# Barth and Hermeneutics

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## Abstract and Keywords

While Karl Barth avoided the question of hermeneutics and theological method, preferring to focus on the actual exegesis of Scripture, his work is thoroughly—albeit often implicitly—hermeneutical. His hermeneutics, however, is always determined by the subject matter. Over against historical critics who advocated a posture of feigned neutrality, Barth argued that the interpretation of a text requires a participation in its subject matter. Barth's hermeneutics thus changed over the course of his career as his understanding of the subject matter changed. The eschatological subject matter of his early theology led to a hermeneutic of simultaneity. The historical subject matter of his later, Christocentric theology led to a hermeneutic of description. This chapter argues for an apocalyptic subject matter that unifies the eschatological and the historical and generates a bifocal hermeneutic.

Keywords: apocalyptic, bifocal vision, eschatology, historical criticism, history, normativity, objectification, participation, simultaneity

ON 2 May 1962, during his visit to Princeton Theological Seminary, Karl Barth was asked to comment on the recent work in the area of hermeneutics. The names of Rudolf Bultmann, Gerhard Ebeling, Schubert Ogden, and many others were in the air, and students were looking to Barth for an indication of what to expect from this discipline. Barth replied by saying they should *do* interpretation rather than keep talking about *how* to interpret:

> The theme of hermeneutics has come up, more and more people speak of hermeneutics—every young man in a different way—and I regret that in discussing 'hermeneutics' the texts themselves come short, you see? They are discussing the question of language, of translation, of application and so on. I have always preferred *to do* the thing, to try to explain, to understand texts. And now they are fighting especially in the different schools of the 'Bultmannitis', because there are different Bultmann-schools now, and they are fighting on this methodological basis. I can't like this thing, I'm not involved in it, I look, I see, I read it,



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> but I would prefer they would write commentaries or deliver sermons or write, let us say, a good theology of the New Testament, a better one—yes. Instead of that they are thinking round and round *how* do we understand instead of trying to understand and then make a jump in the water and look if they are able to swim!
>
> (GA 25: 507, emphasis original)

As Richard Burnett argues, Barth consistently prioritized exegesis over hermeneutics following his turn from liberalism in 1915 (Burnett 2004: 14). Whereas liberal theology since Schleiermacher had been preoccupied with questions of historical criticism and theological method, Barth sought a return to the Word of God. Barth's admonition to 'jump in the water and…swim' demonstrates his fidelity in his final years to the originating insight of dialectical theology—namely, that we are confronted by a divine (p. 565) Subject who interrupts our preoccupation with method and scientific accuracy, and simply demands our obedient response.

Despite the fact that Barth places himself against the blight of 'Bultmannitis', Bultmann himself appeals to Barth's early exegetical work as a central inspiration for his own hermeneutical project. In 1959, three years before Barth's visit to Princeton, Bultmann listed the second edition of Barth's *Epistle to the Romans* as one of the six most influential books upon his scholarly work. Barth's commentary showed Bultmann 'that the interpretation of a text presupposes a personal relation to the matter of which the text speaks' (Bultmann 1959: 125). The participation in the subject matter (*die Sache*) of the text that Barth advocated over against historical critics who pursued a neutral, objective understanding of the text became the underlying hermeneutical principle of Bultmann's programme of demythologizing. This apparent paradox disguises an often-overlooked point: Barth's rejection of liberalism did not have to issue in a rejection of Bultmann's hermeneutics, as is often alleged. While Burnett and others are right to see a consistent trajectory in Barth's work, it is also important to recognize that Barth's criticism of historical criticism—what Eberhard Jüngel calls his 'hermeneutical metacriticism' (Jüngel 1982: 88)—was itself a dynamic and fluid position that morphed over time. Understanding the history of Barth's project thus provides us with the resources for critically assessing his perspective on hermeneutics.

At the heart of Barth's explicit and implicit hermeneutics is the connection between *what* we are interpreting (i.e., the subject matter) and *how* we interpret, and in particular the decisiveness of the former for the latter. Barth twice changed the subject matter: first, from history to eschatology, and second, from eschatology back to history. Each shift involved a corresponding change in his hermeneutics. But if theology always begins again at the beginning, so too does hermeneutics. In this chapter, after reviewing the first two subject matters, I suggest that a third change in the subject matter is necessary as we appropriate Barth's legacy in the twenty-first century—a move from eschatology and history to apocalyptic.



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# Changing the Subject: From History to Eschatology

Barth's turn from liberal to dialectical theology was, from the outset, a hermeneutical decision. This would have been the case even if he had not announced this new direction in his thinking through a biblical commentary on Romans (first edition 1919, GA: 16; second edition 1922, RII) that Hans-Georg Gadamer called 'a kind of hermeneutical manifesto' (Gadamer 1986: 391). The hermeneutical significance of this turn stems from the fact that, due in large part to Friedrich Schleiermacher, nineteenth-century liberal theology was inseparable from the historical criticism of the Bible that arose in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Liberal theology, we might say, is (p. 566) simply the form that theology takes when it allows historical criticism to become the criterion for appropriate God-talk. Richard Burnett thus rightly argues that 'Karl Barth's attempt to break with liberalism was his attempt to overcome the hermeneutical tradition of Friedrich Schleiermacher' (Burnett 2004: 4).

The hermeneutical problem with liberal theology is that historical research, insofar as it provides any norms at all for theology, provides norms that are immanent to history. Ernst Troeltsch presented this position most forcefully in his 1922 work, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme*, where he states: 'If we no longer recognize the norms for shaping life in church dogma or its offspring, rationalist dogma, then all that remains is history as the source and philosophy of history as the solution' (Troeltsch 2008: 291). But immanent, historicized norms are unable to regulate belief and action in a way that ensures critical distance from cultural context. The cultural context effectively *becomes* the norm. Friedrich Gogarten, writing in 1924, observes that Troeltsch's 'real norm is…the idea of Europeanism' (Gogarten 1962: 179). Further, before the issue of normativity became a theological and hermeneutical problem for Barth, it was a *political* problem. In July 1914, at a meeting of religious-socialist pastors—and Barth, at that time, was a socialist pastor in Safenwil—Barth spoke about the politics of Friedrich Naumann, a German liberal politician with nationalist and imperialist views. Barth's lecture notes describe Naumann's political world view: '*Germanism, belief in the special mission of Germany*, in each case: we want power. Hence empire, military, navy, politics of expansion' (GA 48: 50, emphasis original). Three weeks later war broke out. In September 1914, a group of twenty-nine theologians and church leaders, including Barth's professors Adolf von Harnack and Wilhelm Herrmann, signed a manifesto asserting that Germany's cause in the war was holy, because its colonialist activities were a fulfilment of the 'great commission' of Matthew 28 (Besier 1984: 40–5; Congdon 2015: 837–43). The next month ninety-three German intellectuals, including Naumann in addition to Harnack and Herrmann, signed the more famous manifesto in support of the war (Besier 1984: 78–83). In the judgement of Barth and Gogarten, liberal theology's captivity to history—as critically reconstructed by the guild of academic historians—left theologians without the resources for critiquing the ideology of Germanism and Europeanism.



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Barth's rejection of nineteenth-century liberal theology was therefore a quest to recover a genuinely theological norm in order to liberate the gospel from its sociopolitical captivity, and the only way to pursue this quest was to become '*more critical*' than the historical critics (GA 47: 14; RII: 8, emphasis original). Achieving a critical vantage point required abandoning the 'philosophy of history' as the 'solution' for shaping modern life. More importantly, it necessitated a new source or subject matter. Barth thus changed the object of theological inquiry from history to *eschatology*. In Romans I he defines his new *Sache* or subject matter as 'the opening of a new aeon, the creation of a world in which God again has control…This is the gospel that we proclaim. This is our subject matter' (GA 16: 20). Barth went even further in the second edition, removing from the first edition those vestiges of an organic, progressive eschatology that could still lend themselves to ideological manipulation in favour of what Walter (p. 567) Kreck calls the 'eschatology of the *hic et nunc* [here and now]' (Kreck 1961: 40–76). Barth famously writes in Romans II: 'Christianity that is not completely and utterly eschatology has completely and utterly nothing to do with *Christ*' (GA 47: 430; RII: 314, emphasis original). By shifting the object of inquiry, Barth discovered a norm for theology that was 'wholly other' than history and as such incapable of being conscripted for the purpose of buttressing a Eurocentric cultural Christianity.

Burnett argues that the new subject matter Barth discovered was God, and there is certainly truth to this. In his 1924 lecture on the new movement of dialectical theology, Bultmann states that 'the object of theology is God, and the charge against liberal theology is that it has dealt not with God but with human beings' (Bultmann 1933: 2). Such claims require qualification, however, since liberal theologians intended to deal with God as well, albeit in a historicized way. Barth and the other dialectical theologians presuppose that God-talk only genuinely speaks of God if the God in question forgives sin, and God can only forgive sins if God is not confined to history along with the rest of humanity. God must be 'wholly other' than the world, which means that eschatology must be the norm for our God-talk. For this reason, the new subject matter is not just any God but the *eschatological* God.

Barth held to some version of this subject matter from 1915 to 1936. While Bruce McCormack speaks of a 'shift from an eschatological to a christological grounding of theology' in the Göttingen period (McCormack 1995: 327), he later clarifies that, through at least *Church Dogmatics* I/1, 'Barth's center of gravity still lay…in the situation of the human recipient of revelation in the here and now of his/her existence' (McCormack 2009: 63). Barth locates the centre of gravity in the human recipient because, according to his realized eschatology, the eschaton is an atemporal 'eternal moment' in which revelation occurs in 'the relation of eternity to the existence of the believer' (Beintker 1987: 53). In other words, even when it becomes Christologically focused, Barth consistently operates during these years under the shadow of a 'here and now' eschatology that identifies God's present-tense event of self-unveiling as the subject matter of theology.



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# Participating in the Subject Matter: A Hermeneutic of Simultaneity

Within a purely immanent cosmos, our access to the past is only available through those who have come before us, in all their fallibility and cultural limitation. For this reason, Troeltsch claims that historical knowledge is only probable at best, for 'in the field of history there are only judgments of probability', never of certainty (Troeltsch 1913: 731). Consequently, theology either has to abandon a transcendent norm, following the path of Troeltsch and liberal theology, or it has to receive this norm through the ostensibly infallible tradition of the church. Either way, revelation is reduced to (p. 568) empirical history, whether the secular history of the academy or the sacred history of apostolic succession. As Barth states in his Göttingen lectures on dogmatics, a Bible that is merely the record of Christianity's historical origins is unable to 'bring revelation from the past to the present, or bring us from a revelation-less present back to the past'; instead of normative revelation 'we simply have something that is historically different', and taking this approach 'might lead us straight back to the Roman Catholic doctrine' (GA 17: 251; cf. GD: 206). This judgement explains in part why Barth viewed Protestant modernism and Roman Catholicism as the twin threats to a theology of the Word of God and even speaks of an 'inner relationship between the Roman Catholic view and the Modernist view' (KD I/1: 69; CD I/1: 68). Both posit a continuity between God and the world—whether the 'pantheism of *history* of liberal theology' (Bultmann 1933: 5, emphasis original) or the *analogia entis* (analogy of being) of Roman Catholicism (KD I/1: viii; CD I/1: xiii)—which means, according to Barth, that neither place the proclamation of Jesus Christ at the centre of the church's life. Ultimately, both modernism and Roman Catholicism commit an eschatological error: they confuse 'the person of the present…and the person of eternal glory' (KD I/1: 65; CD I/1: 64). To use Barth's earlier language, they violate 'the boundary of time and eternity' (GA 20: 3; GD: 319).

By shifting the subject matter from history to eschatology, Barth rejected an epistemology that flattens divine action into creaturely action and thereby confines us either to relative probabilities or to a church that has replaced Christ. Both options abrogate divine freedom. The eschatological God, however, transcends the world and is not bound by creaturely limitations. God is free to encounter the creature when and where God wills to do so. And because 'God confronts humanity in qualitative and not merely quantitative *superiority*' (GA 17: 220; cf. GD: 179, emphasis original), every moment in history is equally distant from, and so equally near to, the eternal. God's address dissolves the barrier between past and present. Consequently, when we encounter God today, we encounter the same subject matter as the prophets and apostles. The eschatology of the 'here and now' corresponds to an epistemology of the 'here and now'. Knowledge of the subject matter does not depend on peeling back layers of history because the subject matter, as the divine *subject*, meets us in the present moment—but it meets us *in* the words of Paul as a messenger of the truth.



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In the opening lines of the preface to the first edition of his commentary on Romans, Barth thus differentiates between Paul as a historical person and Paul as the apostle of revelation:

> Paul spoke to his contemporaries as a child of his age. But *much* more important than this truth is the other, that he speaks to all people of all times as a prophet and apostle of the kingdom of God. The differences between then and now, there and here, should be considered. But the goal of this consideration can only be the knowledge that these differences have essentially *no* meaning.
>
> (GA 16: 3, emphasis original)

(p. 569) Eberhard Jüngel calls this 'a *hermeneutic of simultaneity* [Gleichzeitigkeit]' (Jüngel 1982: 85, emphasis original), in the sense that Paul's message becomes contemporaneous with the reader of the text. The reader recognizes that 'our questions are…the questions of Paul, and Paul's answers must…be our answers' (GA 16: 3). We could also call this a *participatory* hermeneutic, since the simultaneity only occurs when the reader does not keep herself at a remove from the text but fully enters into and participates in the subject matter. It is over this issue that Barth criticizes historical criticism, a point that comes out more clearly in the drafts of the preface to his first commentary on Romans. In Draft IA, Barth says that 'to understand an author means for me mainly *to stand with him*'; but 'today's theology does not stand with the prophets and apostles, does not share a common subject matter with them, but rather stands with modern readers and their prejudices' (GA 16: 587, emphasis original). Against the modern pursuit of scientific neutrality, Barth argues that 'whoever in this sense does not constantly "read in" [*einlegen*], i.e., participate in the subject matter, does not read out [*auslegen*]' (GA 16: 587). In Draft II of the preface he adds: 'For me the decisive presupposition in the exegesis of a text is thus the participation in its *subject matter*' (GA 16: 591, emphasis original).

It is important to notice that Barth differentiates between the text and the subject matter. This stands out more clearly in the preface to the second edition, where he writes: 'I must push forward to the point where I virtually only confront the riddle of the *subject matter* and no longer merely the riddle of the *document* as such, where I thus virtually forget that I am not the author, where I have understood him so well that I let him speak in my name and can myself speak in his name' (GA 47: 14; RII: 8, emphasis original). Participation in an eschatological subject matter involves moving beyond what is given in the text, which is a historical artefact, to the gospel itself—what Barth calls the 'real gospel' as opposed to the 'whole gospel', meaning the text (GA 47: 20; RII: 12). What remains ambiguous is precisely the nature of this participation. What does it mean to 'read into' the text? There are two possibilities here. One possibility is that standing with the author of a text means bringing our questions—the concerns that animate our particular context—to the subject matter, so that the text can illuminate and address the situation in which we stand. In this case the participation is reciprocal: the reader participates in the subject matter, but the subject matter also participates in the reader and her situation. The other possibility is that participation in the subject matter means to encounter an eternal truth



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so timeless and universal that the particularities of the reader's context fade entirely from view. The former says that '*our* questions are…the questions of Paul', while the latter says that '*Paul's* answers must…be our answers' (GA 16: 3, emphases added). The former was the path that Bultmann took, while the latter was Barth's path.

We see evidence of this path already in the drafts of the preface to the first commentary on Romans, where Barth writes: 'What I call "standing with [the author]" means having the presupposition that what was once true will always be true' (GA 16: 587). Barth here posits a Platonic idea of eternal truth, where the specific contexts within which one encounters this truth are fundamentally irrelevant to its understanding.

**(p. 570)** But there is also evidence of the other path in Barth's writings. In the Göttingen period and beyond, Barth struggled to do greater justice to the particularity of both the event of revelation and the recipient of revelation. We see the fruit of this struggle especially in *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf* (Christian Dogmatics in Outline) (1927), where he writes that 'the correlate of truth, of revelation, of the word of God is the human person…[The individual] is the correlate of truth, not humanity, not even Christianity in general…but rather *this* person, I' (GA 14: 517–18, emphasis original). He even goes so far as to posit that 'the hearing human person is included in the concept of the Word of God as is the speaking God. The human is "co-posited" in it…One does not speak of the Word of God, if one does not speak at the same time of its being heard by the human, or still more concretely: of the human who hears it, of the human I' (GA 14: 148). Hermeneutically, this would mean the individual person addressed by God's revelation being taken up into the event of interpretation. Barth's position at this point was virtually indistinguishable from Bultmann's.

Barth's stance was thus internally unstable, as he himself realized. By the time of *Church Dogmatics* he rejects the 'co-positing' as a violation of God's free grace, which always encounters the human person as a *concretissimum* and never as a 'general truth' (KD I/1: 145; CD I/1: 140). Neither an abstract universal truth nor an existentially situated truth satisfied him theologically. While they succeeded in preventing the exploitation of revelation for political ends, they failed, in his view, to orient the task of theology around the particular reality of Jesus Christ. An eschatological subject matter, and the hermeneutic of simultaneity that it entailed, was no longer an option.

# Changing the Subject Again: From Eschatology Back to History

Barth changed his subject matter again for a host of reasons we need not rehearse here. Some of the principal stimuli included his dialogue with Erich Przywara, his dispute with Emil Brunner, and his ongoing interactions with Rudolf Bultmann. The ultimate result of these and other engagements was that Barth came to see 'the elements of truth in the old school' (HG: 56) and so returned from eschatology back to history—not the general history of the historicists, but the 'highly special history of God with humanity, the highly spe-



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cial history of humanity with God', namely, 'the history *of Jesus Christ*' (KD IV/1: 171–2; CD IV/1: 157–8 rev., emphasis original). In *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, where he was operating with an eschatological subject matter, Barth writes that 'revelation is thus…beyond history' (GA 14: 311); in *Church Dogmatics* he argues that 'this *human* history, the "earthly life of Jesus", belongs *with* the act of *God* to *what* is revealed' (KD IV/2: 37; CD IV/2: 35 rev., emphases original). Revelation not only takes place in history, but a particular history is included in the content of revelation.

Barth's new subject matter manifests itself in earnest following the revision of his doctrine of election around 1939. He begins *Church Dogmatics* II/2 by claiming that 'the (p. 571) voice that reigns in the church as the source and norm of all truth' is 'the voice *of Jesus Christ*'—indeed, the name of Jesus Christ 'disclosed itself to us at every turn as the object, as the subject matter, with which we had to deal' (KD II/2: 2; CD II/2: 4 rev., emphasis original). Without the man Jesus of Nazareth—and not merely God the Son—sitting at the right hand of the Father, 'God would not be God…God without this man and without this people would be a different, alien God' (KD II/2: 6; CD II/2: 7 rev.). Barth grounds this claim dogmatically in his doctrine of election, according to which Jesus Christ, in his divine–human unity, is both the subject and object of election. Against the Reformed doctrine of predestination, which has the character of a static divine decree in the eternal past, Barth argues that God's decree is a living decision that is 'completed but *not* finished', that is not only past but also present and future (KD II/2: 201; CD II/2: 183 rev., emphasis original). God's electing work in Jesus Christ is 'event, history, encounter, and decision' (KD II/2: 206; CD II/2: 187 rev.). The divine decree of election is an 'eternal *occurrence*' that takes place precisely as 'concrete history' (KD II/2: 202; CD II/2: 184 rev., emphasis original). Barth reiterates this point to make sure his meaning is clear: 'the beginning of all things with God is itself history, encounter, and decision…The history, encounter, and decision between God and the human person was in the beginning with God' (KD II/2: 203; CD II/2: 185 rev.). According to Barth, God's 'deity *encloses humanity in itself*' (HG: 50, emphasis original). We can only describe this as a historicizing of God—not in the mythological sense of reducing God to history but in the theological sense of God eternally uniting Godself to history in a free act of self-determination.

In an important small-print section at the end of §33 of *Church Dogmatics* II/2, Barth contrasts his new doctrine of election with the position presented by his brother, Peter, at the International Calvin Congress in 1936. He describes Peter Barth's position as the 'actualistic' or 'present' (*aktuell*) understanding of election, but he could also have called it the 'eschatological' understanding, since it is the very position he advocated in his earlier works (KD II/2: 205–7; CD II/2: 187–8). On this view, election occurs anew in every moment, simultaneously with a person's decision of faith. Barth rejects this view as being 'purely formal', lacking in definite content (KD II/2: 209; CD II/2: 190). An actualistic election ends up being either arbitrary or conditional upon the human person. It is unable to offer a word of genuine hope and grace to the sinner. In accordance with the Christocentric norm set out earlier, the will of God is truly known 'only in the work of God', namely, 'in the person and work of Jesus Christ' (KD II/2: 210; CD II/2: 191 rev.). But if this work is to be God's definitive 'Yes' to humanity, then it has to be fixed and unchangeable. For



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this reason Barth writes that election '*occurred before all time* in the bosom of God…The election of Jesus Christ is unchanged and unchangeable *history*' (KD II/2: 210; CD II/2: 191 rev., emphases original). Barth's shift from eschatology back to history is thus at the same time a shift from eschatology to *protology*. The history that defines the *Sache* of theology is a protologically grounded history that stands not only in time but also before all time.

In this way Barth solves the dilemma posed by his previous subject matter, since revelation is now neither a timeless general truth nor is it an existential truth in the present moment. The revelation that demands our interpretation is a truth located in (p. 572) concrete history that is nevertheless eternal and universal. It is the revelation of the crucified one, which 'occurs not merely in some invisible, suprahistorical, heavenly realm, but rather in a visible, historical, earthly realm—and is thus as human, worldly, immanent, and objective as the death of Jesus' (RB: 33; RBE: 110). Barth attempted to make the subject matter *objective* without making it *objectifiable*.

# Participating in the Subject Matter: A Hermeneutic of Description

Around the same time Barth was changing his subject matter, Bultmann was developing his programme of demythologizing, at the heart of which was a version of the hermeneutic of simultaneity: the reader encounters the text as a historically and culturally alien message, and understanding occurs in the act of translating the message from its foreign conceptuality (or world-picture) into the conceptuality of the reader's context. Bultmann operates with the history–eschatology dialectic of the early Barth, and thus a change in the context and conceptuality does not fundamentally affect the eschatological message. But one only accesses the content *through* the process of historical translation; there has to be a simultaneous, mutual participation of the reader in the *Sache* and the *Sache* in the context of the reader (Congdon 2015: 759–64).

It is no accident that talk of history becomes most prominent in the volume of *Church Dogmatics* that begins with Barth admitting: 'I have found myself throughout in an intensive, although for the most part quiet, conversation with Rudolf Bultmann' (KD IV/1: i; CD IV/1: ix rev.). The year before the publication of *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, Barth commented at length on Bultmann's theology in *Rudolf Bultmann: Ein Versuch, ihn zu verstehen* (*Rudolf Bultmann: An Attempt to Understand Him*). In this essay, which is the clearest expression of his later hermeneutics, Barth rejects simultaneity in favour of a distinction between the *primary* task of understanding and the *secondary* task of translation, and he does so on the grounds that the subject matter stands objectively before our eyes in its historical otherness:

> Does not *what was said* in the New Testament (in its historical form)—or rather *the one who encounters* me in it—stand before us gigantically in almost every verse, calling for an ever new inquiry into it, and is it not true that in the task of under-



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> standing and interpreting these texts our first and primary concern must be with what was said as such…and then in the course of this struggle over the *subject matter* one will also do the necessary work of *translation* and somewhere confront contemporary human beings? Is not this work of translation a *secondary* task that the reader and interpreter can only do well in relation to the *primary* task?
>
> (RB: 8; RBE 87–8, emphases original)

In contrast to the early period of the Romans commentaries, in which Barth claims that understanding the suprahistorical subject matter collapses the distance between past (p. 573) and present, the later Barth argues that 'the message of these texts must first be understood in unity with its original historical form' and only afterwards 'can it be translated into other forms' (RB: 7; RBE: 87). Within the Bultmann school, he claims, translation is 'inappropriately passed off as the basic problem of exegesis and, if possible, also of dogmatics', whereas it has its proper place in the field of 'practical theology' (ET: 182). This means that, for Barth, we are to 'learn the subject matter from exegesis and dogmatics and discern the form from the psychology, sociology, and linguistics that is most appropriate at a particular time', but the process of interpretation '*always* takes the direction from the first to the second (and thus never the reverse)' (ET: 183 rev., emphasis original). While Krister Stendahl argues for a two-stage process in which biblical theology says what a text 'meant' and dogmatic theology says what a text 'means' (Stendahl 1962), Barth argues that exegesis and dogmatics tell us what a text objectively 'meant', while practical theologians—those concerned with the 'problem of *language*' (ET: 182, emphasis original)—focus on what it 'means' for people today.

What makes Barth's two-stage interpretative method possible is his conviction in these later writings that the subject matter of the biblical text stands plainly and objectively before the reader, calling for our attention and obedience. Barth's return to history was not a return to the empirical history of the historians but to the theological or narratival history of biblical saga (*Sage*)—what he calls 'unhistorical' history (KD III/1: 88; CD III/1: 81 rev.)—and this history meets us *in the text*. We participate in this historical subject matter not by pressing beyond the text but by entering into the Bible's 'spirit, content, and scope [*Geist, Inhalt, und Skopus*]' (RB: 31; RBE: 108). Practically speaking, the subject matter is identical with the unhistorical history that we encounter in the text. Theological history, according to Barth, has to be understood 'in its older, naïve significance', which disregards the distinction between what can be 'historically proved' and what has the 'character of saga' or is even 'consciously constructed or "invented"' (KD IV/2: 541; CD IV/2: 478–9 rev.). In order to grasp their 'kerygmatic' character, 'one must read these histories *still* or *again* naively in their unity and totality' (KD IV/2: 541; CD IV/2: 479 rev., emphasis original). History in both testaments of the biblical text has a 'synthetic' element, in which 'present and past are not wholly but almost fused into one' (KD IV/2: 541; CD IV/2: 479 rev.). Past and present (almost!) become one in the text itself, at least when read with a 'tested, critical naivety' (KD IV/2: 542; CD IV/2: 479). Hans Frei is close to the truth



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when he writes of the later Barth that he aimed ‘to be a *direct* reader of the text, and not of some hypothetical subject matter behind the text’ (Frei 2015: 59, emphasis original).

The later Barth advocates what we might call a hermeneutic of *naive description*. The exegete only needs to describe the subject matter that one encounters directly and ‘gigantically’ in Scripture. The Bible, Barth writes in 1947, presents us with ‘a picture’, and interpretation takes place when the exegete ‘thinks what the biblical witnesses thought after them’ and produces an ‘independent repetition of the picture presented by their words’ (SK: 10). The simplicity of this approach is certainly attractive. But the need to distance himself from Bultmann seems to have led Barth (once again) into an impossible position. By separating the subject matter from translation Barth fails to (p. 574) recognize that translation is already involved in the very act of articulating the subject matter; it is not an act of subsequent application but necessarily internal to every instance of exegesis. In his attempt to stave off the threat of an existentialist interpretation that, in his mind, allows contemporary culture to define the gospel, he therefore ends up with the opposite problem of conflating the subject matter with the ancient contexts and linguistic forms of the prophets and apostles. Barth still speaks of the Bible as a ‘witness’, but the actualism once associated with this word is muted in his later writings. In 1962, for instance, he claims he has ‘always stressed and emphasized the objective character of the inspiration of Scripture’, such that ‘the Biblical word is in its objective character an event’ that bears immediately ‘upon the existence of all [people]’ (GA 25: 472–3). As Barth shifts from an actualistic revelation in *Church Dogmatics* I to an actualistic Christology in *Church Dogmatics* IV, Scripture becomes a more direct and reliable testimony to Christ in order to fend off critics such as Bultmann. While Scripture is *ontologically* distinct from Christ, it is *hermeneutically* identical, inasmuch as Barth refuses to separate the subject matter from the textual narrative of Christ’s history. Translation is unnecessary if the biblical text is transparent to Jesus Christ. Here we find the grain of truth in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s famous charge of a ‘positivism of revelation’ (Bonhoeffer 1998: 404). Barth’s later hermeneutical statements come within a hair’s breadth of treating the biblical language as an ‘unimpeachable *given*’ that one either has to take or leave (McCormack 2008: 133). The question, then, is whether there is a way to do justice to the historical character of the subject matter while retaining the eschatological nongivenness of the early Barth. I suggest there is, and the answer lies in apocalyptic.

# Towards a New Subject: From History to Apocalyptic

The turn to apocalyptic in the twentieth century had its origins in the work of Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer, but they recovered apocalyptic only to dismiss it as obsolete. It was Ernst Käsemann, writing in the 1960s, who took apocalyptic seriously as ‘the mother of all Christian theology’ (Käsemann 1960: 180). Barth was sceptical about Käsemann’s work, from what little he knew of it, since he took it to be a reduction of the New Testament to an ‘apocalyptic subject matter [*Apokalyptik-Sache*]’ (GA 41: 255). But



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apocalyptic theology—especially the version developed after Käsemann by, amongst others, J. Louis Martyn, Christopher Morse, Beverly Gaventa, and Douglas Campbell—offers a potential synthesis of the early and later Barth. In agreement with the later Barth it identifies the historical event of Jesus Christ as the subject matter of the New Testament; but in agreement with the early Barth it understands this event as an eschatological invasion and disruption of the world. Without wading into the ongoing dispute in biblical studies over apocalyptic, a sketch of some of (p. 575) its central claims, with special reference to the work of Martyn, will demonstrate the possibilities resident in apocalyptic for developing Barth's thought in constructive new directions.

The apocalyptic that interests Käsemann and his followers is not the literary genre that includes texts like Daniel, 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, and Revelation; instead, apocalyptic for them refers to a particular understanding of the Christ-event as the event that marks the end of the old age and the inauguration of the new. The Greek term *apokalypsis*, for which 'revelation' is an 'inadequate translation', is not the 'unveiling' of eternal truth but rather the 'invasion of Christ' on the scene—the coming of Christ is '*the* cosmic conflict' (Martyn 1997b: 282, emphasis original). God has invaded the 'present evil age' (Galatians 1:4) by sending Christ and his Spirit in opposition to the powers that enslave the world (Martyn 1997a: 99). The 'present time' is now the moment of 'God's apocalyptic war of liberation…whose outcome is not in question' (Martyn 1997b: 283). As with all apocalyptic scenarios, 'the world is not neutral ground; it is a battlefield, and everyone is a combatant' (Käsemann 1971: 23). The difference in 'Paul's christological apocalyptic' is that Christ has already decided the outcome (Martyn 1997a: 99). In a Pauline correction of Käsemann's overemphasis on the 'imminent Parousia' (Käsemann 1969: 114), Martyn defines the apocalypse in terms of the conflict between 'two different worlds…[Paul] speaks of an old world, from which he has been painfully separated, by Christ's death, by the death of that world, and by his own death. And he speaks of a new world, which he grasps under the arresting expression, new creation' (Martyn 1997b: 114). Apocalyptic theology, at least in the form developed by Martyn, is thus essentially a theology of the cross, for 'the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is itself the apocalypse, after which nothing can be the same' (Martyn 1997b: 285).

The apocalyptic subject matter turns out to be simultaneously eschatological and historical. Like Jewish apocalypticism, early Christian apocalyptic is oriented towards the end of history and the coming of the new creation. It therefore frames things in terms of 'oppositional pairs': old cosmos and new creation, sin and Spirit, God and anti-God powers (Martyn 2000: 258). Within this cosmic conflict, God comes on the scene *from beyond*. The apocalyptic revelation of Christ is an 'invasive movement' of liberation and deliverance (Martyn 2000: 254). The gospel, in this sense, is an apocalyptic event that *happens* ever anew; it always comes '*from God*' and does not become the word of human beings, namely, tradition (Martyn 1997a: 150, emphasis original). Instead, 'the gospel was and is God's immediate word—the word God himself speaks in the present moment—and this fact guards the gospel from ever becoming in its heart a tradition. At stake, one might say, is the matter of the gospel's *permanent* origin' (Martyn 1997a: 151, emphasis original). At the same time, God truly comes *on the scene* from beyond. The apocalyptic God does not



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encounter human beings the way a tangent touches a circle, as in the early Barth. The eschatological dualism within Pauline apocalyptic is not an infinite distinction between time and eternity 'as though the New Creation were statically existent *up there*, and the Old Age statically existent *down here*' (Martyn 1997b: 282, emphases original). Apocalyptic is concerned not with (p. 576) metaphysical otherness in the abstract but with the cross of Jesus as a physical, historical occurrence: 'it is the real death that was carried out with literal nails on a literal piece of wood' (Martyn 1997a: 277). It naturally follows that 'grace relates us more deeply to the earthly because it thrusts the community as a whole and each of its members beneath the cross where extreme assault and victory coincide' (Käsemann 1980: 232).

Unlike the later Barth, however, Martyn does not stabilize this historical event in protology, nor does he think it can be read naively off the text. It remains eschatological *in* its historicity. Martyn thus situates apocalyptic beyond the binary opposition between 'otherworldliness' (which corresponds to eschatology) and 'this-worldliness' (which corresponds to history): while each side has scriptural warrant, each ultimately misses the dynamic, invasive event at the heart of the gospel, which is simultaneously eschatological and historical (Martyn 1997b: 280–2). By transcending this divide, Martyn bears witness to a theological norm that remains non-given within the given contingencies of history and so precludes objectification. To participate in *this* subject matter is to have an 'epistemological crisis' that transforms one's interpretation of the world (Martyn 1997b: 284).

# Participating in the Subject Matter: A Bifocal Hermeneutic

If the gospel as apocalyptic event is neither otherworldly nor this-worldly but both at the same time, then the one who participates in this apocalypse 'now sees bifocally', that is, she sees 'both the evil age and the new creation simultaneously' (Martyn 1997a: 104). This 'bifocal, simultaneous vision' is an ever new gift of faith for those who participate in Christ's crucifixion, establishing 'a radically new perception of God' and 'a radically new perception of time', since it sees the present in light of both the past and the future (Martyn 1997a: 104). Just as faith sees the crucifixion of Jesus as the decisive victory of God over the powers of evil, so too the bifocal vision of apocalyptic interprets the present historical moment as the scene of God's liberating inbreaking. Martyn uses the example of the civil rights movement in the United States to illustrate his point. The unifocal vision of the old age only sees a group of people mobilizing in the streets for justice. The bifocal vision of faith recognizes 'that the real struggle in Birmingham is a struggle in God's apocalyptic war' (Martyn 1997b: 285).

A bifocal hermeneutic thus involves what we might call an *apocalyptic simultaneity*. The eschatological simultaneity of the early Barth renders a person's historical context irrelevant, since the unveiling of the eternal is the same everywhere for everyone. The turn to history in the later Barth entails a kind of textual simultaneity, in which the subject matter presents itself 'gigantically' and immediately to the reader. An apocalyptic simultane-



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ity, however, neither retreats to an ahistorical revelation nor focuses on a past revelation that is already complete; it neither circumvents the historical (p. 577) particularity of the crucified Christ nor ignores the particularities of those crucified with Christ by faith. A bifocal hermeneutic sees the eschatological reign of God in the contingencies of the present situation without reducing the one to the other. The gospel is 'not a view from everywhere' but instead 'quite specifically the epistemology *kata stauron*, the view that perceives everything "according to the cross"' (Martyn 2000: 260 n. 39). Because the subject matter is an event of divine action and not of human tradition, it is never directly available in the text. Martyn finds in Galatians a contrast between the false teachers, who model 'Law-observant exegesis of the scriptures', and Paul, who 'speaks of something that happens to human beings' when the Spirit of Christ 'invade[s] their hearts' (Martyn 1997a: 284). The text points us to the battlefield and orients our vision. It does no more but also no less than this. For this reason, translation is essential to interpretation, not because we are engaged in a benign task of exegetical understanding but because we have been enlisted in the struggle against sin and death and we find ourselves and our context caught up in the liberative invasion of God.

In 1934, Barth gave a lecture on revelation in Paris that was decidedly apocalyptic in tone. In it he describes revelation as the attack of God upon the prophets and apostles:

> *On the battlefield* (namely, not in a study, nor on a stage but on the battlefield of human life) *it has happened* (it has indubitably and irrevocably happened with the complete, once-for-all singularity and with the whole gravity of a factual event) *that the enemy* (the enemy, the other one, not man himself but his opponent, an adversary who is determined to engage man) *with overwhelming superiority…has gone into action*…This event is God's revelation.
>
> (GIA: 4, emphasis original)

Barth goes on to state that the report from the frontlines of this battle is Holy Scripture, and that this report calls for reinforcements—namely, the church. There are certainly similarities with the apocalyptic perspective, but just as many differences. For instance, the divine attack in apocalyptic is against the anti-God powers that enslave the world. It is not an attack of revelation but of liberation. And these human beings are liberated in order to participate 'in the front trenches of the Spirit's war against the Flesh' (Martyn 1997a: 483). The front lines are thus not in the distant past of the original apostles; they are rather in our neighbourhoods, our streets, our homes. The only way to interpret Scripture according to its subject matter is to hear it as a summons to action in the here and now. The result would be a hermeneutics of theological content criticism (*Sachkritik*), determined not by the content of tradition, whether canonical or confessional, but by the apocalyptic inbreaking of the crucified one.



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# Conclusion

Barth was always reluctant to focus overmuch on hermeneutical and methodological issues. As he said in 1964, 'it has been characteristic of my style that I have constantly (p. 578) tried to think in relation to particular texts' (GA 28: 123). He was far more interested in actually exegeting Scripture than in reflecting on how to exegete it. What is nevertheless clear is that Barth does not have a single hermeneutic. While one can accurately describe Barth as advocating a kind of 'theological interpretation of Scripture'—broadly defined as 'refusing any two-stage views of past versus present, or of what the text "meant" versus what it "means"' (Treier 2008: 17)—his writings indicate at least two different versions of theological interpretation and point in the direction of a third. The first version unites past and present in the eternal moment of the reader's faith; the second version unites past and present in the text as a direct testimony to the history of Jesus Christ; and the third unites past and present in the apocalyptic event of the cross that stands beyond both text and reader but is constantly invading the world in ways that illuminate our present situation as the scene of God's liberating victory over sin and death. We should therefore be cautious about aligning Barth too closely with any particular theological or hermeneutical programme. Barth will best aid us in our hermeneutical endeavours when we allow him to serve his stated aim—namely, to point us to the subject matter of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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