also something *unique* to the authors of Scripture, it follows that it is not applicable to authors like Goethe or Lao-tse.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 81.

⁵⁸ Barth, "Preface to First Edition," 1. The emphasis here is my own.

⁵⁹ Wood, *Barth's Theology of Interpretation*, 23. Note: the emphasis in this citation is my own.

⁶⁰ McCormack, "The Being of Holy Scripture," 67.

⁶¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1*, 115. In this passage, Barth seems to be using the term "inspiration" as a way of referring to the *past* inspiration of Holy Scripture. That Barth used the term to refer to *both* this past act of inspiration, as well as the *present* act of illumination, is acknowledged in Bromiley, "The Authority of Scripture in Karl Barth," 291.

⁶² Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1*, 113.

But even if one finds this interpretation persuasive (and I, of course, do), we still haven't specifically addressed Barth's problematic admission that he "should find considerable difficulty in applying the method to certain . . . books . . . in the Bible."⁶³ How are we to interpret *this* remark? Personally, I think that all Barth meant by this is *precisely* what he said. In other words, notice that he *doesn't* say that this method *cannot* be applied to all the books of the Bible, but only that he "should find considerable difficulty" in doing so. And this, of course, is still entirely consistent with everything we have said about Barth's high view of Scripture.

Reactions to the Second Edition

Reactions to the second edition of Barth's *Römerbrief*, like the first, were once again mixed. Rudolf Bultmann agreed with Barth about the importance of the interpreter not only engaging in historical-critical exegesis of the text, but of having "an inner relationship" to it as well.⁶⁴ However, he went on to accuse Barth of doing "violence" to Paul's letter, and even to Paul himself! In Bultmann's opinion, "it is impossible to assume" that Paul has always given "adequate expression" to the "subject matter" of his letter—unless, of course, "one intends to establish a modern dogma of inspiration," which he believes Barth has, in fact, done, "to the detriment of the clarity of the subject matter itself."⁶⁵

Adolf Harnack also entered the fray, engaging in a spirited debate with Barth in the pages of *Die Christliche Welt* in 1923. In Harnack's opening letter, he asks fifteen questions of those theologians (particularly Barth) who, he believes, are "contemptuous of the scientific theology."⁶⁶ Most of the questions aim to show, in one way or another, the importance (and even

⁶³ Barth, "Preface to Second Edition," 12.

⁶⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, "Karl Barth's *Epistle to the Romans* in Its Second Edition," in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, ed. James M. Robinson, trans. Keith R. Crim, vol. 1 (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), 118.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 119. For another interesting review see Adolf Schlatter, "Karl Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*," in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, ed. James M. Robinson, trans. Keith R. Crim, vol. 1 (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), 121-25.

⁶⁶ See Adolf Harnack, "Fifteen Questions to Those among the Theologians Who Are Contemptuous of the Scientific Theology," in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, ed. James M. Robinson, trans. Keith R. Crim, vol. 1 (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), 165-66.

necessity) of scientific theology, critical reflection, and historical knowledge for accurately interpreting Scripture. In his response, Barth points out that his criticism of “scientific theology” need not imply that he is “contemptuous” of it.⁶⁷ Here we see, once again, that even though Barth had clearly indicated, in both prefaces to his *Römerbrief*, that historical criticism should play a role in biblical exegesis, he was nonetheless constantly having to remind his critics of this point. He concludes by asking whether it is, in fact, advisable to set up “science” as a standard to which theology should feel itself obligated to conform?⁶⁸ Barth, of course, didn’t think so.

As for Bultmann, Barth simply acknowledged that he had “never attempted to conceal the fact” that his method of interpretation bore a certain resemblance to “the old doctrine of Verbal Inspiration.”⁶⁹ He then went on to ask whether it is ever really possible to penetrate “the heart of a document . . . except on the assumption that its spirit will speak to our spirit through the actual written words?”⁷⁰ Although Barth is here speaking generally of *any* document, we must nonetheless bear in mind, as we have noted previously, that for Barth, the “spirit of the Bible” is none other than “the Eternal Spirit.”⁷¹ The claim thus dovetails nicely, not only with Barth’s rather muted acceptance of the *original* inspiration of Scripture,⁷² but also with his strong endorsement of its *present* inspiration (or “illumination”)—the inner work of the Spirit which enables the reader to understand and accept what is written in the Bible as the Word of God.

⁶⁷ Karl Barth, “Fifteen Answers to Professor Von Harnack,” in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, ed. James M. Robinson, trans. Keith R. Crim, vol. 1 (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), 167.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 170. For more information on this debate see Adolf Harnack, “An Open Letter to Professor Karl Barth,” in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, ed. James M. Robinson, trans. Keith R. Crim, vol. 1 (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), 171-74. See also Barth’s response: Karl Barth, “An Answer to Professor Von Harnack’s Open Letter,” in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, ed. James M. Robinson, trans. Keith R. Crim, vol. 1 (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), 175-85. Harnack concluded the debate with a brief postscript: Adolf Harnack, “Postscript to My Open Letter to Professor Karl Barth,” in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, ed. James M. Robinson, trans. Keith R. Crim, vol. 1 (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), 186-87.

⁶⁹ Karl Barth, “The Preface to the Third Edition (1922),” in *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 18.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Barth, “Preface to First Edition,” 1.

⁷² Bromiley, “The Authority of Scripture in Karl Barth,” 291.

Conclusion

This paper has presented arguments and evidence that, contra Jasper, there *is* a hermeneutic in Barth's program, that it is *not* dismissive of appropriate historical and cultural concerns, and that it *is* most definitely concerned with understanding the biblical text.

Concerning the first and third points, we have seen that Barth was already giving careful attention to the issue of biblical hermeneutics as early as his 1917 address, "The Strange New World within the Bible." Not only so, but he continued to think and write about such issues in successive editions to his commentary on *Romans*, as well as in his monumental *Church Dogmatics*.

Of course, within the unique historical and cultural circumstances in which Barth lived and wrote, his hermeneutical approach is certainly a bit unusual and distinctive, for it arises primarily out of his *theological* reflections on the nature and content of Scripture. In Barth's estimation, it is better that the interpreter approach the Bible in humility and faith, rather than adopting some feigned attitude of objectivity. It is better that he recognize the uniqueness and authority of Scripture, as a book *both* human *and* divine, than to view it as the product of the human imagination only. And it is better that he recognize, and rely upon, the *present* ministry of the Holy Spirit, who sovereignly and graciously enables us to *understand* and *receive* the things of God in the Bible, than it is to deny this necessary spiritual dynamic and to rely merely on the historical-critical method alone.

Concerning the second point, that Barth is not sufficiently attentive to historical and cultural concerns, we have seen that he *nowhere* rejects the historical-critical method, nor does he reject using *any* of the available tools appropriate for careful biblical scholarship. He does, of course, assign such tools and methods a *secondary* role in biblical interpretation. But he nowhere rejects their "rightful place" and, in fact, repeatedly affirms it. It is therefore completely inappropriate for Jasper to tell us that Barth restored "to the Bible its ancient authority [while] bestriding all concerns of culture, ancient or modern."⁷³ As David Henry observed, after

⁷³ Jasper, *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics*, 101.

“comparing Barth’s exegesis” in both editions of his *Römerbrief* “with the historical-critical studies of the time,” “Barth made full use of the historical-critical resources available to him, and the content of his commentary cannot be seriously faulted on the basis of the historical criticism of the time.”⁷⁴ Thus, it seems to me that the central argument of this paper has been sufficiently sustained.

In conclusion, therefore, while Barth’s position can certainly be criticized for its rather “muted” acceptance “of the past inspiration of Scripture,” as well as his *possible* denial of biblical inerrancy,⁷⁵ nevertheless, it seems to me that there are also many valuable insights to be gleaned from Barth’s early hermeneutics. His stress on approaching the biblical text in a spirit of humility, faith, and reliance on the grace of God is a welcome (and necessary) reminder to all those engaged in the academic study of the Bible. His strong emphasis on the necessity of the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit to accurately grasp the meaning of the text is both biblically and theologically sound. Finally, one must also admire Barth’s courage in being willing to publicly relegate historical criticism to a position inferior to that of Christian doctrines like inspiration, illumination, and canonicity. In a very practical way, this demonstrates his commitment to both biblical authority and the teaching of the church in preference to the then-current consensus of theologically liberal scholarship in matters pertaining to biblical interpretation and exegesis. For all these reasons, then, and for many more besides, I think that we should view the early hermeneutics of Karl Barth with “a critical appreciation.”

⁷⁴ Henry, “The Early Development of the Hermeneutic of Karl Barth as Evidenced by His Appropriation of Romans 5:12-21”, 380.

⁷⁵ See Bromiley, “The Authority of Scripture in Karl Barth,” 291. Barth’s position on the inerrancy of Scripture does not seem entirely clear. Bromiley says that Barth rejected it, but also observes that he accepted “the general . . . veracity of the records” and that “he never specified actual errors in the Bible” (291). On the other hand, McCormack believes that Barth’s doctrine of Scripture is “compatible” with that of evangelicals, even though it is not “identical.” He notes that whereas evangelicals hold a doctrine of “inerrancy,” Barth embraced a “concept of ‘dynamic infallibilism.’” But both of these, he insists, “give rise to a very high view of the authority of the Bible.” See McCormack, “The Being of Holy Scripture,” 73-4.

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