

12 THE WORD AS EVENT: BARTH AND BULTMANN ON SCRIPTURE

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Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann are without question the two most important theological scholars of the twentieth century. Their work has decisively shaped the fields of theology and biblical studies, respectively. For both, theological reflection and biblical exegesis imply each other and resist any static bifurcation. Any attempt to summarize their views on Scripture will necessarily be incomplete and inchoate. In addition, the two of them share a complex relationship that began in the early 1920s, when they were allies in the rejection of 19th-century German liberalism. With time, the group of dialectical theologians broke apart, and Barth and Bultmann came to oppose each other's work.¹ Ever since then, the divide between them has become something of a truism that one

¹ One can see the change in their relationship by reading the letters, many of which have been gathered together and translated as Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, *Karl Barth-Rudolf Bultmann Letters, 1922–1966* (ed. Bernd Jaspert; trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981). For a very helpful analysis of the “break-up” between the so-called “dialectical theologians,” which included Barth, Bultmann, Emil Brunner, and Friedrich Gogarten, see Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909–1936* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 391–411. See also Christophe Chalamet, *Dialectical Theologians: Wilhelm Herrmann, Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann* (Zürich: TVZ, 2005).

can simply presuppose. The two have become type and antitype, symbolic of larger theological schools and currents of thought. As a result, the concrete points of unity and divergence are all too often forgotten.

This essay will interrogate the relation between Barth and Bultmann regarding the *nature* and *interpretation* of Scripture. Many view the doctrine of Scripture as a central point of divergence between them. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that, despite some key differences, they share a substantial common ground. To borrow a phrase that Eberhard Jüngel uses in relation to God, we can speak of *a still greater similarity between Barth and Bultmann in the midst of a great dissimilarity*.² Both view the Bible as the event of God's Word addressed to us, and both understand exegesis as an existential, participatory encounter with the living Christ who confronts us in the text. Hopefully, by taking a fresh look at how Barth and Bultmann understand the Bible, a new appreciation for each theologian—beyond the bitter disputes of the past—will become possible again.

THE BIBLE AS THE EVENT OF GOD'S ADDRESS:

THE BEING-IN-BECOMING OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

What *is* the Bible? What is the relation between the biblical text and the Word of God? What makes Scripture authoritative for the church? These questions regarding the nature of Holy Scripture raise the problem of ontology—the *being* of the Bible. Despite differing on the relationship between theology and philosophy, between the gospel and being, Barth and Bultmann are of one mind in their distinctly *actualistic* conceptions of Scripture. For both of them, the Bible *becomes* the Word of God for us by a special divine act.

² Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism* (trans. Darrell L. Guder; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 288. The original quote reads: "...a still greater similarity between God and man in the midst of a great dissimilarity."

Barth's Christological Conception of Scripture

Barth develops his doctrine of Scripture within the context of what he calls the "threefold form of the Word of God." He first presented this concept in the prolegomena to his 1924 lectures on dogmatics in Göttingen³ and later gave it a definitive form in volume one of his massive *Church Dogmatics*,⁴ published in 1932. Barth's doctrine of the Word of God serves to distinguish between three interrelated modes of existence: the Word incarnate as revelation, the Word written as Holy Scripture, and the Word proclaimed as Christian preaching. The first alone is the Word of God proper and is thus constitutive of the latter two, both of which exist only insofar as they bear witness to the first: Scripture referring us back to revelation, and preaching to both Scripture and revelation.⁵ Barth orders these three forms according to his famous metaphor of the concentric circles. Jesus Christ stands at the center, with Scripture as the inner circle and preaching as the outer periphery. Nevertheless, there are not three different words of God, but rather *one Word* in a *threefold unity-in-differentiation*.

Through this threefold form of God's Word, Barth introduces his key dogmatic distinction between revelation and Scripture, between the christological event of God's self-disclosure and the human witness to that divine event. "The texts bear *witness*," he says in the *Göttingen Dogmatics*, "and *the texts* are the witness that we are to perceive. We cannot leap out of this circle. The reality of revela-

³ Cf. Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion* (ed. Hannelotte Reiffen; trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 1:3.

⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; 13 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956–75); hereafter cited as *CD*.

⁵ Cf. *CD* I/1, 120–21: "It is one and the same whether we understand [the Word of God] as revelation, Bible, or proclamation. There is no distinction of degree or value between the three forms...The revealed Word of God we know only from the Scripture adopted by Church proclamation or the proclamation of the Church based on Scripture. The written Word of God we know only through the revelation which fulfills proclamation or through the proclamation fulfilled by revelation. The preached Word of God we know only through the revelation attested in Scripture or the Scripture which attests revelation."

tion is indirectly identical with the reality of Scripture. Indirectly, for the Bible is not the same as revelation. The tension remains. The Bible is one thing and revelation another.”⁶ The relation between the Bible and revelation is paradoxical, because it is not self-evident apart from faith that this ancient text is indeed the Word of God to us. The 17th-century doctrine of verbal inspiration is “deplorable,” he says, precisely because it transforms an indirect witness to revelation into direct revelation. These theologians, he says, “no longer had the courage to face this paradox. They did not have too much faith but too little.”⁷ In addition to rejecting any objective “mechanization and stabilization of the Word of God” in Scripture,⁸ Barth is also keen on rejecting any form of subjectivism which would stabilize revelation by locating it in one’s “inner experience.”⁹ According to Barth, the Christian theologian must firmly reject any attempt to capture revelation in some static given—whether objective or subjective in nature—that is directly available to human beings. All such approaches undermine the lordship of God whose Word never becomes a fixed entity that we can control and manipulate. God’s Word is instead a free act of divine self-communication.

In contrast to the Protestant scholastic tradition which presupposes a doctrine of biblical inerrancy, Barth offers a different basis for Scripture’s clarity and authority. For Barth, what makes the Bible to be the Word of God is solely the *event* of God’s address to us:

In this event the Bible is God’s Word. That is to say, in this event the human prophetic and apostolic word is a representative of God’s Word in the same way as the word of the modern preacher is to be in the event of real proclamation: a human word which has God’s commission to us behind it, a human word to which God has given Himself as object, a human word which is recognized and accepted by God as good, a human word in which God’s own address to us is an event. The fact that God’s own address becomes an event in the human word of the Bible is, however, God’s affair and not ours.

⁶ Barth, *Göttingen Dogmatics*, 216.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 217–18.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 224.

This is what we mean when we call the Bible God's Word...The Bible is God's Word to the extent that God causes it to be His Word, to the extent that He speaks through it...The Bible, then, becomes God's Word in this event, and in the statement that the Bible is God's Word the little word "is" refers to its being in this becoming.¹⁰

The Bible must *become* God's Word and this occurs only when God wills to address us in and through it.¹¹ While this applies also to proclamation as the third form of the Word of God, the first form, as revelation, does not *become* but simply *is* the Word of God. The Christ-event is God's definitive self-disclosure, while Scripture and preaching are made to correspond to him as faithful witnesses.

The correspondence between the Word of God incarnate and the Word of God written leads Barth to develop an analogy between the divinity and humanity of Scripture and the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ. Barth identifies three basic aspects to this analogy. First, there is an *ontological* analogy between the "two natures" of Christ and the "two authors" or aspects of Scripture. Just as Christ is *fully* human and *fully* divine, and not partly human and partly divine or some combination of the two, so too Scripture is fully human and fully divine—that is, fully determined by its actualistic participation in the revealed Word of God. "Holy Scripture," according to Barth, "is like the unity of God and man in Jesus Christ. It is neither divine only nor human only...But in its own way and degree it is very God and very man, i.e., a witness of revelation which itself belongs to revelation, and historically a very human literary document."¹² Following the basic guidelines of the Chalcedonian Definition, we can neither collapse the two natures into each other, nor bifurcate them. For this reason "it is quite impossible that there should be a direct identity between the human word of Holy Scripture and the Word of God," since even in Jesus Chr-

¹⁰ *CD I/1*, 109–10.

¹¹ See Bruce L. McCormack, "The Being of Holy Scripture is in Becoming: Karl Barth in Conversation with American Evangelical Criticism," in *Evangelicals and Scripture: Tradition, Authority and Hermeneutics* (ed. Vincent Bacote, Laura C. Miguélez, and Dennis L. Okholm; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 55–75.

¹² *CD I/2*, 501.

ist there is no direct identity between God and humanity.¹³ By positing a direct identity between revelation and Scripture, the doctrine of inerrancy is guilty, by analogy, of docetism.¹⁴

The second, and closely related, aspect of this analogy between Christ and Scripture is *soteriological*. Just as the incarnation, in Barth's distinctly Reformed Christology, is not the divinization of humanity, so too God's authorization of Scripture does not involve the divinization of human authorship.¹⁵ God's divine Word remains absolutely transcendent and cannot be turned into a finite, creaturely artifact; likewise, the biblical text remains, culturally and historically, a thoroughly human word. Like the incarnation, the "divinity" of Scripture remains divine and its "humanity" remains human. But unlike the incarnation, "there is no unity of person between God and the humanity of the prophets and apostles."¹⁶ The Bible is *not* a prolongation of the incarnation. There is no permanent, independent significance that inheres in the biblical text, for the simple reason that Scripture is not the event of salvation but only the witness to it. We protect the freedom and sovereignty of God's grace in Jesus Christ by refusing to objectify and ossify God's revelatory self-communication in the text of Scripture. "The statement that the Bible is the Word of God cannot therefore say that the Word of God is tied to the Bible," Barth declares. "On the contrary, what it must say is that *the Bible is tied to the Word of God.*"¹⁷

The third aspect of the analogy is *pneumatological*: the Word of God is always empowered by the Spirit of God. In the same way that Jesus of Nazareth fulfills the will of the Father only by the power of his Spirit, so too the Bible only becomes the Word of God by the Holy Spirit's communicative agency. Already in the *Göttingen Dogmatics* we read that inspiration is an "act of God...in *both* the biblical authors *and* ourselves. It is an act in which the Spirit speaks to spirit, and spirit receives the Spirit. With reference to the holiness of Scripture we are not to distinguish between the ontic basis (then, there, outside) and the noetic basis (here, today, in-

¹³ Ibid., 499.

¹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 510.

¹⁵ Cf. McCormack, "Being of Holy Scripture," 70.

¹⁶ *CD I/2*, 500.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 513; emphasis added.

side).¹⁸ The external clarity of Scripture coincides with our internal clarity, and both aspects occur as a divine act in which the Spirit clarifies the biblical text and illuminates our eyes with the gift of faith. The authority and divine authorship of Scripture is therefore a pentecostal occurrence in the present, not an intrinsic attribute of the text.

As Barth puts it in his *Table Talk*, “For me the Word of God is a *happening*, not a thing. Therefore the Bible must *become* the Word of God, and it does this through the work of the Spirit.”¹⁹ As we encounter these writings, God grants us understanding through the illumination of the Spirit so that the revelation to which Scripture witnesses becomes a *present* reality here and now. What distinguishes Scripture as a text, therefore, is the revelatory *content* or *subject matter* (*die Sache*) to which it witnesses, not the words themselves.²⁰ Moreover, this ability to witness to the gospel—and thus to mediate the subject matter of revelation—is not a natural predicate of the text but a gift of God’s grace, in the same way that our faith in Christ is not a natural predicate of our humanity but a divine gift in the Spirit. For this reason, we cannot say the biblical text *qua* text has two authors: divine and human. Rather, only insofar as the text bears witness to the kerygma of Jesus Christ by the power of his Spirit—and thus insofar as the community hears this kerygma in *faith*—can we speak about dual authorship.

Instead of inerrancy, Barth presents us with the notion of “dynamic infallibilism,”²¹ a term coined by Bruce McCormack to refer to Barth’s insight that the Bible becomes infallible in the concrete moment when God addresses us by the Spirit through the witness of the prophets and apostles. Because of its actualism, Barth’s doctrine of the Word of God is able to uphold the normativity of Scripture for the church without any fear of historical-critical scholarship. The infallibility of God’s Word and the fallibility of all human words coexist in an actualistic relationship of non-competitive simultaneity, analogous to the way the doctrine of

¹⁸ Barth, *Göttingen Dogmatics*, 225.

¹⁹ Karl Barth, *Karl Barth’s Table Talk* (ed. John D. Godsey; Richmond: John Knox, 1963), 26.

²⁰ Cf. *CD* I/1, 108.

²¹ McCormack, “Being of Holy Scripture,” 73.

creation and modern science coexist non-competitively. Historical research does not undermine the authority of the text but rather emphasizes the fact that its authority comes from God alone.²² Revelation is not a *given* confined to these ancient writings; it is much rather a divine *giving* here and now. In these human words, we encounter the Word of God—which is “living and active” only because *God* is living and active and chooses to address us in these writings with the radiance of God’s self-disclosure (cf. Heb 4:12). In the end, the Word of God is not a *what* or a *how*, but a *who*.

Bultmann’s Kerygmatic Conception of Scripture

Turning now to Bultmann’s understanding of Scripture, we find a substantially similar picture of how these ancient writings function as the Word of God. While he does not elaborate an ontology of Scripture, he does speak about the actualistic nature of how these ancient historical writings become the Word of God to us. His context for proposing such a view is quite different from Barth’s, however. Unlike Barth, Bultmann is not combating the Protestant scholastic doctrine of verbal inspiration. As a scholar trained in historical-critical methods, he already presupposes the “humanity” of the text. His target is rather the 19th-century German liberalism which reduces everything of significance to what historical criticism can reconstruct. Whereas Barth opposes bibliological docetism, Bultmann opposes historicist reductionism.

Liberal theology implicitly presupposes what Bultmann in 1924 calls a “pantheism of history,” in which God is given to us directly in social history as an object available for our investigation.²³ It is this “givenness” of God within the nexus of social relations, human personality, and scientific research that defines liberalism. The consequence of this view is that revelation becomes a historical-psychological phenomenon, Jesus becomes a great religious personality, and faith becomes a religious “feeling” (*Gefühl*)

²² Cf. *CD* I/2, 508: “We know what we say when we call the Bible the Word of God only when we recognize its human imperfection in face of its divine perfection, and its divine perfection in spite of its human imperfection.”

²³ Rudolf Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding* (ed. Robert W. Funk; trans. Louise Pettibone Smith; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 32.

rooted in our “sense of value” and our “yearning for God.” In short, liberal historicism leads to the deification of human experience (*Erlebnis*). Against this, Bultmann proclaims that “God is not a given entity”²⁴—that is, God is absolutely transcendent and thus not a directly accessible thing that we can objectify—and this becomes axiomatic for everything that Bultmann says later in life, including especially his understanding of Scripture and biblical exegesis.

The radical differentiation between God and the world that Bultmann makes basic to all theology corresponds to the differentiation between the Word of God and the human words of the Bible. Bultmann distinguishes between the ancient writings which are objectively available for all and the divine word of address which personally confronts us in the text as a present-tense event of faith. The Scriptures must therefore be “understood neither as a manual of doctrine nor as a record of witnesses to a faith which I interpret by sympathy and empathy. On the contrary, to hear the Scriptures as the Word of God means to hear them as a word which is addressed to me, as *kerygma*, as a proclamation.”²⁵ In short, the Word of God is visible—or rather, audible—only to faith. Because it is an act of God, it precludes verification. One cannot offer a proof that this canonical text is authoritative and truthful. “The fact that the word of the Scriptures is God’s Word cannot be demonstrated objectively; it is an event which happens here and now. God’s Word is hidden in the Scriptures as each action of God is hidden everywhere.”²⁶ For Bultmann, God’s radical transcendence means that God does not act in a perceptible way as an agent among other agents. Divine action is *sui generis* and does not interfere with creaturely activity. Instead, faith confesses “the paradoxical identity of an occurrence within the world with the act of the God who stands beyond the world.”²⁷ Bultmann therefore distinguishes between Word and word, between God and world, so that the two may pa-

²⁴ Ibid., 45.

²⁵ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribner, 1958), 71.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings* (trans. Schubert M. Ogden; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 162.

radoxically and kerygmatically coexist without competition or confusion—as a truly divine Word proclaimed in truly human words.

The emphasis on address and proclamation, which is strong in Barth's theology, is even stronger in Bultmann. The word of the preacher is, for Bultmann, the self-proclamation of Jesus Christ. It is a performative utterance, a divine speech-act, which makes present what it promises. For this reason, Scripture does not primarily function as a witness to some past occurrence or message, but rather serves, when joined with the spoken word, as the present occasion for our encounter with the living God. According to Bultmann, "the proclamation of the church refers me to scripture as the place where I will hear something decisive about my existence."²⁸ The preached kerygma turns our attention to the text. In this oral-aural event, the words of the preacher and the words of Scripture together become the Word of God:

God meets us in His Word, in a concrete word, the preaching instituted in Jesus Christ...Accordingly it must be said that the Word of God is what it is only in the moment in which it is spoken. The Word of God is not a timeless statement but a concrete word addressed to men here and now...It is His Word as an event, in an encounter...From this it follows that God's Word is a real word spoken to me in human language, whether in the preaching of the Church or in the Bible, in the sense that the Bible is not viewed merely as an interesting collection of sources for the history of religion, but that the Bible is transmitted through the Church as a word addressing us.²⁹

Scripture and preaching coincide in the event of God's Word. In the moment that we hear this concrete word of address, the Word of God *happens*.³⁰ The divine Word is never contained in a text which one can examine and assess apart from the moment of faith.

Bultmann does not mean that the Word of God is simply a subjective psychological experience. On the contrary, this is precisely what he is trying to protect against. While he is often criticized for reducing theology to anthropology and the objective to

²⁸ Ibid., 106.

²⁹ Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 78–79.

³⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 82: "The word of God is Word of God only as it happens here and now."

the subjective, his point is rather that we cannot speak about the objective reality apart from our subjective relation to it. He is fond of quoting his teacher Wilhelm Herrmann, “We cannot say of God how he is in himself but only what he does to us.”³¹ And he repeatedly says that “if a man will speak of God, he must evidently *speak of himself*.”³² As insists, however, this does not mean that God has no reality apart from us.³³ Rather, it means we cannot objectify God by taking a supposedly “neutral” position vis-à-vis the divine. “God does not stand still and does not put up with being made an object of observation,” but instead “God ever stands before me as one who is coming.”³⁴ We can speak about God only because God first interrupts us with a word that addresses us, calls us into question, and demands a decision. This apocalyptic encounter with God occurs anew in each moment. Faith is “not a knowledge possessed once for all”; it is new every morning.³⁵ The same goes for Scripture as the Word of God. The divine Word is not a visible object contained in a particular text that presents itself to a neutral observer, but instead it confronts us as a fresh word for today. That is why, when Bultmann asks how God speaks to us through the Bible, he can turn the question around and ask instead, “Are we ready to hear?”³⁶

In the end, like Barth, the Bible for Bultmann is a being-in-becoming. The relation between Scripture and revelation is, for both of them, dialectical in nature, in correspondence to the dialectical relation between divinity and humanity which we find concretized in Jesus Christ. Revelation is not an object we can see; it is a word that we hear and receive. These ancient texts thus become the Word of God for us in the preaching moment, when we hear

³¹ See Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 99.

³² Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding*, 55 (emphasis original).

³³ Cf. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 70.

³⁴ Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 144.

³⁵ Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 64. For an excellent treatment of Bultmann’s conception of faith, see Benjamin Myers, “Faith as Self-Understanding: Towards a Post-Barthian Appreciation of Rudolf Bultmann,” *IJST* 10 (2008): 21–35.

³⁶ Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann* (trans. Schubert M. Ogden; New York: Meridian Books, 1960), 170.

God addressing us in and through them. With Barth, Bultmann declares that this divine speech-act occurs *by the Spirit*. The fact that the Bible “becomes a word addressed to me personally, which *gives* me existence...is—in traditional terminology—the work of the Holy Spirit.”³⁷ In distinction from Barth, however, the Word of God for Bultmann has no independent significance apart from the receptive relationship of faith and obedience actualized through the Spirit’s existentializing activity. Bultmann’s conception of God’s Word is thus pneumatic-kerygmatic, where Barth’s is more strictly christological through an analogy with Christ’s two natures. To put it differently, Scripture for Bultmann mediates the interrupting presence of the *Christus praesens*,³⁸ whereas Scripture for Barth mediates the self-proclamation of the historical Jesus Christ. In both cases, the human witness of the prophets and apostles becomes God’s personal address to us today through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AS PARTICIPATORY EVENT: EXEGESIS AS EXISTENTIAL ENCOUNTER

Even if Barth and Bultmann share a fundamentally actualistic and dialectical conception of Scripture’s being and authority, it is clear that there is no common ground between them on the interpretation of Scripture. Or is it? Certainly, this was the point that Barth himself found so objectionable about Bultmann. But did Barth understand Bultmann correctly? Barth himself admits in a letter that “we are like a whale...and an elephant meeting with boundless astonishment on some oceanic shore.”³⁹ They do not share a common language, Barth says, and the only hope for mutual understanding is eschatological. In the midst of such a seemingly insuperable impasse, there appears to be little hope for a rapprochement between them. And yet an attempt at mutual understanding must and can be made. Stark differences remain, albeit within the scope of a more expansive affinity. Much has been written already

³⁷ Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 106.

³⁸ See the very fine study by James F. Kay, *Christus Praesens: A Reconsideration of Rudolf Bultmann’s Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

³⁹ Barth and Bultmann, *Letters*, 105.

on the hermeneutics of Barth and Bultmann, and I will not attempt in this space to summarize the results of those studies.⁴⁰ Instead, I will take as my starting-point the suggestive comment by Hans-Georg Gadamer that “Bultmann’s combination of historical-critical research with theological exegesis and his reliance on philosophy (Heidegger) for methodological self-awareness prevents Barth from recognizing himself in Bultmann’s method.”⁴¹ In order to assess the accuracy of this statement, I will first sketch their basic agreement regarding a participatory model of exegesis, then I will complicate this by exploring the point of their disagreement.

Existential Presuppositions and Participatory Exegesis

In his 1962 methodological definition of “biblical theology,” Krister Stendahl famously distinguished between “two tenses” of meaning in a biblical text: “What *did* it mean?” and “What *does* it mean?”⁴² Stendahl separated the historical task of descriptive exegesis from the theological task of relevant translation and application—restricting biblical theology to the former. The result was a divide between biblical studies and theological reflection, between an objective-scientific investigation into the historical *meaning* of the text and a theological-contextual application of the text’s present *significance*. In contradistinction to Stendahl, Barth and Bultmann are united in their opposition to any final separation between what a text *meant* and what it *means*, precisely because the past and present of a text are coterminous. As will become clear, true exegesis for

⁴⁰ On Barth’s hermeneutics, see Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); Bruce McCormack, “The Significance of Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis of Philipians,” in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 89–105. For a critical but appreciative and detailed study of Bultmann’s hermeneutics, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

⁴¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall; 2d rev. ed.; New York: Continuum, 2004), 509.

⁴² See Krister Stendahl, “Biblical Theology, Contemporary,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. George A. Buttrick; 5 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 1:418–32.

both Barth and Bultmann requires instead an existential participation in the *Sache*—the “subject matter” or “object”—of the text.

In an important 1957 essay, “Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?” Bultmann challenges the separation between exegesis and translation by arguing for an approach to biblical hermeneutics which acknowledges the necessity of certain existential presuppositions.⁴³

The question whether exegesis without presuppositions is possible must be answered affirmatively if “without presuppositions” means “without presupposing the results of exegesis.” In this sense, exegesis without presuppositions is not only possible but imperative. In another sense, however, no exegesis is without presuppositions, because the exegete is not a *tabula rasa* but approaches the text with specific questions or with a specific way of asking questions and thus has a certain idea of the subject matter with which the text is concerned.⁴⁴

Every exegete, according to Bultmann, “is determined by his or her own individuality in the sense of special biases and habits, gifts and weaknesses.”⁴⁵ These factors do not prevent our understanding of the text, but rather make such understanding possible. To understand history, we must be *in* history. We must be “existentially alive” to our present historical situation, and thus to the claims that the text makes upon us.⁴⁶ Bultmann calls this existential involvement a “life-relation” (*Lebensverhältnis*) or “preunderstanding” (*Vorverständnis*).⁴⁷ This preunderstanding is neither a “definitive understanding” which prejudices the meaning of the text, nor is it “subjective” in the sense that history “loses all objective significance.”⁴⁸

⁴³ See Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 145–53. Originally translated in Bultmann, *Existence and Faith*, 289–96. The ideas presented in this essay are present in at least an incipient form in his 1925 essay on theological exegesis. See Rudolf Bultmann, “The Problem of a Theological Exegesis of the New Testament,” in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology* (ed. James M. Robinson; Richmond, Va.: John Knox, 1968), 236–56.

⁴⁴ Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 145.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁴⁶ Bultmann, “Problem of a Theological Exegesis,” 245.

⁴⁷ Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 149.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 150.

It simply means that we are capable of understanding the subject matter of the text. For example, in order to understand the narration of a war or a parable about money, the exegete presupposes his or her preunderstanding about politics and economics. We are not ahistorical beings who come to the biblical writings with a blank mind. "Therefore, every word we utter about history is necessarily a word about ourselves," because "there is no point at which we can stand outside history."⁴⁹ The self's existence is involved in the exegetical act, and thus, quite paradoxically, only a "subjective" interpretation is truly "objective." A faithful understanding of history "is possible only for one who does not stand over against it as a neutral, nonparticipating spectator but also stands within it and shares responsibility for it."⁵⁰ We must participate in the subject matter of the text in order to properly interpret the text.

For Bultmann this means that exegesis *is* translation. If one's understanding of the text occurs in an event of mutual understanding between past and present, then one's interpretation is inseparable from the translation of the text into the thought-world of the exegete. In order for the biblical writings to be understood as the authoritative witness to the kerygma, "they must first be interpreted historically, because they speak in a strange language, in concepts of a faraway time, of a world picture that is alien to us. Simply put, they must be *translated*...To translate means to make understandable, and this presupposes an understanding."⁵¹ Translation from one historical context to another is therefore the *sine qua non* of all exegesis,⁵² according to Bultmann, and this is precisely what Stendahl and those who represent the modern divide between Scripture and theology are not willing to accept.

⁴⁹ Bultmann, "Problem of a Theological Exegesis," 242, 250.

⁵⁰ Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 150.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁵² This conception of hermeneutical translation is the essence of what Bultmann means by "demythologization." He explicitly states that demythologization is not the elimination but the *interpretation* of myth, in which the exegete translates the *Sache* of the text from an ancient world-picture (*Weltbild*) to the modern one so as to facilitate one's proper understanding of the biblical message. See *ibid.*, 11–12.

We find Bultmann's affirmation of existential presuppositions already anticipated by Barth in the preface drafts to the first edition of his *Epistle to the Romans*.⁵³ Barth repeats a radical axiom throughout these drafts: "Whoever does not continually 'read in' because he participates in the subject matter cannot 'read out' either."⁵⁴ Exegesis is not possible without a certain kind of eisegesis—a participatory involvement in the *Sache* of the biblical text. Barth says, "I have consciously raised again the method which has long since been repudiated in theology of 'reading in' our own problems into the thought world of the Bible...But it could not be otherwise...because, from the beginning, I felt I was participating in it [the subject matter] much too strongly, because I had heard Paul speaking directly *to us* so clearly."⁵⁵ This does not mean that we only "read out" what we first "read in." Instead, Barth intends to affirm that we can only be grasped by the subject matter of the text if we first participate in it: "One can only *understand* [*verstehen*] that for which one *stands* [*stehen*]."⁵⁶ There must be a true concourse between past and present, what Barth calls an "immediate relation" or "living context," in order for historical understanding to take place.⁵⁷ Barth later affirms the necessity of existential, participatory exegesis in his *Church Dogmatics*. He reasserts the axiom that exegesis includes eisegesis: "Exegesis is always a combination of taking and giving, of reading out and reading in."⁵⁸ And in a small-print paragraph in *Church Dogmatics* I/2, he explicitly dismisses the position of "complete impartiality" as "merely comical."⁵⁹ According to Barth, while there is always the danger of doing violence to the text, this risk is necessary to preserve the possibility of participating

⁵³ I am dependent for what follows on the work of Richard Burnett, who has made Barth's preface drafts available to English-speaking audiences for the first time.

⁵⁴ Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis*, Appendix 2, Preface Draft III, 288.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* Barth places his participatory exegesis over against "the Unwillingness-To-Understand, the non-participatory, distancing of oneself [which] has simply been made into a scientific principle" (*ibid.*).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *CD* I/1, 106.

⁵⁹ *CD* I/2, 469.

in the subject matter, content, and theme of the Bible. We are called to the perilous vocation of exegesis.

Methodologically speaking, therefore, Barth and Bultmann are in basic agreement—as Gadamer suggests.⁶⁰ Both understand the hermeneutical task as a participation in the *Sache* of Scripture, and this *Sache* is none other than the living Christ who confronts us by his Spirit. It is thus not surprising that Stendahl explicitly defines his method in opposition to them, because they are “primarily concerned with the present meaning” of the text.⁶¹ Stendahl is indeed correct when he says that the existential-theological hermeneutic of Barth and Bultmann indicates a loss of “enthusiasm or ultimate respect for the descriptive task,” but this does not mean Barth and Bultmann reject historical-descriptive work altogether. They simply reject giving this task any *ultimate* respect. As a purely historical enterprise, the investigation into what a text meant to its “original audience” has a certain relative value. But in the act of interpretation and understanding past and present meaning coincide, since there is no exegesis without an existential relation to the subject matter.

Theology and Hermeneutics: Clarifying the Divide between Barth and Bultmann

Bruce McCormack is quite right when he states that “the measure of agreement between Barth and Bultmann in the 1920s on the hermeneutical level was great.”⁶² But this agreement is not limited to the 1920s. Certainly the affinity between them in those early years turned into indifference, if not hostility, at least from Barth’s side. And yet there remains, I would argue, even in the 1950s, a

⁶⁰ I will grant that this similarity is obvious in the 1920s, when the two of them were allies. However, contrary to popular wisdom and despite appearances to the contrary, I would argue that the basic theological and hermeneutical decisions advanced in this early stage hold true in their mature work. While I cannot support that claim here, it will be central to my forthcoming dissertation. For more on this point, see Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith* (trans. James W. Leitch; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 309–11.

⁶¹ Stendahl, “Biblical Theology,” 421.

⁶² McCormack, “Barth’s Theological Exegesis of Philippians,” 97–98n31.

substantial amount of methodological consonance. It is no doubt true that Bultmann's mature hermeneutics differentiates more sharply between the descriptive and theological tasks,⁶³ while Barth seems to repudiate his early existential exegesis in favor of a "tested and critical naivety."⁶⁴ The story of their development, however, is not a straightforward movement from agreement to disagreement. Burnett oversimplifies matters when he says, without qualification, that Bultmann follows the tradition of Schleiermacher and Dilthey. Burnett even asserts that Bultmann is "caught up in the same bifurcated, 'double-entry book-keeping' approach" of people like Stendahl.⁶⁵ While this is perhaps Barth's perspective, it is a misunderstanding of Bultmann's position. In his 1950 essay on "The Problem of Hermeneutics," Bultmann places himself in the tradition of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, but not without subjecting this tradition to serious criticism. Against his predecessors, he says that "instead of reflection on the individuality of the author and of the interpreter, on their psychological processes, and on the interpreter's genius or congeniality," what is necessary "is reflection on the simple fact that the presupposition of understanding is the life relation of the interpreter to the subject matter that is—directly or indirectly—expressed in the text."⁶⁶ There is considerable overlap between this statement and Barth's own hermeneutical procedure. For this reason, McCormack is correct to point out that "the real

⁶³ To a certain extent, the later Bultmann separates scientific and theological exegesis, but unlike traditional liberal and evangelical hermeneutics, he does not isolate an objective interpretation from a subjective application. Bultmann retains a two-step process to exegesis in order to distinguish between the text and the subject matter; historical criticism negatively identifies what the true *Sache* of the text is by positively identifying what is accessible to scientific investigation. On the other hand, Barth collapses historical and theological exegesis such that the text and the subject matter coincide. But Barth does not directly identify the text with the subject matter. Rather, a distinction remains between the kerygma and the historical witness to it, even if the two coexist in simultaneity by the Spirit's work.

⁶⁴ Cf. *CD* IV/2, 479.

⁶⁵ Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis*, 202–3.

⁶⁶ Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 73–74.

dividing point between Barth and Bultmann was not hermeneutical, in the first instance, but *theological*.”⁶⁷

We can be more specific and identify *soteriology* as the locus of their disagreement. To flesh this out, we must first see just how much affinity there is between them. In a lengthy passage from an address he gave on the authority of Scripture, Barth demonstrates both his similarity to and dissimilarity from Bultmann:

What distinguishes the witness of the prophets and the apostles, so that it can have this significance for the existence of the congregation and its proclamation to the world? After all, they were men as fallible as we are, children of their time as we are of ours, and their spiritual horizon was as limited as ours—in significant ways, even more limited than ours. Whoever enjoys that sort of thing can again and again demonstrate that their natural science, conception of the world, and also to a great extent their morality cannot be binding for us. They told all sorts of sagas and legends and at least made free use of all kinds of mythological material. In many things they said—and in some important propositions—they contradicted each other. With few exceptions they were not remarkable theologians. They have only their election and calling to commend them. But this counts! Their many-sided testimony has, in its own way and in its own place, one and the same center, subject, and content: *Jesus* of Nazareth, indicated and anticipated in God’s covenant with His people Israel, born at the end of the divine judgment on Israel’s unfaithfulness, together with the new people, His disciples and brothers, the *Christ* of the Jews who as such is also the *Savior* of the Gentiles.⁶⁸

A few things are worth noting. First, Barth fully affirms the results of historical criticism, even if he himself does not care to engage in that work (“whoever enjoys that sort of thing”). Second, the biblical text is not directly identical with the subject matter, and thus Scripture’s significance cannot be read off the surface of the text. The “center, subject, and content” of Scripture is the living Christ who confronts us in and through the textual witness, but is not

⁶⁷ McCormack, “Barth’s Theological Exegesis of Philippians,” 97 n. 31.

⁶⁸ Karl Barth, “The Authority and Significance of the Bible: Twelve Theses,” in *God Here and Now* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 48.

identical with the witness itself.⁶⁹ Third, because of the distinction between text and *Sache*, Barth says later that the exegete “must bring to light the perspective and conceptual world of the author of a given text” in order “to translate his meaning and intention.”⁷⁰ Fourth, and most importantly, the *Sache* of the text is Jesus Christ, the electing God and elected human, whose election includes the election of the prophets and apostles as the normative witness to this covenant of grace. The subject matter for Barth is thus not simply Jesus of Nazareth, but rather Jesus as understood in the light of Barth’s doctrine of election. It is this soteriological dimension which forms the real conflict with Bultmann when it comes to reading the Bible.

We see this soteriological disagreement play itself out in their competing interpretations of Rom 5. In his 1952 essay, *Christ and Adam*, Barth claims that Jesus Christ ontologically precedes Adam and so constitutes true humanity.⁷¹ By subordinating Adam to Christ, Barth makes the reconciliation accomplished in Jesus effective for all humanity prior to each person’s own existential acknowledgement of this salvific fact. Barth argues that “in His [Christ’s] own death He makes their [humanity’s] peace with God—before they themselves have decided for this peace and quite apart from that decision. In believing, they are only conforming to the decision about them that has already been made in Him.”⁷² Bultmann responded to Barth by rejecting the universalistic logic that Barth

⁶⁹ Pace Frei, who states: “That was what Barth’s ambition was, to be a *direct* reader of the text, and not of some hypothetical subject matter behind the text. *The subject matter is the text!*” (emphasis added). See Hans W. Frei, “Scripture as Realistic Narrative: Karl Barth as Critic of Historical Criticism” (paper presented at the Karl Barth Society of North America, Toronto, 1974), <http://people.exeter.ac.uk/mahigton/frei/transcripts/Frei02-Narrative.htm>. The distinction between Frei and Barth can be put like this: Frei has a direct identity between the *Sache* and the biblical witness, whereas Barth has only an indirect, paradoxical, and actualistic identity, in accordance with the ontology of Scripture outlined above.

⁷⁰ Barth, “Authority and Significance of the Bible,” 53.

⁷¹ See Karl Barth, *Christ and Adam: Man and Humanity in Romans 5* (trans. Thomas Allan Smail; New York: Harper, 1957).

⁷² *Ibid.*, 24.

finds in Rom 5:12–21, and insisting that there is no objectively true humanity in abstraction from our personal act of faith:

According to logical consequence all men after Christ should receive life. Of course Paul does not mean that; instead all men now face the decision whether they wish to belong to “those who have received,” provided that the word of proclamation has already reached them. While Adam, then, brought death to all men after him without a possibility of escape, Christ brought for all the possibility (of life). One thing, however, is clear now: just as the fate of Adamic mankind is predestined by the trespass of Adam, so, to be sure, the *fate* of mankind after Christ is not predestined by the obedience of Christ, for this depends upon the decision of faith “to receive.”⁷³

For Bultmann, there is no election apart from faith but only *in* faith: “Every speculative or mythological conception of the idea of election is therefore to be rejected. Election comes to pass in faith—neither before nor after it.”⁷⁴ It is this soteriological differentiation which finally separates Barth and Bultmann, while their actualistic doctrine of the Word of God and their basic understanding of what exegesis entails—viz. a participatory encounter with the christological *Sache* of the text—are materially congruent. This only serves to confirm that hermeneutics and theology are inseparable. There is no unidirectional movement from exegesis to theology: exegesis presupposes theology just as theology presupposes exegesis.

CONCLUSION: READING THE BIBLE BEYOND BARTH AND BULTMANN

Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann were both men of their time. Their “theology of crisis” was a response to the problems of liberal theology, even as it set forth a new paradigm for thinking about divine transcendence and agency. Misunderstandings of both theo-

⁷³ Rudolf Bultmann, “Adam and Christ According to Romans 5,” in *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Otto A. Piper* (ed. William Klassen and Graydon F. Snyder; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 158.

⁷⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, *Essays, Philosophical and Theological* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 178.

logians predominate whenever their dialectical heritage is obscured or ignored. In the case of Barth, attempts to turn him into a post-liberal or make him palatable to Roman Catholicism fail to attend to the thoroughly dialectical character of his mature dogmatic theology. In the case of Bultmann, interpretations of his controversial program of demythologization often ignore its dialectical basis,⁷⁵ thus failing to see that it is a method which interprets Scripture anti-metaphysically in light of God's radical transcendence.⁷⁶ Much like Barth's own *analogia fidei*, demythologization is a program for God-talk that seeks to ensure that our language is indeed about *God* and not about ourselves. For both Barth and Bultmann, God is an event of Word and Spirit, not an object in nature, history, or Scripture that we can analyze *extra fides*.

What can we learn from their different conceptions of Scripture and the task of interpretation? First, the conflict between biblical authority and historical-critical research is a false conflict because it makes the gospel proclamation "a truth among other truths" in the world, instead of being "a question-mark against all truths."⁷⁷ God does not compete with creaturely agency, and therefore historical criticism cannot in any way threaten the truth of God's self-revelation. Second, the post-Enlightenment ideal of exegetical neutrality is to be rejected as a false understanding of what interpretation entails. Contrary to both historicist liberals and conservative evangelicals, there is no straight line of authority that moves from "objective" exegesis through biblical and historical theology to its "subjective" appropriation in systematic and practi-

⁷⁵ An exception to the rule is Chalamet's superb study, *The Dialectical Theologians*.

⁷⁶ There is much confusion regarding the nature of "myth" in Bultmann's theology, not only on the part of Barth but also on the part of many theologians today. In lieu of a complete analysis of this problem, we can state the following: what Bultmann calls "myth," Barth calls "metaphysics." Barth mistakenly thinks that his concept of "saga" occupies the space which Bultmann assigns to the word "myth." While his mistake is understandable, it has had the effect of obscuring Bultmann's true intention.

⁷⁷ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns; 6th ed.; London: Oxford University Press, 1933; repr., 1968), 35.

cal theology.⁷⁸ Barth and Bultmann, by contrast, point toward a “third way” which is able to engage in historical research without sacrificing a deeply evangelical emphasis on Scripture’s authoritative witness.

Third and finally, Barth and Bultmann attest to the central role of divine agency in the being and interpretation of Scripture. Scripture *becomes* the Word of God by virtue of God’s gracious decision, and we become capable of exegeting Scripture only through the Holy Spirit’s illuminating power. Mark Alan Bowald rightly describes the “objective” and “neutral” mode of post-Enlightenment biblical exegesis as effectively “deistic or atheistic,”⁷⁹ since it isolates the interpretive task from the ongoing agency of Father, Son, and Spirit. The true Word of God is intrinsic to neither text nor reader, but is rather a *verbum externum* that speaks to us again and again from without.⁸⁰ To put this differently, the perspicuity of Scripture is not a property of the text that we can simply read off the page; instead, it is a speech-act of God—the *viva vox Dei*—in which the Spirit clarifies both text and reader within the context of God’s self-communicative mission of reconciliation. The clarity of Holy Scripture is the clarity of *God*.⁸¹

As helpful as I think both Barth and Bultmann are, the task today is to think not only *with* them but also *beyond* them. From Bultmann, we can glean the insight that interpretation is necessarily

⁷⁸ Joel Green points out that evangelicals, in particular, have adopted Stendahl’s methodology for their own “biblical theology.” See Joel B. Green, “Scripture and Theology: Uniting the Two So Long Divided,” in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 33. Dan Treier also takes evangelicals to task for their use of “inductive Bible study,” which employs a “two-step hermeneutics” that separates the objective facts of a text from their subjective significance. See Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 24.

⁷⁹ Mark Alan Bowald, *Rendering the Word in Theological Hermeneutics: Mapping Divine and Human Agency* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 1.

⁸⁰ Cf. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 79.

⁸¹ For a profound treatment of the perspicuity of Scripture, see John Webster, “On the Clarity of Holy Scripture,” in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2005), 33–67.

an act of translation; it is a dialogical engagement with the *Sache* of the text within our concrete existential horizon. Bultmann does not, however, attend to the communal nature of biblical exegesis. His existential emphasis focuses on the interpreter as an individual who hears and responds to God's Word in an almost private manner. On this point, we have much to learn from Barth, who rightly situates the reader within the Christian community gathered and sent by the Spirit to participate in the mission of God through its active witness. On the other hand, from Barth we gain a doctrine of *concursum* in which divine agency coexists with creaturely agency.⁸² In light of this—and here I can only be suggestive—we can develop a doctrine of Scripture in which (1) divine authorship fully and non-competitively coincides with human authorship in the past, while (2) divine illumination non-competitively coincides with human interpretation in the present. By bringing these elements together, we can move beyond Barth and Bultmann in ways that are both biblically faithful and theologically fruitful. The future of the church has much to gain by allowing them to speak anew as witnesses to “the one Word of God which we have to hear, and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death” (Barmen Declaration).

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⁸² See *CD* III/3, 90–154.

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