

ABSTRACT

Testimony to Revelation: Karl Barth's Strategy of Bible Interpretation in *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*

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This thesis examines the strategy of Bible interpretation employed by Karl Barth in *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*. The guiding principle of this strategy is Barth's conviction that the Bible ought to be treated as testimony to God's self-revelation in history. 'Testimony' is understood to be capable of providing a reliable source of historical knowledge. As such, it enabled Barth to interpret the Bible in a way sensitive to the requirement that Bible interpretation be rational and historical and also capable of responding to modern insights into the nature of the Bible.

Part I shows that Barth sought a strategy of interpretation that would be true to history. For him, the Christian understanding of history is dependent on the resurrection of Jesus Christ (Chapter 1). This leads to the conclusion that interpretation which is true to history is interpretation in the light of Jesus' resurrection (Chapter 2). Making use of Alisdair MacIntyre's discussion of the nature of rationality, it is shown that Barth stands in a tradition of historical enquiry that is different from, but no less rational than, that of modern secular theorists.

Considering further the matter of rationality, Part II asks whether Barth's strategy provides good reasons on which to base assertions. Chapter 3 describes his treatment of the Bible as testimony and shows that he saw testimony as providing a means to knowledge. Chapter 4 defends this approach in the light of modern epistemological discussion. Chapter 5 describes in detail how an appreciation of testimony applies to Barth's Bible interpretation.

Part III considers examples of Barth's Bible interpretation and, in the light of them, asks whether his strategy is capable of taking account of modern insights into the nature of the Bible. Chapter 6 discusses the tremendous variety found in the Bible and Chapter 7 asks what happens if variety becomes outright contradiction. Finally, Chapter 8 looks at issues surrounding the recognition that the Bible is literature.

TESTIMONY TO REVELATION:

**Karl Barth's Strategy of Bible
Interpretation in *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik***

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Introduction

That Jesus Christ is true God is shown by His journey into 'the foreign land' in which He, the Lord, became a servant. For, in the majesty of the true God, the eternal Son of the eternal Father became obedient by offering and humbling Himself to be the brother of human beings, to take His place with the transgressors, to judge them by judging Himself and dying in their place. But God the Father raised Him from the dead, and in so doing recognized and gave effect to His death and passion as a full satisfaction made for us, as our conversion to God, and therefore as our redemption from death to life.¹

So begins one of the most important sections of Karl Barth's *Kirchliche Dogmatik*. The words stand as a summary of the section, but they also could be a summary of the whole of Barth's *Dogmatik*, or even of all his work. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that they could stand as a summary of Barth's understanding of the meaning of all history.

Relative to such weighty matters, questions about the technicalities of Bible interpretation might seem a little petty. And in one sense they are. If it is true that 'Jesus Christ is very God' and that what he has done is a matter of 'our redemption from death to life', then we must not get caught up in endless debate about exegesis and eisegesis, about hermeneutic versus hermeneutics, and so on. Barth was concerned that people often prefer discussion of such 'technicalities' to consideration of things which really matter.²

I sympathize enormously with Barth here. There often is a tendency, not just among academics but with all people, to let the unimportant obscure the important. But, ironically enough, Barth's reluctance to get caught up in debates about method provides many critics with reason to disregard the contribution he has to make on 'the important matters'. In particular, the apparent lack of interpretative sophistication in his treatment of the Bible is seen to undermine his claim to have produced a 'biblically-based' theology.

However, reluctance to enter into debate *about* interpretation is not the same thing as failure *in* interpretation. A judgment about whether Barth's theology is 'biblically-based' can only be reached by an analysis of his theory and practice of interpretation. It is just such an analysis that I strive toward in this thesis. I offer it in the hope that it will not get in the way of more important things, but that it will rather help make the important things a little more 'intelligible and perspicuous'.

¹From Volume Four, Part One (cited hereafter as KD IV/1) of *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, I/1–IV/4 (Studienausgabe; Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1986–93), p. 171 (English translation: CD IV/1, p. 157). The official English translation is *Church Dogmatics* I/1–IV/4 (trans. G.W. Bromiley *et al.*; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956–75). I follow the practice throughout of referring to KD where I have offered my own translation and giving the equivalent place in CD in brackets.

²Thus, when Friedrich Gogarten complained, 'Why don't you do anything about the necessary business of getting your presuppositions clear?', Barth could only respond with a question of his own: 'When will you get down to business?' (recorded in E. Busch, *Karl Barth—His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* [London: SCM Press, 1976], p. 194).

The phrase 'intelligible and perspicuous' comes later in the section with which I began this introduction. Barth argues that all people, rather than face up to the insurmountable chasm between God and themselves, put other problems in the way. Rather than accept that sin prevents them from knowing God, and that sin has been dealt with in Christ, they choose to believe that other obstacles stand in the way. The particular obstacle Barth has in mind is historical separation:

We need the consciousness of historical distance [*geschichtlichen Distanz*], the neutralizing historicist consideration [*historische Betrachtung*]; the thought of the 1900 years, and the message, tradition and proclamation of others which binds but also separates the There and Here; the question of their truthfulness and credibility, the feeling of the uncertainty of the mediation, the disquiet which it involves for us. We need all this because it appears to create a delay...Like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden...we need to safeguard ourselves as far as this way of escape will allow—from the directness with which He does in fact confront us, from His presence, and the consequences which it threatens.³

This problem of historical separation, and all that goes with it, is nevertheless a real one—the question has 'genuineness [*Echtheit*]', as Barth puts it. Consciousness of the fallibility of those who have passed on the gospel message in the intervening years is not unfounded. Insights into the difficulties of relying on the Bible—its 'foreignness', its ambiguities, its proneness to error—are real insights. But, in Barth's view, it is possible to make historical separation into more of a problem than it deserves to be, to make a mountain out of (what is admittedly a rather substantial) molehill. Barth believes that the real mountain, the fact of sin, has been overcome. And in so far as it has been overcome, so in principle have all the other difficulties: 'in and with the overcoming of the real and spiritual problem of the connection between Jesus Christ and us, the technical problem of the relationship between his Then and There and our Now and Here is also soluble and has already been solved'.⁴

Barth does admit that 'technical difficulties' do exist and are important. At times his eagerness to talk about 'the things that matter' obscures this. And at times his polemic against those who denied the possibility of such talk—such as died-in-the-wool historical critics, who would only discuss 'what Paul believed and did' and never 'what we should believe and do with regard to the matters which Paul raised'⁵—at times such polemic makes it seem as if technical matters had no significance at all for Barth. But, taken over all, 'technical matters' are important for him, both in theory and in practice, so long as they are held in the correct perspective.

It is with the 'technical difficulty' of Bible interpretation that this thesis is concerned.

³KD IV/1, pp. 321-22 (CD IV/1, p. 292).

⁴KD IV/1, p. 322 (CD IV/1, p. 293).

⁵I am alluding here to a theme which began with Barth's famous Preface to the second edition of his Romans commentary. He responds there to the accusation of 'being an "enemy of historical criticism"' (*The Epistle to the Romans* [trans. from 6th edn by E.C. Hoskyns with Forewords to the first six editions; London: Oxford University Press, 1933, repr. 1977], p. 6). He states (among other things) that, Criticism (*κριτικὴν*) applied to historical documents means for me the measuring of words and phrases by the standard of that about which the documents are speaking—unless indeed the whole be nonsense...Intelligent comment means that I am driven on till I stand with nothing before me but the enigma of the matter...For me, at any rate, the question of the true nature of interpretation is the supreme question. Or is it that these learned men, for whose learning and erudition I have such genuine respect, fail to recognize the existence of any real substance at all, of any underlying problem, of any Word in the words? Do they not perceive that there are documents, such as the books of the New Testament, which compel men to speak at whatever cost, because they find in them that which urgently and finally concerns the very marrow of humancivilization? (pp. 8-9).

a. Scope

I use the phrase 'Bible interpretation' in a broad sense: I mean both Barth's strategy and practice of interpretation. As the title indicates, the scope of the thesis is Barth's Bible interpretation in *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*. The conviction which lies behind this is twofold. First, Barth's treatment of the Bible in the *Dogmatik* is different from (though not unrelated to) that found in the various editions of his first commentary on Paul's Letter to the Romans and in others of Barth's early writings.⁶ Secondly, although the *Dogmatik* was written over a period of 37 years (1931–68), Barth had settled on a way of treating the Bible by the beginning of the period which he stuck to throughout the writing of the twelve volumes.⁷ This is not to say that his understanding of the Bible did not develop throughout the period. It undoubtedly did. But his basic belief that the Bible is 'testimony to revelation' and that it ought to be interpreted as such did not change.

b. A Brief History of Criticism of Barth's Bible Interpretation

Over the last twenty years or so there has been a gradual but nevertheless real increase of interest (on the Anglo-American side of things at any rate) in the theology of Karl Barth. This has included an increase of interest in his strategy of biblical interpretation. I therefore offer a brief history of criticism of Barth's Bible interpretation in two parts: 'Up to the Mid-1970s' and 'After the Mid-1970s'.

Up to the Mid-1970s

In comparison to study of aspects of Barth's systematic theology, for a long time his Bible interpretation in *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* was left relatively untouched. In part this was because many scholars saw the Romans commentary as the groundbreaking work (and therefore spent a good deal of time and energy on it) and the treatment of the Bible in the *Dogmatik* as part of a disappointing relapse towards orthodoxy which did not greatly interest them.⁸ But also it was because in the

⁶Studies of Barth's early period include N.T. Bakker, *In der Krisis der Offenbarung: Karl Barth's Hermeneutik, dargestellt an seiner Römerbrief-Auslegung* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1974); H.W. Frei, 'The Doctrine of Revelation in the Thought of Karl Barth, 1909 to 1922' (PhD dissertation; Yale University, 1956); D.P. Henry, *The Early Development of the Hermeneutic of Karl Barth as Evidenced by his Appropriation of Romans 5:12-21* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985); J.D. Smart, *The Divided Mind of Modern Theology: Karl Barth and Rudolph Bultmann 1908-1933* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967); T.F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to his Early Theology 1910-1931* (London: SCM Press, 1962).

In his excellent intellectual biography, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), B. McCormack has shown that the supposed change in Barth's theological method from dialectic to analogy around 1930 (a scheme made popular by H.U. von Balthasar's *Karl Barth: Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie* [Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1986, 4th edn]) is untenable, and that the significant changes took place somewhat earlier (in the early 1920s). McCormack also shows that as well as change there is also considerable continuity in Barth's theological method. I consider that the same is true of his Bible interpretation. With his commentary on Romans, Barth made a first attempt at offering a different and better way of reading the Bible from that pursued by Liberal theologians. In the 1920s he continued this search and by the beginning of the *Dogmatik* (1930) he had developed a way of reading which was different from, but had some continuity with, that seen in the Romans commentary. He set out his understanding of this way of reading in KD I/1-2.

⁷At no point did Barth give any indication that the basis of his reading strategy had changed from what he had set out in KD I/1-2 and, as this thesis demonstrates, his actual reading of texts remained, in general, consistent with this basis (although there were occasional lapses).

⁸This tendency is perhaps most obvious in the New Hermeneutic school, which regarded Barth as starting down a path with his Romans commentary which Bultmann followed but from which Barth soon retreated. See, for example, J.M. Robinson's essay 'Hermeneutic Since Barth', in J.M. Robinson and J.B. Cobb, Jr (eds.), *The New Hermeneutic* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. 1-77. Robinson speaks of

Dogmatik his Bible interpretation fell between two stools. On the one hand, it did not claim to be pure biblical exegesis—had it done so, biblical scholars might have taken more notice.⁹ On the other hand, because it was dealing with biblical texts, systematic theologians did not feel themselves competent to comment in detail—and tended, therefore, only to mention Barth's biblical interpretation as illustrating a peculiarity of his position (usually that his is 'a theology of the Word') without actually considering the nature of his interpretation.¹⁰

Although the general trend up to the mid-1970s was to neglect study of Barth's interpretative theory and practice, there are two related areas which were not neglected. On the one hand a number of mainly German-speaking biblical scholars examined the nature of Barth's relationship to historical criticism,¹¹ while on the other hand a number of systematic theologians examined his doctrine of the nature and authority of scripture.¹² The tendency of the former body of work is to assess Barth's comments on hermeneutics and history from the point of view of the committed historical critic, without coming to terms with the nature of Barth's actual interpretation of the biblical text.¹³ The latter tends in a similar direction (but from a different point of view—often rigid fundamentalism¹⁴), assessing Barth's doctrinal comments on Scripture without dealing with his actual interpretation. Neither group comes to terms with Barth's view of testimony as providing an epistemologically adequate category for Bible interpretation.¹⁵

'Barth's intuitive insights' about hermeneutics found in the Romans commentary, and describes 'the task of [his own] essay to trace [the development from these insights] to the explicitly hermeneutical formulations of Gadamer' (*ibid.*, p. 27). Beyond these initial 'intuitive insights', Robinson seems to imply, Barth has nothing to contribute. This tendency can also be seen in general accounts of the history of Bible interpretation in which the Romans commentary is usually mentioned as providing the impetus for new approaches to biblical study in the twentieth century that are then taken *only by other people*, and Barth's own subsequent Bible interpretation is ignored. See, for example, B. Lindars account in J. Rogerson, C. Rowland and B. Lindars, *The Study and Use of the Bible* (Basingstoke: Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1988), pp. 378, 389.

⁹K. Stendahl's well-known *IDB* article on contemporary 'Biblical Theology' (in G.A. Buttrick [ed.], *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, I [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962], pp. 418-32), for example, only takes into account Barth's Roman's commentary and ignores the *Dogmatik*.

¹⁰See, for example, G.C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (trans. H.R. Boer; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956); H.U. von Balthasar, *Karl Barth* (1st edn, 1951); H. Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth: An Introduction* (London: Duckworth, 1965).

¹¹These include G. Eichholz, 'Der Ansatz Karl Barths in der Hermeneutik', in E. Wolf, C. von Kirschbaum and R. Frey (eds.), *Antwort—Karl Barth zum Siebzigsten Geburtstag am 10. Mai 1956* (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1956), pp. 52-68; W. Lindemann, *Karl Barth und die kritische Schriftauslegung* (Hamburg: Herbert Reich Evangelischer Verlag, 1973); F.W. Marquardt, 'Exegese und Dogmatik in Karl Barths Theologie', in the *Registerband* (1970) of Barth's *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, pp. 651-76; R. Smend, 'Nachkritische Schriftauslegung', in E. Busch, J. Fangmeier and M. Geiger (eds.), *Parrhesia: Karl Barth zum achtzigsten Geburtstag* (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1966), pp. 215-37. Examples of work by English-speakers are J.C. Livingston, 'A Critical Study of Karl Barth's Biblical Hermeneutics' (unpublished PhD dissertation; Columbia University, 1965); J.A. Wharton, 'Karl Barth as Exegete and his Influence on Biblical Interpretation', *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 28 (1972), pp. 5-13.

¹²These include J.K.S. Reid, *The Authority of Scripture* (London: Methuen, 1957); K. Runia, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962); C. Van Til, *The New Modernism—An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner* (London: James Clark, 1946).

¹³I agree with the appraisal of P. McGlasson (*Jesus and Judas—Biblical Exegesis in Barth* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991], p.5) that, 'The most illuminating of this secondary literature is the article of Rudolph Smend'. Smend argues that Barth has sought to come to terms with historical criticism (and so is not 'pre-critical'), does not ignore it (so is not 'non-critical') but does not make it the central criterion of his theology (so is not 'critical'). Smend argues that Barth is therefore the first 'post-critical' interpreter of Scripture. Thus the title of his article: 'Nachkritische Schriftauslegung'.

¹⁴The exception being Reid, who is positive about Barth's approach.

¹⁵Runia does spend some time on Barth's characterization of the biblical authors as 'witnesses'. He is happy with this characterization, but his interest is mainly in arguing that Barth is wrong to assert that it must imply human limitation of the witnesses and that it necessitates a distinction between their words and actual revelation (*Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture*, p. 33). Runia concentrates on arguing that

These specialist studies captured little attention in the wider world of biblical studies. For the majority in Anglo-American scholarship, Barthian Bible interpretation was represented not by Barth's own work but by the Biblical Theology movement.¹⁶ Since many saw Biblical Theology as the logical extension of Barth's approach, when, by the early 1970s, it was accepted that that movement had failed,¹⁷ something of a consensus was also reached that Barth's approach did not work.¹⁸

In fact, this state of affairs paralleled the Anglo-American reception of Barth's theology as a whole. In the 1960s, Tom Torrance had worked to improve understanding of Barth.¹⁹ 'The climate of theological opinion, however,' as Stephen Sykes notes,

cannot be said to have responded to Torrance's evident enthusiasm for his subject. The 1960s saw the *Honest to God* debate and the *Death of God* theologies, for both of which Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* are more responsible than any writing of Barth's. Even in 1969, Robert Jenson, the author of a study of Barth, could complain that 'almost nothing of what people have spoken of in America or England as "Barthianism" has much to do with the thought of the man from Basel.'²⁰

Although voices were to be heard asserting the contrary, the majority view of the time seems to have been that Barth raised important questions (particularly in his earlier period, and particularly in terms of criticism of Liberalism) but was unable to offer acceptable solutions. Most would have accepted John Macquarrie's opinion that,

...probably Barth 'will be known to the history of theology by his earlier contributions. It is one of the ironies of history that amendments and alterations are apparently done better by others'...The early, exaggerated writings made the decisive impact which changed the course of theological thinking.²¹

this idea of 'witnesses' is compatible with a fundamentalist and inerrantist position; he has little else to say about testimony. Reid also discusses Barth's view of 'witnesses', for his part arguing that Barth is right to assert that 'witness' implies human limitation and distinctness from revelation. That is, Reid finds the witness idea useful insofar as it allows the possibility of historical errors and the like in Scripture. But again he has little to say about the positive place of testimony in Barth's theology.

¹⁶Indeed, this sort of view still persists:

[A] resounding protest against the phenomenological approach had come from Karl Barth...in his commentary on Romans...In Germany it led to Bultmann's programme of demythologisation...

Another response to Barth, more popular in Britain and America, is the biblical theology movement... (B. Lindars, *The Study and Use of the Bible*, p. 378).

¹⁷The main impetus having been provided by James Barr's *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

¹⁸On this point, Brevard Childs provides a helpful critique:

...one of the curious things about the whole Biblical Theology Movement was its misunderstanding of Karl Barth's exegesis. Although Barth's dogmatic theology—usually in mediated form—had exerted an influence on the Biblical theologians, very seldom was much attention paid to his exegesis. Usually it was dismissed by the Biblical theologians as well as by the older Liberals as 'precritical', and at best tolerated as an unfortunate reaction against his past. Yet amazingly enough, Barth remained invulnerable to the weaknesses that beset the Biblical Theology Movement. He would have nothing to do with *Heilsgeschichte*, Hebrew mentality, or unity in diversity of the Bible. His formulation of the Bible against its environment took a totally different shape from that which was defended by the movement (*Biblical Theology in Crisis* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970], p. 110).

¹⁹See, for example, his *Karl Barth: An Introduction to his Early Theology 1910–1931* (London: SCM Press, 1962).

²⁰S.W. Sykes, 'The Study of Barth', in S.W. Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth—Studies of His Theological Method* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 1–16 (11). The whole essay provides a very instructive guide to reception of Barth in Britain and America.

²¹J. Macquarrie, *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought—The Frontiers of Philosophy and Theology, 1900–1960* (London: SCM Press, 1963), p. 321 n. 2. The quotation marks enclose E.P. Dickie's opinion, with which Macquarrie is agreeing.

In his 1971 biography of Barth, John Bowden took a similar view. He characterized the early Barth as a 'prophet' to the world of theology in the 1920s.²² But, while finding some things of value in *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Bowden concluded that in three major areas (his doctrine of God, his christology and—more significantly for us—his view of the Bible),

Barth's theology appears to be badly flawed. These flaws are becoming more and more obvious as time goes on, and to the theological world at large the name of Karl Barth does not mean what it did even ten years ago.²³

On Barth's view of the Bible in particular, Bowden concluded that his opinions were rendered 'highly dubious' by historical criticism, and that, "'Unnatural" is in fact an adjective which comes constantly to mind as one reads Barth's interpretation.'²⁴

After the Mid-1970s

In the middle to late 1970s the atmosphere began to change somewhat, both in systematic theology and in biblical studies. Sykes notes that,

a curious phenomenon became apparent at this time.²⁵ It emerged that a number of the most radical of the younger theologians had done doctoral work on the theology of Karl Barth as students, and had even published a first book of a markedly 'Barthian' character.²⁶

Recognition of this phenomenon led, in time, to renewed study in the wider theological arena of Barth's own work. For this and other reasons,²⁷ there began a period of reassessment of Barth's contribution to systematic theology.²⁸

Geoffrey Bromiley provides a useful sketch of this contribution:

Negatively, Barth made a massive and not unsuccessful protest against the forms of Liberal Protestant theology which had dominated much of the thinking of the later 19th and early 20th centuries: against the fixation on historico-critical exegesis of scripture; the absorption of theology into

²²See Chapter 2 (entitled 'Prophet') of J. Bowden, *Karl Barth* (London: SCM Press, 1971).

²³*Karl Barth*, pp. 116-17.

²⁴*Karl Barth*, pp. 114-15.

²⁵Sykes is actually speaking of the period around 1970, when people began to realize what considerable influence Barth had had on many of the foremost new theologians. But it took some time for this realization to bear fruit in renewed study of Barth himself.

²⁶S.W. Sykes, 'The Study of Barth', p. 11. Sykes does not mean that these younger theologians can be regarded as followers of Barth: often, their views are radically different. As G.W. Bromiley puts it, 'Barth's main influence... is to be sought more in the stimulation of others than in the making of immediate disciples...' ('The Influence of Barth after World War II', in N. Biggar [ed.], *Reckoning with Barth* [London: Mowbray, 1988], pp. 9-23 [12]). Thinkers who are at present influential who are named by Bromiley in this regard include T.F. Torrance, R. Anderson, P. Maury, E. Jüngel, H. Gollwitzer, O. Weber, H. Berkhof, J. Moltmann, H. Thielicke, J. Ellul, H.U. von Balthasar, H. Küng, R.M. Brown, H. Cox, G.C. Berkouwer, D. Bloesch.

²⁷Among the 'other reasons', I would list (in no particular order of importance) (i) the gradual demise of Demythologization, existential theology and the New Hermeneutic; (ii) the influence of the Yale theologians who, beginning with Hans Frei, were more positive about Barth; (iii) the growing influence of American Evangelicals in mainstream theology, some of whom made a good deal of use of some of Barth's ideas; (iv) the serious discussion of Barth's work undertaken by some progressive Roman Catholic theologians; (v) the influence of certain biblical scholars (especially B.S. Childs) who were themselves influenced by Barth.

²⁸A good example of reassessment is found in the collection of excellent essays entitled *Karl Barth—Studies of His Theological Method* (published in 1979) edited by Sykes. Other major work reassessing Barth's theology and published since the mid-1970s includes N. Biggar (ed.), *Reckoning with Barth* (London: Mowbray, 1988); C. Gunton, *Becoming and Being—The Doctrine of God in Charles Hartshorne and Karl Barth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); G. Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth—The Shape of His Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); E. Jüngel, *Karl Barth—A Theological Legacy* (trans. G.E. Paul; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986); B. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); S.W. Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

religion and religious psychology or sociology; the subjectivizing grounding of faith upon this or that religious or moral *a priori*; the secularizing of eschatology; the reversal of the *imago dei*; and...christological reductionism ...To appreciate the effectiveness of Barth's protest one only need make a general comparison of theological productions at the beginning of the century with those of more recent decades.

Barth never believed, however, that a 'No' can be the last word. He had not only to show the inadequacy of what was passing for theology but also to indicate some possible lines of reconstruction and renewal. Academically, this involved a crucial shift of interest that has had momentous consequences and may well rank among Barth's more enduring achievements. Briefly, it meant a new concern for theological and not just historical exegesis, a development of such special fields as hermeneutics and biblical theology, a sense of the relevance of the past which refashioned the history of doctrine as historical theology, a resolute commitment to the special task of theology which restored to dogmatic theology its proper place, and an insistence on the close relation between theology and practice which resulted in theological ethics on the one side, and on the other side in an authentic homilectical or practical theology...²⁹

It would be wrong to say that Barth alone was responsible for all this, but there is no doubt that he has played a very large part.

As is often remarked, the world of biblical studies is distinct from the world of systematic theology. Nevertheless, some related, and occasionally parallel, changes have taken place. Perhaps most importantly for the subject of this thesis, historical criticism began to lose its dominant position, and other methods of Bible study which were focused more on the 'final form' of the text began to enjoy attention. Many of these new approaches owed little to systematic theology, but even so Barth, with his critique of unrestrained historical criticism and his emphasis on interpreting the text and not what may or may not have lain behind it, began to be regarded with more warmth by some.

Perhaps the greatest interest taken in Barth's biblical interpretation in *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* has been in his treatment of texts as narrative. The most influential work in this regard has been David Ford's *Barth and God's Story*,³⁰ in which Barth is represented as a narrative theologian.³¹ But there have also been a number of studies of Barth's interpretation of the Bible in the *Dogmatik* from other points of

²⁹The Influence of Barth after World War II', pp. 17-18.

³⁰(Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1st edn, 1981). Ford has also published an article on 'Barth's Interpretation of the Bible', in Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth—Studies*, pp. 55-87.

³¹Ford's basic thesis is summarized in the following words (although it is rather more nuanced than the quote might suggest):

To me, Barth is claiming that God chooses to bring people to faith through certain stories, that this does not depend on us being able to verify the stories historically or affirm them as inerrant; but it does depend on us following the stories carefully and trusting that their subject who is still alive to confirm them, is rendered adequately for God's purpose' (*Barth and God's Story*, p. 22).

Ford has built on this idea of biblical story rendering the agent (God or Christ) from what he rightly calls 'a pregnant half-chapter on Barth's use of Scripture' ('Barth's Interpretation of the Bible', p. 73) in David Kelsey's book *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975). Both Ford and Kelsey have some very useful things to say. Nevertheless, as I explain in detail at various points in the following chapters, I believe their overall construals of Barth's approach to the Bible are flawed. Suffice it to say here that I believe they underplay Barth's emphasis on the importance of what has happened in history being the grounds for faith and his corresponding dependence on the biblical text as the written testimony of human witnesses which provides us with a link to that history. Barth is not a 'narrative theologian'; 'event theologian' would be closer to the truth (though that phrase would need an awful lot of qualification).

One recent work which (over-)stresses Barth's affinity with current literary theories is M.I. Wallace's 'Karl Barth's Hermeneutic: A Way beyond the Impasse', *Journal of Religion* 68 (1988), pp. 397-402.

view. Three which focus on Barth's interpretation in practice are Christina Baxter's 'The Movement from Exegesis to Dogmatics in the Theology of Karl Barth',³² Mary Cunningham's 'Karl Barth's Interpretation and Use of Ephesians 1.4 in his Doctrine of Election'³³ and Paul McGlasson's book, *Jesus and Judas—Biblical Exegesis in Barth*.³⁴ Studies which focus on Barth's interpretative theory are Werner Jeanrond's 'Karl Barth's Hermeneutics',³⁵ Bruce McCormack's 'Historical Criticism and Dogmatic Interest in Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis of the New Testament'³⁶ and Thomas Provençe's 'The Hermeneutics of Karl Barth'.³⁷ There have also been a number of short articles on Barth's doctrine of Scripture.³⁸

An Observation from the History of Criticism of Barth's Bible Interpretation

One recurring feature of the history of criticism of Barth's Bible interpretation is the uncovering of an apparent disparity between his interpretative theory (which emphasizes the importance of history) and his interpretative practice (which, in the view of many, pays very little attention to history). This view is perhaps best summarized for critics in the period up to the mid-1970s, who tended to think of the issue in terms of Barth's relationship to historical criticism, by John Bowden:

But will Barth's position stand up to the findings of historical criticism? Indeed, does he take any notice of historical criticism at all? From the beginning Barth has paid at least lip service to the work done by scholars over the past century...In his actual writings, however, it is difficult to find any indication that he has taken his own advice; any indication that he has seriously concerned himself with historical criticism again after his student days.³⁹

Subsequent studies have brought this view into question.⁴⁰ Bruce McCormack's article has shown that 'the suspicion that Barth was engaged in a flight from history'⁴¹ is a false one, while Christina Baxter's thesis demonstrates conclusively that Barth did take practical historical criticism seriously and made extensive use of its various

³²The full title is 'The Movement from Exegesis to Dogmatics in the Theology of Karl Barth, with Special Reference to Romans, Philippians and Church Dogmatics' (unpublished PhD thesis; University of Durham, 1981).

³³ PhD dissertation; Yale University, 1988.

³⁴ Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991. Each of these three studies has the merit of taking a 'bottom-up approach', describing and evaluating actual examples of Barth's interpretation. They do not attempt any detailed analysis of his theoretical discussions of interpretation or of how these are related to his interpretative practice. It is my view that the link between his practice and theory is to be found in his treatment of the biblical text as testimony, as I explain in the following chapters.

³⁵In Biggar (ed.), *Reckoning with Barth*, pp. 80-97.

³⁶In M.S. Burrows and P. Rorem (eds.), *Biblical Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 322-38.

³⁷Unpublished PhD thesis; Fuller Theological Seminary, 1980.

³⁸These include G.W. Bromiley, 'The Authority of Scripture in Karl Barth', in D.A. Carson and J.D. Woodbridge (eds.), *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* (Leicester: IVP, 1986), pp. 275-94; Timothy Gorringer, 'In Defence of the Identification: Scripture as the Word of God', *SJT* 32 (1979), pp. 303-318; Trevor Hart, 'The Word, the Words and the Witness: Proclamation as Divine and Human Reality in the Theology of Karl Barth', *TynBul* 46.1 (1995), pp. 81-102.

³⁹*Karl Barth*, pp. 114-15.

⁴⁰Indeed, it had been questioned at an earlier time also. For example, accepting that theological interpretation must not be an enterprise separated from historical criticism, Georg Eichholz argued (in 'Der Ansatz Karl Barths in der Hermeneutik') that Barth was not guilty of such separation. But, as Bruce McCormack puts it, 'Eichholz's defense is more assertion than explanation' and 'Other defenses of Barth have really fared no better' ('Historical Criticism and Dogmatic Interest', p. 325 n. 7) McCormack does not appear to be aware of Baxter's work). More representative of the general consensus in the earlier period is the comment of S. Paul Schilling that, 'Barth's attitude has contributed substantially to the cleavage recently evident on the Continent between exegesis and dogmatics' (*Contemporary Continental Theologians* [London: SCM Press, 1966], p. 40).

⁴¹'Historical Criticism and Dogmatic Interest', p. 324.

forms (though not necessarily in ways that would please historical critics⁴²) throughout *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*.⁴³

Nevertheless, there is a sense in which the apparent disparity remains, as is revealed by the two kinds of interpretation offered by the more recent studies. On the one hand, a good deal has been made by Ford and others of Barth's approach to narrative and his use of the final form of the text. They have tended to see him as being unconcerned with history in his actual interpretation of texts;⁴⁴ they see Barth as focusing on what biblical stories do now, how they function for present-day readers.⁴⁵ On the other hand, studies of Barth's theory of interpretation tend to reaffirm his commitment to history.⁴⁶

Could it be that these two conflicting trends in interpretation of Barth reflect a real inconsistency at the heart of Barth's approach? Does his actual treatment of the biblical text, despite his theoretical affirmation of the importance of history and despite his use of historical criticism, remain in some sense 'ahistorical'?⁴⁷ This is the basic issue internal to Barth's theology with which I am concerned in this thesis. It is my argument that a proper understanding of what Barth means by 'testimony' and by 'history' will show that he is not inconsistent and that his treatment of the biblical text, in line with his theoretical affirmations, is thoroughly 'historical'.

c. Thesis Summary

Barth sought to interpret the Bible in such a way that it would be 'authoritative' for his theology. He attempted to do this under the rubric of 'the Bible as testimony to God's self-revelation in history'. At the same time, he attempted to make his interpretation credible in the light of modern insights into the nature of the Bible. This opens up the possibility of evaluating Barth's Bible interpretation from two angles. First, we can ask whether the concept 'testimony to revelation in history' is worked out consistently in Barth (and indeed whether it is a workable concept at all). Secondly, we can ask whether the concept can be applied to the Bible in a way that

⁴²As Baxter puts it in her article 'Barth-A Truly Biblical Theologian?' (*TynBul* 38 [1987], pp. 3-27), 'Barth is prepared to use source criticism, form criticism and redaction criticism, indeed any part of historical criticism, but always discriminately, always in order to help him understand not the event, but the witness to the event in the text' (p. 13).

⁴³'The Movement from Exegesis to Dogmatics in the Theology of Karl Barth', especially Chapter 1, 'The Historical-Critical Method in Barth's Exegesis'.

⁴⁴Wallace, for example, says that in 'Barth's antihistoricist hermeneutic...the Bible's meaning is not located in the historical realities or authorial intentions behind the text, but in the language specific realities spoken of within the text' ('Karl Barth's Hermeneutic', p. 403).

⁴⁵For example, David Kelsey says that, for Barth, Scripture is authoritative when 'the stories "work"'. The agent they render is truly made present to the worshipper in revelatory encounter. Thus the authority of scripture is understood in functional terms' (*The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, p. 47), and 'Narrative is taken to be the authoritative function of scripture; it is authoritative in so far as it functions as the occasion for encounter with an agent in history, viz., the Risen Lord' (p. 48).

⁴⁶See, for example, Jeanrond, 'Karl Barth's Hermeneutics', p. 86; Provence, 'The Hermeneutics of Karl Barth', p. 226.

⁴⁷McCormack addresses another side of this problem when he asks about the relationship in Barth's theology between the biblical text's present 'revelatory significance' and its 'historical sense'. He says, 'If it could be shown that revelatory significance has no relation to historical sense, then the claim to take historical-critical study seriously would be rendered hollow' ('Historical Criticism and Dogmatic Interest', p. 325). He goes on to argue that analysis of Barth's concept of *the analogia fidei* ('analogy of faith') provides a way of showing that 'revelatory significance' does have a relationship to 'historical sense' in Barth. That is, it 'provides a vehicle for the coherent conceptualization of the relationship in question' (*ibid.*).

I agree with McCormack's solution. However, it tells only part of the story. It explains how, in Barth's theory of interpretation, the historical sense of the words of the Bible are related to the present hearing of God's self-revelation. It does not deal with the question of whether or not Barth's actual interpretation of texts can be said to explicate the historical sense in the first place.

takes sufficient cognizance of modern insights into the Bible's nature. Throughout this thesis I attempt to approach Barth's Bible interpretation from both these angles.

The thesis is made up of three main parts. In Part 1 (Chapters 1 and 2) I argue that Barth seeks a strategy of Bible interpretation which is historical in character. That is, it seeks to be true to what has happened in history. This argument goes contrary to what has been something of a consensus in Anglo-American criticism of Barth, namely that he is not really interested in taking history seriously. I try to show at the end of Chapter 2, on the basis of Alisdair MacIntyre's discussion of different rationalities, that this consensus arose because Barth stands within a different tradition of rationality from that of many of his critics.

In Part 2 (Chapters 3 to 5), I argue that the key differentiating characteristic of Barth's approach (and of his rational tradition), with regard to Bible interpretation, is his treatment of the Bible as testimony. It is because he treats the Bible as testimony providing reliable knowledge of events in history that he considers his interpretation to be true to history. In Part 2, I make use of the work of philosopher C.A.J. Coady on testimony as an epistemological category. In the first part of Chapter 3, I clarify a number of matters which have tended to obscure Barth's reliance on testimony and then, following Coady, explain why testimony has tended to be denigrated in modernity. In Chapter 4, I offer a basic account of Coady's work and relate it to the criticisms of Barth offered by some biblical scholars. In Chapter 5, I describe how an understanding of testimony informed by Coady's work can be applied to Barth's approach.

In Part 3 (Chapters 6 to 8), I explain how Barth's approach can make sense of three major modern insights into the nature of the Bible, namely its variety (Chapter 6) and contradictions (Chapter 7), and its literariness (Chapter 8). I seek to show that Barth's approach is able to deal with these insights in a fruitful and creative way.

In sum, I argue that, contrary to the view of many critics, Barth's interpretative strategy is a rational and historical one (thus being sensitive to two key demands of modernity) and is also capable of being sensitive to some of the major insights of modern biblical studies into the nature of the Bible.

PART I:

**HISTORICAL
INTERPRETATION**

1.

History and Jesus' Resurrection

In the Preface to the first volume of *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* Karl Barth explains why he altered the original title of *Die Christliche Dogmatik* to the present one:

By substituting the word 'Church' for 'Christian' in the title, I have tried...to show that from the very beginning dogmatics is not 'free', but is bound to the sphere of the Church, where alone it is possible and meaningful as a science.¹

This is an orientation which informs not only the title but the whole of the volume. Its first section is given to establishing that, 'Dogmatics is, as a theological discipline, the scientific self-examination of the Christian Church with respect to the content of its distinctive talk about God.'² This means that Barth is interested primarily in Bible interpretation which can be related in some way to church proclamation. It is therefore interpretation directed to a particular end.

It is for this reason that Barth does not feel constrained to consider and use every critical interpretative method, or to accept every so-called 'assured result' of criticism. If something does not serve the purpose of dogmatics then it need not be considered further. In later chapters I discuss a number of ways in which Barth continues to be a critical theologian, but for the moment we need simply notice the way in which Barth consciously puts limits on *any* critical method.³ His justification is quite simple: insofar as theology is a 'science',⁴ its methodology must be determined by the nature of the 'object' it studies; any one particular critical method may or may not help dogmatic theology in its task and it will only be used in so far as it does so.

The crucial point here is that the 'object' which dogmatics studies is *not* the Bible. Barth understands (dogmatic) theology to be 'the task of criticising and correcting [the church's] speech about God'.⁵ In other words, the 'object' (or subject matter) of

¹KD I/1, p. viii (CD I/1, pp. xii-xiii).

²KD I/1, p. 1 (CD I/1, p. 3; in future references I will simply give 'CD' and page number in brackets when I am quoting KD). We should note that by 'the Christian Church' Barth means no one particular Denomination or Confession, such as Reformed or Roman Catholic or Greek Orthodox, but the Christian church as a whole. Thus it is an 'idealized' community whose boundaries are not known (except by God!). As such, the *Dogmatik* seeks to be 'non-sectarian'.

³In doing this Barth, of course, is following in the footsteps of that archetypal critical philosopher Immanuel Kant, who sought to delineate the limits of various types of reasoning.

⁴Barth is careful to put 'science [*Wissenschaft*]' in inverted commas (KD I/1, p. 6 [CD, p. 7]). There are several useful analogies between theology and other sciences, but there are also some very important differences.

⁵KD I/1, p. 1 (CD, p. 3). Of course, insofar as the NT is representative of the earliest church's speech about God, the NT (and, by extension, the OT) falls within this area of criticism and revision. That would

theology is what the church says, and has said, about God. In theory this means everything the church and its members do and say. But, in practice, it boils down to official, or 'public', words and acts that particular church groupings have settled on at particular times. These are what Barth calls church dogmas.

The criterion for the task of criticising and revising the church's speech about God is the Bible. Not the Bible *per se*, but the Bible read as telling the church about God's self-revelation. That, in brief, is what Barth means by saying the Bible must be read as 'witness to revelation':

The Bible is not in itself and as such God's past revelation [*Gottes geschene Offenbarung*]...But, speaking to us and heard by us as God's Word, the Bible bears witness [*bezeugt*] to past revelation ...Therefore the decisive relation of the Church to revelation is its witness by the Bible. Its witness [*Ihre Bezeugung*]⁶

[T]he Bible is real witness only in its relation to the past revelation attested in it, i.e., the factual recollection of past revelation.⁷

Since the Bible is the criterion, it cannot at the same time be the object of criticism. That is, there comes a moment in theology when the Bible is no longer criticized but is simply heard. For Barth, theological interpretation

rests on the assumption that what Scripture tells us, even in its apparently most questionable and insignificant parts, in all circumstances is truer and more important than the best and most necessary things that we ourselves have said or are able to say. In that it is the divinely ordained and authorised witness to revelation, it has the claim to be interpreted in this sense...⁸

However, it is only the Bible *read as telling the church about God's self-revelation* that is not the object of criticism. In Barth's language 'the cardinal statement of the doctrine of the Word of God', namely the doctrine of the criterion of theology, is 'in reality nothing other than the authority and normativity of Holy Scripture *as the witness to God's revelation*'.⁹ In every other sense the Bible is open to criticism of the most radical kind. The Bible is a human document like any other; and, like any other, its contents can be criticized on moral, historical, literary, political, even theological grounds. It may well be that this criticism will help the reader understand the Bible better, and therefore will help the reader hear better what it has to say as witness to divine revelation.

be one reason why the church must not be content simply to repeat the words of the NT, but must find its own words. However, for Barth, there is a sense in which the NT is not just 'the earliest church's speech about God,' but also uniquely the witness to revelation. That it is 'witness to revelation', can only be stated in faith and cannot be proved. Therefore, the NT (and OT, which is just as much 'witness to revelation') is not open to unrestrained criticism in this aspect. The issues surrounding these assertions will be discussed in Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

Obviously it is possible to dispute this understanding of the nature of theology. I will not consider that issue here because it would take me too far off the point.

⁶KD I/1, p. 114 (CD, p. 111). As well as asserting the Bible as witness in this passage, Barth makes clear his belief that it can only be heard as witness if God wills it. Some critics have taken this to imply some sort of mystification of the reading process. Some 'fundamentalist' critics (for example, K. Runia, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture*) have combined this with their suspicions of Barth's supposed Existentialist tendencies and argued he denies the 'objectivity' of the Bible as revelation for the sake of a modernist 'subjectivity.' I will show in Chapter 3 that neither charge can be made to stick.

⁷KD I/1, p. 120 (CD, p. 117).

⁸KD I/2, p. 806 (CD, p. 719).

⁹KD I/1, p. 43 (CD, p. 43; my emphasis).

Consequently there is no *a priori* reason why any critical approach to the Bible should be rejected. In fact, Barth made use of many of the critical methods available to him. Christina Baxter, in her PhD thesis on Barth's use of the Bible,¹⁰ has shown that all the major branches of historical criticism (form criticism and tradition history, source criticism and redaction criticism) play a part in Barth's Bible interpretation. Baxter has also shown that, at the same time, Barth is prepared to reject some of the preconceptions and methods of historical criticism and therefore feels able to reject some of its conclusions.¹¹

The scope of Baxter's thesis is very broad, taking in the whole of *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* as well as a number of Barth's other works of Bible interpretation. From a much more focused perspective, Mary Cunningham has come to the same conclusion about Barth's approach to historical criticism. In her thesis, Cunningham examines Barth's novel interpretation of Eph. 1.4 in the context of the doctrine of election. She concludes that 'while [Barth's] concerns at times intersect those of historical critics of the Bible, he often diverges from their methods and observations, because he is operating with a different set of rules and presuppositions'.¹²

His willingness to make use of critical approaches while at the same time refusing to accept them 'wholesale' arises out of Barth's conception of the 'object' of theology as being the church's speech about God. Theology will make use of whatever may lie to hand in its attempt to understand, criticize and revise the church's language. Historical criticism is no exception.

a. Historical Criticism as the Theologian's Tool

It is clear that Barth's brand of Bible interpretation stands in a rather ambivalent relationship to historical-critical approaches to the Bible. On the one hand, he asserts that historical criticism is a vital building block in any interpretation. It is part of the first stage, termed *explicatio*,¹³ in which the interpreter attempts to understand the words of the text in their historical setting.¹⁴ On the other hand, if it wishes to discover 'the witness to revelation', interpretation must always go beyond, and sometimes against, the historical critics.¹⁵

Reading for the sake of dogmatics has to do with discovering the witness to revelation; and, since that witness has to do with the message the biblical writers sought to convey,¹⁶ it is reading that begins with historical understanding. Historical understanding is the first move in discovering what the writers of the text intended¹⁷

¹⁰The Movement from Exegesis to Dogmatics in the Theology of Karl Barth, with special reference to Romans, Philippians and Church Dogmatics'.

¹¹See Baxter, 'Movement', Chapter 1.

¹²Mary K. Cunningham, 'Karl Barth's Interpretation and Use of Ephesians 1:4', p. 116.

¹³The second and third being *meditatio* and *applicatio*.

¹⁴See KD I/2, pp. 810-12 (CD, p. 722-24).

¹⁵Barth first affirmed the need to 'go beyond' in *Der Römerbrief*: 'I have nothing whatever to say against historical criticism. I recognise it, and once more state quite definitely that it is both necessary and justified. My complaint is that recent commentators confine themselves to an interpretation of the text which seems to me to be no commentary at all, but merely the first step towards a commentary' (*The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 6). He demonstrated his willingness to disagree with specific results of historical critics on numerous occasions in *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*. The basis on which he felt justified in doing this will be explained later in this chapter and in Chapter 2.

¹⁶See Chapters 3 and 5.

¹⁷On issues surrounding the question of whether 'intention' is a viable interpretative concept, see Chapter 8.

to say. Historical criticism can help achieve historical understanding; so it has an important place. Yet, precisely because reading dogmatically has primarily to do with the witness to revelation, it is not bound by any historical criticism which does not pertain to that witness. The practical result is twofold: Barth rejects the classic attempt of 'wholehearted' historical critics to found theology on a 'quest for the historical Jesus', while on other issues he radically reinterprets many historical critical 'results'.

A number of scholars, aware of Barth's theoretical affirmation of historical criticism and his 'rejection' of it in practice, have accused him of what amounts to duplicity,¹⁸ and suspect this indicates a failure in reality to take history seriously.¹⁹ That is a misunderstanding of the situation. Barth makes it clear from the outset of *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* that his is an interpretation which seeks the Bible's witness to revelation. Any historical criticism which is relevant to that search will not be rejected. This is merely the use of historical criticism as a tool to do a certain job. It does not in itself mean a failure to take history seriously.

Even so, such an attitude is unacceptable to many scholars. Whether historical critical results 'pertain to the witness to revelation' or not, they cannot be ignored.

¹⁸See, for example, John Bowden's comments in his short biography, *Karl Barth*. J.C. Livingston in his PhD thesis on Barth makes the extreme claim that 'Barth either (1) wholly ignores the method and results of historical critical procedures or (2) sets up unique categories of historical understanding which make historical claims but demand immunity from the logical discourse or (3) intrudes upon his biblical interpretation certain dogmatic or systematic requirements which are detrimental, if not hostile to a forthright historical interpretation or understanding' ('A Critical study of Karl Barth's Biblical Hermeneutics', p. v). This is a terminal problem 'so long as Christian theology makes claims to being an "historical" religion' (*ibid.*). Livingston's criticism number (1) has been dealt with above, number (2) is considered in the present section and number (3) is dealt with later.

¹⁹It is important to add that this suspicion has been fuelled by the nature of the reception of Barth's theology within the English-speaking world. As S.W. Sykes notes in his article 'The Study of Barth', for much of the time Barth's influence has 'been indirect and generalized, rather than direct and particular' (p. 5 n. 10). Most scholarly reaction has actually been to 'Barthianism', a caricature of Barth, rather than to Barth himself. Some of this has been due to lack of effort on the scholars' part. Sykes notes, for example, how (although there were exceptions) it quickly became accepted that Barth lays too heavy an emphasis on divine transcendence, and,

This passing indictment, both as to manner and substance, became a virtual habit in the 1930s.

Oliver Quick, admitting that he had not studied Barth in the original, devoted ten pages to a criticism of "'Barthianism" as commonly presented' on much the same grounds (p. 5).

And 'by 1939 the term "Barthianism" had become the code-word, even among the neo-orthodox, for "an unacceptable transcendentalism, anti-intellectualism, and ignoring of social responsibility"' (*ibid.*, p. 8). But the caricature also arose out of a number of historical and geographical accidents. There was, for example, by virtue of distance, 'the coupling of Barth with Brunner under the term "Barthianism"'. Emil Brunner (1889-1966), however, had a quite separate, and, to a large extent, more immediate impact on the English-speaking scene' (*ibid.*, p. 7). Then there was the fact that Barth's Romans commentary with its highly polemical and one-sided language (along with his published dispute with Brunner over natural theology) remained for a long time representative of Barth's position in the majority of the English-speaking world. This was because the Second World War had interrupted translation of *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, and while by 1955 Barth had completed ten volumes, only the first had been published in translation (in 1938). Thus, as Sykes notes,

With the publication in 1957 of the second volume of the *Dogmatics* the history of the English-speaking reception of Barth enters a transitional phase... Dimly aware that Barth was developing his work along sometimes unexpected and always highly sophisticated lines, professional theologians in England and America were forced to bring to an end the long tradition of amateurish comment based on a few dips in the literature, and [were] faced with the alternative of a lot of hard work or silence. For the most part they chose silence (*ibid.*, pp. 9-10).

The upshot is that,

Even in 1969, Robert Jenson, the author of a study of Barth, could complain that 'almost nothing of what people have spoken of in America or England as "Barthianism" has much to do with the thought of the man from Basel' (*ibid.*, p. 11).

Christianity claims to be an historical religion, and as such it must take history seriously. Christian theology, in other words, must be compatible with historical research. A theology such as Barth's, with its supposedly cavalier attitude to historical criticism, will fail in this regard in the eyes of those who directly equate *history* and *historical critical results*. It follows that a defence of Barth must show if and why such a direct equation is not valid from Barth's point of view.

In the rest of this chapter and the next I will attempt to show why Barth does not 'fail' in his treatment of history. The attempt is not based on an assumption that his view ought to be acceptable to any historian whatsoever, but rather on the argument that his view can be shown to be a rationally acceptable one when seen in the right perspective.

b. *The Importance of History in Barth's Kirchliche Dogmatik*

In the light of accusations that he fails to take history seriously, it is important to recognize that, in Barth's work, 'history' is an indispensable category. He regularly affirms that God has acted to reveal himself *in history*,²⁰ that such an act always has the form of an event in history,²¹ and that these acts, understood as the Word of God, are the foundation of Christian faith and theology.²² Indeed, it is not going too far to say that the *form* of Barth's theology is historical. Drastically simplified, its form is: 'An event X occurred in history, which as an act of God reveals Y about God, which means the church should say Z about him.'

It could be argued that the logical implication of this sentence is that a properly-founded theology must begin by showing that the event X did occur. In the modern world, with its loss of confidence that events did occur as the Bible says, it would seem that any credible theology must begin here. But Barth's does not do so. Instead, it begins with the *assumption* that God has acted in history.

Why is that? One explanation has been as follows: For Barth, theology is an act of faith,²³ and as such it begins with the assumption that the events on which faith is founded have occurred; to seek to prove the events did occur is to try to get back 'behind' faith; but to do that is to replace faith as the foundation of Christianity with evidential proof. Faith, in other words, believes that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead, for example; to try to prove his resurrection is to deny such faith. Theology's function, therefore, is not to prove by means of reason but to understand the implications of faith.²⁴

However, the fact that Barth distinguishes between the *occurrence* of events and the possibility of discerning revelation *in* them ought to cast suspicion on this interpretation. It is possible, Barth asserts, to experience the occurrence of an event in which God acts, without perceiving revelation.²⁵ This distinction is important to

²⁰See, for example, KD I/1, pp. 148-49 (CD, pp. 143-44). Barth's exposition of the doctrine of the Trinity is based on the assertion that God has revealed himself in history. See KD I/1, pp. 311-52 (CD, pp. 295-333).

²¹See, for example, KD I/1, p. 153 (CD, p. 148). On p. 343 (CD, p. 325) Barth says, 'Part of the concept of the biblical witness to revelation is that it is an historical event [*in geschichtliches Ereignis*].'

²²See KD I/1, 89 (CD, p. 88).

²³KD I/1, p. 16 (CD, p. 17).

²⁴This understanding of Barth's theology has often led to its description as 'positivism of revelation'. See, for example, John Bowden, *Karl Barth*, p. 110.

²⁵KD I/1, p. 343 (CD, p. 325).

Barth, and he uses it to argue that the 'historical' nature of an event is not itself revelation. It also means that if an event is not historical, that is, if it did not happen, then there is no revelation. Consequently, a person who wishes their belief that God has revealed himself to be well founded must have good reason to think that certain events did occur.

This is a clear implication of Barth's argument, which requires that there was 'good reason' to believe certain events did occur. 'Good reason', though, need not be the same as 'proven by modern historians'. Barth's polemic against those who sought historical proof as the basis for theology has tended to obscure this. Instead of thinking Barth might offer 'good reason', critics have tended to assume that he is simply contrasting a desire for historical proof with the challenge to 'just believe'.²⁶

In fact, there are a number of places in which Barth makes foundational assertions that are open to the question, 'Is there good reason to believe this really did happen in this way?' As we will see, these are places where he asserts that Jesus Christ physically rose from the dead. To what extent assertions about other events are open to the same question will be answered after consideration of Jesus' resurrection.

Before moving on though, we need to return to the question why Barth did not begin with giving 'good reason' to believe that certain foundational events did occur. In my opinion, there are two aspects to this. The first is simply one of tactics. Barth did not consider, at the time he began writing *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, that proof or disproof of occurrence was the most important issue to be dealt with.

In other words, the reason lies in the contingent nature of dogmatic theology. Dogmatics is not a timeless establishment of the truth of the gospel, and a dogmatic theology is not an impregnable fortress ready to withstand any possible attack from any direction.²⁷ Instead, dogmatics has to do with the understanding of what the church has said in the past in order to better understand what needs to be said in the present.²⁸

For Barth, one way the church, as represented by the dominant Liberal theology, had erred recently was in saying that in uncovering history it was uncovering revelation. Liberal theology's 'Quest for the historical Jesus' was a prime example. The important thing to do now, therefore, was to show that the theologian who wished to 'discover' revelation could not guarantee he or she had done so simply by the discovery of historical facts. He summarized his argument with the now well-known assertion that 'revelation is not a predicate of history, but history is a predicate of revelation.'²⁹ Thus, Barth wished to make clear, before the occurrence or non-occurrence of events is considered, that an answer one way or another will not in itself answer the question of revelation.

In consequence many have failed to notice that it is just as important to Barth's approach that 'revelation is history [*Geschichte*], and therefore only as such is it

²⁶Probably it is this misunderstanding that lies behind the often-repeated criticism of Bonhoeffer that Barth is offering a 'positivism of revelation'.

²⁷'I have never understood the whole *Church Dogmatics* as a house but as the introduction to a way which must be followed, as the description of the movement of something that can only be described in dynamic, not static concepts. A house is a static object.' From a conversation reported by E. Busch, *Karl Barth*, p. 375.

²⁸See, for example, KD I/1, pp. 78-79 (CD, p. 77).

²⁹KD I/2, p. 64 (CD, p. 58): *Offenbarung ist nicht ein Prädikat der Geschichte, sondern Geschichte ist ein Prädikat der Offenbarung.*

revelation and only as such can it be recognised and believed'.³⁰ In other words, it is a necessary condition of somebody's recognition of revelation that revelation be historical. It is nevertheless not a sufficient condition. It is insufficient for somebody to recognize a certain event as historical for them to recognize it as revelation.

This brings us to the second aspect of the answer to why Barth did not begin by proving the occurrence of the foundational events. If recognising an event as historical does not enable us to talk satisfactorily of revelation, what does? Barth needed to answer this question first. In Chapters 3, 4 and 5 I will look in detail at Barth's answer in relation to his understanding of the Bible as 'the witness to revelation', but for the moment I want to emphasize the negative side: we are not enabled to talk about revelation by some sort of search for historical 'truth'.

On a number of occasions Barth tells us that his work on Anselm was a crucial precursor to his dogmatic strategy.³¹ For example:

Most commentators have failed to see that this Anselm book is a vital key, if not *the* key, to understanding the process of thought that has impressed me more and more in my *Kirchliche Dogmatik* as the only one proper for theology.³²

The essence of this 'process of thought' is that it is 'faith seeking understanding', the subtitle of his book on Anselm.³³ Following such a process, dogmatic theology begins with the assumption of the validity of faith. It therefore at least begins with the assumption that the foundational events did occur. The logical conclusion is that it is never a part of dogmatic theology's task to 'prove' the occurrence of the events; but it will need to respond to supposed proofs that they did not occur. This is what happens in Barth's theology. He seeks to show why Bultmann, for example, as the prime representative of the claim that the resurrection of Jesus was not an historical event, is wrong. But he never seeks to *prove* from the point of view of secular³⁴ history-writing that the resurrection did occur.

Even so, as we will see, there are a number of important things to be said about the foundational events as history, and about the nature of history as a whole. I will also seek to show that Barth thought there was 'good reason' to consider the resurrection to be an historical event. Far from history being unimportant to Barth, it is indispensable. Nevertheless, it is history as understood from within his own tradition of rational inquiry, and not from the rival tradition (or traditions) of secular historical inquiry.

³⁰KD I/2, p. 150 (CD, p. 137).

³¹It is worth noting that I am not subscribing here to the view which became standard with H.U.von Balthasar's *Karl Barth*, that, in terms of chronological intellectual biography, the book on Anselm represents a fundamental shift away from dialectics to the method of analogy. In his excellent recent work, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, B. McCormack has shown that analogy had already gained an important part in Barth's theology before his book on Anselm, and dialectics continued to be crucial throughout the *Dogmatik*. However, the book on Anselm does represent Barth's formal explanation of his intention to give the method a central part.

³²Quoted in Busch, *Karl Barth*, p. 210. Also see KD I/1, p. vi (CD, p.xi).

³³K. Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (trans. I.W. Robertson; London: SCM Press, 1960).

³⁴I use the word 'secular' throughout this chapter in a quite broad sense. I want to indicate by it the kind of historical thinking that has been dominant in Twentieth Century academia, which tends to identify itself with supposedly non-religious principles worked out by Dilthey and Troeltsch. It therefore does not exclude its use in modern Protestant theology. In fact much modern Protestant theology sets great store by its claim to apply exactly the same sort of historical rigour to its understanding of the origins of Christianity as is found in 'secular' historical research. I will return to this issue at the end of the next chapter.

c. *The Search for Historical 'Truth'*

I have put 'truth' in inverted commas here because most modern historians consider that the kind of certainty indicated by the word is not attainable. With regard to any particular event, the historian is only able to judge the degree of probability of its having occurred. With that in mind we are likely to be rather cynical about a claim to be engaged in a 'search for historical truth.' On this level we might feel Barth's refusal to engage in such a search is reasonable.

Nevertheless, there remain serious questions. While we might reject a 'search for historical truth,' there is still the very real possibility of historical research disconfirming the historical claims Barth makes. Barth undoubtedly does make such claims, and it surely is reasonable to expect these to be open to the historian's assessment of their probability. If they are foundational to his theology, and they are shown to be historically improbable, then there is a major weakness present.

I will return to this question in a moment. It should be noted first though that at least on the level of 'non-foundational' claims it is unfair to say that Barth is not open to historical enquiry. There is ample evidence that he took historical research very seriously. On numerous occasions in *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* he refers the reader to other scholars' historical-critical enquiries into the matter at hand. He often simply gives references to a book in a short excursus and goes on to make use of its results in the main text.³⁵ At other times, where he disagrees with commonly accepted results, he interacts with the scholars in a longer excursus, giving reasons for his disagreement and setting out his own position.³⁶

Barth's practice, in principle at least, seems a good one in this regard. He takes account of historical scholarship, interacts with its protagonists and reaches conclusions based on his own critical reasoning. It is tempting to ask whether he could do anything else in view of his decision to produce dogmatic theology. He did not go further and become a historical scholar himself because he believed he would not have the time to do what was, for him, the more important task of writing his *Dogmatik*.

It is possible to ask, though, whether he ought to have been prepared to accept at all times the conclusions of historical scholars. Should he have made use of his own historical conclusions in his theology when he did not have the support of historians? There are two issues here: first, the general one of how the work of the specialists³⁷ ought to be treated; second, the particular one of whether Barth the theologian could accept in full the methodology of the particular historians with whom he had to interact.

1. Barth was not himself a specialist in the field of 'biblical history.' However, he was competent at 'doing history' in general and was a specialist in the history of (Western) Christian theology.³⁸ In addition, as a student he had been thoroughly

³⁵E.g. KD I/2, p. 442 (CD, p. 402).

³⁶E.g. KD I/1, pp. 422-26 (CD, pp. 402-406).

³⁷Barth referred to these as his Old Testament and New Testament colleagues.

³⁸His conclusions about various thinkers in the history of Christianity have often been highly controversial, but they have also often provoked renewed debate about these thinkers. This happened both with his book on Anselm and with his history of *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (trans. B. Cozens and John Bowden; London: SCM Press, 1972). Also, as Busch tells us, Barth wondered

schooled in historical criticism of the Bible. Finally, his knowledge of the Bible itself was very impressive; he therefore could compete with the specialists in terms of knowledge of their primary source.

Consequently, it is not possible to argue that Barth should have behaved towards the 'specialists' in the same way as might be expected of a 'lay person.' He was well aware of the canons of historical study, what makes for good historical research, and so on. He was obviously well placed to make good judgments as to historical matters. Whether in each particular case he did so is another question of course. That must be left for detailed analysis of his arguments in each case.

If he was competent to accept or reject others' conclusions, was he also competent to build historical cases himself? That is, where he rejected others' conclusions should he have kept quiet rather than making his own historical assertions? Barth himself was aware of this problem. He would have preferred to build on the work of others, but on certain subjects there simply was none available that used methodology acceptable to him.³⁹ Where these subjects were indispensable to his discussion Barth felt compelled to reach his own conclusions. Again, it must be left to a detailed analysis of these conclusions, and the arguments backing them, to decide whether they are sound. To simply point out that they are different from those of certain historians is not enough to undermine Barth's theology.

2. The discussion now comes to the second issue I mentioned above. Why could Barth not accept in full the method of the historians with whom he had to do? Barth made it clear a number of times that he could not.⁴⁰ His reasons need to be considered carefully.

In the first volume of *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* Barth sets out the procedure which he intends to follow. As might be expected, he refers quite frequently to historical criticism and his differences with it. Unfortunately, this occurs within discussions of other subjects and never as a subject in its own right. Therefore a full answer to our question requires a degree of reconstruction. The first section of the *Dogmatik* is a discussion of 'The Word of God as the Criterion of Dogmatics [*Das Wort Gottes als Kriterium der Dogmatik*]'.⁴¹ Barth sets out to establish that, if the subject-matter of dogmatic theology is the church's language about God, the language must be tested against the Word of God. That is, what the church has to say about God must be shown to be faithful to what God has had to say about himself, what he has revealed himself to be.

whether 'in a second life I might not turn completely to history, for which I have a secret passion' (Karl Barth, p. 168).

³⁹In general there is greater unanimity amongst Protestants today than thirty years ago, especially in regard to some of the basic aims of theological work. But the time does not yet seem to have arrived when the dogmatician can accept with a good conscience and confidence the findings of his colleagues in Old and New Testament studies because it is clearly recognised again on both sides that the dogmatician has also an exegetical and the exegete a dogmatic responsibility. So long as so many exegetes have not better learned or practised their part in this common task; so long as so many still seem to pride themselves on being utterly unconcerned as to the dogmatic presuppositions and consequences of their notions, while unwittingly reading them into the picture, the dogmatician is forced to run the same risk as the non-expert and work out his own proof from Scripture' (CD III/2, p. ix [KD, p. viii]).

⁴⁰E.g. CD III/2, p. ix (KD, p. viii).

⁴¹KD I/1, pp. 47-310 (CD, pp. 47-292).

Whenever God reveals himself, he does so, according to Barth, in the form of the Word of God. This Word of God cannot be identified directly with the Bible,⁴² which attests it, nor with church language, which proclaims it (or ought to).⁴³ Therefore it is necessary to say something about what the Word of God actually is; Barth does so in a section entitled 'The Nature of the Word of God [*Das Wesen des Wort Gottes*]'.⁴⁴ In this section the reader comes to the first extended discussion of 'the modern concept of history'.

The reason for the discussion is that Barth believes a proper understanding of the nature of the Word of God is threatened by the modern view of history. According to Barth, this view requires a kind of levelling out of history in which all differences between events are only relative. A proper understanding of the nature of the Word of God, on the other hand, requires that at least one moment in history be utterly different.

Barth approaches the matter by first asserting that the Word of God is always an act of God: 'There is no sense, when God speaks, in looking about for a related act ...The Word of God requires no supplementation by an act. The Word of God is itself the act of God.'⁴⁵ There are all kinds of questions that might be asked about this assertion, but the relevant point for us is that if it is true it means that something utterly different has taken place in history:

Mere word is passive, act is an active participation in history. But this kind of distinction does not apply to the Word of God. As mere Word it is act. As mere Word it is the divine person, the person of the Lord of history [*Des Herrn der Geschichte*], whose self-expression is as such an alteration, and indeed an absolute alteration of the world, whose *passio* in history is as such *actio*.⁴⁶

The implication is that the moment of God's self-revelation is of a different order to all other moments.⁴⁷ Therefore, it cannot be understood on the same basis.

Nevertheless, it remains possible to do history without allowing for this:

One can, of course, dissolve the difference in time [*Ungleichzeitigkeit*] by ignoring the differentiation [*Verschiedenheit*] of the times in God's order, i.e., by taking into account only the difference of the periods and their human contents as such. Estimating the difference along these lines need then be no obstacle to a direct insight into the continuity and unity of the times, to an insight into our contemporaneity [*Gleichzeitigkeit*] with Christ and all his saints.⁴⁸

That is, it is possible to do history with an appreciation of the very considerable differences between peoples and periods, between different ways of life, beliefs, and so on, while at the same time not appreciating the one absolute difference between God's actions and all other acts.

'This', says Barth in an excursus, 'is the way which the new Protestant theology (after overcoming the great crisis of Enlightenment unhistoricity [*Ungeschichtlichkeit*]) took and is still taking in all its typical representatives.'⁴⁹ He

⁴²KD I/1, p. 115 (CD, p. 112).

⁴³KD I/1, pp. 89-101 (CD, pp. 88-99).

⁴⁴KD I/1, pp. 128-94 (CD, pp. 125-186).

⁴⁵KD I/1, p. 148 (CD, p. 143).

⁴⁶CD, p. 144 (KD I/1, p. 149).

⁴⁷See KD I/1, p. 149 (CD, p. 145).

⁴⁸CD, pp. 145-46 (KD I/1, pp. 150-51).

⁴⁹KD I/1, p. 151 (CD, p. 146).

argues that 'the epoch-making name' here is G.E. Lessing. Lessing's 'ugly, wide ditch' across which he simply could not jump was, not the centuries of (relative) difference between Bible times and modern times, but the absolute difference between the historical moment in which God acts and all other moments. Lessing

rightly saw it was impossible to overcome the non-contemporaneity [*Ungleichzeitigkeit*] between Christ, the apostles and ourselves. It was this that disturbed him and which he discarded in favour of immanence, and he thereby overcame non-contemporaneity by means of immanence.⁵⁰

In Barth's view, Protestant historical study since Lessing has been tied to a methodology which refuses to recognize the possibility of God's acting within history to reveal himself, and instead has understood history *itself* to be revelation: 'From then on all the more lively thinkers, in contrast to the Enlightenment and Kant, found no further difficulty or offence in interpreting revelation as history and history as revelation.'⁵¹

Such a methodology means that, though theologians may still use the phrase 'the Word of God', its meaning has changed. It no longer expresses the idea that something has impinged on the human realm from beyond, and instead expresses something entirely immanent. In this situation,

the concept of the Word of God is humanised in such a way that it is no wonder that people prefer to use it comparatively rarely and in quotation marks; the surprising thing is that they have not preferred to drop it completely and unequivocally. Distinctions immanent in history, no matter how seriously they are taken as such, cannot justify a serious use of the concept of God's Word.⁵²

The point is that, if the concept of 'the Word of God' means anything, it means that God has said something to human beings. If, because of the modern view of history, the church is no longer able to affirm this, it must in effect deny its own foundation. For the church believes itself to have arisen, not from human actions and words, but from God's act which is his Word. In consequence, theologians who locate themselves within the church are unable to accept unreservedly the modern way of doing history. Instead they must recognize its limitations while accepting its usefulness.

Bruce McCormack notes that even as early as the first edition of *Der Römerbrief* (1919),

Barth was seeking to show the limits of historical-critical study of the Bible in the interests of a more nearly theological exegesis. He was not at all interested in setting historical-critical study aside, as some of his early critics thought. In fact he was quite convinced that historical criticism could itself play a role in establishing its own limitations. Just as Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* paid the highest possible compliment to reason (by showing that reason itself could establish its own limits), so Barth was in a very real sense paying a compliment to historical-critical study.⁵³

⁵⁰KD I/1, p. 152 (CD, p. 147). I turn to Barth's solution to Lessing's problem in Chapter 5.

⁵¹KD I/1, p. 152 (CD, p. 147).

⁵²KD I/1, p. 152 (CD, p. 147).

⁵³B. McCormack, 'Historical Criticism and Dogmatic Interest', p. 322. McCormack concentrates on showing how and why Barth limits historical-criticism in the hermeneutical process. That is, he concentrates on literary aspects. He has little to say about the more purely historical issues which I am addressing in this chapter.

All this means that those who wish to do interpretation from within the church will be unable to accept a purely 'modern historical' approach to the Bible. The Bible, in Barth's view, is the place where the Word of God is to be found; but the modern historical approach is rendered unable to find it by its methodology.

Interpretation of the Bible which is dominated by historical criticism—which does not recognize historical criticism's limits—will not, in Barth's view, be suitable for a theologian who wishes to talk about revelation. Consequently, Barth found himself from the beginning of his career having to oppose the direction Biblical Studies had taken, dominated as it was by historical criticism, and having to develop an alternative approach.

Again, the credibility of this approach will turn on the credibility of Barth's claim that the Bible does 'witness to revelation', and we will turn to that issue in later chapters. However, it is important first to reiterate that, despite his polemic against 'the historians', Barth's interpretative strategy is neither anti-historical⁵⁴ nor opposed to modern historical method per se. In support of this, I wish to assert that Barth's discussion of 'the Word of God' can be seen as an example of 'the exception proving the rule.' That is, Barth's argument requires that 'the Word of God' be the only absolute exception in the historical process.⁵⁵ Every other event in history, no matter how exceptional it may appear, can be understood as a 'relative difference', and so can be understood by historical method.

Furthermore, Barth's argument is not meant to isolate any period of time from historical research. His terminology is confusing in this regard. He speaks of 'three times' [*drei Zeiten*]: the time of Jesus Christ, the time of the prophets and apostles, and the time of the church.⁵⁶ The time of Christ is the time of the Word of God. This might lead one to think that a period of about 35 years when Jesus of Nazareth lived is exempted from research. That is not the case: Barth recognises that that period can be understood from the point of view of historical method.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, he argues that such an approach is not enough for the dogmatic theologian because it does not enable us to perceive God's self-revelation in Jesus. This does not prevent us from

⁵⁴It is important that even in the 'early days' of the first and second editions of his Romans commentary, although he gained a reputation to that effect, Barth was never anti-historical. Commenting on Barth's eschatological language in the famous second edition, B. McCormack notes that,

Barth's dehistoricization of eschatology cannot rightly be interpreted as a manifestation of the 'anti-historical revolution' which took place in Germany after the war without some fairly weighty qualifications. In the first place, the dehistoricization of eschatology did not entail for Barth the abandonment of history as it did for many of the figures associated with the 'anti-historical revolution' (Oswald Spengler, Stephan George, etc.). Barth was not *anti*-historical'. What Barth's dehistoricized eschatology was seeking to accomplish was simply to bear witness to a Creator/creature distinction in terms sufficiently radical so that the confusion of revelation with history which could still arise on the basis of a misreading of *Romans I* could now be excluded' (*Theology*, p. 233).

Barth's reputation for being anti-historical, therefore, was based on an (admittedly understandable) misreading of the second edition of his *Romans* commentary. It should be noted that Barth soon abandoned his dehistoricized eschatological language in order to find a better way of speaking 'of a revelation *in* history, but not *of* history' (McCormack, *ibid.*).

⁵⁵If historians were to accept this exception I think the situation would be somewhat analogous (though not parallel) to physicists' acceptance that there are certain points in the universe where the laws of physics break down. The so-called 'Big Bang' theory of the universe's origins posits such an 'exception' in the first moment of the universe's history. Black holes are similar 'exceptions'. See the conclusion of the next chapter.

⁵⁶See KD I/1, pp. 150-51 (CD, pp. 145-46); cf. KD I/2, pp. 50-133 (CD, pp. 45-121).

⁵⁷E.g. KD I/1, p. 150 (CD, p. 145).

following Barth's interpretative strategy while affirming the historian's interest in the period as legitimate.

What the historian has to say about this period may be very useful to the theologian, but it will not be adequate for what the theologian has to say about it. It may also be that the theologian will have to refute certain of the historian's conclusions. The theologian will do this on the basis that the historian has stepped beyond the limits of historical method and denied the possibility of God's having acted in history. I will argue in the next chapter that historical approaches (subjected to the necessary limitation) could have a more positive influence than Barth allowed in practice.

Disagreements between Christian theologians and 'secular' historians are most likely to arise in discussions of the resurrection of Jesus. This is particularly so in Barth's case, because, as will become clear, he considers the resurrection to be the 'pure moment' of the Word of God, that is, the moment which is the 'exception that proves the rule'. It is the moment to which historical method does not apply. Therefore a careful analysis of Barth's understanding of Jesus' resurrection is in order here.

d. Jesus' Resurrection

Because of the procedure Barth followed in writing his *Dogmatik*, there is no section given over to discussion of the resurrection in and of itself. Barth chose to structure his theology around certain classic Christian themes,⁵⁸ not around analysis of particular events. Thus the *Dogmatik* is structured around 'The Doctrine of the Word of God' (vol. 1), 'The Doctrine of God' (vol. 2), 'The Doctrine of Creation' (vol. 3), 'The Doctrine of Reconciliation' (vol. 4, incomplete) and 'The Doctrine of Redemption' (never written).

However, this does not mean the resurrection is unimportant. In fact, it is materially of first importance throughout. As is well known, Barth's theology is centred in christology.⁵⁹ Whatever is known of God, he argues, is known because it has been revealed in Jesus Christ. But revelation has only been perceived in Christ because the resurrection provided a kind of prism through which it could be seen. Certainly, God was in Christ from his birth to his death, but the disciples only understood this had been so after the resurrected Jesus appeared to them.⁶⁰

We will see in Chapter 5 that Barth believes this is the correct way to understand the Gospels. For the moment, though, it is sufficient to notice that the kind of theology Barth seeks to do is only possible on the presupposition that the resurrection

⁵⁸In doing this he consciously returned to the method of *Loci* followed by Melancthon and Calvin (KD I/2, p. 973 [CD, p. 870]). He considered that this procedure would be more likely to protect dogmatics from being determined by some other principle than the Word of God itself.

⁵⁹'A church dogmatics must, of course, be christologically determined as a whole and in all its parts...' (KD I/2, p. 135 [CD, p. 123]).

⁶⁰It is crucial to realize that Barth is not arguing that *belief* in the resurrection led the disciples to draw their own conclusion that God was revealing himself in Christ. Rather, he is arguing that in the resurrection itself God did reveal himself. The disciples, recognizing that God was in the resurrected Jesus, were then able to see that God had also been in the pre-resurrection Jesus. Thus, in Barth's view, *belief* in the resurrection was not, for the disciples, and is not for later Christians, sufficient proof. That God has revealed himself cannot be proved by anyone or anything other than itself: 'That revelation is revelation can, of course, only be proved by revelation itself' (*The Resurrection of the Dead* [trans. H. J. Stenning; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1933], p. 148).

enabled the disciples to perceive that God had revealed himself in Jesus of Nazareth. Without his resurrection it may very well have been that God was in Christ,⁶¹ but the disciples could not have known and testified to it, and theologians would have no material on which to base dogmatics.

It follows, therefore, that the whole of *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* is based on the presupposition that a 'resurrection' of some sort did occur and that it enabled the disciples to see that the man Jesus was also the Son of God:

[The Easter-history (*Ostergeschichte*) and Easter-message (*Osterbotschaft*)] is the revelation of the Word of God, to which Holy Scripture, and with it the proclamation of the Christian Church, is connected. With it they stand and with it they fall. With it also all church dogmatics obviously stands or falls.⁶²

This, of course, neither guarantees that Jesus' resurrection actually happened, nor tells us what its nature was if it did happen. It might be possible to argue, for example, that it can be understood simply as the change in perception of the disciples and not as a physical bringing back to life. Those wanting to take this line have tended to agree with Rudolph Bultmann's description of Jesus' resurrection as the rise of faith of the disciples expressed in mythical language.

⁶¹In fact Barth considers it a very real possibility that God might not have chosen to raise Christ from the dead. In that case the cross would still have been the act of God's judging the world, doing away with corruption and sin: 'Ruling as the Judge, [God] might have given death and nothingness the last word in relation to the creature. He would still have been in the right'. But, 'He would have been in the right only in complete concealment...He would not have sustained or demonstrated or revealed His right to the world and in the world' (CD IV/1, pp. 306-307 [KD, p. 338]).

Instead, God chose to raise Christ from the dead, and in doing so made death and nothingness only the penultimate word. In so doing, God chooses, 'when judgment has taken its course, when that which is worthy of death and nothingness, when that which is dust has returned to dust, to justify the creature, to justify man, to acknowledge Himself the creator once again and this time in fullness, to create him afresh with a new: "Let there be light"' (CD IV/1, p. 307 [KD, p. 338]).

⁶²KD I/2, p. 134 (CD, p. 122). Barth had reached the conclusion that Jesus' resurrection is materially of first importance well before making an attempt at dogmatics, and he reached it by reflection on the biblical text of 1 Cor. 15. His commentary on that text was published in 1924, and in it he could already say that, according to 1 Cor. 15.3-7, 'the primitive church', earlier even than Paul, testified 'that Christ, who died for our sins, lives...[and this] is in no way to be understood as a continuation of human experiences, and insights of a higher and the highest kind, but only as the witness of God's revelation, as the really genuine Easter gospel, within the very Church of Christ' (*Resurrection*, p. 147). Barth emphasizes that the language of vv. 5-7 is of Jesus' actively *appearing to*, rather than passively *being seen by*, the witnesses. That is, the language is of Jesus' *revealing himself*. For this and other reasons, Barth thinks that Paul cites the list of witnesses in vv. 5-7 *not* to confirm the fact of the resurrection of Jesus, not for that purpose at all, but to confirm that the foundation of the Church, so far as the eye can see, can be traced back to nothing else than appearances of the risen Christ. The Corinthians seem somehow to believe in the miracle of the resurrection of Christ...but that the origin of Christianity along the whole line is revelation, and only revelation, they do not seem to have grasped' (*ibid.*, pp. 150-51). Barth does not dispute that the list of witnesses might be used by others as evidence towards 'proving' Jesus' resurrection occurred, but he believes that Paul's purpose is different.

A good summary of the centrality of Jesus' resurrection in Barth's thought is provided by Thomas Torrance's account of his last meeting with Barth a short while before Barth's death:

The last time I saw Karl Barth was at his home in Basel at the end of the summer of 1968...We [talked] about...the question of 'the scientific starting point' in theology which [had been put to Barth early in his career], to which Barth had answered that the starting point he had adopted was *the resurrection of Christ*. The reason for that answer Barth had often given: it was from the perspective of the resurrection that the whole of the New Testament presentation of Christ is shaped, and it is still from the event of the resurrection that Jesus Christ and his being and action in his life and death penetrate to us...Then I ventured to say that unless that starting point was closely bound up with *the incarnation*, it might be only too easy, judging from many of our contemporaries and even some of his former students, to think of the resurrection after all in a rather docetic way, lacking concrete ontological reality. But at that remark, Barth leaned over to me and said with considerable force, which I shall never forget, 'Wohlverstanden, leibliche Auferstehung'—'Mark well, bodily resurrection' (*Space, Time and Resurrection* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976], pp. ix-xi).

Jesus' Resurrection, Barth and Bultmann

Again, as is well known, Barth strongly opposed such an idea. He was therefore called on from time to time to respond to Bultmann. Much (mis)understanding of Barth is based on his polemic against Bultmann's position and not on his own position. The exchange between Barth and Bultmann and supporters of Bultmann in the *Kerygma und Mythos* collection of essays is particularly well known.⁶³ This exchange has tended to dominate later discussion when in fact Barth can be better understood from his positive formulation of the issues in *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*.⁶⁴ In particular, the first part of Volume 4 is decisive. Barth tells us in the Preface that the 'situation of the moment in theology and also the particular themes of this book have made it necessary that throughout I have found myself in an intensive, although for the most part quiet, debate with Rudolph Bultmann'.⁶⁵

In this section of the *Dogmatik*, Barth considers the work of Jesus Christ in the context of the doctrine of reconciliation. Reconciliation has to do with the restitution of relationship between God and humanity; and Jesus' resurrection, Barth argues, plays an indispensable part in this. Part of its function, as it was in the earlier parts of the *Dogmatik*, is to cause people properly to understand what has gone before. It demonstrates that the death of the Son of God was sufficient to enable the restitution of relationship to take place. As such it is 'The Verdict of the Father [*Das Urteil des Vaters*]'⁶⁶ that Jesus' 'high-priestly sacrifice' is acceptable.

But Jesus' resurrection is not to be understood simply as 'a miracle which accredits Jesus': it is also 'the revelation of God in Him'.⁶⁷ It is not simply God's

⁶³Barth's and Bultmann's contributions can be found in translation in H.-W. Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth*, Vols. 1 and 2 (complete in one volume; trans. R.H. Fuller; London: SPCK, 1972).

⁶⁴Busch records Barth's remark in a letter that 'one can only demythologize demythologizing by a better explanation of what Bultmann and his followers seem to understand as no more than "myth" and shudder at with horror again and again' (*Karl Barth*, p. 387).

⁶⁵KD IV/1, p. ix (CD, p. ix).

⁶⁶KD IV/1, pp. 311-402 (CD, pp. 283-357).

⁶⁷KD IV/1, p. 332 (CD, p. 301). Barth claims that Jesus' resurrection caused the first Christians to see that God was in Christ (i.e. God's self-revelation). That is open to debate. Some might argue that the New Testament only represents Jesus' resurrection as a miracle accrediting the man Jesus and bestowing on him eternal life, and that it does not represent Jesus' resurrection as demonstrating to the disciples God's presence in Jesus.

The debate is not easy to resolve. Certainly, the New Testament never states that Jesus was very God and very man in a way similar to the Nicene Creed, for example. However, many theologians have argued that it does point in that direction. Barth takes this line, arguing that, for example, in 'ascribing the name of Kyrios to Jesus', the New Testament writers (in the light of this title's usage in Hellenistic religions and its close connection with the Jewish 'Adonai' title for God) 'remove[d] the One described thereby far from the sphere of other men to the side of "deity" in the more or less serious sense of the concept as this might arise in the religious world in question...' (CD I/1, p. 400 [KD, p. 420]). He also argues that, 'We are pointed in the same direction by the practical meaning of the name Jesus as the name in which they prophesied...prayed and baptised, in which sins were forgiven...The name Yahweh has precisely the same comprehensive and pervasive meaning in the Old Testament...' (*ibid.*) He goes on to mention a number of other evidences, such as other titles of Jesus (*ibid.*, pp. 400-402 [KD, p. 420-22]).

Thus Barth argues that the evidence of the New Testament is that the first Christians in practice treated Jesus as divine (though without necessarily thinking through immediately the implications of this and certainly without thinking of the issue in the precise terms of the Nicene Creed), and that what must have been decisive in bringing the situation about was his resurrection. Barth does not mean that *the fact* of Jesus' resurrection brought this about. The simple fact of Jesus' resurrection could only demonstrate that a man had been brought back to life. He means that those who experienced Jesus' resurrection appearances must, as part of their experience, have perceived that Jesus was in some way divine.

demonstration that the man Jesus was the Elect of God (though it is that), it is also in and of itself God's self-manifestation in the world:

It was not, therefore, something merely formal and noetic [*Formale, Noetische*]. It was also the true, original, typical form [*die eigentliche, ursprüngliche, exemplarische Gestalt*] of the revelation of God in Him and therefore of revelation generally, the revelation which lights up for the first time all God's revealing and being revealed...For the first community founded by this event, the event of Easter day and the resurrection appearances during the forty days were the mediation, the infallible mediation as unequivocally disclosed in a new act of God, of the perception that God was in Christ (2 Cor. 5.19), that is, that in the man Jesus, God Himself was at work, speaking and acting and suffering and going to His death, and that He acted as, and proved Himself, the one high and true God, not in spite of this end, but on this very way into the far country which He went to the bitter end, in this His most profound humiliation, at the place where an utter end was made of this man.⁶⁸

As such, Jesus' resurrection is a new act of God which in itself changes the human situation. Were the crucifixion the last act of God, his last word would be judgment and death. But in Jesus' resurrection God's last word is life, and this in itself must be something which God *tells* human beings.⁶⁹ It is not enough to say with Bultmann that Jesus' resurrection consists of humans' coming to realize for themselves that life is the last word. In that case Christian faith would be grounded in a human act and would be 'in vain'.⁷⁰ Christians would be left to tell themselves that the last word is 'life' when in fact God's last word was 'death'.

In contrast to that position, in order for Christian faith to be grounded, Jesus' resurrection must be an act of God that is not identical with the disciples' 'rise of faith' or with any other human action. And so,

For our part, we maintain the direct opposite...Jesus Himself did rise again and appear to his disciples. This is the content of the Easter history, the Easter time, the Christian faith and Christian proclamation, both then and at all times. This is the basis of the existence of the Church and its sacraments.⁷¹

The fact that this 'rising again' consisted in the giving of new life to a body which had been dead guarantees that it was purely an act of God:

⁶⁸CD IV/1, p. 301 (KD, p. 332).

⁶⁹CD IV/1, pp. 304-309 (KD, pp. 335-36).

⁷⁰I take it that this is what lies behind Barth's understanding of the implications of Bultmann's view: The point is that Jesus Himself is at work during that history and time [sc. of the first Easter] only in the faith of His disciples...There was no new, and in its novelty decisive and fundamental, encounter between Him and them to give rise to their faith...They were quite alone. To be sure, they had their faith, which had come into being through an 'act of God,' whatever that may 'signify.' They had the insight into the mystery of the cross, which had suddenly become possible and actual. But they were alone. Their faith had no object distinct from itself, no antecedent basis on which to rest as faith...The "act of faith" was identical with their faith...Jesus Himself had not risen. In its simple and unqualified sense, this statement is quite untenable (CD III/2, p. 445 [KD, pp. 533-34]). Some critics argue that Barth has misunderstood Bultmann here, and that Bultmann did distinguish between a real, though non-objective, non-historical, act of God (Jesus' resurrection), and the subsequent faith of the disciples. The problem is that Bultmann fails to give an intelligible account of what such an act could be. In the absence of such an account Barth is justified in thinking that in effect Bultmann identifies the act of God with the rise of faith. What else can the following words of Bultmann mean? 'The historical event of the rise of the Easter faith means for us what it meant for the first disciples—namely, the self-manifestation of the risen Lord, the act of God in which the redemptive meaning of the cross is completed' (quoted in J.C. Livingston, 'Critical Study', p. 77). To paraphrase: the rise of faith *means* the act of God.

⁷¹CD III/2, p. 445 (KD, p. 534).

it is not the kind of event which can be the result of human will and activity or can be made clear or intelligible as such. An event which continues the being of man after death cannot be the result of the will and activity of either the man himself or of other men. To be dead means not to be. Those who are not cannot will and do, nor can they possibly be objects of the willing and doing of others... To raise...the dead, to give life...to the dead, is, like the creative summoning into being of non-being [*das schöpferische Rufen des Nicht-Seienden ins Sein*], a matter wholly and exclusively for God alone...⁷²

This is why Barth considers it vital to maintain the *bodily nature* [*liebliche*] of Jesus' resurrection.⁷³ Without it Christians have no ground for their faith. If Christianity is

⁷²CD IV/1, p. 301 (KD, pp. 331-32).

⁷³At times, though, Barth seems to argue for belief in Jesus' physical resurrection because he is forced to by his *concept* of revelation and not necessarily by the biblical witness. He can appear to be offering the nature of revelation as a second reason for belief in Jesus' bodily resurrection. Thus, in his response to Bultmann's categorizing of Jesus' resurrection as 'nature-miracle' he argues that it had to be physical because if God is to reveal himself he *has* to take the form of nature. Therefore it is splitting hairs to call it as merely a 'nature-miracle' (See KD III/2, p. 541 [CD, p. 451]). Barth comes dangerously close to denying his own theological principles here. He argues elsewhere that God, being at all times free, might have chosen to work in a different way (see KD I/1, pp. 101-102 [CD, pp. 99-100]) but that in fact he has chosen to reveal himself in Christ. But here he seems to be saying that God *had* to do what he did in Jesus' resurrection and that it *had* to take the form it did. There is no *a priori* reason why God could not have acted in a different way (perhaps by giving visions) to tell the disciples that 'life' is his last word. Instead of arguing from what the Bible 'says', Barth seems to argue at this point from the analysis of a particular concept.

There is debate whether Barth's doctrine of the Trinity is also determined by the same analysis. I cannot go into that in depth here, but for the moment it is sufficient to say that the criticism is nowhere near being fatal. Barth's theology is based on the claim that God *has* revealed himself and that this revelation took the form of physical resurrection. It is not dependent on God *having* to act in that way, only on the claim that he *has*, as a contingent fact, acted that way. The question is not whether God had to reveal himself in a physical action, but whether the Bible witnesses to his having revealed himself that way.

Unfortunately, however, Barth does sometimes use language which operates in the opposite direction. In the following passage Barth seems to be trying to say that Jesus' resurrection *had* to be physical. But at the same time he wants to claim it as an explanation of the facts:

It may and must be said, *not as a postulate* [*nicht im Sinne eines Postulats*] but as a legitimate explanation of the facts [*Sachverhalts*], that if the man Jesus was the incarnate Word of...God, if as such he was the Bearer of a hidden glory...and if finally this hidden declaration of His nature was to be effective as well as operative, if it was not to remain hidden but to be disclosed, then everything *had to happen* [*mußte es geschehen*] as it actually did according to the Easter story in its simple, literal sense...This man, the incarnate Word of God, had not only to be present but to be apprehensible as the triumphant justification of God and man, as the revelation of the divine sovereignty over life and death which delivers man, and finally as the one who exists in the higher, eternal time of God. This...is what Jesus was in his real and therefore physical resurrection from the dead...This is the way in which He was 'manifested in the mode of God' to His disciples (CD III/2, p. 451 [KD, pp. 540-41]; my italics).

Barth seems to be tying himself up in knots here. I think he wants to say that God could have done something else, but that nothing else would have been effective in causing human beings to realize that 'the triumphant justification of God and man' has occurred. This is different from his usual form of argument. In my opinion he would have been better advised to say that we do not know if it could have happened a different way, but in fact it did happen this way. The counter to Bultmann's position is not to say that it must fail *a priori* but that *a posteriori* it does not provide sufficient grounds for the Christian faith. The issue ought to be, in other words, whether the biblical witness compels us to believe Jesus' resurrection was physical or to admit the Christian faith is 'in vain', or whether, as Bultmann would have it, there is a viable third option.

The passage cited earlier, in which Barth calls Jesus' resurrection 'the true, original, typical form of the revelation of God' (CD IV/1, p. 301 [KD, p. 332]) means that the nature of Jesus' resurrection cannot be determined by a general concept of revelation, but that any concept of revelation must be determined by the nature of Jesus' resurrection. That in turn can only be known by listening to the biblical witness. This clearly has important implications for the idea of the Bible as 'witness to revelation' so I will return to the matter in Chapter 5.

There are, of course, all kinds of important implications of the bodily nature of Jesus' resurrection. It offers hope for the future of the physical universe, for example. This in turn can lead to an intellectually 'satisfying' theological account of the relationships between religion, ecology, science, and so on. Those

not 'in vain,' then, in Barth's opinion, the Christian theologian must maintain that Jesus' resurrection really did occur as an event in itself, and that therefore it was physical. The 'if' at the head of this sentence is crucial. What grounds are there for the assertion that the Christian faith is not in vain?

The opinion of many critics is that Barth fails to answer the question satisfactorily. In one sense they are right: he nowhere sets out to offer historical proof of Jesus' resurrection. Yet, as we will see, his critics fail to understand that their criticisms are derived from a different tradition of rational inquiry, and so they fail to appreciate his argument. For these critics, 'satisfactory grounds' would be historical proof of Jesus' resurrection *by means of the modern historical method*. That is, they would be grounds established from within their tradition. There are features of this tradition which Barth considers extremely valuable, but there are others which he cannot accept. To accept these would be to deny the viability of his own related but different tradition, namely the tradition of rational Christian inquiry.

Before describing what are, in Barth's work, reasonable grounds for accepting Jesus' resurrection as historical, physical reality we need to understand why he believed such grounds could not be forthcoming from the tradition of modern historical inquiry. That is, we need to understand why Barth considers historical proof of Jesus' resurrection to be impossible. We will then be able to see that it nevertheless is possible, while following Barth's strategy, to have rational discussion about the historical issues surrounding Jesus' resurrection and about the grounds for

who are part of the Christian tradition which believes in Jesus' physical resurrection may well consider the 'satisfying' resulting understanding of the world to be preferable to that offered by any other tradition. In this way, what are initially attractive implications, can in themselves become 'reasons' to believe in the physical resurrection. Barth, in my opinion, on occasion confuses this latter kind of 'reason' with the former. This is particularly so with regard to his understanding of 'revelation'. One of the *implications* of the resurrection for Barth is that God reveals himself through a medium which is physical. This in turn offers a paradigm for understanding other supposed occasions of revelation: they too will have an aspect of physicality, that is, they will be mediated by something which is part of creation, because physicality enables human beings to perceive 'something' has happened (though this does not guarantee they will perceive the revelatory content; see Chapter 5). As a result Barth is enabled to reach a satisfactory interpretation of the world, in which God and humans interact in history.

His understanding of 'revelation' is, strictly speaking, an implication of the nature of Jesus' resurrection, but at times he seems to argue that it is the nature of revelation which means the dogmatist must believe Jesus' resurrection to be bodily.

It is also possible for critics to mislead themselves into thinking that one of the *implications* is being offered as a *reason*. J.C. Livingston makes this mistake when he asserts that Barth's conclusion about physicality is determined by a dogmatic need to deny Docetism ('Critical Study', p. 89-90). Barth asks, 'What is the implication of the fact that after He had completed the span from birth to death He had this subsequent time [sc. a time marked by physicality]? The answer is that...in this time the *man* Jesus was manifested among us in the mode of *God*' (CD III/2, p. 448 [KD, p. 537]). In other words the *implication* of Jesus' resurrection's physicality is that Docetic interpretations are wrong. Another implication, of course, is that, if Jesus was placed in a tomb, the tomb must now be empty. This reasoning influences Barth's discussion of the empty tomb narratives, as Livingston notices. But it does not, in my opinion, cause him to treat them improperly, as Livingston implies. Barth is prepared to admit that the evidence the narratives offer of an empty tomb is inconclusive and there are elements about them which make them seem 'unhistorical'. Therefore he is prepared to admit they may be 'legend' (CD III/2, p. 453 [KD, p. 543]). But whether or not the narratives are legend, the bodily nature of Jesus' resurrection means there must have been something like an empty tomb somewhere. In consequence Barth considers that the empty tomb functions as a 'sign' of Jesus' resurrection, and it is better not to reject it (CD III/2, p. 453 [KD, p. 543]; CD IV/1, p. 341 [KD, pp. 376-77]). Those who do reject it must be careful not to fall into Docetism (CD IV/1, p. 341 [KD, pp. 376-77]). Barth treats Jesus' ascension in the same way: if his resurrection is physical then, unless he is still to be located somewhere on Earth, there must have been something like his ascension (CD III/2, pp. 453-54 [KD, p. 544]).

belief in it. This kind of discussion becomes the best means of approach if Barth is right that Jesus' resurrection cannot be historically proven.

Jesus' Resurrection and Historical Proof

Barth's primary argument against historical proof has nothing to do with the empirical question of whether the sources provide enough evidence for a decision to be made. Nor does it directly have to do with the kind of argument offered by Bultmann that historical proof would be contrary to the requirement that Christianity be based on faith. Rather, it has to do with the nature of Jesus' resurrection itself.

On the assumption that Jesus' resurrection did occur, Barth reasons that an event has taken place whose character is 'the true, original, typical form of the revelation of God'.⁷⁴ It is an event which is distinct from any other in being unambiguously the 'pure presence of God [*reiner Gegenwart Gottes*]'.⁷⁵ It is unambiguously the Word of God.⁷⁶

All other events in history,⁷⁷ whether God is acting in them or not, can be perceived and experienced without the presence or action of God being apparent. It is possible with all other events, therefore, to place them, as 'historicists' do, within what we might call the causal nexus of this universe.⁷⁸ That is, every other event can potentially be understood by wholly accounting for its ('this-worldly') causes. Every other event, therefore, has the potential to be proven historically.

That is not so with Jesus' resurrection. All those who experienced the resurrected Jesus experienced God:

the man Jesus appeared to them in those days in the mode [*Weise*] of God. During this period they came to see that He had always been present to them in His deity, though hitherto this deity had been veiled... During these forty days the presence of God in the presence of the man Jesus was no longer a paradox [*gerade kein paradoxes Faktum*].⁷⁹

⁷⁴KD IV/1, p. 332 (CD, p. 301).

⁷⁵KD I/2, p. 125 (CD, p. 114).

⁷⁶Whether Barth has sufficient grounds for describing Jesus' resurrection in this way will be discussed in Chapter 5.

⁷⁷With the exception of creation, which is the beginning of history, and which therefore has no prior cause within history (KD III/1, pp. 84-87 [CD, pp. 77-80]).

⁷⁸Barth does not use the phrase 'causal nexus'. His equivalent is to say that events can be understood in terms of 'how' they happened:

If in modern scholarship 'historical ground [*historischem Boden*]' means the outline of an event as it can be seen in its 'How [*Wie*]' independently of the standpoint of the onlooker, as it can be presented in this way, as it can be proved in itself and in its general and more specific context and in relation to the analogies [*Analogien*] of other events, as it can be established as having certainly taken place, then the New Testament itself does not enable us to state that we are on 'historical ground' in relation to the event here recorded. There is no reason to deplore this. After all that we have seen of the nature and character and function of the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the basis, and in the context, of the New Testament message, it is inevitable that this should not be the place for the 'historicist' concept of history [*'historischen' Begriff von Geschichte*] (CD IV/1, p. 335 [KD, p. 370]).

⁷⁹CD III/2, pp. 448-49 (KD, p. 538). Barth goes on to say that this is how the NT understands the resurrection:

This is made abundantly clear in the resurrection narratives, where the disciples begin by doubting and even disbelieving. But their doubts and disbelief are soon dispelled, never to return. They are definitively overcome and removed in the forty days. 'Be not faithless, but believing' (John 20.27f). This is not pious exhortation, but a word of power. And to this Thomas gives the appropriate answer: 'My Lord and my God.' In and with the presence of the man Jesus during this time, in the unique circumstances of the forty days, a decision is taken between the belief and unbelief of His disciples. There takes place for them the total, final, irrevocable and eternal manifestation of God Himself. God Himself, the object and ground of their faith, was present as the man Jesus was

This was the one event, then, which human beings could not experience without the presence and action of God being apparent. That is, to experience Jesus' resurrection was to experience God. It therefore cannot be wholly accounted for in terms of a causal nexus, since God is not a part of that nexus. As a result it does not have the potential to be proven historically:

It is beyond question that the New Testament itself did not know how to conceal, and obviously did not wish to conceal, the peculiar character [*die Eigenart*] of this history [sc. the time of the resurrection], which bursts through all general ideas of history as it takes place and as it may be said to take place in space and time. There is no proof, and there obviously cannot and ought not to be any proof, for the fact that this history did take place (proof, that is, according to the terminology of modern historical scholarship [*heutiger historische Wissenschaft*]).⁸⁰

Barth believes, in other words, that it may well be possible to account for every other event in history by means of modern historical method, but if Jesus' resurrection did occur it will *necessarily* fall outside the scope of the modern historian: 'The death of Jesus Christ can certainly be thought of as history [*als 'Historie'*] in the modern sense, but not the resurrection.'⁸¹ With this in mind we can go on to consider some of the critic's arguments against Barth.

Van A. Harvey provides some pungent criticisms in his book *The Historian and the Believer*.⁸² The book is subtitled 'The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief', and his criticism essentially is that Barth's position is inconsistent, and therefore is not compatible with 'the morality of historical knowledge'. According to Harvey, Barth 'offers with his right hand something that he takes away with the left'.⁸³ Or again, 'Barth, in effect, claims all the advantages of history but will assume none of its risks'.⁸⁴ This is representative of a commonly-taken line against Barth.

The detail of Harvey's criticism can be summarized in three points:

- (1) There is an internal inconsistency: 'On the one hand, [Barth] insists that the resurrection is a physical and bodily fact while, on the other hand, he claims that the historian can determine nothing about it.' It is possible, Harvey thinks, to 'make much of Barth's apparently contradictory claim that the resurrection is a fact and yet a fact of such a nature that no historical science could verify or falsify statements about it'.⁸⁵
- (2) In arguing that historians make an *a priori* denial of the resurrection Barth has misunderstood them: 'the historian is not interested primarily in an *a priori* denial that certain events can happen. His function, rather, is to determine the degree of probability an event may claim according to the rules of criticism and to make a judgment concerning it, a judgment the historian should be ready to revise in the light of new evidence.'⁸⁶

present in this way. That this really took place is the specific content of the apostolic recollection of these days (CD III/2, p. 449 [KD, pp. 538-39]).

I will return to this issue in Chapter 5.

⁸⁰CD IV/1, p. 335 (KD, p. 370).

⁸¹CD IV/1, p. 336 (KD, p. 370).

⁸²Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (London: SCM Press, 1967).

⁸³Harvey, *Historian*, p. 159.

⁸⁴Harvey, *Historian*, p. 158.

⁸⁵Harvey, *Historian*, p. 156.

⁸⁶Harvey, *Historian*, pp. 156-57.

(3) The consequence of point (2) is that the 'issue is not whether a resurrection is thinkable or could have happened, but the grounds upon which one claims that it did', and though Barth thinks he has these grounds he fails to show adequately what they are. In order to do so he would have to 'state what constitutes the reality of historical events and what would constitute sufficient grounds for believing in a resurrection' and then investigate whether these criteria are satisfied. Without doing so he 'has, in effect, exempted himself from any possibility of assessing the historical truth of his claims.'⁸⁷

Turning to the first point, then, is there an internal inconsistency? It should be clear from what I have said above in my discussion of the Word of God as the act of God that there is not. Barth's view may not be consistent with the secular historian's view of history but it is *internally* consistent. He provides a coherent account of why Jesus' resurrection as pure 'Word of God' is an historical event not open to current historical methodology. The real problem, therefore, is located in his difference with 'the historians'.⁸⁸

Harvey thinks that Barth 'makes historical assertions on the basis of faith which he then claims no historian has the right to assess'⁸⁹ and that the historian *can determine nothing* about the resurrection. This is a misunderstanding of the following words of Barth's about the resurrection accounts which Harvey cites:

[The resurrection accounts] really describe an event beyond the reach of historical research or depiction [*historischer Erforschung und Darstellung*]. And that means that we have no right to try to analyze them or harmonize them. This is to do violence to the essence [*das Wesen*] of the event in question.⁹⁰

Barth is talking here about the impossibility of reaching a philosophically or historically satisfactory description of *the event itself*,⁹¹ but he is by no means disallowing historical assessment of claims about it. The historian is free to ask, for example, whether there is evidence that those making the claims were simply lying (perhaps for reasons of financial gain, as Reimarus believed) or were deluded (by hallucinations, perhaps, as Strauss believed).

In Barth's view, there are certain features of Jesus' resurrection event to which the New Testament accounts witness. These are that it was an event in space and time

⁸⁷Harvey, *Historian*, p. 157.

⁸⁸D. Ford comments,

Harvey's conclusions seem to me sound in so far as they show that Barth's arguments...do not succeed in establishing the resurrection to an ordinary historian's satisfaction. Yet Harvey is open to the objections that he has neither taken seriously enough the 'imaginative-poetic' status of the saga of the resurrection appearances in the *Church Dogmatics*, nor tackled Barth's claim for the uniqueness of the resurrection ('Barth's Interpretation of the Bible', p. 80).

⁸⁹Harvey, *Historian*, p. 157.

⁹⁰KD III/2, p. 542 (CD, p. 452).

⁹¹Two examples of the 'impossible attempt' are provided by those who try to analyze and those who try to harmonize. Most likely, Barth means Bultmann by the former and 'fundamentalist' approaches by the latter. Bultmann, in Barth's opinion, tried to analyze Jesus' resurrection in terms of existentialist philosophy, and the result was an equating of the act of God with the faith of the disciples. This denies the testimony of the NT, none of whose 'authors even dreamed, for example, of reducing the event to "the rise of the Easter faith of the first disciples"' (CD III/2, p. 452 [KD, p. 542]). Fundamentalists, on the other hand, might try to harmonize the resurrection narratives so as to produce something like a neutral, objective, historical report of what happened. In doing so they make it seem like the event in question is within the reach of historical methodology (CD III/2, p. 452 [KD, p. 542]).

and that it took place in the person of Jesus, the same Jesus whom the disciples had known before his death,⁹² and that it took place solely as an act of God.⁹³ Again, the historian is free to dispute this interpretation. But to go beyond that and try to 'make sense' out of the accounts is to misunderstand their nature. In these accounts human language is at breaking-point because it is attempting to speak of something that is beyond its capacity, namely deity itself:

In the slender series of New Testament accounts of the disciples' meeting with the risen Lord we are dealing with the attestation of the pure presence of God...The whole historical difficulty occasioned by the Easter story itself has its foundation in the fact that in it the New Testament witness touches the point at which as witness, i.e., as human language about and concerning Christ, it comes up against its true object...Little wonder human language begins to stammer at this point...⁹⁴

Not only that, but the moment of Jesus' resurrection, which underlies all else, is a moment utterly indescribable. For it is a moment in which something is brought into being out of nothing, because to be dead means not to exist. In this regard it is often noted that nowhere in the New Testament is an attempt made to describe Jesus' resurrection itself. In the words of Kendrick Grobel,

There are witnesses *to its effects*, but this is a very different matter. Nothing like the waking-of-Lazarus scene is even hinted at in the case of Jesus. The resurrection has already occurred before any witness in any Gospel gets to the tomb. Even in Matthew the still-closed tomb is opened by the angel, not to let Jesus out—he is already not there—but to let the women in. In John, too, even before Mary Magdalene gets there, the Easter event is already complete.⁹⁵

In Barth's words, 'It cannot be sufficiently observed that in the most artless possible way all the New Testament Easter narratives fail to supply the very thing most eagerly expected in the interests of clearness, namely an account of the resurrection itself.'⁹⁶

Despite all this, it is still open for the historian to consider the supposed effects of Jesus' resurrection and come to some conclusion about the cause of those effects. Barth's observation that the New Testament accounts of Jesus' resurrection are obviously contradictory and fragmentary,⁹⁷ and that this makes sense if they 'are describing an event beyond the reach of historical research or depiction', is an empirical description of the sources and a corresponding explanation. The historian is free to contradict either the description or the explanation or both. The same might be done with Barth's assertion that, despite their problematic nature, the accounts, are agreed in substance, intention, and interpretation. None of the authors ever even dreamed, for example, of reducing the event to 'the rise of the Easter faith of the first disciples.'⁹⁸

Barth describes what he believes are certain effects and asserts that their best explanation is 'an event beyond the reach of historical research or depiction', namely,

⁹²KD III/2, p. 537 (CD, p. 448).

⁹³KD IV/1, p. 332 (CD, p. 301).

⁹⁴CD I/2, pp. 114-15 (KD, pp. 125-26).

⁹⁵K. Grobel, 'Revelation and Resurrection', in J.M. Robinson and J.B. Cobb, Jr (eds.), *Theology as History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), pp. 155-75 (171).

⁹⁶CD I/2, p. 115 (KD, p. 127).

⁹⁷KD III/2, p. 542 (CD, p. 452).

⁹⁸CD III/2, p. 452 (KD, p. 542).

Jesus' resurrection.⁹⁹ We can assume, therefore, that, in his view, no convincing contradiction of this argument has been forthcoming. In the absence of such contradiction the grounds for belief in Jesus' historical, physical resurrection are the testimony of the first disciples that they encountered Jesus Christ raised from the dead. Barth's grounds, in other words, are that the NT documents witness to Jesus' resurrection.¹⁰⁰ Why Barth considers these to be sufficient grounds will be considered in Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

Jesus' Resurrection and Apologetics

Admittedly there are a number of steps missing in Barth's argument, in comparison with W. Pannenberg's account, for example. He does not attempt a complete historical 'apology' for Jesus' resurrection, as Pannenberg does. But this does not mean that his strategy is inimical to one. It simply means that he did not consider it pertinent to his *Dogmatik*.

Barth considered that theology ought to be 'faith seeking *understanding* [*credo ut intelligam*]' and that anything which seemed like *proof* of faith ought not to be offered. It may be that he was mistaken in judging an apology for Jesus' resurrection would be such proof.¹⁰¹ One could argue, for example, that an historical apology for Jesus' resurrection demonstrates only that it is reasonable to believe an utterly unique event did occur. It does not furnish the knowledge, for example, that in this event God revealed himself. It would still be possible to argue in Barthian terms that such knowledge is only available *in faith*. Since dogmatics is about that knowledge, and is based on the presupposition that such knowledge is possible, an historical apology is not directly relevant.

In other words, one could argue that Barth's approach is compatible with an historical apology so long as the apology remains limited to demonstrating it is not unreasonable to believe Jesus' resurrection best explains certain historically ascertainable events. Perhaps without such an apology Barth's theology is not as thoroughly grounded as it could be. However, this does not seem to me to be a 'fatal flaw'.

e. *Conclusion*

In terms of Harvey's second criticism, given above, all this means that in an important sense Barth's interpretative strategy is compatible with the way an historian operates, even with regard to Jesus' resurrection, *so long as* the historian is prepared to accept that historical method reaches its proper limit at this event. The historian, in other words, will rightly ask about the probability of the alleged effects of the resurrection event actually having been present, and whether those effects can reasonably be ascribed to it; but the historian must also accept that, if the event did occur, it itself is not susceptible to investigation. Insofar as historians have not been prepared to accept such a limitation Barth has not misunderstood them and Harvey is wrong to say he has.

⁹⁹Or, as W. Pannenberg would have it, an event which can only be described by the metaphor of resurrection. See, for example, his essay 'The Revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth', in Robinson and Cobb, Jr (eds.), *Theology as History*, pp. 101-33 (115).

¹⁰⁰See KD IV/1, pp. 370-73 (CD, pp. 336-38).

¹⁰¹Though in the case of its most famous exponent, Pannenberg, it does seem to function as proof.

In terms of Harvey's third criticism, I have already demonstrated that Barth only fails to show adequate grounds for belief in Jesus' resurrection when viewed from the tradition of modern historical inquiry. It also ought to be clear by now that Barth has *not*, 'in effect, exempted himself from any possibility of assessing the historical truth of his claims'. Barth's argument is open to it being shown by a historian either that the alleged 'effects' did not occur¹⁰² or that they have another, more likely, cause than Jesus' resurrection.¹⁰³ Thus, while Barth thinks that the resurrection event is not capable of direct historical verification, he remains open to its being disconfirmed.

What can be said positively about the resurrection event, in Barth's view, is as follows: The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the one event that is unambiguously the Word of God. All other events which are the Word of God could also be understood as something else by those who experienced them. Jesus' resurrection, though, was (and had to be) understood by all those who experienced it as the pure self-revelation of God. Barth sees this truth epitomized in Thomas's words: 'My Lord and my God!' (Jn 20.27-28).¹⁰⁴

As pure revelation of God, Jesus' resurrection is the one event above all others that is beyond the limits of modern historical method. Yet this does not mean that it was unhistorical¹⁰⁵ or that nothing can be said about it as history. Quite the contrary in fact: there is a sense in which Jesus' resurrection is the one true historical moment around which all other history 'revolves'.¹⁰⁶ For it is the moment in history in which God demonstrated his choice to be one with creation.

¹⁰²That the authors of the resurrection accounts were consciously writing fiction, for example.

¹⁰³That those who 'saw' the resurrected Jesus were the victims of mass hallucinations, for example.

¹⁰⁴KD III/2, p. 539 (CD, p. 449).

¹⁰⁵This is true even in the second edition of the *Romans* commentary, where Barth uses language which makes it seem otherwise. Once again, McCormack is very helpful here:

In the strictest sense, revelation in *Romans* II is the resurrection of Jesus Christ and only the resurrection... But herein a problem seems to arise, for the resurrection is said by Barth to be the 'unhistorical' event *par excellence*...

What Barth most certainly did *not* intend was for any of these statements to be taken literally; they were to be understood paradoxically, as statements which point beyond themselves to the truth. For Barth, the resurrection of Jesus Christ was a 'bodily, corporeal, personal' event. How could Jesus be raised *bodily* otherwise than 'in' history? The only possible answer is: He could not. What we are seeing here is Barth's use of the time-eternity dialectic to drive home the point once and for all that revelation is *in* history, but it is not *of* history.

The resurrection from the dead is an absolutely unique event; unique in the sense that the forces operative on the surface of history cannot produce something like a resurrection. It is an 'unhistorical' event in this specific sense: it does not belong to the realm of time because it is not produced by historical causation (*Theology*, pp. 251-52).

In the second edition of *Romans* (and, indeed, in the later *Dogmatik*), the resurrection, is a pure event; an event without before and after—which is to say, lacking any prior *conditions* which might be said to have produced the event and lacking as well any ongoing *effects* which might be said to be a continuing presence of that which produced the event. *That* is what Barth means in speaking of the resurrection as 'unhistorical' (*ibid.*, p. 253).

¹⁰⁶This is possible because, for Barth, in contrast with classical theology, God is neither unhistorical nor timeless. A number of scholars have brought this aspect of Barth's thought to attention (E. Jüngel and C. Gunton are two well-known examples). God, as they put it, has history and time because he is triune. In his introduction to Barth's theology, Robert Jenson discusses an explanation of historical being:

The history of any being starts, is carried on, and is completed when something other than it...encounters it...and determines its being appropriately to this other, so that it is compelled and enabled to transcend itself in response... [CD III/2, p. 189]. The definition is a standard modern definition. What Barth notices and makes us notice is that it perfectly suits only one reality: the triune God.

It is not in order here to go any further in this direction, for it would take us too far from the subject of Barth's interpretative strategy. What I hope I have demonstrated is that, far from being anti-historical, Barth's interpretative strategy directly affirms history. What at first sight appeared to be a hiatus in the historical process, is actually a constitutive moment of history. Certainly, historical method is not capable of researching this moment; but that ought not to be surprising. A constitutive moment is one which makes the process possible. As such it is not itself subject to the process or to the methods which investigate the process.

Barth's strategy, therefore, is not one which denies the importance of history, or of research into history, but it is one which provides a strong challenge to modern historical method. It does not argue that the method is unusable, but it does argue that it must be prepared to recognize its own limits. Implicitly, therefore, Barth is arguing for a somewhat modified version of historical method to be used in Christian interpretation of the Bible, a method which corresponds to the somewhat different conception of history held by the Christian tradition of rational inquiry.

I will enlarge on this different conception of history at the end of the next chapter, but before that we must turn to look at how Barth treats other historical events. Many critics, aware of Barth's assertions about Jesus' resurrection, have assumed that he wishes to 'shield' other biblical events from the historians. In the next chapter I will ask whether this is so.

In this definition, history is self transcendence; thus it requires the difference between what is and what is not yet, it requires time. In his triune encounter, God thus has time. In his triune encounter, he has beginning, middle and end.

The resulting 'comprehensive statement of the reality of God', Jenson says, is that God has and is history. It is not we who are innately historical, and God who in fellowship with us adapts himself to historicity; it is God who is himself historical, and we who acquire history as we are taken into him (in David Ford [ed.], *The Modern Theologians*, I [Oxford; Basil Blackwell, 1989], pp. 40-41).

If human beings acquire history as we are taken into God, then we acquire history as God makes himself one with the man Jesus. History therefore revolves around the existence of the man Jesus Christ on Earth. Since his resurrection is the moment when the oneness of God and humanity becomes fully apparent in history, there is a sense in which history revolves around this moment and the death of Jesus which is its presupposition: 'the positive connection between the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ consists in the fact that these two acts of God with and after one another are the two basic events of the one history of God with a sinful and corrupt world, His history with us as perverted and lost creatures' (CD IV/1, p. 310 [KD, p. 341]).

2.

History in the Light of Jesus' Resurrection

Because of its central importance, I have spent a long time on the relationship between Jesus' resurrection and historical methodology in Barth's interpretative strategy. Now we need to ask how historical methodology relates to Barth's historical claims about other events referred to in the Bible.

a. *Other Historical Events*

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, many critics seem to think that a consequence of Barth's reasoning will be the screening of other biblical events from historical scrutiny. The Bible claims, as with Jesus' resurrection, that God acted in these other events and so, it is suspected, historical methodology will not be allowed to apply to them either.

Because he is interested primarily in the action of God, Barth's language at times appears to support this view. However, it is important to realize that the logic of his position operates in precisely the opposite direction. Since Jesus' resurrection is the only moment in history in which God *must* be acknowledged as present, all other events can be experienced and, therefore, understood historically without such acknowledgement.¹ They are therefore open to historical scrutiny.

Barth argues that no other event attested in the Bible has the quality of being the 'unambiguous' revelation of God.² He reads the rest of the Bible as speaking of the God who is coming to humanity but who is not immediately present.³ That is, he reads the Bible as speaking of God eschatologically. Consequently, when the Bible refers to other events in which God is involved, it does not mean that God acts in history in the same way as in Jesus' resurrection. In Jesus' resurrection, God acts as one present in history, while in other events he acts as the one who will make himself present in the future. These latter kinds of events, therefore, are always in themselves comprehensible in some way as 'normal' history. They also have a 'meaning', of course, which points towards the future manifestation of God.⁴ Without grasping this

¹Again, with the exception of the moment of creation, which by definition cannot be experienced by created beings.

²With the possible exceptions of the transfiguration of Christ and the conversion of Paul, which are a kind of prologue and epilogue to that event (KD I/2, pp. 125-26 [CD, p. 114]).

³KD I/2, pp. 103, 125 (CD, pp. 94, 113). This reading can, of course, be questioned. It might be argued that the Bible speaks of God's making himself immediately present to Moses (e.g. Num. 12.6-8). I suspect that Barth would respond that God's presence to Moses, while very full, always had elements of ambiguity and absence (e.g. Exod. 33.20-23).

⁴It is in this sense that other biblical events, in Barth's view, in some way attest to the events of Christ's life, when God does manifest himself. Many of those who criticize Barth for using a 'typological'

meaning we will not have understood them fully, but we nevertheless can comprehend them as historical events.

It follows that the limitation of historical methodology described above in relation to Jesus' resurrection does not apply to other events, even though God is acting in them. In my view, therefore, Barth's strategy is compatible with, though not the same as, a thoroughly historical perspective,⁵ and the resurrection is the exception which proves this rule. I will demonstrate this is the case by describing the relationship between historical events and Barth's interpretation of the Bible under the following three headings: 1. The history of Israel, 2. The so-called 'historical' Jesus, 3. The history of the earliest church.

The History of Israel

We should not expect to find anything resembling a history of Israel in *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*. Barth's purpose is not to use the Bible as a source for historical reconstruction. Rather, he uses the Bible text as a source for understanding revelation.⁶ Consequently, many of his discussions of OT texts make no reference to detailed historical questions. This is not because he systematically ignores such questions, but because they do not seem relevant to the specific point or because the historical assumption behind the point is not contentious. Nevertheless, he is sensitive to the historical reconstruction done by others.

The first thing to note is that throughout *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* Barth interacts with the leading modern (German-speaking) OT historians. The Names Indexes of

approach do not seem to realize that this is what he means when he says the OT witnesses to Christ. A good example comes in KD II/2, pp. 391-453 (CD, pp. 354-409), where Barth interprets a number of Old Testament passages (including Gen. 4; 17; 25; 30-37; 48; Lev. 14 and 16; 1 Kgs 13) as speaking of God's election and rejection of pairs of individuals (including Cain and Abel; Ishmael and Isaac; Leah and Rachel; Manasseh and Ephraim). He argues that in each of these passages one individual is elected (e.g. Abel) and one rejected (e.g. Cain), and yet in a sense the elected one is 'rejected' (Abel is killed) while the rejected is 'elected' (Cain is given divine protection). That is, there is an ambiguity in the passages with regard to the motif of election and rejection. Barth believes this ambiguity of who in the pair of individuals is elect and who is rejected points forward (for those who have faith in him—see p. 410 [CD, p. 364]: 'it is a question of faith') to a resolution in one individual, Jesus Christ, who was both elected and (in his death on the cross) rejected by God, and whose election 'overcame' rejection in his resurrection. I deal with Barth's interpretation of some of these passages in more detail in Chapter 8, but the point to be made here is that when he says, 'the subject of the Old Testament witness may be accepted as identical with the person of Jesus Christ' and, 'The elect individual in the Old Testament...is always a witness to Jesus Christ, and is indeed a type of Christ Himself (p. 401 [CD, p. 363]), he means it in the kind of sense I have outlined. The passages are read in a realistic manner, not in the highly symbolic manner which characterizes much typological interpretation. Read realistically, they yield up problems and ambiguities which push the interpreter to at least think about the possibility of resolution, and cause the Christian interpreter to think of their resolution in the person of Christ. Thus Barth says of the above-mentioned passages:

These data confront us with the following choice. On the one hand this subject of the Old Testament witness may be regarded as an unknown quantity. This might mean that for some reason it is not yet known to us, whether because it has not yet made itself known, or has in fact taken place but has somehow escaped us. But it might also mean that the Old Testament has no subject at all, that its testimony points into the void...On the other hand, the subject of the Old Testament witness may be accepted as identical with the person of Jesus Christ...The choice between these two possibilities is not an exegetical question; it is a question of faith. It is, therefore, to be distinguished from exegesis. But it is inescapably posed by it; and in the answer to this question, whatever it may be, exegesis is forced (even in the form of a *non liquet*) to speak its final word (CD II/2, pp. 363-64 [KD, p. 401]).

⁵Though by 'a thoroughly historical perspective' I mean a perspective sensitive to 'history' as conceived within the Christian tradition, not necessarily as conceived within a modern secular tradition.

⁶This distinction only makes sense, of course, in light of Barth's oft-repeated argument that history is not identical with revelation. Revelation must always take place in history, but to uncover history is not to uncover revelation.

the various volumes have references to J. Wellhausen, H. Gunkel, W. Eichrodt, G. von Rad, M. Noth and others. That of course means little in itself, other than indicating Barth's awareness of the work of these scholars. More significant is his attitude towards, and use of, the various conclusions reached by them.

In this regard it is striking that, when discussing passages in the book of Genesis, Barth is perfectly at home with the JEDP hypothesis. He accepts it (one might almost say 'uncritically!') and interprets the passages in the light of it.⁷ He therefore agrees that the Pentateuch has a pre-history. The pre-history is not the focus of his interest, but his interpretation of the text nevertheless takes account of it. It is useful because it enables Barth to better understand how the final text came into being and so to understand how its author sought to witness to revelation.

Acceptance of the JEDP hypothesis, of course, has also come to imply that the later history of Israel should be understood differently from what a 'naive' reading of the Bible might suggest.⁸ Barth is aware of this issue; but how does he deal with it in his interpretation? Again, we should not be surprised that he fails to address it directly. As far as he is concerned, even the most perfect reconstruction of Israel's history will not put us in touch with God's revelation. The only way that that can happen is for us to hear the witness of those who experienced revelation. Nevertheless, since those who experienced revelation did so at certain moments *in history*, a better understanding of history will enable us to hear their witness better.

Barth's awareness of historical issues manifests itself differently according to the specific kind of interpretative method he is applying to a particular text.⁹ For example, one method he uses is the analysis of certain biblical 'ideas'. In a section entitled 'The Covenant as the Presupposition of Reconciliation' he follows the term 'covenant' through the OT.¹⁰ In doing so he makes use of etymological studies (e.g. by W. Eichrodt) and historical reconstructions (especially by M. Noth).

Another method is the interpretation of story. It is a literary approach, so historical concerns are of less importance. Even so, Barth often signals his knowledge of research into the historical background of the story. The strange account of the 'man of God' and the 'false prophet' in 1 Kings 13, for example, is often read by historical critics as evidence of the activity of a redactor inserting a story from another source into the larger narrative. In his highly unusual exposition Barth makes it clear

⁷Examples abound in his discussion of the creation narratives of Gen. 1-2 in KD III/1.

⁸One popular reconstruction, for example, has been that the J and E documents imply an early phase of 'spontaneous' religion, followed by a stage of centralization and regulation of worship (indicated by D), and finally a stage of religion dominated by priests demanding observance of religious minutiae (indicated by P).

⁹In her thesis Baxter lists and analyses six methods used by Barth. They are interpretation of concepts, themes, theological statements, story, typology, and allegory and analogy. (In the case of allegorical interpretation, Baxter notes that Barth's major use of it is in interpreting the parables of Jesus. In my opinion, it is somewhat misleading to call his interpretation of the parables 'allegorical'. It would be more accurate to say that he views them as having more than one meaning: the meaning when Jesus originally told the parable, and the meaning when it was written down within a Gospel. Thus, Barth's recognition of the 'King' as Jesus [KD I/2, p. 474 (CD, p. 429)] in what Baxter calls the parable of the sheep and goats is not a result of his employing the allegorical method as Baxter thinks [The Movement from Exegesis to Dogmatics in the Theology of Karl Barth, with special reference to Romans, Philippians and Church Dogmatics', p. 207], but of his belief that Matthew intended his readers to understand the passage that way.)

¹⁰KD IV/1, pp. 22-26 (CD, pp. 22-26).

that he is aware of this background, but he also makes it clear that he is interested in what the story as it stands tells the reader about the themes of election and rejection.¹¹

In all of his interpretative techniques Barth seeks to discover how the original writers were communicating their own particular understandings. These understandings were undoubtedly shaped by the authors' historical circumstances. For this reason, Barth keeps himself up-to-date on historical theories in so far as they shed light on the authorship of books and the historical situations to which they refer. Such awareness is often not made explicit in his writings, or it might only manifest itself in passing references, but it is there.

Therefore, with respect to the history of Israel, Barth is sensitive to the issues, but he is not interested in reconstructing Israel's history himself. That is because he is concerned to understand the revelation witnessed to by the text, not the history that lies behind the text. Again, the viability of this approach depends on the viability of the claim that the Bible does indeed witness to revelation in the way Barth thinks.¹²

The So-called 'Historical' Jesus

Again, we will be disappointed if we come to Barth expecting a version of a 'Life of Jesus'. Some scholars have argued that this is a significant lack in one whose whole theology is centred on Jesus. John Bowden believes that 'disinterest' in the quest for the historical Jesus leads to 'great obscurity at the heart Karl Barth's thought'.¹³ Bowden seems to think that failure to participate in 'the quest' means that the figure of Christ has no historical content in Barth's writing. There are two aspects to my response to this criticism. The first is consideration of *why* Barth refused to participate in 'the quest'. The second is consideration of whether Barth offered an alternative way of providing historical content for the figure of Christ.

1. 'Disinterest' is probably not a good characterization of Barth's attitude to 'the quest'. It implies impartiality, the taking up of a neutral position. Barth, on the contrary, took up a negative position toward 'the quest', arguing that it was bound to fail in its theological purpose. This purpose, he believed, was to provide an historically-assured foundation for theology. It could not do that because of two kinds of consideration.

First, there is the *historical* judgment that the sources on which 'the quest' must be based simply do not provide sufficient evidence, nor are they of the right type, to produce an historically-assured 'portrait' of Jesus.¹⁴ Therefore 'the quest' is unable to lay a strong enough foundation on which to build. Whether he might have judged differently in the light of the very recent approaches to the matter we cannot know.

Secondly, there is the *theological* judgment that, in any case, such a foundation is of the wrong kind. Barth came to this conclusion early in his career. In the famous dispute of 1922-23 with his old teacher Adolf von Harnack, Barth made clear his conviction that according to the Christian gospel Christians know Christ only in faith.¹⁵ The corollary of that was that 'the question of a historically discernible core of

¹¹KD II/2, pp. 434-53 (CD, pp. 393-409).

¹²See Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

¹³Bowden, *Karl Barth*, p. 113.

¹⁴KD I/2, p. 71 (CD, p. 64). Barth notes that he is following the judgment of Martin Kähler here.

¹⁵See, for example, Barth's response to the fourteenth of Adolf von Harnack's famous 'Fifteen Questions to the Despisers of Scientific Theology', originally published in the journal *Christliche Welt* in 1923. It can

the gospel¹⁶ need not be raised in *dogmatic theology*, for dogmatic theology is about what Christians *as Christians* can know and proclaim. Dogmatic theology is done from within the church on the assumption that Christians do know Christ in faith and that this is the foundation for what they know and proclaim. To seek an alternative foundation is to deny the God-given one and replace it with a human one.¹⁷ The assertion of a God-given foundation may be a 'scandal' to academia, but it is one the dogmatic theologian must have the courage to make.¹⁸

It is clear, therefore, that Barth was not 'disinterested' about 'the quest', but rather he felt he had good reason not to embark on it. However, failure to embark on 'the quest' need not necessarily imply that historical questions about Jesus are in themselves unimportant to Barth.

2. This brings us to the second aspect of my response to the criticism that 'Christ' lacks historical content in Barth's theology. Lack of historical content was one of Harnack's fears. He asked,

Does the awakening of faith, insofar as it includes the knowledge of the person of Jesus Christ as the centre of the gospel, take place without regard for his historical person?...[C]an faith dispose of historical knowledge of that person?...[C]an the critical-historical study of this person with regard to faith be something irrelevant or is it not rather absolutely necessary?¹⁹

Harnack believed that Barth saw historical criticism ('the most radical biblical science') as only useful for showing that a quest for a historical Jesus will fail. Therefore, he went on to argue that,

What you say here in relation to biblical science may be formulated like this: the most radical biblical science is always right and thank heaven for that, because now we may be rid of it.²⁰

There are two charges here: that historical knowledge of Jesus is unimportant in Barth's theology, and that he rejects historical criticism despite its being valid. The fact that they were levelled by Harnack, the most influential theologian of the time, and were made public in the most influential theological dispute of the time, may have contributed to the continuing perception of Barth as 'anti-historical', even to today. This is despite the fact that Barth's constructive theological position was not reached until ten years after the dispute with Harnack and his ideas developed considerably in that time.²¹

Nevertheless, Barth did try to make clear during the dispute that Harnack had misunderstood him. He was not rejecting historical criticism but was questioning its governing role in theology:

the point is not to keep the historical-critical method of biblical and historical research developed in the last centuries away from the work of theology, but rather to fit that method, and its refinement of the way questions are

be found in the translation of the 'open' letters exchanged between Barth and Harnack provided by H.-M. Rumscheidt in *Revelation and Theology—An Analysis of the Barth-Harnack Correspondence of 1923* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 35.

¹⁶This phrase is found in the text of the fourth letter exchanged between Barth and Harnack. See Rumscheidt, *Revelation*, p. 46.

¹⁷Rumscheidt, *Revelation*, p. 35.

¹⁸Rumscheidt, *Revelation*, p. 46. In fact it might well be possible now, in the light of modern non-foundational theories of epistemology, to make an academically-acceptable case for this assertion.

¹⁹Rumscheidt, *Revelation*, p. 39.

²⁰Rumscheidt, *Revelation*, p. 39.

²¹The first volume of *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* was first published in Germany in 1932.

asked, into that work in a meaningful way. I think I said this [earlier] and may thus be permitted to express astonishment that you still accuse me of regarding critical biblical science as something 'devious', of wishing to be 'rid of it'...What I must defend myself against is not historical criticism but rather the foregone conclusiveness with which...the task of theology is *emptied*, that is to say, the way in which a so-called 'simple gospel', discovered by historical criticism *beyond* the 'Scriptures' and *apart from* the 'Spirit', is given the place which the Reformers accorded to the 'Word' (the correlation of 'Scripture' and 'Spirit').²²

Thus, in intention at least, Barth did not want even at this early stage to reject historical criticism, but merely to redefine and limit its role. Failure on the part of other scholars to understand this meant that for quite a number of decades theology missed the opportunity to debate Barth's constructive position on the matter. Had it done so it may have more quickly reached the conclusion now accepted by many, that a purely historical critical approach to the Bible (and to the life of Jesus) is theologically sterile.

In 1923 Barth was only able to say constructively of the historical critical quest for Jesus that it showed us '*a posteriori* that there is *no road* this way'²³ for theology. We have seen above that in the later *Kirchliche Dogmatik* historical criticism *in general* does have a constructive, though limited, role in Barth's Bible interpretation. But what about *specifically* in relation to the life of Jesus? We can take the conclusion of his final letter of response to Harnack as indicating that in 1923 he was not completely happy with aspects of his position:

let me repeat: I do not intend to entrench myself in those positions in which you, honoured Sir, and our voluntary-involuntary audience in this conversation have seen me, simply because I know how frighteningly relative *everything* is that one can *say* about the great subject which occupies you and me. I know that it will be necessary to speak of it in a way quite different from that of my present understanding.²⁴

By 1937 Barth had come to see the possibility of a more positive role for historical criticism. He argued that, 'the real historical Christ [*wirkliche Geschichtliche Christus*] is no other than the biblical Christ attested by the New Testament passages, i.e., the incarnate Word',²⁵ and, 'There is no reason why historico-critical Bible research should not contribute to the investigation and exposition of this historical Christ of the New Testament'.²⁶ However, this was emphatically not the same as a quest for an historical Jesus. 'The quest' was still a 'wrong way',²⁷ and for the same reasons.

For Barth, there *is* an historical Jesus and we do have 'access' to him. But it is not the access those participating in 'the quest' think they have. Those participating in 'the quest' reconstruct a historical Jesus different from the one portrayed in the Gospels 'by means of a series of combinations, restorations and also and particularly deletions'.²⁸ Barth acknowledges it is possible to do this, but he asserts that the reconstructed Jesus produced will not be the real historical Jesus.

²²Rumscheidt, *Revelation*, p. 42.

²³Rumscheidt, *Revelation*, p. 46.

²⁴Rumscheidt, *Revelation*, p. 52 (Barth's emphasis).

²⁵CD I/2, p. 64 (KD, p. 71).

²⁶CD I/2, p. 65 (KD, p. 71).

²⁷CD I/2, p. 64 (KD, p. 71).

²⁸CD I/2, p. 64 (KD, p. 71).

The reason, essentially, is a literary one. It is a judgment about the kind of literature the Gospel-writers produced. Barth holds that D.F. Strauss demonstrated that the Gospels should not be treated as historical *records* of facts about Jesus, some of which may be correct and some not, from which an historical core can be reconstructed.²⁹ Strauss asserted that instead they should be treated as myth. That is, as the expression of a universal truth or 'idea' in historical form. But Barth argues that there is another possibility, which is to treat them as *testimonies* to Jesus: 'the Gospels are testimonies not sources [*Zeugnisse seien und nicht Urkunden*]'.³⁰

The issues surrounding this assertion of Barth's are to be considered in Chapters 3, 4 and 5. The important point here is that this literary judgment provides the starting point for the argument that a historically-reconstructed Jesus will not be the real historical Jesus. On the assumption that the real historical Jesus is the one testified to by the Gospels, it becomes impossible for historical method as has usually been applied to discover him. Why? Because the real historical Jesus is testified to as one whose person includes certain features inimical to historical method.

For Barth, the Gospels testify to a Jesus who was conscious of being both Israel's messiah and God's eternal Son, who proclaimed the kingdom of God and his own Second Coming, and who was raised from the dead.³¹ Barth calls these things predicates of Jesus' being. The historian who denies the possibility of such predicates before embarking on a quest will obviously be unable to find them. Therefore, since 'according to the representation of the Gospels the so-called personality of Jesus is so indissolubly linked with these predicates...the historian of the life of Jesus cannot escape a fatal dilemma'.³² The historian must either 'erase the predicates' and accept the resulting insipid 'moralizing interpretation' of Jesus, or portray Jesus as a madman, a noble spiritual fanatic, or accept that Jesus himself cannot be reached and the earliest church is the 'last historically accessible date'.³³

In all of these three alternatives the historian is hamstrung by a method which denies the possibility of something truly unique having occurred in history. As a result, the historian will only be able to portray the Jesus-event as something relative; something special and important, perhaps, but not of the utmost importance:

Is it not a fact that the goal of historical research can at best only be a historical Christ and that this implies a Christ who as a revealer of God can only be a relative Christ? Is it not a fact that such a Christ... at best could only be related to a real, eternal revelation to mankind as a most high and perhaps ultimate symbol is related to the thing itself, who could on no account be the Word that became flesh, executing God's judgment upon us and challenging us ourselves to make a decision?³⁴

Because of its commitment to modern historical method, Protestant theology, in Barth's opinion, has been unable to escape this relativizing of Jesus.³⁵ And that has

²⁹See Barth's *Protestant Theology*, pp. 558-61. Barth distinguishes between an early Strauss (of 1835) who took this position, and a later Strauss (of 1864) who, disappointingly, reverted to the belief that a historical core could be reconstructed. See *Protestant Theology*, pp. 553-54.

³⁰CD I/2, p. 64 (KD, p. 71).

³¹*Protestant Theology*, p. 565.

³²*Protestant Theology*, p. 565.

³³*Protestant Theology*, pp. 565-6.

³⁴*Protestant Theology*, p. 566.

³⁵Of course, though that may have been true of the theology of Barth's time, it might not be true of the more recent attempts by historians (some Protestant, some not) to research the 'historical Jesus'. If these

been too high a price to pay, because it means the removal of the linchpin of the whole Christian enterprise, namely the uniqueness of Jesus.

In consequence, Barth's strategy of interpretation from within the church requires departure from modern historical method at this point or it will no longer be interpretation from within the church. Or, to put it another way, Barth's strategy requires that historical method recognize its limits at this point if it is to be of service to the tradition of rational Christian inquiry.

It is also possible to argue that, instead of recognizing the method's limits, the Christian historian could actually *reconceive* the method. That is, historical method might be modified in some way so that it could allow for the possibility of uniqueness. Pannenberg has attempted something like this.³⁶ If this attempt were successfully realized it might enable historians to achieve an accurate portrayal of Jesus. However, Barth did not seem to consider this theoretical possibility a viable option for the basis of dogmatics.³⁷ Perhaps the decisive reason for this is his conviction that knowledge of Christ is already 'available' to the Christian who reads the Bible in faith: there is no need for a quest for the historical Jesus because of the simple exegetico-dogmatic fact [*schlichten exegetisch-dogmatischen Begründung*] that the real historical [*wirkliche geschichtliche*] Christ is no other than the biblical Christ attested by the New Testament passages, i.e., the incarnate Word, the risen and exalted one, God manifest in his redeeming action as he is the object of His disciples' faith.³⁸

Even the most accurate historical portrayal of Christ could be only that, an accurate historical portrayal. This historical knowledge is inadequate for dogmatics for two reasons. First, as a historical portrayal it could only enable us to 'know' Jesus in the same way that we 'know' Alexander the Great or Napoleon. This is knowledge of the wrong kind, because dogmatics is about a person who existed in history but who also continues to exist and so can be known now. Secondly, as a historical portrayal it can only be a portrayal of *history* and therefore, on the basis that 'revelation is not a predicate of history', it could not be a portrayal of *revelation*. It is therefore knowledge of the wrong thing.

This is not to say that a historical portrayal can be of no use, or should be received only negatively. It may well enable the reader to understand the NT writings better and therefore to hear their witness better. Barth, though, was not able to see it in such a positive light. He recognized that historical criticism had a contribution to make, but not an historical search for Jesus. That is hardly surprising when we remember that the historical 'quests' of which he was aware had been attempts, and failed attempts at that, to provide a basis for theology rather than more modest attempts to contribute to understanding of the texts. With this in mind, it should be

have been able to work *with* the 'predicates' rather than rejecting them out of hand it is hard to see why they should be incompatible with Barth's interpretative strategy.

³⁶He has argued that the principle of analogy be applied in a different way than has been usual when historians have discussed Jesus' resurrection.

³⁷There is also the question of whether it can be achieved in practice and the objection that Christianity cannot have its basis in something that is only available to an elite of specialist historians.

³⁸CD 1/2, pp. 64-65 (KD, p. 71). Barth does not mean by this quotation that every detail of the NT passages is historically correct, or even that each Gospel provides a perfect portrayal of Christ. Rather, he means that the NT passages are the place at which we have access to Christ and that this 'biblical' Christ is the 'real, historical Christ'. See Chapter 5 on the general issue of the relationship between the words of the Bible and their historical referents.

possible for a person following Barth's strategy of interpretation to take a more positive view of historical research into the life of Jesus.

The History of the Earliest Church

I need say only a little about this. Barth's views are much as we might expect. He is not interested in reconstructing the history of the earliest church himself, but his interpretation of the text displays considerable historical awareness. He is aware that several of the Pauline letters may not have been written by Paul; that the Gospels are products of a process of transmission of traditions in the early church; that there are present in the NT portions of early worship material. He is aware, in fact, of virtually all the modern historical approaches to the early church, and he makes use of many of them in his interpretation.³⁹

The events of the early church, therefore, have an important part in Barth's strategy of interpretation. But they are not its goal.

b. *Barth's Ambiguous Historical Language*

Under this heading we return to the suspicion of many that Barth seeks to shield biblical events from scrutiny. There is no doubt that he can often sound as though he wants to assign certain events to a special category of history which the historians must not touch. His preparedness to use the German theological distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte* is one example. Another is his introduction of the terms 'saga' (*Sage*) and 'legend' (*Legende*) in his discussion of certain biblical narratives, so as to distinguish them from 'myth' (*Mythus*).

The distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte* has to do with the question of what we can know about history. Barth's language of 'saga', 'legend' and 'myth', on the other hand, is part of his elucidation of *how* the Bible witnesses to God's self-revelation in history. The latter terms will be discussed in Chapter 8.

Before discussing *Historie* and *Geschichte*, it is important to note that Barth saw nothing to fear from historical scrutiny of any biblical event. Because of his concentration on the event of Jesus Christ as the act of God, some have gained the impression that his theology requires the Hebrew Scriptures to be the record of lots of historically demonstrable discreet events in which God can be seen to have acted.⁴⁰ It might be thought, therefore, that a Barthian understanding of the Hebrew Bible would be severely weakened if it were shown, for example, that there was no exodus from Egypt.

I consider this view to be mistaken. While it is true that actualism is a very important motif in Barth's *theology*,⁴¹ his Bible interpretation is not dominated by the category of 'acts' or 'events'. He does not have a simplistic strategy, for example, of trying to isolate various occurrences in the OT in order to interpret them as acts of God. The situation is far more complex than that. The Bible can witness to revelation

³⁹Baxter gives details of this awareness in Chapter 1 of 'Movement', pp. 7-77.

⁴⁰This may in part be the reason why the American movement of Biblical Theology, as represented for example by G. Ernest Wright, was thought to be 'Barthian'.

⁴¹See George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, e.g. pp. 4, 31-32. Hunsinger says, "'Actualism" is the motif which governs Barth's complex conception of being and time. Being is always an event and often an act...' (p. 4).

in all kinds of ways, through stories,⁴² themes, concepts, simple statements, and so on. What these have to say about revelation can only be answered by careful study of each particular instance. And this careful study is what Barth tries to undertake. So if, for example, it were to be shown beyond doubt that there had been no exodus of Israel from Egypt, then it would have to be accepted that the stories are witnessing to revelation differently to the way usually understood. It would remain the interpreter's task to discover the witness. In theory, therefore, careful historical scrutiny will help the interpreter.

What are we to make, then, of Barth's supposedly 'ambiguous' language?

Historie and Geschichte

Often, those who use these two terms are criticized for dividing history into two parts and claiming that one part (designated by *Geschichte*) is not open to historical research, while the other (designated by *Historie*) is. *Geschichte* may be given the prefix *Heil*, producing the compound noun *Heilsgeschichte*, or 'salvation-history.' 'Salvation-history' may in turn be conceived as a small segment of history or stream of events running through, and encompassed by, the rest of history.

This is seen to be a highly arbitrary procedure in which the theologian, apparently with little justification, can choose those events which are *geschichtlich* and which are therefore protected from historical criticism.⁴³ Barth, it is often argued, does just this. However, there are reasons why we should see matters somewhat differently.

The first is that Barth inverts the way the relationship between salvation-history and world-history is usually conceived. In Barth's view, God's purpose in creating the world was to make possible relationship between himself and humanity. Because 'God the Creator is the triune God who acts and who reveals Himself in history [*Geschichte*]',⁴⁴ this relationship becomes real through a sequence of events in time. This is 'the sequence of events in which God concludes and executes [his covenant of grace with humanity]'.⁴⁵ It is also rightly called 'salvation-history [*Heilsgeschichte*]'. (It must be emphasized that by saying this Barth was in no way aligning himself with the *Heilsgeschichte* school.⁴⁶) The aim of creation, therefore, is salvation-history. Consequently, it

⁴²In fact David Ford has gone so far as to argue that 'story' is the dominant interpretative category in Barth's theology (*Barth and God's Story*), and a number of narrative theologians have claimed Barth's approach as a precursor of their own. I consider these views to be wrong. Barth's interpretation is highly eclectic, not dominated by any one method. Its goal is to understand the text's witness in whatever form it may take. Also, Ford's and the narrative theologians' approach tends to imply that, for Barth, God acts primarily, and somewhat a historically, through 'story'. That is not so. In Barth's theology God acts primarily through his Word, Jesus Christ, and only secondarily through words. I return to this issue a number of times in later Chapters.

⁴³James Barr speaks in terms of 'artificiality'. He thinks that difficulties consequent on the use of 'history' as a mandatory and central theological concept 'have been treated through the artificiality of special distinctions or abnormal ad hoc definitions of terms. I would regard the distinction between *Geschichte* and *Historie*...as such an artificiality' (*Old and New in Interpretation* [London: SCM Press, 1966], p. 68). Barr considers Barth's distinction between *Sage* and *Mythus* to suffer the same problem (*ibid.*). In Chapter 8 I return to this issue, where I also consider the terms *sprae-historisch*, *unhistorisch* and *Urgeschichte*.

⁴⁴CD III/1, p. 59 (KD, p. 64).

⁴⁵CD III/1, p. 59 (KD, p. 64).

⁴⁶Thus he thinks that it was no improvement on the Liberal view when 'the so-called "positive" theologians of the 19th century...separated off the special historical context before and after Christ as the so-called *Heilsgeschichte*, yet within this *Heilsgeschichte* asserted the uniqueness of Jesus Christ over against all else, with rather more force than clarity' (KD I/2, p. 14 [CD I/2, p. 12]). On this issue, see H.-J.

is not just one history or element among others. It is not just a kind of red thread in the texture of all other history, of real history...The history of salvation is *the* history, the true history which encloses all other history...⁴⁷

So theology must assert that the whole of history, when seen from the right point of view, is the history of salvation. 'This history is from the theological standpoint *the* history.'⁴⁸

The logic of Barth's argument is that history is *one*: it should not be divided into two parts which can be played off against each other. There are, however, different ways of perceiving that one history, and there are different methods for establishing what has occurred in history. The most powerful method for doing this has been that employed by modern historians, who, 'by the application of the categories of historical *relation* and historical *analogy*'⁴⁹ work out what can be affirmed as actually having happened. The events that historians are able to affirm as actually having happened are clearly only a small portion of the sum total of events occurring in history. For most events the necessary evidence is lacking, but, as far as Barth is concerned, the theologian may nevertheless wish to affirm that certain of them did occur.

It is in the light of this conception of history and historical method that we should understand Barth's use of the terms *Historie*, *historisch*, *Geschichte* and *geschichtlich*. He uses *Geschichte* to indicate the sum total of events which make up all of history.⁵⁰ He uses the adjective *historisch* to indicate those events in *Geschichte* which have been, or have the potential to be, affirmed by the (modern) historian. *Geschichtlich* is an adjective which indicates events or aspects of events that have taken place but which by their nature may not be knowable to historians. Finally, *Historie* is used by way of concession to modern historians. It does not have a substantive place in Barth's theology, since no event is purely *historisch*. The creator God has a hand in all of history and therefore every event has a *geschichtlich* aspect. So *Historie* is a construct

Kraus, 'Das Problem der Heilsgeschichte in der "Kirchliche Dogmatik"', in Wolf, Kirschbaum and Frey (eds.), *Antwort*, pp. 69-83.

⁴⁷CD III/1, pp. 59-60. The original German is, 'diese Heilsgeschichte ist nicht nur e i n e Geschichte, e i n Moment, nicht nur so etwas wie ein roter Faden im Geflechte der übrigen, der eigentlichen Geschichte...Die Heilsgeschichte ist aber d i e Geschichte, die e i g e n t l i c h e Geschichte, in der alle andere Geschichte beschlossen ist...' (KD, p. 64).

⁴⁸CD III/1, p. 59 (KD, p. 64). That is not to say that every historian must see things this way. Barth is always determined to maintain the right of theology to be an independent discipline, and therefore to maintain its own understanding of reality. But at the same time he is aware of the right of other disciplines to maintain their own independence, and therefore for the historian to reject the theologian's assertions.

⁴⁹*Credo* (trans. J. S. McNab; New York: Scribner's, 1936), p. 187.

⁵⁰It is worth noting that Barth appears to have assumed that when historians use the term *Geschichte* they mean something similar but with the important presupposition, rejected by Barth, that there are no 'divine workings' (or at least none that make any detectable difference) in *Geschichte*. Thus he speaks of 'a general concept of historical truth [*geschichtliche Wahrheit*]' (CD I/1, p. 326 [KD, p. 345]). He considers this general concept, with its all-important presupposition, to be unsuitable for his theology. He says that,

Even histories [*Geschichten*] enacted between God and man do, of course, come under this general concept of history [*Geschichte*] on their human side...But they do not fall under this general concept on their divine side. Hence the '*historisch*' judgment which presupposes this general concept can in principle relate only to the temporal side. It can neither claim nor deny that at this point or that God has acted on men. To be able to claim or deny this it would have to abandon its presupposition, and become a confession of faith or unbelief *vis-à-vis* the biblical witness' (*ibid.*).

Consequently, on occasion Barth uses the term *Geschichte* with, as it were, the presupposition included, when he is referring to the historians' point of view, but most of the time he uses it redefined and without the presupposition, for his own theological purposes.

2. *History in the Light of the Resurrection*
of the modern historical imagination, an 'abstraction [*Abstraktion*]',⁵¹ a sequence of purely *historisch* events. It is useful as far as it goes, but it cannot be allowed to overrule the theological understanding of history.⁵²

It follows that all of the events about which the theologian speaks will be *geschichtlich*, while only some will be *historisch*. This may be because the event by its nature cannot be *historisch*, or it may simply be because of the contingent fact that not enough of the right kind of evidence is available. The prime example of the former is the event of creation. Nobody (except God) could have observed creation happening, and therefore there was not even the potential for historical evidence to have been produced.

Other events, though, while having the potential to be *historisch*, may involve the activity of God. That is, they are events which are observable but which come about because of, or are influenced by, the unobservable action of God. These are the events in which the theologian is particularly interested and which much of the Bible is about.⁵³ It may be that the theologian will have good reason to affirm that one of these events did happen, and therefore is 'historical', despite the fact that the historian is unable to affirm it.⁵⁴ Even if historians could affirm the event, they would be unable to affirm that aspect of it which is the action of God.⁵⁵ That is, *Historie* (the modern historical enterprise) can only perceive one aspect of an event. *Geschichte*, on the other hand, includes every aspect. It includes both the aspects which can be understood in relation and analogy to other *historisch* events and the aspect which is the action of God.

In response to Bultmann's objection that the theologian ought only to accept as historical those things which have been proved to be 'historical' fact (*historisches Faktum*), Barth argues:

It is sheer superstition to suppose that only things which are open to 'historisch' verification can have happened in time. There may have been events which happened far more really in time than the kind of things Bultmann's scientific historian can prove. There are good grounds for supposing that the history [*Geschichte*] of the resurrection of Jesus is a pre-eminent instance of such an event.⁵⁶

⁵¹See KD IV/1, p. 563 (CD, p. 505).

⁵²Thus, Barth distinguishes between events in *Geschichte* which are *historisch* and others which, by nature, are *unhistorisch*. See KD III/1, pp. 84-85.

⁵³It belongs to the nature of the biblical material that although it forms a consecutive historical narrative [*Geschichtsbericht*] it is full of *this kind* of history [*Geschichte*] and contains comparatively little "*Historie*" (CD III/2, p. 446 [KD, p. 535]; emphasis in KD but not in CD). The official English translation renders both *Historie* and *Geschichte* as 'history'. Where it is necessary to show the distinctions Barth makes, I leave *Historie* untranslated. I follow the same practice with the adjective derived from *Historie*, namely *historisch*.

⁵⁴This is made absolutely clear in the German of KD III/2, p. 535 (CD III/2, p. 446).

⁵⁵Relevant here are the following words of Barth: 'It is the case everywhere that when there is unveiling there is also veiling, when [God] reveals Himself His hiddenness is confirmed. Revelation occurs for faith, not for unbelief. God exposes Himself, so to speak, to the danger that man will know the work and sign but not Himself through the medium of the work and sign. *A complete non-recognition of the Lord who has instituted and used this medium is possible*' (CD II/1, p. 55; my italics). My point is that the historians who (rightly and properly in their own context) discount faith as a means of knowing are thereby rendered unable to recognize God, even though God may have acted to reveal Himself in an event.

⁵⁶CD III/2, p. 446 (KD, p. 535).

Even Jesus' resurrection, though, has 'a tiny "*historischen*" margin.'⁵⁷ This 'margin', as I explained earlier, is presumably open to investigation by modern historical method, and to its affirmation or otherwise.

The Bible is concerned with *Geschichte*, and not with *Historie* (although it contains a good deal which is *historisch*). Its writers were concerned with discussing the action of God in the world, and not with providing conclusive evidence that such and such an event had occurred. It may well be, therefore, that the theologian feels the need to affirm certain events while admitting that historical evidence is lacking. Thus, far from trying to hide certain events from historical scrutiny by the use of ambiguous language, Barth makes clear that he wishes to affirm certain events while frankly admitting that he does not have the total support of modern historical method in doing so. For one set of events, those of creation, he has no support at all, because their nature is *unhistorisch*. For another event, Jesus' resurrection, he can expect very little support, because only a tiny margin is *historisch*. The other events narrated in the Bible may well be considerably more *historisch*. That can only be decided after careful consideration of each particular case.

The result is that, for Barth, the decision whether to assign an event a place in history (*Geschichte*) cannot be decided solely on the criteria of modern historical (*historisch*) method. If *Historie*, with its proper limits duly recognized, can show that an event did or did not occur (regardless of what the Bible says), theologians must be prepared to adjust their understanding of history (*Geschichte*) accordingly. But simple lack of *historisch* evidence ought not to prevent theologians from affirming certain events if they have other good reasons to do so.

This is where Harvey, for example, misses the point completely. He says that 'Barth's distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte* [is no] more than a verbal solution' to the problem of providing sufficient grounds for belief in the resurrection. For the distinction 'merely discloses the weak point in his [Barth's] argument, because to affirm an event in space and time without sufficient reason is either arbitrary or a sacrifice of the intellect.'⁵⁸

Harvey thinks that the only possible 'sufficient reason' is one which satisfies the criterion of modern historical method. He therefore is unable to see that Barth introduces the distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte* to make the very point that for certain *geschichtlich* events he does not have *historisch* reason to affirm them but he does have sufficient reason of another kind.

That 'other kind' of reason has to do with the Bible's character as witness. From very early in his career, Barth made it clear that his theology would depend on this understanding of the Bible,⁵⁹ and one could almost say that the *Dogmatik* is an extended attempt to consistently work out its implications. Thus, we should take him seriously when we hear him saying of one of his own lectures, given towards the end of his career, 'Ultimately, and in its most decisive aspect, today's instruction is but an introduction to the source and norm of all theology: namely, the testimony of the Scriptures...'⁶⁰

⁵⁷CD III/2, p. 446 (KD, p. 535).

⁵⁸Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, p. 157.

⁵⁹See, for example, Barth's second letter in the exchange with Harnack, in Rumscheidt, *Revelation*, pp. 40-52.

⁶⁰Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology—An Introduction* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), p. 173.

The phrase, 'testimony of the Scriptures', or something like it, is used so often by theologians that it can become a platitude. But Barth means it very seriously. His theology has to do with the Bible read *as testimony to Geschichte*,⁶¹ not as source for *Historie*, nor as literary creation (though it may testify by means of literary device), nor even as a moral or theological handbook. The Bible *as testimony* provides sufficient reason (though not *historisch* reason) to affirm that God has acted in certain ways in history. In Chapters 3, 4 and 5, I will develop this idea further.

c. *Conclusion*

Because dogmatic Bible interpretation takes place within the church, its attitude towards historical approaches must be carefully nuanced. This is not because it considers history unimportant, but precisely the opposite. Historical research is important because it enables the theologian to understand the Bible better, and therefore to hear better its witness to revelation. But history *in itself* is even more important. Those who wish to read dogmatically are convinced that an historical event, and a God who acts in history, is the church's reason for being. They cannot allow an uncontrolled historical methodology to blind them to this event and this God.

On the other hand, those who wish to read dogmatically must have a *controlled* historical methodology at the heart of their interpretative strategy. And this is for just the same reason: a supposed historical event is the church's reason for being. If historical methodology were to show, for example, that those who wrote the Gospels were not making an historical claim—were not saying that at one moment in time the man Jesus was dead and then, some time later, he was alive—then the church's reason for being must be brought into question.

Exactly because there is supposed to be an historical event foundational to the church's being, and so to Christian theology's being, historical methodology must be allowed to question whether the earliest Christians believed that that event *had occurred*. Historical methodology must also be allowed to question whether they had good reason to believe that. *But* historical methodology must not be allowed to determine beforehand that they *cannot* have had good reason. It must allow the possibility that this is the one particular instance where the rules which enable us to understand the historical process do not apply. It must allow the possibility that the first Christians saw something which historical methodology cannot 'see'.⁶²

⁶¹I think this is one place where Baxter has significantly misunderstood Barth. She argues that Barth's attitude toward historical criticism is due to his belief that the biblical documents are 'not primarily concerned with history but with witness' (see 'Barth: A Truly Biblical Theologian?', *TynBul* 38 [Cambridge; Tyndale House, 1987]). In fact, as we have seen, he argues that the 'primary concern' of the documents is their witness to history, in the sense that they witness to God's action in history.

The misunderstanding, I think, is due to the false reputation Barth achieved in conservative circles of being an existentialist. (In Baxter's view, 'His exegesis never escaped from the existentialism he learnt so well from Kierkegaard' ['Barth', p. 24].) These circles have tended to (mis)understand Barth's language about the Bible's present effectiveness by reading existentialism into it. They have tended to think his assertion that the Bible becomes the Word of God when heard in faith (see KD I/1, pp. 89-128 [CD, pp. 88-124]) must be existentialist, despite the fact that Barth provides a purely theological account of how this occurs (namely by the operation of the Holy Spirit), without recourse to existentialist language. See, for example, K. Runia, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture*, p. 202. I return to this issue in the next chapter.

⁶²There is a possible analogy here with the field of astrophysics. Scientists strongly argue for the presence in the universe of what are known as Black Holes. Nevertheless, they know that the methodology of

2. History in the Light of the Resurrection

We should be clear that Barth is asking *Christian theologians* to think this way, not 'secular' historians. The Christian theologian ought not to expect historians to agree to such a limitation of their method. For the secular historian is not operating from within the church. The secular historian will operate from different points of reference and from within a different interpretative community. Nevertheless, the theologian who accepts an understanding of Jesus' resurrection as history's constitutive moment will, for this reason, welcome historical scrutiny of all events that are part of the historical process. Therefore, those who wish to make use of Barth's strategy will need to be sensitive to the work of historians.

On the other hand, historians ought not to be surprised when they find theologians wanting to use the word 'history' differently in their work. Historians such as Van Harvey seem to think that Barth has improperly co-opted the word for his own use and imbued it with his own private meaning. To Harvey, 'Barth, in effect, claims all the advantages of history but will assume none of its risks.'⁶³ As we have seen, this simply is not true; his theology is open to 'the risks of history', but, at the same time, his view of history is open to the 'insights of theology'. That is to say, the concept 'history' must be able to take on board the possibility of God's having 'made' history.

Barth argues that the difficulty theologians have faced in dealing with the famous 'faith-history' dichotomy first raised by Lessing is due in part to their acceptance of a 'secular' definition of history. What he calls the 'modern problem of "revelation and history"' has remained unresolved partly because there 'has been a failure to see that in answering this question we cannot start with the general phenomenon of time [Zeit], or, as it is preferably called, history [Geschichte].'⁶⁴

The quotation continues,

We cannot assume that we know its normal structure [Normal-Struktur] on the basis of comparative observation, and then go on to ask whether and how far the phenomenon of revelation discloses itself [sich...das Phänomen der Offenbarung zeigen], perhaps, to the said comparative observation at a specific point. On this it is to be said that the general phenomenon of time or history [das allgemeine Phänomen der Zeit oder der Geschichte] in its manifold state is certainly not the text [der Text] in perusing which we will ever come directly or indirectly upon the phenomenon of revelation.⁶⁵

George Hunsinger, in his analysis of the shape of Barth's theology, has noticed Barth's willingness to take concepts from other disciplines and recast them for use in his theology. He gives as an example Barth's appropriation of the philosophical idea of 'being' which is 'thoroughly shattered and recast in terms of the idea of an "acting subject" ',⁶⁶ and is assimilated to Barth's doctrine of God. It has become clear in the course of this chapter that Barth does a similar thing with the idea of 'history', though

astrophysics cannot directly 'see' these phenomena in the way that it can see normal stars. Within Black Holes the laws of physics do not apply; but Black Holes are nevertheless *physical* phenomena. Physicists believe Black Holes exist, not because they can directly experience them, but because they can experience their effects. Barth, it seems to me, is arguing that theologians ought to do the same with respect to Jesus' resurrection and historical methodology. That is, they can ask whether the 'effects' are there which lead them to deduce his resurrection, but they should not expect historical method to give them direct access to Jesus' resurrection itself.

⁶³Harvey, *Historian*, p. 158.

⁶⁴CD I/2, p. 56 (KD, p. 62).

⁶⁵CD I/2, p. 56 (KD, p. 62).

⁶⁶George Hunsinger, *Karl Barth*, p. 61.

the process is less obvious because 'history' is much more a part of public consciousness than is the philosophical idea of 'being'.

I do not intend to describe exhaustively the content Barth gives to the concept of 'history' because that would take us too far from the nature of Barth's interpretation of texts. However, this and the previous chapter should have helped to indicate the direction of his argument in this regard: rather than beginning with a general concept and moving on to ask how particulars 'fit in', Barth begins with the particular event of the resurrection of Christ and moves from there to develop a general concept. In other words, he 're-reads' history in the light of Jesus' resurrection (thus the titles of this and the previous chapter). This, of course, is in line with his determination to do theology which begins with God's act in Christ.

Hunsinger shows that the tendency to assimilate concepts is part of Barth's rational procedure. That is, it is part of the means by which Barth explicates Christian faith's own peculiar and intrinsic rationality.⁶⁷ This means that, within Christian tradition, history will be understood differently to the way it is understood outside of that tradition.

But it does not mean the Christian understanding of history can be contrasted with an 'objective', tradition-free understanding of history. Or at least, it does not mean this if we accept, as I do, something like the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's account of rationality. MacIntyre seeks to show that all rationality operates, and can only operate, within tradition.⁶⁸ His discussion is in the context of moral philosophy, or 'ethics', but much of his work is concerned with establishing how rationality works in itself. Since theology seeks to be a rational discipline, there is no reason why MacIntyre's arguments should not apply to it also.⁶⁹

MacIntyre argues that the Enlightenment attempt to replace the functions of tradition and authority with rational justification was misguided. In enforcing this replacement the Enlightenment excluded from view,

a conception of rational enquiry as embodied in a tradition, a conception according to which the standards of rational justification themselves emerge from and are part of a history in which they are vindicated by the way in which they transcend the limitations of and provide remedies for the defects of their predecessors within the history of that same tradition.⁷⁰

With this latter conception of rational justification it no longer is a matter of proving everything from first principles that are acceptable to *all rational persons whatsoever*. The Enlightenment attempt to do that has failed, in MacIntyre's view, because 'rationality itself, whether theoretical or practical, is a concept with a history: indeed, since there are a diversity of traditions of enquiry, with histories, there are ...rationalities rather than rationality'.⁷¹ In other words, what are acceptable first principles to persons of one rationality, from one tradition, will not be acceptable to persons of another rationality, from another tradition.

⁶⁷See Hunsinger, *Karl Barth*, pp. 55-56.

⁶⁸See his books *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1985) and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988).

⁶⁹In fact, MacIntyre has made specific contributions to a number of theological debates and has been discussed in a number of theological books.

⁷⁰MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 7.

⁷¹MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 9.

In my view, the clash between Barth and many of those who have reacted (at times very strongly) against his pronouncements about history can be best understood from this perspective. Barth makes it quite clear that he locates himself in a different stream of tradition of historical enquiry from the one dominant in 'the new Protestant theology'.⁷² He considers this began with Lessing and includes Ritschl, Harnack, Lagarde and Troeltsch. I suspect that most of Barth's fiercest critics would consider themselves to stand in the continuation of this stream. It is just because of this that Barth often does not feel their criticisms are pertinent.

In MacIntyre's terms, Barth has different first principles and a different rationality from many of his critics. This may make it difficult for the one to recognize the presence of rationality in the other. As a result it has been possible for some critics to think that Barth undervalues and even denies the place of reason in theology. Listen, for example, to the following statement of John Macquarrie:

[I maintain] that rationality is itself an essential characteristic of the whole man, and that no experience however intense and no conviction however fervent [can] be exempted from critical examination. In the case of any alleged religious revelation, this means that we must submit it to the scrutiny of reason, both theoretical and practical.

But this seems to be what Barth...—if we have correctly understood him—will not allow.⁷³

Macquarrie, in other words, thinks that ultimately Barth denies rationality. I believe he perceives matters this way because he is located in a tradition of historical inquiry from which Barth distances himself. Macquarrie is strongly influenced by Bultmann's ideas,⁷⁴ and in this respect can be considered to be in the tradition which stretches from Bultmann back to Lessing. Its rationality is different from Barth's (though it is not unrelated) and so it finds it difficult to recognize Barth's rationality.⁷⁵

Understanding the situation in the light of MacIntyre's argument also helps explain the oft-noted fact that those who are not 'against' Barth often find themselves very strongly 'for' him. Those who are 'for' him tend to share Barth's first principles and tradition and they see his theology as an extremely rational, but at the same time imaginative, working out of those principles. They may well still have certain criticisms to make, but they nevertheless find his overall strategy an extremely good one.

In this and the previous chapter, I have sought to demonstrate that Barth's strategy of interpretation involves commitment to one particular tradition of rational

⁷²KDI/1, p. 151 (CD, p. 146). Presumably (though he does not say so), Barth understands himself to be within a tradition which includes the Reformers and goes back as far as the New Testament, where we find writers such as Paul who also 're-read' history in the light of Jesus' resurrection.

⁷³John Macquarrie, *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought*, pp. 333-34.

⁷⁴See, for example, *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought*, pp. 374-75.

⁷⁵Examples can also be found of theologians who, though much more sympathetic to Barth than Macquarrie, are still unable to understand his argument with respect to history. Stephen Neill, for example, in his influential book *The Interpretation of the New Testament*, says of Barth's criticisms of the results of historical Jesus research: 'What does this mean? The opposite of a historical Christ would appear to be a non-historical Christ...A Christ who is in any way at all less than historical is not the Christ of the Gospels, or of faith, or of glory' (S. Neill and T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986* [Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2nd edn, 1988], p. 224). Barth is not arguing for the 'opposite of a historical Christ', but for the impossibility (because of the limitations of *historisch* method) of a *historisch* Christ being the actual Jesus of Nazareth who walked in First Century Israel, i.e. being the historical Christ. To reiterate, it is crucial to Barth that the Christ to whom he refers be utterly historical.

inquiry at the expense of another. This 'other tradition' is one that I have called variously 'modern' and 'secular history'. But I have tried to show that its rejection as a tradition does not mean the wholesale rejection of its values or the rejection of history *per se*.

In fact an interpreter following Barth's strategy will be able to be sensitive to changes in the historical conclusions of others and to adjust the interpretation accordingly. In this sense, therefore, it is a thoroughly historical strategy. Of course, as a result it may well lead to different dogmatic conclusions than the ones reached by Barth. That was something he thoroughly expected. He saw his *Dogmatik* as the opening of a way of doing theology, not as theological answers set in stone:

I never thought that I had had the last word in the *Church Dogmatics*. It is very clear to me that the thing could have been done differently and better on every page.⁷⁶

I see...the *Church Dogmatics*, not as a conclusion, but as the opening of a new conversation—about the question of the right course for theology.⁷⁷

In conclusion, we can say that Barth's approach at least opens up the possibility of *rational*⁷⁸ and *historical* interpretation of the Bible as part of a tradition of Christian theological inquiry. But those are not the only requirements we might have of an interpretative strategy. On MacIntyre's model, a tradition of inquiry will have certain first principles. Chapters 3 and 4 will be taken up with the explanation and analysis of one of Barth's first principles that relates specifically to his interpretative strategy, namely his assertion that the Bible is 'witness to revelation'.

⁷⁶Cited in Busch, *Karl Barth*, pp. 450-51.

⁷⁷Cited in Busch, *Karl Barth*, p. 488.

⁷⁸T.F. Torrance is a careful scholar of Barth, and so his remark that, 'Karl Barth belongs to the very centre of the great European tradition which has sought to give reason its fullest place in exact and careful thinking', provides considerable support to the idea that this was what Barth was seeking to do. The comment is found in his 'Introduction' to Barth's *Theology and Church* (London: SCM Press, 1962), p. 40.

PART II:

TESTIMONY

3.

Testimony in Barth and Modern Thought

In Chapters 1 and 2, I argued that Karl Barth's approach to biblical interpretation ought to be understood as an approach which stands within an alternative tradition to that occupied by secular historical critical approaches. I argued that, even so, Barth's approach still has a valid claim to being historical interpretation and that it is thoroughly rational interpretation. This is a very important point, because it is often assumed that the only alternative to the secular historical critical tradition is one which surrenders rationality.

Often, when theologians talk of alternatives, they speak of conflict between scholarly rationalism and a tradition of churchly belief. Austin Van Harvey puts it just that way:

the heart of the issue before us is the collision of two moralities of knowledge, the one characteristic of the scholarly world since the Enlightenment, the other characteristic of traditional Christian belief.¹

Often, language characteristic of Barth's position ('revelation [*Offenbarung*]', 'Word of God [*Wort Gottes*']') is used to bolster the side of 'belief'. Here is the continuation of the quote from Harvey:

As soon as the issue is posed in this fashion, one possible way of resolving it comes immediately to mind. One might say:

...surely it is a matter of choice whether one wishes to be a child of the Enlightenment or of the church. The real question is whether one wants to be accepted by the scholarly establishment or whether he [sic] wills to remain loyal to the Word of God...

Some Christian theologians have cast the issue precisely in those terms...Erwin Reisner, for example, argues that the acceptance of revelation requires one to surrender everything that belongs to the godless world, including 'the whole superstition that calls itself science, above all historical science'.²

Now, if it is accepted that Barth should be situated in a churchly tradition, it may easily be assumed that his position supports one like Reisner's, particularly when Barthian-type language is used. I will argue that this is not so. My argument will concentrate on Barth's use of the category of 'testimony' or 'witness', though to achieve clarity I will also deal with certain pervasive misunderstandings that have

¹Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, p. 127.

²Harvey, *Historian*, pp. 127-28.

arisen. I will attempt to clear the ground of misinterpretations of Barth's use of the Bible.

First though, I will demonstrate that Barth really did argue that 'the Bible as witness' stood at the heart of his enterprise.

a. *The Bible as Testimony*

It is indisputable that the language of testimony dominates when Barth discusses the Bible. Any reader who uses the Indices of the *Dogmatik* to turn to biblical references will see that Barth repeatedly uses 'testimony language' to refer to the function of Scripture. By testimony language I mean the use of words like 'attestation [Bezeugung]', 'witnesses [Zeugen]', 'eye-witnesses [Augenzeugen]', 'to bear witness [bezeugen]', 'witnessing [Bezeugen]'.

I have already given some examples at the beginning of Chapter 1, but the following quotations give a further flavour of such language. They are taken from the last part of the *Dogmatik*, part IV, indicating that it continued to be important to Barth throughout his career.³

The New Testament *witness to Jesus the Christ* [*Das neutestamentliche Zeugnis von Jesus dem Christus*], the Son of God, stands on the soil of the Old Testament and cannot be separated from it.⁴

[T]he twelve [sc. disciples] were in an exemplary way the *authentic eye-witnesses* [*die authentischen Augenzeugen*] of that revelation of the Head, the Messiah of Israel who, as such, was the Saviour of the world...[T]hey were *representative of the authority* [*repräsentativ für die Autorität*] of the New Testament.⁵

[God's election and exaltation of humanity] is unavoidably posed by Holy Scripture *as the witness* [*als das Zeugnis*] of God's work and revelation of grace.⁶

That [the statement that Jesus Christ is the one Word of God] is demanded of Christians...is first learned quite simply from *the biblical witness* [*das biblische Zeugnis*].⁷

We need to return to the first part of the *Dogmatik* to fill out the content of the language of testimony. We will see there that Barth means the language to be taken

³It is also significant that from very early on Barth was emphasizing the importance of testimony. In 1923 he makes 'the testimony of the Scriptures' an important part of his response to Harnack's criticisms. For example: 'I only ask whether we should not for once *reckon* more soberly with the fact that what is called Christianity made its first and for us recognisable beginning with this testimony?', 'The Scriptures then witness to revelation. One does not have to believe it, nor can one do it. But one should not deny that it witnesses to revelation, *genuine* revelation that is, and not to a more or less concealed religious possibility of man but rather to the possibility of God, namely that *he* has acted under the form of a human possibility—and this as *reality*' (in Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology*, p. 44; Barth's emphasis), 'I see the theological function of historical criticism especially in the task of making clear to *usa posteriori* that there is no road this way [sc. the way of the Quest for the Historical Jesus], and that in the Bible we have to do with testimonies and *only* with *testimonies*' (p. 46; Barth's emphasis), 'However, and here I think I come to the nerve of your objections, I am indeed *content* with the testimonial character of all that which occurs here and there in time and as a result of man' (p. 48; Barth's emphasis).

⁴KD IV/1, p. 182 (CD, p. 166).

⁵KD IV/1, p. 806 (CD, p. 722).

⁶KD IV/2, p. 5 (CD, p. 6).

⁷KD IV/3, p. 102 (CD, p. 92).

very seriously. His emphasis on testimony has mostly been ignored,⁸ and it seems likely to me that this is because virtually all theologians describe the Bible as 'witness' at one time or another, no matter how they actually use the Bible in their particular theology. Their looser use of testimony language has prevented scholars from paying adequate attention to Barth's use of it.⁹ When Barth calls the Bible a 'witness' he does not, for example, intend it as a synonym for 'historical source', as historical critics

⁸One exception is Reid, *The Authority of Scripture*, where it is recognised that, for Barth, 'The fundamental proposition concerning the Bible is that "the Bible is the witness to God's revelation..."' (p. 211). Even so, only four pages are given over to an analysis of Barth's position on testimony, and even then Reid's interest is in Scriptural authority and so he does not address issues of epistemology in any detail.

⁹Of those who have asked how the Bible functions in Barth's theology perhaps the most influential scholars (at least among English speakers) have been David Ford and David Kelsey. Both Kelsey (*The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*) and Ford (*Barth and God's Story; 'Barth's Interpretation of the Bible'*) consider that the dominant function of the Bible in Barth's theology is *as narrative*. This assertion has probably gained widespread acceptance because it is believed to explain Barth's 'virtual lack of theological concern about historical criticism' (Ford, 'Barth's Interpretation of the Bible', p. 56). I have already shown that 'lack of concern' is a misconstrual of Barth's position in the first place.

Ford thinks that Barth's use of the Bible can best be understood as being similar to literary critical interpretation of the realistic novel-type: 'The literary genre that seems to be most fruitful as a comparative model is that of the realistic novel' ('Barth's Interpretation of the Bible', p. 76). Kelsey takes a similar position. He argues that, for Barth, Bible narrative functions to 'render an agent' present to the reader. That is, when a person reads a text, by virtue of the way narrative functions, it can make God, whom the text is about, present to the reader: 'Reading and, indeed, understanding a passage of scripture does not necessarily bring man into an encounter with God. But it may...[T]he texts may provide the occasion on which the revelatory event occurs here and now and God "speaks as I and addresses as thou."' On such occasions the stories "work." The agent they render is truly made present to the worshiper in a revelatory encounter' (*Uses of Scripture*, p. 47).

Kelsey's very next words show why his interpretation is inadequate (though not completely wrong): 'Thus the authority of scripture is understood in *functional* terms. The texts are authoritative not in virtue of any inherent property they may have, such as being inerrant or inspired, but in virtue of a function they fill in the life of the Christian community' (*ibid.*). This is not quite true. First, Barth repeatedly claims (as I demonstrate below) that it is an inherent property—the Bible's nature as testimony to revelation—which makes the Bible authoritative. Kelsey is aware that Barth makes this kind of claim (see p. 47), but he is unable to give it due weight because he has failed to recognize the importance of Barth's testimony language. Secondly, this failure is exacerbated by Kelsey's attempt to account for Barth's discussion of the *present* nature of the Word of God too early. Barth discusses in KD I/1 how a reader (or hearer) of the Bible's testimony is able to experience God's Word as present to them. Kelsey, in focusing on narrative, jumps to the conclusion that this occurs whenever the text functions to render an agent (who is God or Jesus). This seems to imply that it is a literary feature that makes the Word of God present. I show in Chapter 5 why this does not make sense of Barth's position. Thirdly, Kelsey seems to have confused 'authority' with 'what makes the Bible work for an individual'. These are different (though not unrelated) things. The former has to do with how a community agrees on what will regulate them in belief and action, while the latter has to do with how individuals within a community come to faith.

Now undoubtedly Barth's interpretation of narrative is important, and Kelsey and Ford have noticed some important things by focusing on it. But, in my opinion, they have gone too far in claiming that narrative interpretation is the key to understanding Barth's use of the Bible. The correct procedure is to first understand Barth's testimony language and then to understand his narrative interpretation in the light of that. I will return to Kelsey and Ford later.

For now I want to make one further point about narrative theology in general. A number of literary theorists of the Bible, perhaps building on Kelsey's and Ford's work, have claimed parallels between Barth and themselves. (Bruce McCormack cites Mark I. Wallace as an example.) They see the Bible's importance located in its nature as a literary work of art, and see its reference to historical events as being relatively unimportant. Wallace says that for current literary theorists *and for Barth*, 'the Bible's meaning is not located in the historical realities or authorial intentions behind the text, but in the language-specific realities spoken of within the text' (quoted by McCormack in 'Historical Criticism and Dogmatic Interest', p. 324). Ford thinks that, when Barth interprets Biblical narrative, 'the historical referent is not the meaning of the passages' (*Barth and God's Story*, p. 89).

But this misrepresents Barth. For him, 'the historical referent' is the meaning. As we have seen, this is because God always reveals himself *in history*. However, as I will show, the historical referent is not discovered by treating the Bible as historical source, but by treating it as testimony.

often do, or as a synonym for 'collection of propositional truths', as some fundamentalists do.

Here are some words from the beginning of a crucial section on 'The Word of God Revealed':

The Bible is the concrete medium [*das konkrete Mittel*] through which the Church recollects God's past revelation [*geschene Offenbarung*]...The Bible, then, is not in itself and as such God's past revelation...The Bible...bears witness to past revelation.¹⁰

Barth wishes to make it absolutely clear that he means this testimony language very seriously, so he continues:

Therefore the decisive relation of the Church to revelation is its attestation by the Bible. Its attestation [*Ihre Bezeugung*]¹¹

In part 2 of the *Prolegomena* to the *Dogmatik*, we find his calling the belief that Scripture is the witness of divine revelation, 'our basic principle [*unseres Grundsatzes*]'.¹²

These sentences make it crystal clear that, for Barth, those who interpret the Bible from within the church should treat it as testimony, and that such interpretation is intended to be central to his own theological enterprise. Therefore, it would seem obvious that my next step should be to describe and analyse just what 'testimony' is. Unfortunately, the matter is not quite that simple, because Barth adds a rather difficult qualification. This qualification, in my opinion, has led many of Barth's interpreters astray, resulting in one of the misinterpretations mentioned earlier. I need to deal with it carefully before returning to the matter of 'testimony'.

A Difficult Qualification

In what follows I set out the continuation of the quotation, with Barth's additional qualification in italics:

Once again, the Bible is not in itself and as such God's past revelation. But *in as far as it is God's Word* it bears witness to God's past revelation, and it is God's past revelation in the form of witness. *In as far as the Canon*, the 'staff' which commands and sets on the move and points the way, *is moved by a living outstretched hand* [*von einer lebendigen ausgereckten Hand bewegt wird*], just as the water was moved in the Pool of Bethesda so that it might thereby become a means of healing, then it bears witness...¹³

Without this qualification, Barth would be committed to the belief that any person who interprets the Bible correctly (i.e. as testimony to revelation) has direct access to revelation. And, because revelation is God's self-revelation, that person would have direct access to God.

Now, in Barth's view, God is always free, including at those times when he reveals himself,¹⁴ and so direct access to God is only possible if he both permits and enables it. Thus Barth argues that the Bible is only testimony to revelation when God

¹⁰KD I/1, p. 114 (CD, p. 111).

¹¹KD I/1, p. 114 (CD, p. 111).

¹²KD I/2, p. 524 (CD, p. 473).

¹³KD I/1, p. 114 (CD, p. 111).

¹⁴According to Barth, God reveals himself as Lord, and, with respect to God, 'Lordship means freedom [*Herrschaft heisst Freiheit*]...Godhead in the Bible means freedom, ontic and noetic autonomy [*ontische und noetische Eigenständigkeit*]' (KD I/1, p. 323 [CD, pp. 306-307]).

3. *Testimony in Barth and Modern Thought*

has a hand in it, when he allows it to be his Word. Provision of this permission and enabling, Barth argues a little later, is the work of the Holy Spirit.¹⁵

The function of the qualification, therefore, is to safeguard God's freedom. Unfortunately, it has widely been understood in a different sense. On the one hand, it has been understood by supposedly more historically sensitive theologians as an attempt to mystify the hermeneutical process and so to overcome historical difficulties. On the other hand, it has been seen by more conservative theologians as the substitution of Existentialist philosophy for a properly Christian doctrine of scriptural authority. That is, on the one hand, it is seen as a denial of the problems introduced by modern thought, while, on the other hand, it is seen as capitulation to modern thought!

Anthony Thiselton exemplifies the first position. Thiselton agrees that Barth has the right 'starting-point' when he emphasises the discontinuity between the Word of God and all human thought and experiences. It is also true, says Thiselton, that the 'Holy Spirit is active in interpreting the Word of God to men'. But Barth has gone 'beyond this starting-point, so that at times it seems to be implied that the Spirit's communication of the Word of God is somehow independent of all ordinary processes of human understanding.'¹⁶ Thiselton approves of John Maquarrie's assertion that Barth's 'kind of thinking about the role of the Holy Spirit...tends to make the Spirit into a mysterious *tertium quid* which stands over against both God and man.'¹⁷ Thiselton argues that Barth's position is an unnecessary mystification because 'it in no way diminishes the crucial importance of the Holy Spirit to say that the Spirit works *through* the normal processes of human understanding, and neither independently of them nor contrary to them.'¹⁸

But *does* Barth argue the Spirit works independently of and contrary to human understanding? In support of his interpretation, Thiselton quotes Barth's following words: 'This Word of God can only confront and illuminate man as truth and reality if it is seen to run counter to his whole natural capacity to understand'.¹⁹ Presumably, Thiselton is equating the Word of God and the Holy Spirit, if he thinks this sentence proves his thesis. But that goes against the whole of Barth's trinitarian theology: for Barth, the Holy Spirit is to be distinguished from the Word of God precisely at this point.

When God reveals himself, he does so in the form of the Word of God. Yet that form remains imperceptible by human beings unless, as it were, the Holy Spirit opens their eyes to see it.²⁰ It is not my task here to expand on Barth's doctrine of the Trinity (though I will return to the matter later). My point simply is that, according to Barth, it is *the Word of God* which runs counter to the human capacity to understand, while it is the Holy Spirit that nevertheless causes us to understand. (The Word of God, by

¹⁵The doctrine of the Trinity is important here. God the Father reveals himself in God the Son (i.e. permitted and enabled by) the Holy Spirit. Thus, the Spirit 'imparts' revelation to humans (KD I/1, p. 342 [CD, p. 324]), and is 'the subjective side [*die subjektive Seite*] in the event of revelation' (KD I/1, p. 472 [CD, p. 449]).

¹⁶A.C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1980), p. 89.

¹⁷Cited in Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, p. 90.

¹⁸*Two Horizons*, p. 90.

¹⁹*Two Horizons*, p. 89. The sentence is from Barth's famous essay, 'Rudolph Bultmann—An Attempt to Understand Him', in Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 123.

²⁰See KD I/1, pp. 338-39, 470-514 (CD, pp. 320-32, 448-89).

the way, is of itself incomprehensible because it is God, and God is beyond human understanding.²¹)

It is my contention, therefore, that Barth's argument runs in the opposite direction to the way Thiselton has understood it. The Holy Spirit's work is to enable 'the normal processes of human understanding' to understand something which otherwise could not be understood. I will seek to prove that later, but first I must deal with the second of the misinterpretations I mentioned earlier, which says that Barth has imposed Existentialist philosophy at this point.

As I mentioned, this second criticism is popular among conservative theologians in particular, though it is not limited to them.²² Conservatives seem to be afraid that Barth's approach to the Bible leads to a loss of biblical authority.²³ They argue that his denial of inerrancy in particular will lead people to doubt the Bible's ability to reliably tell them 'what God has done'. The point of interest for us is that these critics argue that Barth attempts to shore up biblical authority by over-stressing the present action of the Word in the believer.²⁴ This 'over-stressing' tends to be blamed on Barth's supposed failure to rid himself of existentialist influences.

The criticism seems to stem from a work entitled *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture* by the Dutch Reformed scholar, Klaas Runia, published in 1962. Runia argues that, if someone says the witness is fallible but that God nevertheless reveals himself through it, this means,

that God reveals Himself through a witness that in fact speaks quite differently from what it ought to say! In other words, the propositional aspect of the revelation...is here *sacrificed to the personal existential aspect of the meeting with God.*²⁵

I will show where Runia has gone wrong with respect to how God can reveal himself through a fallible witness in Chapter 5. For now, I am interested only in the matter of Barth's supposed existentialism. Towards the end of his book, Runia concludes that,

it is, of course, quite possible that in spite of all good intentions there are more philosophical presuppositions in a theology than the theologian realises...

We do believe that this also happens in Barth's theology and that it applies in particular to his conception of revelation. Although we find many genuinely scriptural elements in this conception, yet there are undoubtedly

²¹Of course, this way of putting the matter is not the whole picture. The phrase 'The Word of God' implies the idea of communication, and therefore implies that the Word of God is comprehensible. Therefore, it has to be added that, in Barth's view, God's action in the Holy Spirit is not separable from his action in the Word of God. God is unity. So part of God's self-revelation in the Word is his enabling certain people to perceive that revelation.

²²A lot of other theologians seem content to accept that Barth is an Existentialist, so that they can then point out his supposed hypocrisy in accusing Bultmann of being too philosophically predisposed!

²³For example, Geoffrey Bromiley argues that, though there is much to be commended about Barth's view, its great weakness is in the area of authority (see 'The Authority of Scripture in Karl Barth', pp. 275-94, esp. pp. 290-92).

²⁴Bromiley considers that 'Barth's muted championship of the past inspiration of Scripture as compared with its present inspiring produces further uncertainty about its objective authority. Is it authoritative because God inspired it once and for all, or is it authoritative only ad hoc as God inspires it when heard or read?' ('Authority', p. 291).

²⁵*Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture*, p. 177, my italics.

also elements which have not been derived from the Bible, but have their origin in the *present-day existentialistic-personalistic way of thinking*.²⁶

Now the problem with this interpretation of Barth is that it runs counter to what Barth explicitly says about existentialism. In the Preface to *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik I/1* (the very volume on which Runia bases much of his argument), Barth tells us that, 'in this second draft of the book I have done my best to exclude anything in the first draft that could appear to find for theology a foundation, support, or justification in existentialist philosophy'.²⁷ Barth does freely admit that before the *Dogmatik* his theology had an existentialist appearance, particularly in its references to Kierkegaard. He is confident though that his new approach really was a new approach: 'I had to change my own learning a second time...Because I cannot regard subjectivity as being the truth, after a brief encounter I have had to move away from Kierkegaard again.'²⁸

Of course, Runia and others assert that despite this Barth still retains vestiges of existentialism. But what do they mean? That Barth was subconsciously in thrall to existentialism perhaps? And, in spite of his own best efforts, it 'came out' in his writing? It seems incredible that Barth could have been using a sophisticated philosophy such as existentialism without realising it. On the other hand, if the critics only mean that Barth makes use of some existential language and ideas, then their criticism loses all force. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, Barth explicitly appropriates all kinds of philosophical terms and concepts.²⁹

More importantly, what is the evidence for the invasion of existentialism in his theology? For these critics, it is Barth's addition of the qualification I have been discussing, namely that the reader of the Bible only has access to revelation when God enables it. Put positively this means that the reader (or hearer) of the Bible's testimony, when moved by the Holy Spirit, perceives the Word of God, and in that way meets with God. Now there is no mention of, or need for, existentialism here, but conservative theologians have been prone to read it in. Listen to this (admittedly rather extreme example):

To him [sc. Barth] there were no doubt many human errors and imperfections in the biblical record, even in the autographs. How then could the Bible be God's perfect Word when it was really, in many places, a record of man's erring words? The answer was simple and forthright: the Bible *becomes* the Word of God when He chooses to use this imperfect channel to confront man with His perfect word. For Barth, the Bible and the Bible alone uniquely reveals God to man: not in *propositions* about God, but as a means of *personal encounter* by God with man in an act of revelation. In this existential experience, crisis encounter, the meaningless ink blots on the pages leap from the Bible to speak to man concretely and meaningfully. At

²⁶*Barth's Doctrine*, p. 202, Runia's italics. When Christina Baxter says Barth's 'exegesis never escaped from the existentialism he learnt so well from Kierkegaard' ('Barth—A Truly Biblical Theologian?', p. 24), I presume she has simply accepted Runia's judgment, since she offers no evidence for her claim. This is unusual in Baxter, because the rest of her work is an excellent example of careful scholarship.

²⁷KD I/1, p. viii (CD, p. xiii).

²⁸Quoted in Busch, *Karl Barth*, p. 173. Examples of Barth's denial that existentialism had a place in his theology could be multiplied, for example, from his criticisms of Bultmann's use of existentialism.

²⁹Runia, for example, agrees that 'the personal, existential aspect' is present in 'the meeting with God' (*Barth's Doctrine*, p. 177).

this "moment of meaning," the Bible *becomes* the Word of God to the individual.³⁰

Nothing could be further from Barth's view than the final few sentences of this quotation. (Though it has to be said that there is one short passage in KD I/2, p. 588, where Barth allowed his rhetoric to run away with him, which can be interpreted this way. I deal with the passage in Chapter 7.³¹) Yet the interpretation has gained popularity in conservative circles.³² Its influence can even be felt in Christina Baxter's otherwise excellent study of Barth's use of the Bible, when she says,

The fact is that for Barth all historical witness is reliable in so far as God speaks through it, and unreliable in so far as it is human and therefore errant words. The author's intended meaning is important only because it is the witness which God chooses to use.³³

(I will demonstrate later how Baxter has misunderstood Barth's reliance on testimony.) The key point is that this second way of (mis)interpreting Barth's qualification of how the reader perceives the Word of God has come about because of the myth of Barth's existentialism.

We should also note how similar is the effect of this misinterpretation to the one offered by Thiselton and others. Thiselton argues that Barth's invocation of the Holy Spirit involves a denial of 'the normal processes of human understanding'. In effect this latter interpretation does just the same. It presents Barth as one who puts existential encounter in place of cognitive understanding. It says that for Barth the meaning of the words in the Bible does not matter, so long as the person meets with God when reading them.³⁴

I have shown that Barth has largely been misunderstood in his qualification of how we have access to revelation through the testimony of the Bible. It remains to try and make clear what he does mean by the qualification. To do that we need to look a little more at his discussion of the action of the Holy Spirit and his understanding of 'inspiration'.

As is well known, Barth's theology is founded on the claim that God has revealed himself to human beings. Put simplistically, this claim involves two elements, first that God *can and does* reveal himself and secondly that human beings *can and do* know and experience that revelation. In *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* I/2, Barth discusses this second issue in a section called 'The Outpouring [*Ausgiessung*] of the Holy Spirit'.³⁵ Barth uses the phrase 'freedom for God [*Die Freiheit für Gott*]'³⁶ to express his belief

³⁰N.L. Geisler and W.E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), p. 40.

³¹Pp. 128-29. In CD the passage is found on pp. 529-30.

³²Presumably because conservatives have found it difficult to conceive of anything other than an inerrant Bible effectively communicating cognitive truth about the Word of God. I speculate that in consequence they think that those who believe in an errant Bible must receive from it in a non-cognitive way, or that God over-rides the untruth that it actually communicates.

³³Christina Baxter, 'The Movement from Exegesis to Dogmatics in the Theology of Karl Barth, with special reference to Romans, Philippians and Church Dogmatics', p. 89. In the preceding sentence Baxter says Barth 'does not put any heavy emphasis on the eye-witness, who might be supposed to guarantee historical reliability.' It is a large part of my thesis to show that this conclusion is wrong. Presumably Baxter has reached it partly because of the influence of the conservative critique and partly because she has failed to see the importance of Barth's appeal to testimony.

³⁴I am surprised that Baxter has not seen this incongruity in her interpretation, for the rest of her study is spent demonstrating that *the meaning of the words* is crucial to Barth.

³⁵KD I/2, pp. 222-504 (CD, pp. 203-454).

³⁶The title of the first subsection of 'The Outpouring of the Holy Spirit' is 'The Freedom Of Man for God' (KD I/2, pp. 222-64 [CD, pp. 203-42]).

that human beings can and do know and experience God's revelation. Yet he consistently asserts that this freedom is only made possible by the Holy Spirit: 'we are not free for God other than in the Holy Spirit'.³⁷

If that assertion is not intended to be a mystification, a displacement of the human processes of understanding—as the first interpretation I outlined claims—then what is it? It is exactly what it says, a claim that we can only know God if God (the Holy Spirit) permits and enables us to know him.³⁸ The problem is that the critics have understood it to be saying something more. They have assumed that, as well as saying something about the way God acts in the process, Barth is saying something about human understanding, namely that it is not operative.

It can easily be established that Barth is not saying that human understanding is inoperative by looking at what he says about 'inspiration'. The concept of 'inspiration' is usually seen as having to do with how the words of the Bible came to be written down. But in Barth's opinion it is wrong to limit it to that. According to him, inspiration also means the enabling of the original witnesses to perceive revelation, and the enabling of the readers and hearers to do the same:

That the mystery [sc. of revelation] is disclosed to [the witness] is the first thing, and that he can speak of it the second...But the mystery of God, now entrusted to the human witness [*dem menschlichen Zeugen anvertraute*], will remain a mystery... if its self-disclosure [*Selbsterschließung*] does not go a step further, even in its form as a human witness, if the same Spirit who has created the witness does not bear witness of its truth to men, to those who hear and read. This self-disclosure *in its totality* is *theopneustia*, the inspiration of the word of the prophets and apostles.³⁹

Thus, for Barth, the Holy Spirit is involved in three steps: (1) the Spirit enables the witness to perceive revelation and (2) to communicate what has been perceived, and (3) the Spirit enables the reader (or hearer) also to perceive the revelation through what is communicated.

Now 'inspiration', says Barth, does indeed indicate that the Holy Spirit is the real author of what is stated or written in Scripture, and therefore it also indicates that in an important sense the human authors can be spoken of as secondary: 'They speak as *auctores secundarii*.'⁴⁰ But,

there can be no question of any ignoring or violating [*Beseitigung oder Beeinträchtigung*] of their *auctoritas* and therefore of their humanity. Moreover what we experience elsewhere of the work of the Holy Spirit on man in general and on such witnesses in particular...does not allow us to suppose that we have to understand what we are told here [sc. in 2 Pet. 1.19-21] about the authors of the Holy Scriptures, as though they were not real

³⁷KD I/2, p. 265-67 (CD, p. 243).

³⁸Without the operation of the Holy Spirit, for example, Jesus could only be known as a human being, not as also God. This of course ties up with my discussion in Chapter 2 of Barth's attitude to the 'historical Jesus' and also of the place of Jesus' resurrection in his theology.

³⁹CD I/2, p. 516, my italics (KD, p. 573). Barth seeks to show that this understanding is exegetically justifiable by expounding two passages by Paul, 1 Cor. 2.6-16 and 2 Cor. 3.4-18 (see pp. 514-16 [KD, pp. 571-72]). He argues that these two passages speak of the action of the Spirit in all three areas. He also assumes that Paul 'for his part affirmed a special inspiration of scripture by God' (p. 515 [KD, p. 571]). Therefore he claims to be justified in regarding the *theopneustia* of 2 Tim. 3.16 (even though he is aware it may not have been written by Paul) as expressing a pauline sentiment (p. 516 [KD, p. 572]).

Consequently, Barth claims to be justified in using 'inspiration' in a broader manner than has been traditional. We need not make a judgment about this matter here, since we are looking only at *what* Barth argues the Holy Spirit does, not at whether he has used the right term to describe it.

⁴⁰CD I/2, p. 505 (KD, p. 560).

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auctores, as though in what they spoke or wrote they did not make use of their full human capacities [*menschlichen Möglichkeiten*] throughout the whole range of what is contained in this idea and concept.⁴¹

Thus Barth is adamant that, in steps (1) and (2) mentioned above, affirmation of the work of the Holy Spirit does not mean denial of 'the ordinary processes of human understanding'. Next, he introduces the reason why:

Theopneustia in the bounds of biblical thinking cannot mean anything but the special attitude of obedience [*besondere Gehorsamstellung*] in those who are elected and called to this special service. The special element in this attitude of obedience lay in the particularity, i.e., the immediacy [*Unmittelbarkeit*] of its relationship to the revelation which is unique by restriction in time, and therefore in the particular nature of what they had to say and write as eye-witnesses and ear-witnesses, the first fruits of the Church. But in nature and bearing their attitude of obedience was of itself—both outwardly and inwardly—only that of true and upright men [*echten und rechten Menschen*].⁴²

In order to make it absolutely clear that he is not introducing any mystification or any *tertium quid* between God and human beings, Barth emphasises that this obedience is freely given:

In particular, [their obedience] did not mean any abolition of their freedom, their self-determination. How could their obedience be obedience unless it was rendered freely? But if it was rendered freely, we can only say that they themselves and of themselves [*wirklich selber und von sich*] thought and spoke and wrote what they did think and speak and write as genuine *auctores* [*als echte auctores*].⁴³

And this means that each wrote,

within his own psychological, biographical and historical possibilities [*Möglichkeiten*], and therefore within the limits set by those possibilities. Their action was their own, and like every human action, an act conditioned by and itself conditioning its temporal and spatial environment [*ihre zeitliche und räumliche Umwelt*].⁴⁴

Inspiration, then, at least in steps (1) and (2), is just what Thiselton wants it to be: 'the Spirit works *through* the normal processes of human understanding, and neither independently of them nor contrary to them.'⁴⁵

But is it also true that step (3) mentioned above, where the Spirit enables the reader (or hearer) to perceive the revelation, means also an 'attitude of obedience'? Yes it is. Therefore step (3) also emphatically does not mean a denial of 'the normal processes of human understanding'. However, that is easily obscured by the fact that Barth discusses it in terms of faith.

It would be going too far to discuss in detail Barth's understanding of 'faith'. For now I want to emphasise that it is not intended as a 'mystification' of the reading process. Rather, faith (or 'believing') is that ordering of the ordinary human faculties which is appropriate to its object, God:

Believing [*Glauben*] does, of course, involve recognising and knowing [*Erkennen und Wissen*]. Believing is not an obscure and indeterminate feeling [*dunkles, gestaltloses Fühlen*]. It is a clear hearing, apperceiving, thinking and

⁴¹CD I/2, p. 505 (KD, p. 560).

⁴²CD I/2, p. 505 (KD, p. 560).

⁴³CD I/2, p. 505 (KD, p. 560).

⁴⁴CD I/2, p. 505 (KD, p. 560).

⁴⁵*Two Horizons*, p. 90.

then speaking and doing. Believing is also a free human act, i.e., one which is not destroyed or disturbed by any magic...⁴⁶

And this ordering of the faculties is determined by the object, God. So faith is, a free act which as such is conditioned and determined by an encounter [*Begegnung*], a challenge [*Anruf*], an act of lordship [*Herrschaftsakt*] which confronts man...Therefore believing is not something arbitrary. It does not control its object. It is a recognising, knowing, hearing, apperceiving, thinking, speaking and doing which is over-mastered by its object [*von seinem Gegenstand bemächtigt*].⁴⁷

Of course, such a situation is a situation of obedience: 'Faith can in fact only be obedience and a clinging to the Word as a free human decision.'⁴⁸ And again, just as with the original witnesses, this obedience involves nothing more than 'the normal human processes'.

It cannot be my purpose to justify this equation of 'faith' and 'obedience', or even to justify Barth's claim that faith is the means by which we can know God. The point at stake for us is that, despite the introduction of the concepts of inspiration and faith, there is no mystification of the reading (or understanding) process going on. The Bible is to be read as a book written by human beings who in and of themselves are no different from other human beings. If it is not read in this way, that to which it witnesses will not be perceived:

[T]here is no point in ignoring the writtenness [*Schriftlichkeit*] of Holy Writ for the sake of its holiness, its *humanity* [*Menschlichkeit*] for the sake of its divinity [*Göttlichkeit*]...We must study it, for it is here or nowhere that we shall find its divinity. The Bible is a witness of revelation which is really given and really applies and is really received by us just because it is a written word, and in fact a word written by men like ourselves, which we can read and hear and understand as such. And it is as such that we must read and hear and understand it if this is to happen at all and there is to be any apprehension of revelation.⁴⁹

Barth does have a reason, though, for introducing inspiration (i.e. the work of the Holy Spirit) and faith. His purpose is to affirm that when, by means of the normal reading process, people succeed in coming to know the Word of God, they do so only because God enables and permits it. He enables and permits it by his *Holy Spirit* creating *faith* in the person. There is no question of this replacing the normal process of understanding, rather it corresponds to and works with that process. The 'normal side of things' can only be described by 'normal means', while the 'spiritual side of things' can only be described by 'spiritual means'.

Thus, Barth asserts that the affirmation of the work of the Spirit in making the Word of God ('objective revelation') real in a human's experience ('subjective revelation') is made only for its own sake, and cannot be further analysed into its constituent parts within ordinary processes:

Subjective revelation [*die subjektive Offenbarung*] can consist only in the fact that objective revelation [*die objektive Offenbarung*]...comes to man and is recognised and acknowledged by man. And that is the work of the Holy Spirit. About that work there is nothing specific we can say. We can speak

⁴⁶CD I/2, p. 506 (KD, p. 561).

⁴⁷CD I/2, p. 506 (KD, p. 561).

⁴⁸KD I/2, p. 568 (CD, p. 512). The German is: *Der Glaube kann ja nur Gehorsam sein und am Wort hängen, als eigene freie Entscheidung des Menschen...*

⁴⁹CD I/2, pp. 463-64 (KD, pp. 512-13), Barth's emphasis (not shown in English translation).

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of it only by sheer repetition, that is, by repeating what is told us objectively, that 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.'⁵⁰

This long discussion of Barth's qualification of how the Bible is testimony to revelation now comes to an end. My conclusion is that, despite this qualification, Barth intends 'testimony' to be understood in a normal sense. The Bible witnesses by normal human means, and we are to seek to understand the witness in the same way as we would understand other testimony, though at the same time bearing the qualification about God's freedom in mind. We have gone a long way to establish something apparently very simple. We have had to go that way because Barth has been understood by so many scholars to be espousing something very different.

What I intend to do now is consider the way testimony has been regarded in the modern, Western intellectual tradition. This discussion will then enable us to clarify just why Barth's dependence on the Bible *as testimony to revelation* has been either ignored or rejected by modern theology. I will then be ready in Chapters 4 and 5 to return to my original task of describing substantively what Barth means by his testimony language.

b. *Testimony in the Modern Intellectual Tradition*⁵¹

Testimony [*Zeugnis*], at its most basic, has to do with one person reporting something to another person.⁵² In practice, we all rely on this sort of testimony and its more 'sophisticated' forms all the time. We ask people to tell us the time, we rely on what the newsreader tells us on the One O'clock news, we believe friends when they tell us what they did yesterday. More 'sophisticated' forms of testimony on which we rely are roadsigns, maps and newspapers. This reliance occurs not just in 'ordinary' life, but also when we engage in 'methodologically rigorous' pursuits such as science. Scientists regularly rely on the reported results of other scientists, the word of laboratory assistants and so on.⁵³

However, despite the central importance of testimony as a means of attaining to knowledge, it has had a bad press in recent centuries. The reason, according to the philosopher C.A.J. Coady, goes back to the emergence in the post-Renaissance Western world of a dominant individualist ideology.⁵⁴ Coady points out that, if we are prepared to admit the considerable effects this ideology has had on notions such as freedom, right and society—and we surely must admit this—then, 'we should not be surprised to find similarly notable consequences for such concepts as knowledge, truth, rationality, and evidence.'⁵⁵ Coady's point is that, though we all place enormous reliance upon what others tell us, when we theorise we tend to disparage testimony as a means to knowledge:

⁵⁰CD I/2, p. 239 (KD, p. 261).

⁵¹I owe a great deal of what follows to the work of the philosopher C.A.J. Coady in his book *Testimony—A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

⁵²I will give more precision to the term soon, but this is adequate for now.

⁵³A number of essays seeking to demonstrate that testimony and trust are crucial elements in the acquisition of scientific knowledge have been produced in recent years. See, for example, J.Hardwig, 'The Role of Trust in Knowledge', *The Journal of Philosophy* 88.12 (December 1991), pp. 693-708; M.O. Webb, 'Why I Know about as much as you: A Reply to Hardwig', *The Journal of Philosophy* 90.5 (May 1993), pp. 260-70. For an opposing view, see J.E.Adler, 'Testimony, Trust, Knowing', *The Journal of Philosophy* 91.5 (May 1994), pp. 264-75.

⁵⁴*Testimony*, p. 13.

⁵⁵*Testimony*, p. 13.

It may be no accident that the rise of an individualist ideology coincided with the emergence of the theory of knowledge as a central philosophical concern but, accident or not, the coincidence was likely to cast into shadow the importance of our intellectual reliance upon one another...⁵⁶

If this is true, then it is no surprise that Barth's reliance on testimony has also been 'cast into shadow'.

Coady goes on to point out the 'individualist rhetoric' of such influential philosophers as Descartes and John Locke, and their corresponding rejection of the possibility of knowledge through the word of others. The following words from Locke provide a good example:

I hope it will not be thought arrogance to say, that perhaps we should make greater progress in the discovery of rational and contemplative knowledge if we sought it in the fountain, in the consideration of things themselves, and made use *rather of our own thoughts than other men's* to find it: for I think we may as rationally hope to see with other men's eyes as to know by other men's understanding... *The floating of other men's opinions in our brains makes us not one jot the more knowing, though they happen to be true.*⁵⁷

In other words, if another person tells me something, unless I can justify it in some other way, I do not know it to be true, even if the other person knew it to be true. What is knowledge for the other person can never be more than mere opinion or belief for me. In Locke's words, 'What in them was science is in us but opiniatry.'⁵⁸

Now before I give an account of Coady's criticisms of this position I want to highlight the importance of two other philosophers in what I have called the 'disparagement of testimony'. These two are of special interest to us because of their influence in the world of theology. The first is David Hume.⁵⁹

Coady points out that Hume is one of the few philosophers to have discussed testimony seriously, and he considers that 'if any view has a claim to the title of "the received view" it is his.' Hume's discussion has had particular influence on theology because it is offered in his essay on miracles,⁶⁰ an essay which, whether approved or disapproved by theologians, has certainly had influence on them.

Essentially, Hume's argument is that we should not believe in a miracle simply because someone else claims to have observed one. Clearly this argument requires it to be shown that testimony, at least in the case of miracles, cannot be relied upon. The problem then is to show why it is that most of the time we can rely on testimony, while on certain special occasions we cannot. Hume's solution is to take what Coady calls the 'reductive'⁶¹ approach. He argues that testimony can be reduced to more basic forms of evidence, namely an individual's own observations and his or her inferences from them. The individual observes that in normal circumstances testimony is reliable and draws the inference that testimony can usually be relied upon. However, when the testimony is to something abnormal the inference no longer applies and testimony ought not to be relied upon.

⁵⁶*Testimony*, p. 13.

⁵⁷Cited by Coady, *Testimony*, p. 14, my italics.

⁵⁸Coady, *Testimony*, p. 14.

⁵⁹It may be a little unfair to imply that Hume 'disparaged' testimony, since he recognized both its importance and usefulness in the processes of everyday thinking. However, my thesis is that a 'disparagement' of testimony among theologians can be traced back in large part to Hume's ideas.

⁶⁰Found in section 10 of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.

⁶¹See *Testimony*, pp. 22-23.

I propose to go no further for the moment than this rather sparse description of Hume's argument (though I will return to the points at issue later). What I want to emphasise here is that, after Hume, anyone placing reliance on the biblical testimony to the miraculous would appear suspect to 'rational thinkers'. Now, to be sure, Barth places reliance not so much on 'testimony to miracles' as on 'testimony to revelation'. But I suspect this distinction is felt by many to be so fine as to disappear. Hume's argument seems to have militated against 'testimony to revelation' being taken seriously as a viable basis for theology.

The second philosopher I want to mention as a 'disparager of testimony' is R.G. Collingwood. Collingwood is of particular interest to us, firstly because of his discussion of the role of written reports (a type of testimony) in historical research, and secondly because he has been very influential in the thinking of many of Barth's critics. Harvey, for example, whom we came across in the previous chapter, makes much use of Collingwood. Perhaps even more tellingly, 'Bultmann explicitly acknowledges the kinship of his views and Collingwood's.'⁶²

Collingwood's belief is that history should not be done according to what he calls 'the common sense theory', which he defines as follows:

If an event or state of things is to be historically known, first of all someone must be acquainted with it; then he must remember it; then he must state his recollection of it in terms intelligible to another; and finally the other must accept the statement as true. History is thus the believing of someone else when he says that he remembers something. The believer is the historian; the person believed is called his authority.⁶³

What is sometimes called the 'scissors and paste' method is based on this, which respects testimony but 'exhibits a degree of selection from and criticism of texts and authorities which is not allowed by the common sense theory.'⁶⁴ Even the critical history written in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was only a more sophisticated version of 'scissors and paste' method, for it involved 'a systematic examination of the credibility of authorities and an attempt to establish principles whereby such credibility could be assessed'.⁶⁵

Only the scientific history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has escaped this thrall and established a method of imaginative reconstruction. Rather than giving testimony from the past the place of authority,

the historian is his own authority and his thought autonomous, self-authorizing, possessed of a criterion to which his so-called authorities must conform and by reference to which they are criticized.⁶⁶

Far from being 'respectful' of testimony, the sources are to be 'put to the torture'. Following Collingwood, Harvey argues that once there has been 'rigorous cross-examination' it may be that the

historian *confers* authority upon a witness... Like Bacon's scientist, who does not merely observe nature but puts specific questions to it, the historian calls

⁶²These are the words of D.E. Nineham (*The Use and Abuse of the Bible* [London: MacMillan Press, 1976] p. 216) who refers us to Bultmann's *History and Eschatology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1957), e.g. p. 130.

⁶³Quoted by Coady, *Testimony*, p. 235. The quotation is originally from R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1970), pp. 234-35.

⁶⁴Coady, *Testimony*, pp. 235-36.

⁶⁵Coady, *Testimony*, p. 235.

⁶⁶Quoted approvingly by Harvey in *Historian*, p. 40.

his witnesses to the stand and extorts information from them 'which in their original statements they have withheld, either because they did not wish to give it or because they did not possess it.'⁶⁷

A useful summary of Collingwood's view of the (non)relationship between history and testimony is provided in his discussion of the concept of 'chronicle'.

'Chronicle' refers to the results provided by the 'scissors and paste' method.

Chronicle then is the past as merely believed upon testimony but not historically known...History so far from depending on testimony has therefore *no relation with testimony at all*.⁶⁸

All this means that theologians who have followed Collingwood have been virtually blind to the possibility that Barth offers 'good reason' for his assertions about what God has done in history. Of course, if testimony in fact is not suitable to provide 'good reason', then this blindness will not matter. Therefore, I will need to demonstrate that it is suitable. Before then I wish to spend a short time considering this theological 'blindness'.

Blindness to Testimony

Dennis Nineham provides a fine example of a theologian who seems unable to perceive Barth's appeal to testimony. In his influential book, *The Use and Abuse of the Bible*, Nineham emphasises his agreement with the modern change of attitude towards history outlined by Collingwood (and others such as Troeltsch and Dilthey), and he argues that theology as a whole must accept this change. I have already demonstrated in Chapters 1 and 2 why this argument has little force with respect to Barth, but what matters here is the consequent attitude Nineham has towards Barth's assertions about history.

Nineham recognizes the argument that it would be wrong to say *a priori* that God cannot intervene in history. It is no *logical* impossibility since, at least by some definitions, God is able to do anything:

[W]e have to allow that he may from time to time have intervened in ways essentially 'incalculable and unpredictable'... We shall have to allow for the possibility that certain periods of the past will exhibit what Barth calls an element of 'sacred incomprehensibility' such as the historian does not normally take account of, or need to take account of.⁶⁹

It is therefore logically possible that God has 'intervened in history'. But 'logical possibility' is not nearly the same thing as 'historical probability', and so we need actual evidence if we wish to assert that God has in fact intervened in history. So Nineham says:

Nevertheless, there is another side to the matter. Just as we have no right to dictate to God what he *cannot* have done, so we have no right to dictate to him what he *must* have done. We may only believe that he has intervened in history in certain exceptional events if he has given us good ground for thinking he has done so.⁷⁰

Now it seems to me that this is a perfectly reasonable argument. Nineham accepts that God's acting in history is a logical possibility, but makes the counter

⁶⁷Harvey, *Historian*, p. 42. The latter are Collingwood's words.

⁶⁸Cited by Coady in *Testimony*, p. 238, my italics.

⁶⁹*Use and Abuse*, p. 81.

⁷⁰*Use and Abuse*, p. 81.

point that we need good reason if we are to believe that he has done so. The problem is what comes next.

Nineham proposes that we use the terminology of 'positive warrants'⁷¹ to express this need: 'What positive warrants have we—what warrants, that is, satisfactory to a person of integrity in the twentieth century—for supposing that God has intervened in times past in a way different in principle from any we know now?' He acknowledges that, in the kind of view proposed by Barth, the biblical writers 'are seen as "witnesses" ...able to bear testimony to what they, or their fairly immediate predecessors, had witnessed'.⁷² Nevertheless, having borne that in mind, 'the question is even more pressing: *what are the grounds for our acceptance of these historical reports?*'⁷³

In other words, the historical reports themselves, the 'testimony', will not be allowed to count as grounds, or 'positive warrants' for asserting that God has acted in history. There has been a strange move here. Nineham began by asking simply that God give us 'good ground' that he has acted, but now he requires something more: that we be given grounds for accepting biblical testimony. In other words, he requires that we be given grounds for accepting the grounds that (at least in Barth's view) we have already been given, namely testimony. The explanation can only be that Nineham is blind to the possibility of testimony itself being 'good ground' for 'a person of integrity in the twentieth century'.

Thus Nineham concludes that,

supernatural events in the sense of divine-human dealings of a sort different in kind from anything in current experience can be accepted only on the basis of very strong warrants indeed, and that *we have no warrant*, which satisfies modern standards, for being sure that they have ever occurred.⁷⁴

With this conclusion it becomes very clear what must be done if Barth's theology is to pass the kind of test Nineham sets. It must be demonstrated that testimony does in fact provide the kind of warrant which can satisfy modern standards. The ground is now prepared for me to embark on such a demonstration in the next chapter.

⁷¹Borrowed, incidentally, from Harvey.

⁷²*Use and Abuse*, p. 82.

⁷³*Use and Abuse*, p. 83, my italics.

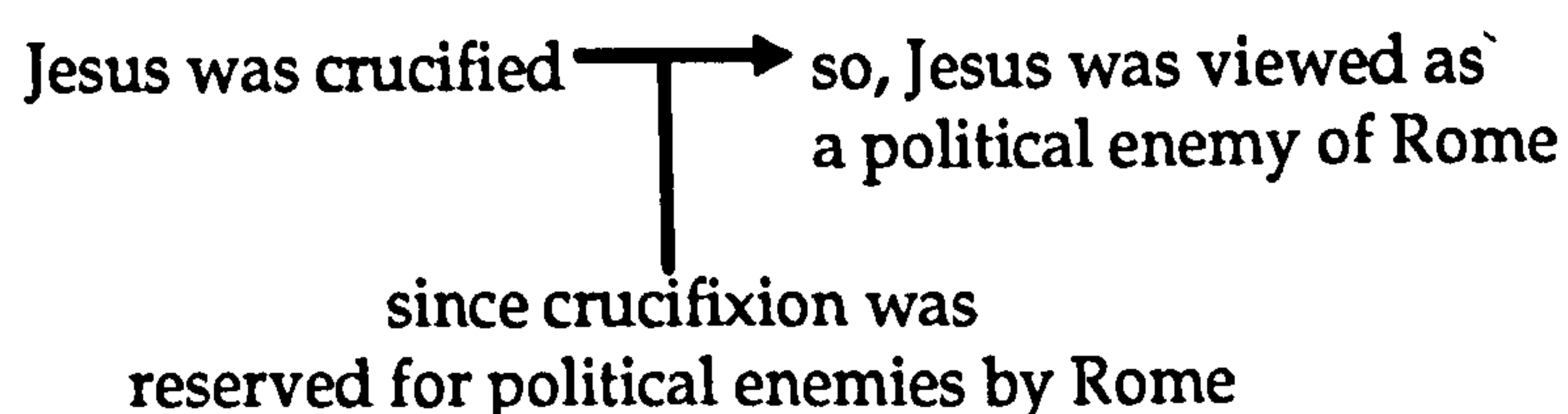
⁷⁴*Use and Abuse*, p. 192, my italics. With this conclusion Nineham is in agreement with Van Harvey (e.g. *Historian*, p. 157) and with Hartlich and Sachs (who argue that Barth only ever talks about the logical possibility of the resurrection having happened and never offers any acceptable evidence [C.Hartlich and W. Sachs, 'Kritische Prüfung der Haupteinwände Barths gegen Bultmann', in *Kerygma und Mythos II* (Hamburg: Evangelischer Verlag, 1965), pp. 113-25, e.g. p. 118]).

4.

Testimony as a Source of Knowledge

I mentioned in the previous chapter that Dennis Nineham borrowed the terminology of 'warrants' from Harvey¹ in his critique of Barth's approach. This terminology in itself demonstrates what is at stake in an interesting way, and for the sake of precision I will now make use of it.

A warrant, says Harvey, is something that makes 'possible the passage from data...to conclusion'.² All arguments begin with 'raw data' (which must be acceptable to the parties to the argument) and end with a conclusion, and warrants provide the bridges between the two. So Harvey provides as a very simple example the argument that we know Jesus was viewed as a political enemy of Rome because he was crucified. The data is that Jesus was crucified and the conclusion is that Jesus was viewed as a political enemy of Rome. The *warrant* here is that crucifixion was reserved for political enemies of Rome. Harvey offers a diagrammatic version of this:



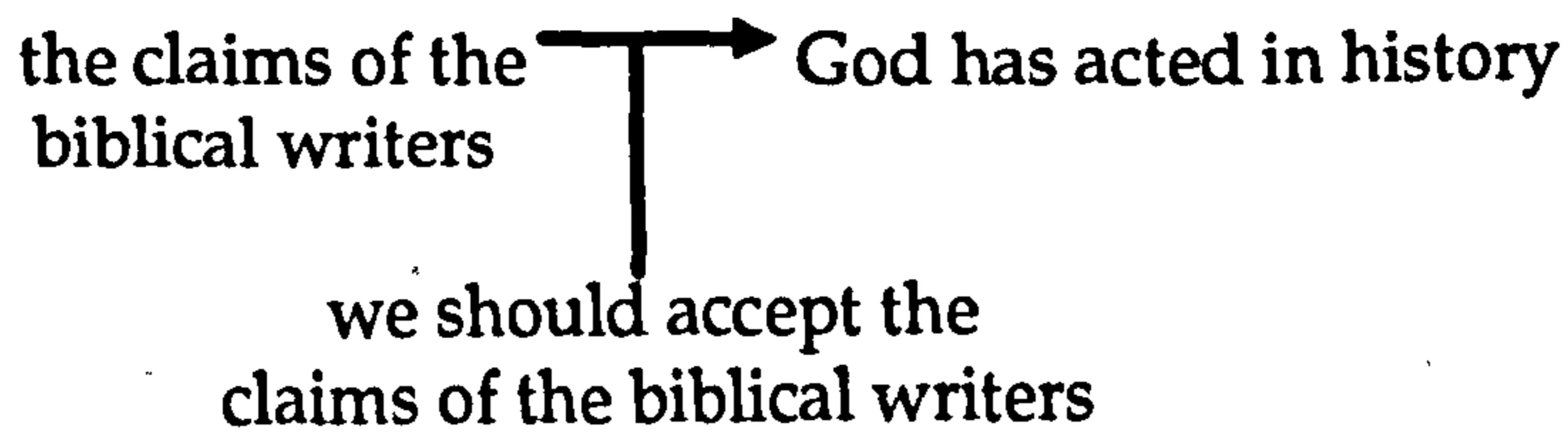
Now if we return to Nineham, we can apply this simple structure to his requirements. He considers that the supposed data is the claims of the biblical writers that God has acted in history³ and the desired conclusion is that God *has* acted in history. He asserts that no acceptable *warrant* exists for this conclusion. But, if one did exist we can assume it would have to be to the effect that we should accept the claims of the biblical writers.⁴ In diagrammatic form, we have:

¹Harvey in turn has borrowed it from the philosopher Stephen Toulmin.

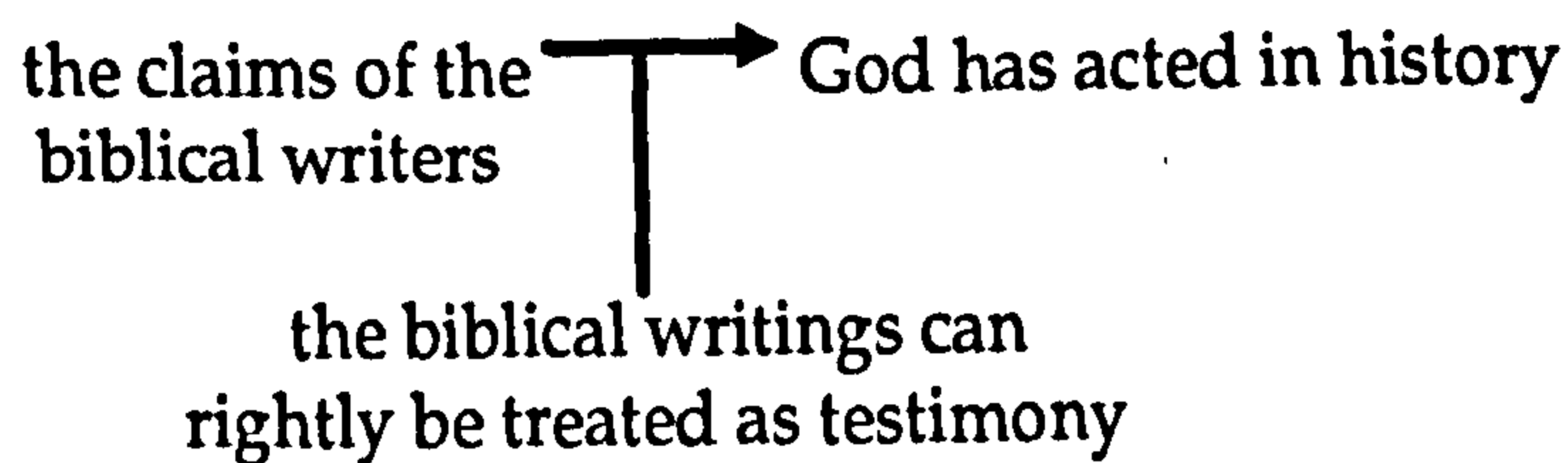
²*The Historian and the Believer*, p. 51.

³It may of course be disputed that the biblical writers claim anything of the sort, but for the sake of this argument it must be assumed for the moment. I will return to this matter later.

⁴In Nineham's words, 'what are the grounds for our acceptance of these historical reports?' (*The Use and Abuse of the Bible*, p. 83).



If we now consider a Barthian-type argument in this drastically simplified form, we will see that it fits the pattern perfectly. The data again is the claims of the biblical writers and the conclusion is that God has acted in history. The warrant is that the biblical writings can rightly be treated as testimony. Here is the diagram:

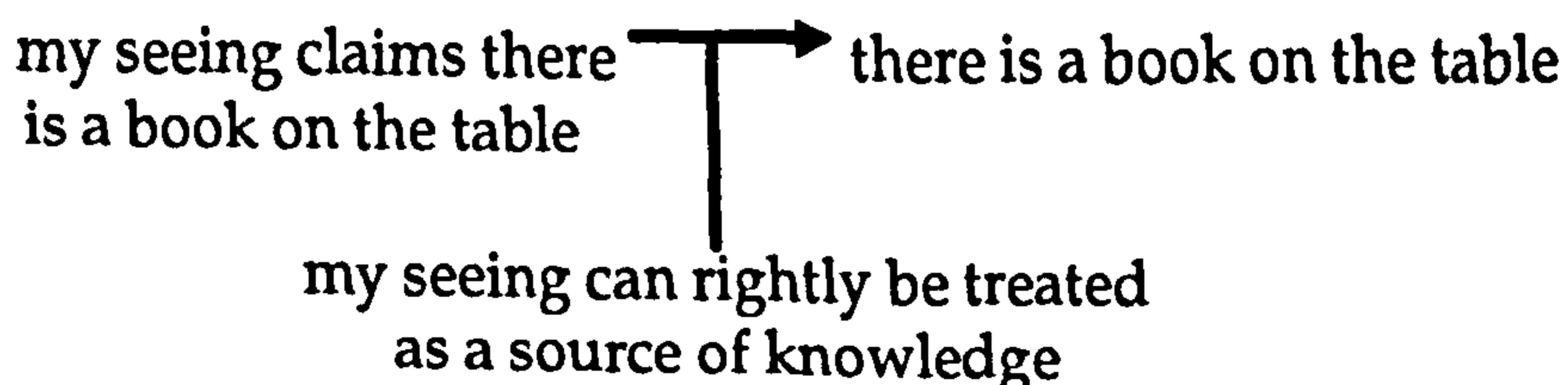


As I mentioned, this is drastically simplified. (It is not necessary or desirable, for example, that all the biblical writings be treated alike.) But it does make two points absolutely clear. The first is that understanding (at least parts of) the Bible as testimony is crucial to Barth's whole project.⁵ The second is that, for the project to be successful, it is necessary for the nature of testimony to be such that it does provide us with knowledge. It is this second point which I will deal with next.

a. A Source of Knowledge

The purpose in setting out the argument in diagrammatic form was to show the distinction between treating the biblical 'data' as 'mere claim' and as 'testimony'. Nineham treats it as mere claim which needs support from some other source. For Nineham, the biblical writings can only express 'opinion' or 'belief', and cannot of themselves rise above that status to being a direct source of knowledge.⁶ Barth, on the other hand, treats the 'data' as being much more than opinion.

For Barth, we can *know* God has revealed himself because the biblical writers testify to the fact. We can draw an analogy here with the way seeing operates. I know there is a book on the table in front of me because I see it there. I do not need support from some other source to know the book is there. The 'warrant' simply is that sight is a direct source of knowledge for me. We could construct the following diagram:



⁵Later sections of this thesis will be given to considering if and how the category of 'testimony' can be applied to the whole Bible in Barth's project.

⁶They can, of course, be an *indirect* source of knowledge, as, for example, when they are used by historical critics to get at what lies 'behind the texts'.

Now, if the analogy with seeing is to work, it needs to be shown that, contrary to the assumptions of the modern intellectual tradition, testimony does have the same kind of epistemological status as seeing (or 'perception', in more precise language). This is just what Coady seeks to show in his book *Testimony*. In what follows, therefore, I set out a simplified version of the salient parts of Coady's thesis. I will argue that, when Barth uses testimony language, he intends something very like what Coady describes.

Coady's Thesis

I have already set out the starting point for Coady's thesis in the previous chapter. I described how we all treat testimony as though it were a reliable source of knowledge, both in ordinary life and in such areas as scientific research. Coady calls this 'The Domain of Testimony',⁷ and he concludes that 'we are greatly indebted to testimony at the level both of common sense and theory for much of what we usually regard as knowledge.'⁸

In the light of this reliance philosophers have responded in four ways. Coady calls the first 'The puritan response',⁹ in which the philosopher argues that we are wrong to think we are achieving knowledge by reliance on testimony. As a result, 'we must conclude that knowledge is much rarer than is usually believed.'¹⁰ Collingwood is a philosopher who takes this path, and it is with respect to his arguments that we will see why 'The puritan response' is not acceptable as a critique of Barth's approach.

The second is 'The reductive response', in which 'it is accepted that we may know in cases where we rely upon testimony, but our dependence upon testimony is itself justified in terms of other supposedly more fundamental forms of evidence, namely, the individual's own observations and his inferences from them.'¹¹ As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Hume is an example of this approach.

The third is 'The fundamentalist response',¹² by which Coady does not mean anything to do with religious fundamentalism. Rather, 'fundamentalists refuse to accept that our reliance on testimony can be "justified" in terms of some other supposedly more fundamental sources of knowledge...Our reliance upon testimony should be regarded as fundamental to the justification of belief in the same sort of way as perception, memory, and inference are. In so far as it is useful to think of knowledge as a building with foundations then testimony is part of the foundations.'¹³ Coady describes this as the approach closest to his own (though there are 'certain very important differences').

The fourth is 'The end-of-epistemology response',¹⁴ which 'acknowledges our reliance upon testimony but concludes from this, and other considerations, that

⁷The title of his first chapter.

⁸*Testimony*, p. 13.

⁹*Testimony*, p. 21. Coady mentions Plato as one philosopher who went this way.

¹⁰*Testimony*, p. 22.

¹¹*Testimony*, p. 22. Coady mentions J.L. Mackie, W.K. Clifford and Bertrand Russell as examples of this approach.

¹²*Testimony*, p. 23.

¹³*Testimony*, p. 23. Coady mentions Thomas Reid as the only philosopher who has explicitly adopted this kind of position.

¹⁴*Testimony*, p. 23. Quine and Popper are mentioned amongst those in this camp.

positive epistemology, certainly in its foundationalist form and perhaps in any guise, is a radically mistaken enterprise.¹⁵ This fourth response is undoubtedly an important approach, but I propose to make no further reference to it.¹⁶ That is because the critics of Barth we have come across so far, and Barth himself, are all agreed that positive epistemology is possible, at least in principle, with respect to history. They are agreed that we can know whether or not certain things have happened. This fourth response, in contrast, asserts that all the terms of discussion are wrong in the first place. We would therefore have to take too long and go too far to take it into account.¹⁷

In what follows I outline the problems of the first two responses as far as they have a bearing on the subject of Bible interpretation. It will become clear that they have both operated in the direction of downgrading the possibility of relying on testimony. My intention, therefore, is to highlight this downgrading and to offer reasons why it should be resisted.¹⁸

The Puritan Response

To repeat a quotation from Collingwood already given in Chapter 3:

Chronicle then is the past as merely believed upon testimony but *not historically known*...History so far from depending on testimony has therefore no relation with testimony at all.¹⁹

It is well known that in Collingwood's view historical knowledge is made possible by what he calls 'imaginative reconstruction'. As Coady puts it, Collingwood's basic argument 'consists of the claim that all historical knowledge is essentially inferential and systematic and that it is the historian's imaginative reconstruction or re-enactment of the past which provides the criterion of historical fact.'²⁰ Lying behind this argument is the ideal of the historian as an 'autonomous thinker', who never relies on anything she or he is told by someone else: not because, in Collingwood's words, 'he thinks his informant is trying to deceive him, or is himself deceived, but because if he accepts it he is giving up his autonomy as an historian and allowing someone else to do for him what, if he is a scientific thinker, he can only do for himself.' Collingwood continues: 'There is no need for me to offer the reader any proof of this statement. If he knows anything of historical work, he already knows of his own experience that it is true.'²¹ It is a pity he concludes this, for if he *had* tried to offer proof he might have found none was forthcoming. He might have found that no historian, including himself, has ever been able to be autonomous

¹⁵*Testimony*, pp.23-24.

¹⁶Coady, of course, does deal with it.

¹⁷Suffice it to say that I do think the task is possible. I would begin by going back to Barth's location of his own enterprise within a (church) tradition and highlight the resultant implication that his epistemology is non-foundationalist. This is significant because the 'end-of-epistemology' approach has greatest force against foundationalist approaches.

¹⁸I have not offered an account of Coady's own preferred approach to testimony. This is because it is fairly similar to the 'common-sense view' and I consider that for the present purposes the 'common-sense view' (that testimony can and should be relied on unless we have good reason not to trust a particular witness in a particular case) is strong enough to be accepted once the objections raised by the other views have been removed.

¹⁹Cited by Coady in *Testimony*, p. 238, my italics.

²⁰*Testimony*, p. 238.

²¹Cited by Coady, *Testimony*, p. 238. The quotation ends with, as Coady puts it, a 'devastating final flourish': 'If he does not already know that it is true, he does not know enough about history to read this essay with any profit, and the best thing he can do is stop here and now.'

4. *Testimony as a Source of Knowledge*
in the sense he desires.²² He might have found that, in fact, every historian does rely on testimony.

Although he does not offer any proof, Collingwood does offer what he considers to be an ideal illustration of the autonomous thinker, in which a detective, by means of imaginative reconstruction, discovers who has committed the murder he is investigating. Coady's strategy is to show that even in this ideal illustration, although Collingwood does not realise it, enormous reliance is placed on testimony. I retell the illustration and Coady's criticisms below because together they provide a powerful demonstration of the importance of testimony and refutation of (at least one version of) the 'puritan response'.

The illustration takes the form of a story entitled 'Who killed John Doe?'²³ In it John Doe is found stabbed at his desk and Inspector Jenkins of Scotland Yard is called in to solve the crime. The actual killer is the rector (whom John Doe had been blackmailing), but Inspector Jenkins is faced with a number of red herrings.

There are two confessions (i.e. testimonies) to the killing, the first from an elderly spinster and the second from the rector's daughter. Jenkins, like a good historian, refuses to take either at face value, but the second intrigues him because the rector's daughter's young man, Richard Roe, is 'a medical student and presumably knew where to find a young man's heart and had spent Saturday night at the rectory within a stone's throw of the dead man's house.' So probably the daughter suspects him and is trying to protect him. Roe had actually been out in the night (there had been a storm in the night and his shoes were muddy in the morning) but refused to say why or where (because, as it turned out, he was protecting the rector).

Jenkins discovers the real killer and his *modus operandi* from such clues as ashes and metal buttons in the dustbin (the rector burnt some incriminating letters and also his gloves, because they had paint on them from Doe's just-painted garden gate). There are also some paint smears on the cuff of a clerical jacket which had been shrunk by a recent wetting and given by the rector to a parishioner the day after the murder.

The solution, according to Collingwood, in its most important phases was reached neither by reliance on testimony nor even on the detective's own statement about others' statements:

The essential points were that Richard Roe got his shoes muddy while going away from the rectory, that no mud was to be seen in John Doe's study and that the circumstances were such that he would not have stopped to clean or remove his shoes. Each of these three points, in its turn, was the conclusion of an inference, and the statements upon which they severally rested were no more statements about other people's statements than these three points themselves. Again the ultimate case against the rector did not logically

²²I have put these last words in italics because Coady maintains that it is still possible to be an 'autonomous thinker' while rejecting the individualist thesis: 'the autonomous thinker need not entirely renounce some degree of fundamental reliance upon the word of others but rather should deploy it to achieve a genuinely critical stance and a viable independence of outlook. One needs intellectual autonomy to achieve a feasible degree of control over the beliefs one acquires and to ensure that one's thinking is appropriately responsive to one's actual cognitive history and present intellectual environment. None the less, the independent thinker is not someone who works everything out for herself, even in principle, but one who exercises a controlling intelligence over the input she receives from the normal sources of information whether their basis be individual or communal (*Testimony*, pp. 99-100).

²³Coady's account of the story and his criticisms of it are found in *Testimony*, pp. 240-46.

depend upon any statements made by the Detective-Inspector about statements made by other persons. It depended upon the presence of certain objects in a certain dustbin, and of certain paint-smears on the cuff of a jacket made in the conventional style and shrunk by wetting, and these facts were vouched for by his own observation.²⁴

Coady's criticism begins by pointing to two errors in the construction of the story. The first is in Jenkins' reliance on the fact of the rector's daughter's confession. Jenkins says, 'The constable tells me that the rector's daughter told him that she murdered Doe'. Thus Jenkins *does* rely on the testimony of the constable, and he believes it is true while believing the daughter's is false. Second, and more interestingly,

Collingwood's claim about the detective-inspector's reasonings concerning 'the essential points' is simply false. The vital conclusion that Roe got his feet muddy while going away from the rectory rests on the premiss that his feet were muddy in the morning and this is said in Collingwood's telling of the tale to be known on the authority of the parlourmaid whose testimony seems simply to have been accepted.²⁵

Of course, the story could be adjusted for these and a number of other mistakes. But Coady thinks 'they are more than mere slips. They show the way in which, even in a highly artificial piece of fiction deliberately organized to eliminate reliance upon testimony from the essentials of the story, such reliance none the less persists and escapes attention since it is such a pervasive feature of the reality that the fiction is aimed at illuminating.'²⁶

And even if these mistakes were removed, there is another way the story is 'highly testimony contaminated'. This is at the level of what Collingwood treats as the inspector's personal observations. Coady lists the following propositions found in the story:

'Richard Roe is a medical student.'

'There was a thunderstorm that night between 12 and 1.'

'The metal buttons—found among the ashes in the rectory dustbin—bore the name of a famous glove maker in Oxford Street *whom the rector always patronized.*'

'John Doe is a blackmailer' (stated by Collingwood to be known 'at the Yard').

In all these propositions (and others not listed) the inspector relies on the testimony of others, though they 'figure in his imaginative reconstruction of the crime to a degree that seems indispensable'. To rid the story of these would be to make it utterly unrealistic since the investigator would have to be virtually omnipresent for the details to rely only on his personal observation. 'Furthermore, it would defeat Collingwood's purposes to seek such recondite emendations since the strength of the fable is supposed to lie in its being typical of the scientific methods of criminal detection.'²⁷

Finally, Coady notes that,

since the fable is intended to throw light on historical reasoning, we should be alive to the striking difference between such tales and real historical

²⁴Cited in *Testimony*, pp. 240-41.

²⁵*Testimony*, p. 241.

²⁶*Testimony*, p. 242.

²⁷*Testimony*, p. 242.

episodes. This is of course that the detective's investigation is more or less contemporaneous with the events he is exploring so that he can observe and remember and interrogate and preserve and even experiment in a way that the historian cannot.²⁸

The point is that the great stress Collingwood 'lays upon the inspector's own observations and their function in his inferences and reconstructions is possible only because the inspector is *not* doing history'.²⁹ While the inspector could know certain things by observation (that ashes were in the dustbin, for example) these could only be known by a historian investigating the case if someone were to tell him or her.

From all this Coady concludes that, far from the fable establishing the importance of non-reliance on testimony, it actually demonstrates precisely the opposite:

[Collingwood's] repeated contentions about the systematic, inferential, re-enactive, reconstructive nature of historical thought do no more than establish a role, and no doubt an important role, for *theorizing* in history. Far from such a role doing away with such data as are provided by testimony it seems to presuppose such data. It may be possible to theorize about the significance of the rector's daughter's confession and to arrive at some other truth by treating it as false, but we cannot even begin on such a trail unless we accept the truth of the report that she actually made the confession. It may be possible to speculate about Caesar's fortunes in Britian on the basis of what he fails to say in his writings, but we can only do so on the basis that they are his writings and that he truly testified to having invaded Britain at all.³⁰

I conclude, therefore, that we can regard Collingwood's rejection of testimony as over-zealous. Even Harvey seems aware Collingwood may have overstated his case somewhat when he admits that the 'declaration of autonomy may sound extreme, an overreaction, perhaps, to the naive confidence of a previous generation concerning the trustworthiness of testimony'.³¹ Unfortunately, Harvey nevertheless goes on to accept Collingwood's rejection of testimony.³²

However, I think Collingwood can still be read profitably if we take his words simply as emphasising the importance of taking a critical attitude towards testimony. As Harvey continues, 'some may think that [the declaration of autonomy] needs to be interpreted largely as a dramatic way of warning the historian to be on his guard against error and fraud.'³³ I will argue later that that is indeed at least part of what we should take from Collingwood.³⁴ For the moment though, I conclude that the 'puritan

²⁸*Testimony*, p. 242.

²⁹*Testimony*, p. 243.

³⁰*Testimony*, pp. 243-44.

³¹*Historian*, p. 40.

³²See *Historian*, pp. 41-2. He says, for example, that, 'Insofar then as history aspires to be knowledge, in contrast to belief, the historian must give reasons for what he asserts. As soon as the reasons are forthcoming *one ceases to rely on mere authority or testimony*' (my italics). It would be possible, of course, to construe these words simply as saying that the historian must take a critical approach, being prepared to reach conclusions different from those found in the sources. At times it seems that that's what Harvey means. And it also is most probably what Collingwood does when he is doing historical research. But this does not alter the fact that their arguments downgrade testimony in such a way that Barth's appeal to testimony is not taken seriously.

³³*Historian*, pp. 40-41.

³⁴For a moment I cannot resist jumping ahead of myself and mentioning the parallel with Barth's approach. I take it that the foregoing discussion means that in historical matters we need to recognize our reliance on the testimony of others, but at the same time we need to be critical toward this testimony, making use of 'systematic, inferential, re-enactive and reconstructive' reasoning to decide just what we need to say about history on the basis of that testimony. (I do not mean to deny, of course, that there are

response' to our dependence on testimony is not satisfactory, at least in the historical field, because, despite its assertions to the contrary, it is never able to free itself from dependence on testimony. I turn now, therefore, to consider the second approach.

The Reductive Response

This second approach is the most popular amongst theorists, and relies essentially on Hume's belief that, though we can sometimes rely on testimony, such reliance can always be justified by some other, more basic, source of knowledge.

There are two issues here. The first is the question of whether the basic argument is right. Can someone, when relying on testimony, always justify their reliance by recourse to some more basic source of knowledge? Coady asserts that they cannot, and explains why.³⁵ I agree with Coady: but even if he were wrong at this point, and the reductive view were right, we would still be able to say that *in general* testimony can be relied upon. At issue would be the question of whether there are *certain types* of testimony that should be rejected, and if so why.

One type of testimony that Hume especially wanted to reject was testimony to miracles. And since the Bible, among other things, provides testimony to miracles, this has a special bearing on any approach to Bible interpretation. Thus, it is the second issue which particularly concerns us. The problem that the 'reductive

also such things as archaeology which provide evidence for history writing.) This will involve a whole range of responses to particular testimonies, from complete acceptance to complete rejection, and it may well be that we will decide to say something about history which none of the testimonies themselves explicitly say.

Now consider the conclusion Barth reaches about how theologians can use the Bible: they can treat it, he thinks, as 'testimony to revelation'. Of course, he is well aware that none of the biblical writers explicitly says, 'God has acted to reveal himself in history', or any such thing. In fact, as James Barr argues (partly in supposed refutation of Barth), neither 'revelation' nor 'history' are 'biblical categories' (see his *Old and New in Interpretation*, pp. 69, 89). But Barth nevertheless argues that on the basis of the biblical writers' testimony we can come to the conclusion that God has revealed himself.

Whether Barth is justified in this will depend on the particularities of his argument, on whether he has made good use of 'systematic, inferential, re-enactive and reconstructive' reasoning as he has considered the testimonies. (In Chapters 6, 7 and 8 I discuss some examples of Barth's actual interpretation of biblical passages as testimony.) The point I wish to make for the moment is that the form of his conclusion ought to be unobjectionable to historians (or historically-orientated theologians) who recognize their own dependence on testimony. The point is demonstrated if we imagine a (suitably enlightened!) historian saying of Caesar's writings, 'We can treat them as testimony to the difficult time the Roman Empire had establishing itself in Britain.' In this latter case we would, admittedly, be reading Caesar 'against himself', something which Barth does not do with the biblical writers. But he is prepared, on occasion to reject what they say. For example when he argues that, contrary to some biblical assertions, demons are not 'fallen angels' (see Chapter 6). In any case, it would be easy enough to think of examples where historians do not read against what the texts say.

³⁵Put very simply his reasons are as follows (see *Testimony*, pp. 80-93): Hume claims that reliance on testimony can be justified by the fact that in 'our experience' (i.e. by *observation*) there is a regular conjunction between what people report and the way the world is, and that when, for example, we come across testimony to a miracle we can reject it because we never *observe* miracles occurring. Now, what can 'our experience' or 'observation' mean? On the one hand it might mean individual observation. But in that case the suggestion is 'plainly false' because 'it seems absurd to suggest that, individually, we have done anything like the amount of field-work required (p. 82). Every person accepts a vast number of propositions as true without checking. For example, I know that Australia exists though I have never been there myself, I know that the lights in the night sky are immensely distant stars because scientists tell me so, I know how babies are born though I have never observed a birth, etc., etc.

On the other hand, 'our experience' and 'observation' might mean something like 'the common experience of humankind'. This certainly has the virtue that it rightly explains how I know the above sort of things. Unfortunately, it fails in Hume's aim. For if I 'know' by common experience then I can only know because others *tell me*. 'The idea of taking seriously someone else's observations, someone else's experience, already requires us to take their testimony (i.e. reports of what they observe) equally seriously.' So there is a 'vicious circularity' (p. 81).

response' raises for us is not the same as that raised by the 'puritan response'. There the value of testimony *per se* was denied, while here it is only the value of testimony which cannot be supported or 'justified' which is denied. Or, put the other way round, the problem raised here has to do with the criteria by which we can accept testimony.

As history writing developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the major criterion that was developed was the 'principle of analogy.' I have no intention here to repeat the well-rehearsed argument that this principle³⁶ involves an arbitrary *a priori* denial of the Christian belief that God has acted in history. Nor do I wish to repeat the more general argument about its denying the possibility of unique occurrences in history. These arguments have force, but only to the effect that the principle does not rule out such things' having happened. They have little to do with the question of how we can know (or can reasonably believe) they have happened.

The principle of analogy is relevant for us at this stage because it came to be seen as that which would satisfy the requirement for 'good warrants acceptable to people of the twentieth century'. As such it became peculiarly responsible for masking the possibility of testimony itself providing 'good warrants'. I wish to demonstrate this by reference to what Coady calls 'Astonishing Reports', a subject which has especial relevance for biblical interpretation.

*Astonishing Reports*³⁷

An 'astonishing report' is a report of something which goes against the expectations of the hearer (or reader). Reports of miracles and of the unique can be treated as special cases of astonishing reports,³⁸ and what we learn of the way we should treat astonishing reports can therefore be applied (though obviously with suitable adjustments) to the kind of things reported by the biblical writers.

There are three areas I will deal with here. The first has to do with what Coady calls 'the search for a criterion of acceptability'.³⁹ The second has to do with a certain view that arose out of the search for a criterion, about the so-called 'world-view' of witnesses. The third has to do with what might be a better approach to the problem of astonishing reports.

1. The first problem that the occurrence of astonishing reports raises is what criterion we may use to decide whether things actually happened as the report claims. The desire for such a criterion is fuelled in Hume and some other philosophers, says Coady, 'by the desire to have a way of ruling certain types of testimony out of court without having to consider the particular circumstances of their deliverance'.⁴⁰ To demonstrate this point Coady quotes Hume's conclusion about a matter that had nothing to do with the miraculous but which Hume also believed had not occurred: 'But as finite added to finite never approaches a hair's

³⁶And its close partner the 'principle of correlation.'

³⁷Again, I closely follow the work of Coady (Chapter 10 of *Testimony*).

³⁸Some attempts have been made to deny this, for instance by J.S. Mill, who made a distinction between events which are *contrary* to the uniform course of experience and those which are unexpected but *conformable* to this course. Unfortunately, it turns out to be very difficult to make the distinction work, since some reports of unexpected events can (rightly!) make us change our opinion about what 'the uniform course of experience' is.

³⁹*Testimony*, p. 182.

⁴⁰*Testimony*, p. 182.

breadth nearer to infinite; so a fact incredible in itself, acquires not the smallest accession of probability by the accumulation of testimony.⁴¹

The English philosopher F.H. Bradley took a similar position.⁴² His arguments are especially interesting because they come in an essay that attempted to justify the new procedures being used in German biblical criticism by scholars like Strauss and Bauer. He argued that all historical testimonies to the 'non-analogous' should be rejected. By the 'non-analogous' he meant events and states of affairs not conforming to 'our' experience of the world. (This, therefore, is the 'principle of analogy' stated in negative form.) Testimony to the 'non-analogous' *can* be accepted, he believed, if we can establish an 'identification of consciousness' with the witness. If 'we are justified in assuming the identity of their standpoint with our own' then we can be sure that they 'can see for us, because we know that they are able to think for us'.⁴³ Such identification is possible, according to Bradley, in the field of science but impossible in history.⁴⁴ Hence the non-analogous in history is to be rejected.⁴⁵

Both Hume and Bradley, therefore, offer a criterion for the rejection of certain testimony, namely testimony to the astonishing. The criterion is applied without any need for examination of the particularities of each case, except for the establishment that something 'non-analogous' is being testified to. The result is that when someone *does* 'examine the particularities' of a certain case, their arguments are allowed no weight. It has been decided beforehand that testimony to the 'non-analogous' *cannot count as evidence*.

Some theologians, such as Harvey and Nineham, make a good deal of use of Hume and Bradley's ideas in their criticisms of Barth. As theologians, they recognize that the principle of analogy cannot be used to rule out the possibility of God's having caused the miraculous in the past. God, after all, can do anything. *But*, a softened version of the principle is still applied. This version does not say beforehand that an 'astonishing report' of the non-analogous must be wrong; rather it says that

⁴¹*Testimony*, p. 182.

⁴²Bradley also has special significance for us because Van Harvey invokes and defends his position.

⁴³Quoted by Coady, *Testimony*, p. 183.

⁴⁴Coady goes on to demonstrate that this distinction simply is not viable (see *Testimony*, pp. 183-85). He does this on two counts: 1) that we are in fact able to 'identify' with witnesses in past history, or else we would not be able to understand them at all; 2) that science itself is notahistorical, as Bradley's argument requires.

⁴⁵There is an interesting discussion in CD I/2, where he is considering the difference between 'general hermeneutics' and 'biblical hermeneutics', in which Barth criticises this kind of approach. In his view, 'the methods of general and those of biblical hermeneutics' ought not to 'separate inevitably at this point' (p. 725). But in practice, those who engage in general hermeneutics tend, he thinks, to have an unacceptably rigid view of what the world must be like. And so,

It is only within definite limits that general hermeneutics is accustomed to take seriously the idea that what is said in a text...might bring into play other possibilities than those known to the interpreter. To be sure, it realises that the hitherto accepted picture of a certain epoch, and even the picture of the historical process as a whole, can be changed in detail and even very radically by what is said in a text. But it holds fast all the more definitely to a certain preconceived picture of actual occurrence itself. It thinks it has a basic knowledge of what is generally possible, of what can have happened, and from this point of view it assesses the statement of the text, and the picture of the object reflected in it as the picture of a real, or unreal, or doubtful happening. It is surely plain that at this point an alien factor is exercising a disturbing influence upon observation (*ibid.*).

On the other hand, (at least some of) those who engage in biblicalhermeneutics are able to recognise that, Strict observation obviously requires that the force of a picture meeting us in a text shall exercise its due effect in accordance with its intrinsic character, that it shall itself decide what real facts are appropriate to it, that actually no prejudgment shall be made, and that *it shall not be a foregone conclusion what is possible* (*ibid.*, my emphasis).

the report will be considered to be wrong until strong proof to the contrary is provided.⁴⁶ Crucially therefore, *yet again*, the testimony itself, the 'astonishing report', is not counted as evidence. This explains why, even though Barth writes a great deal about the particular case of testimony to Jesus' resurrection, Harvey and Nineham think that he provides no acceptable evidence.

2. The second point arises from Bradley's attempt to justify his approach. The reason a witness from the past should not be trusted is that the passage of time inevitably means the witness's 'world-view' is different to ours. This fact combines with another inevitability, namely that no person transmits 'a literal picture of an event',⁴⁷ with the result that a report from the past cannot describe an event as we would describe it. In other words, an historical witness 'saw' a thing differently to the way we would 'see' it if we could. Thus, Harvey (following Bradley) says:

no witness simply hands down a complete, photograph-like description of an event; rather he selects, alters, interprets, and rationalizes...What a witness thinks he sees is in large part filtered through the prism of his own individual mode of perception and conception which, in turn, is heavily influenced by the modes of thought of the culture of which he is a part. Men are historical creatures, and their judgments reflect the 'world' that they bring with them and to which they appeal in support of those judgments.⁴⁸

And he continues:

It is the function of the historian to assess these judgments and inferences, to establish not only their meaning but their truth. He cannot avoid either task...To leave them uncriticized is simply to attribute to the witness a capacity for critical judgment the historian himself lacks or is too timid to exercise.⁴⁹

All of this is true enough,⁵⁰ but a number of things need to be said. Leaving aside the 'historical imperialism' that may lie behind such remarks (our world-view must be better than that of peoples in the past!), it should be emphasized that 'a complete, photograph-like description of an event' ought not be made into an ideal. In fact, the witness's 'judgments and inferences' may be indispensable.

Coady points out that witnesses in court proceedings are usually expected to 'play the role of a kind of tape recorder on whose tape the events of the crime have

⁴⁶Harvey reasons thus: 'In the case of an alleged miracle...the historian will first ask, "What am I being asked to believe?" and then, "What is to be said in its favor?" It is at this point that present knowledge plays such an important role, for if the report contradicts a well-established warrant, the burden of evidence and argument suddenly falls on the one who alleges the report to be true, which is another way of saying that a *prima facie* case exists for the report *not* being considered a likely candidate' (*Historian*, pp. 86-87, Harvey's italics). And in this situation the best response 'for the defender of a miracle is to argue that our usual warrants do not apply in this specific case..This is a sounder argument, but the price paid for it is that conclusions in such cases can never achieve a very high degree of force. For *unless some other warrant is brought forward*, the only possible response is tentativeness or skepticism' (p. 87).

⁴⁷Harvey's phrase, in *Historian*, p. 70.

⁴⁸*Historian*, pp. 41-42. Nineham puts it this way: 'We are told, quite justifiably, that we have no right to deny *a priori* that God may have intervened in history in special ways, and even signaled his interventions by breaches of the natural law; but we are still bound in integrity to ask whether if we, with our twentieth-century background, had been there, we should have felt the historical events in question to demand any explanation in supernatural terms; and we can be quite sure that if so, the terms we should have used would not have been the ones used by the biblical writers' ('The Bible in Modern Theology', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 52 [1969], p. 188).

⁴⁹*Historian*, p. 42.

⁵⁰Though I have strong reservations about the phrase I have left out of the latter quotation, which is: 'for to assume that the reports mean what the ordinary reader takes them to mean overlooks the historically conditioned nature of thought.' What does Harvey mean by the word 'mean' here?

left an impression'.⁵¹ But in fact the 'observer is an active rather than a passive perceiver and recorder, he reaches conclusions on what he has seen by evaluating fragments of information and reconstructing them'.⁵² It depends on the particularities of the situation whether this active role helps or hinders the court. In the following (imaginary) situation, active judgment and inference are most useful:

One morning Jones murdered his wife. He had no time to dispose of her body before work, so he went in to the office intending to get rid of the body that night. At his trial one of his colleagues, Brown, is called as a witness. She testifies that Jones behaved very strangely that day. When asked what was strange about his behaviour she says that he was very serious all day, and not at all his usual jovial self.

If a video recording of Jones's day at work had been produced instead of Brown, it would have been of little use to the court, since the court did not know how Jones usually behaved at work. The same sort of thing must also be true of historical witnesses. They may have been able to make (correct) judgments and inferences that we are not in a position to make. They may also, of course, have made incorrect judgments and inferences, being led astray by their (perhaps inferior) world-view. But that again must be a question asked in each individual case, not one decided beforehand.

The other thing to be said about the 'active' witness is that such activity does not preclude an element of 'passive recording'. Coady puts it this way:

That we are active, selective, interpretive in what we perceive and recount is not only consistent with our also being in part passive, receptive, and recorder-like but it actually seems to require it. Unless we register quite a lot we cannot act, select, and interpret at all. The real story is quite complex and multi-layered; neither the picture of wholly passive registration nor that of furiously active invention is adequate.⁵³

This point is obscured by Bradley's (and Harvey's) view. In contrast to the logical implication of their argument,

there is a crucial role for very plain mere observation, since no matter how interpreted our perceptions are by our theories or outlooks an area of commonly graspable observation is essential for the existence of any form of communication and understanding. It is precisely this function of observation that is under attack in Bradley's argument, for he wants the requirement of 'identification of consciousness' to be fulfilled *before* non-analogous observations are to be counted as observations at all.⁵⁴

This 'crucial role for very plain mere observation' applies in all situations, whether or not the world-view of the witnesses (for example, that represented by the New Testament writers) is unacceptable to us.

3. The above considerations enable us to take what I believe is a better approach to the problem of astonishing reports than that taken by such scholars as Harvey and Nineham. These scholars accept in theory the argument which says we should not rule out in advance the occurrence of any event. But in practice they *do* rule out certain events because, by applying their softened version of the principle of analogy to astonishing reports, they rule out anything which might count as evidence for

⁵¹*Testimony*, p. 267.

⁵²*Testimony*, p. 268.

⁵³*Testimony*, p. 268.

⁵⁴*Testimony*, p. 184, my italics.

those events.⁵⁵ Thus I think the following assertion of Harvey is contradicted by his actual approach. He says,

the historian is not interested primarily in an a priori denial that certain events can happen. His function, rather, is to determine the degree of probability an event may claim according to the rules of criticism and to make a judgment concerning it, a judgment the historian should be ready to revise in the light of new evidence. The issue is not whether a resurrection is thinkable or could have happened, but the grounds upon which one claims that it did.⁵⁶

Despite the problems with Harvey's approach, these words do point us in the direction of the 'better approach' I mentioned earlier. For this approach has to do, fundamentally, with the application of considered judgment. The approach has two key features.

First, it refuses to apply the principle of analogy in such a way as to deny the evidential value of astonishing reports. This does *not* mean it denies the usefulness of the principle of analogy in itself. The principle will still be an important element in *understanding*. How else can I understand a report from the past, other than by assuming it comes from a human being who in important ways is like myself?⁵⁷ But, having sought to understand, it remains for me to reach a judgment as to whether the report is 'telling the truth' about that to which it testifies or whether it is (perhaps deliberately, perhaps unintentionally) reporting in error. How such a judgment is reached cannot be decided beforehand, for it depends on the 'facts of the case'.

Another way of describing this first feature, then, is to say that a better approach gives up the search for a criterion of acceptability to apply beforehand to testimony. Instead, it determines to come to a considered *judgment* in each specific case. To use the court analogy once again, the court refuses to disallow a certain type of evidence (astonishing reports) from the proceedings. Instead, it allows the protagonists to enter a particular astonishing report as evidence and leaves it to the court to decide its bearing on the case.

Secondly, therefore, a better approach involves a preparedness to consider the particularities of each case. It recognizes that a vast number of the 'miracles' testified to in history may well be 'fakes', but it is prepared, where necessary, to treat each one on its merits. This is where the speciousness of the following kind of (often-heard) protest becomes apparent: 'If we allow the occurrence of just one miracle we open the floodgates to reports of blood raining from heaven, animals speaking and so on.' It is not a case of opening floodgates, but rather of critically distinguishing between cases.⁵⁸ The application of considered judgment is a far cry from credulity.⁵⁹

⁵⁵I say 'anything' because it is difficult to imagine what, other than 'astonishing reports', could provide the necessary evidence in the matter of events of the past. For claims as to the occurrence of miracles of healing, for example, in the present, other kinds of evidence might be available. Medical examinations could be carried out, for example. But, by definition, this kind of thing is not possible for past events.

⁵⁶*Historian*, p. 157.

⁵⁷This, of course, is a rather different rendering of the principle than that which says what happened in the past must be essentially similar to what happens in the present. In my view the latter rendering is far less defensible than the former.

⁵⁸Compare the following from Barth: 'The fact that the statement "God reveals himself" is the confession of a miracle that has happened certainly does not imply a blind credence in all the miracle stories related in the Bible...[W]hy should we not constantly find this or that one of the miracles obscure, why should we not constantly be taken aback by them? It is really not laid upon us to take everything in the Bible as true *in globo*...' (CD I/2, p. 65).

My preferred approach would go about its task by recognizing both the active and passive side of testimony. It would recognize the presence of what Coady calls 'very plain mere observation' in testimony from the past. But, at the same time, it would recognize the importance of the 'world-view' which has caused the witness to construe in a certain way what they have observed. It would be prepared to ask whether certain 'defects' in the witnesses' world-view have caused them to construe things in a way we cannot accept.⁶⁰ But it would not automatically assume this is so whenever faced with an astonishing report. Instead, it would be prepared to conclude (if appropriate) that 'the thing itself',⁶¹ that which has been observed, might, had we observed it, have caused us to construe it in a similar way.

⁵⁹When looked at from this point of view, another of the arguments for rejecting testimony to miracles does not appear so strong. Harvey puts the argument this way: 'Actually, the skepticism regarding miracles is not based merely on the conviction that they are incompatible with known laws. It is, rather, that the very existence of miracle stories has itself come to be regarded as a normal and expected occurrence. The contemporary historian expects to find miracle stories in certain kinds of literature, which is to say he has more reason for being puzzled when he does not find such stories than when he does. Not only is he aware of the fallibility of human testimony but also of the tendency of the human mind to create myths and legends, especially in the realm of the religious. Indeed, if anything has been learned from the comparative study of religion it is that myth and legend are the almost natural form of expression for the veneration of extraordinary founders, teachers, and saints' (*Historian*, p. 88).

The first part of this argument depends on its being shown that a large majority of 'miracle stories' are best regarded as 'myth and legend'. Now, I have no doubt that this can be shown. But it can only be shown on the basis of *considered judgment of each particular case*. Therefore, the conclusion 'most miracle stories are myth or legend' cannot be 'fed back' as proof that one particular miracle story is false. It can only indicate the need for caution. In Barth's view, with respect to the Christian religion, what matters is whether one miracle in particular happened, namely the resurrection, and not that all miracles be shown to have occurred.

The fact is that the majority of 'astonishing reports' are likely to be false. But to allow that to lead us to reject *all* 'astonishing reports' would be criminal. For some 'astonishing reports' *are* true, and when they are true they are often of enormous potential value. Coady mentions as an example the British admiralty's rejection of 'an intelligence report prior to the First World War that German naval gunnery at long ranges was astonishingly accurate. The Admiralty declared that the reported results were "impossible" but then had to learn differently at Jutland' (*Testimony*, p. 191 n.19).

⁶⁰This is my way of describing a narrowed version of what Coady calls 'the explanatory requirement' (*Testimony*, p. 198). As he puts it, 'When an investigator decides to dismiss testimony to the unusual there is some onus upon him to explain how the false or misleading testimony came about (p. 196). The requirement is not absolute, since there are cases where most people are prepared to dismiss testimony while tolerating some degree of inexplicability. Coady gives the example of UFO reports, which most people (reasonably) reject without being able completely to explain how they came about. He says, 'The point is that the lack of a suitable explanation of reports, other than their truth, is a consideration against rejecting them, but it is only one consideration and it is defeasible in various ways. The explanatory requirement is an ingredient in the overall verdict, along with the internal and external circumstances mentioned earlier. I think it very unlikely that any hard and fast rule can be laid down for determining the outcome of such assessments of so diverse factors—what is required, as Locke saw, is not a criterion but a judgment' (p. 198).

⁶¹I have put the phrase in quotation marks in order to indicate that I am not advocating a kind of positivism here. Rather, I tend towards something like the 'critical realism' described by N.T. Wright. 'This is', he says,

a way of describing the process of 'knowing' that acknowledges the reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower (hence 'realism'), while also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiralling path of appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known (hence 'critical'). This path leads to critical reflection on the products of our inquiry into 'reality', so that our assertions about 'reality' acknowledge their own provisionality. Knowledge, in other words, although in principle concerning realities independent of the knower, is never itself independent of the knower (*The New Testament and the People of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992], p. 35).

I should add that, in my view, it is not insignificant that in his excellent intellectual biography of Barth (*Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology, passim*), B. McCormack describes Barth as a 'Critical Realist' theologian. By 'critical realism' he does not mean exactly the same thing as Wright does, and Wright is thinking of the historian, not the theologian, but there are important similarities. McCormack describes Barth's 'critical realism' as follows:

The following quotation from Barth, in which he criticises the 'general hermeneutics' of the 1930s, raises a number of further issues which will have to wait to be dealt with later, but it seems a relevant one with which to end this section: 'Strict observation' (by which he means the literary and historical presentation of the structure and sense of the texts 'as documents of their concrete historical situation'⁶²)

obviously requires that the force of a picture meeting us in a text shall exercise its due effect in accordance with its intrinsic character, that it shall itself decide what real facts are appropriate to it, that actually no prejudgment shall be made, and that it shall not be a foregone conclusion what is possible. If general hermeneutics does, in fact, hold a different point of view and work with a conception of what is generally possible as the limit which will be self-evidently presupposed for what can have really happened, it has to be said that this point of view is by no means inevitable and is not required by the essential character of hermeneutics. Biblical hermeneutics is not guilty of an arbitrary exception when it takes a different line. On the contrary, it follows the path of strict observation to the very end. Certainly, it does this because of its own definite presupposition. But it is to be noted that this presupposition does enable it to be consistent as hermeneutics. The same cannot be said of the presupposition of general hermeneutics.⁶³

An Objection

Having considered the matter of 'Astonishing Reports', we are almost ready to turn directly to Barth. But, before we do so, I wish to deal with an important objection, mentioned by Coady, to the treatment of testimony as a direct source of knowledge. This objection is to the effect that rational persons do not believe just any and every thing they are told. Instead, assent is

mediated by a consideration of the veracity of the witness, his reliability...the probability of what he says, and so on. Thus mediated, our belief in what he says must count as inferentially based and likewise for our knowledge, where it is knowledge.⁶⁴

Coady's response is to point out that in our ordinary dealings with other people 'we gather information without this concern'. We are prepared to accept all kinds of important information from unknown voices on the other end of a telephone line without checking the veracity or reliability of voices' owners. It 'would surely be irrational to the point of insanity to withhold assent pending investigation of the

The word 'critical' is meant to suggest that Barth never simply abandoned his *idealistic* inheritance. Idealism would prove to be a valuable ally in establishing the limits of human knowing. Barth would continue to acknowledge the general validity of the idealistic point of view where knowledge of the 'given' was concerned. The 'given' (or what we customarily think of as the 'real') is the product of the knowing activity of the human subject. The word 'realism' is meant to suggest, however, that after the break [sc. with Wilhelm Herrmann's theological idealism] Barth would always insist that the divine being was real, whole, and complete in itself apart from the knowing activity of the human subject...The result would be a completely new framework for theological thinking. Barth would seek to ground theological reflection in the objectively real 'self-presupposing divine subjectivity' in revelation... (*Theology*, p. 67).

George Hunsinger also describes 'realism' (which he contrasts with 'literalism' and 'expressivism') as a very important motif in Barth's theology (see *How to Read Karl Barth*, pp. 43-44).

⁶²CD I/2, p. 723 (KD, p. 810).

⁶³CD I/2, p. 725 (KD, p. 813).

⁶⁴Coady, *Testimony*, p. 143.

respective premisses'.⁶⁵ Ordinary life would simply not be possible if we had to check out every witness.

But there is a more decisive point. Much of the plausibility of the objection, rests on the undoubted fact that testimonial transactions of the kind that are supposed to yield direct knowledge are dependent for their knowledge-yielding status on the truth of certain propositions which the objector casts in the role of premisses to conclusions.⁶⁶

It is certainly true that if the voice on the other end of the phone is mistaken or deceitful or incompetent then I will not *know* whatever it is they are communicating to me. I will not know, either because the proposition I have believed is false, or because my justification for believing it is defective.⁶⁷ But none of this means that when the reverse is true—for example, when the witness is not mistaken—I do not have direct knowledge. Coady makes the point by returning to the analogy of perceptual knowledge:

When I believe unhesitatingly that there is a tomato on the table in front of me on the basis of visually perceiving it, I would normally be conceded the right to know this directly and it is precisely with such paradigms of direct knowledge that our objector wants to contrast testimonial knowledge. None the less, it is equally true for this case that its knowledge status rests upon the truth of such propositions as that the lighting is normal and my eyes are functioning reliably, that no one has recently entered the room and placed a plastic copy of a tomato on the table, and so on. My knowledge rests on the truth of these and many other propositions but it is normally no requirement of my knowing that I have established their truth as part of my justification...

...Clearly, in the perception case, it is essential to the truth of [the] claim to know that the tomato is on the table that no one has substituted a plastic imitation...etc., but equally clearly [I do] not have to establish the truth of these propositions and infer the known proposition (partly) from them.

Similarly with testimony: we do not have to establish the many propositions which, if false, would invalidate our ready assent to what we are told, unless there is already some reason to believe that their truth is in jeopardy. With regard, particularly, to such questions as the reliability and honesty (here) of the witness, we can often take it that the testimony mechanism is functioning adequately, just as we may usually take it that the perceptual or memory mechanism is not malfunctioning. The analogy should be taken seriously. In spite of the differences between perception, memory, and testimony, they all provide techniques or 'mechanisms' for acquiring true beliefs and...testimony has every claim to an important source of knowledge. That it is also a fundamental source has been suggested by the failures of the individualist projects...and by some of the considerations deployed against those projects.⁶⁸

The upshot of all this is that in normal cases there is no reason to deny that testimony provides direct knowledge unless there is reason to think that the testimony mechanism is malfunctioning.

That is fairly uncontentious. But it has considerable significance for us in the bearing it has on abnormal cases (that is, on cases where the testimony is to

⁶⁵Coady, *Testimony*, p. 144.

⁶⁶Coady, *Testimony*, p. 144.

⁶⁷Using a common definition of knowledge as justified true belief.

⁶⁸Coady, *Testimony*, pp. 144-45.

something abnormal). The point is this: that an abnormal case provides good reason to suspect that the testimony mechanism is malfunctioning; *but*, if those suspicions can be allayed, then at least a *prima facie* argument has been made for direct knowledge having been supplied in this case.

In other words, to return to Harvey's argument, I believe he has stopped one step early. In his view, 'In the case of an alleged miracle...the burden of evidence and argument suddenly falls on the one who alleges the report to be true.'⁶⁹ That is right, but if it can then be shown that the testimony mechanism appears to have functioned properly then evidence and a *prima facie* argument have been supplied. There are further questions to be asked of course, and these will have to do with the nature of what is being reported. But the crucial thing to realise is that these further questions involve a move out of the realm of specifically historical competence.

For example, if it were testified that in 1250 CE somebody had turned lead into gold, then a modern person wishing to defend this event would have to begin by showing that there is no evidence that the testimony mechanism has malfunctioned. This might be done by demonstrating that the first reports of the event were not written by someone wishing to deceive their readers, for example; or that they were written by someone who had been in position to check that lead had been turned into gold, and so on. But once questions about the testimony mechanism have been answered there are *further questions*. These might be questions of chemistry and of physics (is there a means of turning lead to gold that could have been available in 1250 CE?⁷⁰); they might be questions of religion and philosophy (did the person claim to have 'otherworldly powers' and can that be possible?), and so on.

The point is that these further questions are not specifically historical. In fact they relate to matters which cannot be settled by the historian (though of course the good historian will make use of what experts in the other fields have concluded). The historian may certainly accept the 'best advice' of the chemist that no means of turning lead to gold could have been available in 1250 CE, and so conclude that, *despite* the testimonial evidence, lead was not turned into gold. But this would have to be done in recognition of the evidence to the contrary and in recognition that it is not being done for any specifically *historical* reason.

b. *Conclusion*

To return to the critics of Barth: In my view, the sort of example outlined above shows how far people like Harvey and Nineham are from demonstrating their claims that Barth does not provide good evidence (or 'warrants' or 'reasons') for his historical assertions. The fact is that, as we will see in the next chapter, he provides discussion of the question whether the New Testament testifies to the resurrection. In the course of that discussion he regularly considers matters that relate to the testimonial mechanism.

What Harvey and Nineham ought to do is recognize Barth's appeal to the testimonial mechanism. They would then be in a position to counter his argument in two ways. They could dispute Barth's claim that the mechanism has functioned adequately. But to do that would be to admit Barth into the inner sanctum of

⁶⁹*Historian*, pp. 86-87.

⁷⁰If so, then a revision of the history of the period might be in order.

historical debate. Or they could say (like my historian above) that, *despite* the testimonial evidence, we must conclude for 'non-historical reasons'⁷¹ that what is testified to did not happen. In fact, this latter move is closest to what they do, but, unfortunately for them, the way I have stated it removes the rhetorical force of their argument. This is because the rhetorical force derives from their claim that Barth fails on *historical* grounds and that that is unacceptable because Christianity is an *historical* religion.

Once the rhetorical force of their argument has been removed it remains to be considered whether it is true that we must conclude that what is testified to did not happen. This involves all kinds of further questions, and, in the case of the New Testament testimony to the resurrection, these questions have come to be called 'theology'. They are questions like, Could a person be raised from the dead? and, if so, by whom? These, of course are just the kind of questions that Barth takes up in *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*. Thus (assuming for the moment that the testimonial mechanism functioned adequately) those who wish to deny the physical resurrection happened must be prepared to enter into theological debate, and not hide behind the false claim that there is no historical evidence for it. Theological debate, of course, could include such claims as that God does not exist, or that if a God does exist he never interferes in history, and so no one particular conclusion is guaranteed

That theological debate, though, is not our subject at this point. Our interest lies in the previous stage, the question of whether the 'testimonial mechanism' functioned properly. So it is with Barth's consideration of this matter that I will begin the next chapter.

⁷¹I consider it no objection to say something like, 'The modern mind has reached a point in history where it cannot believe the miraculous has happened', and to claim this is *ahistorical reason*. The first part of this objection is simply not true (there are plenty of 'modern minds' which believe in the miraculous), while the second part renders the word 'historical' too broad and vague to be of any use and is simply a return to an improper use of the principle of analogy.

5.

The Testimonial Mechanism

My purpose now is to describe and analyse how Barth treats the 'testimonial mechanism'. This should confirm that he does indeed regard testimony as I have described it in the previous two chapters. I will begin with a brief look at his discussion of the resurrection narratives and move from there to begin to address the broader question of how other parts of the Bible function as 'witness' in Barth's conception.

In Chapter 1, I showed that Barth's interpretative strategy is dependent upon a particular understanding of the resurrection of Jesus Christ as a real event in history whose sole cause (uniquely) was God's action. I also noted that Barth's position is dependent on there being reasonable grounds for belief that such an event did occur. I then spent my time in Chapters 3 and 4 showing why *in general* testimony can reasonably be counted as 'evidential grounds'. I intend now to show that Barth considers the New Testament to constitute a body of valid testimony to the resurrection. I will then be in position to describe and analyse how Barth moves from the specific case of testimony to Jesus' resurrection to the general case of the Bible treated as testimony to revelation. That this is the correct procedure to follow is confirmed by these words of Barth:

The witness of Holy Scripture to itself [*Das Zeugnis der heiligen Schrift von sich selber*] consists simply in its essence as witness to Jesus Christ. And the knowledge of the truth of its self-witness, the knowledge of its unique authority, stands or falls with the knowledge that Jesus Christ is the incarnate Son of God. But because this knowledge coincides with the knowledge of faith in His resurrection from the dead, we must say that *Scripture witnesses to itself in the fact that at its decisive centre [entscheidenden Mitte] it attests the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.*¹

Whatever else might be said about this quotation, one thing is certain: Barth places testimony to the resurrection of Jesus at the 'decisive centre [*entscheidenden Mitte*]' of the Bible's function in the Christian community.² It is characteristic of Barth to move from a concrete particularity such as this to more general considerations.³

a. *The Resurrection Testimony*

The death of Jesus Christ can certainly be thought of as '*Historie*' in the modern sense, but not the resurrection.

¹KD I/2, p. 538 (CD, pp. 485-86), my italics.

²I say 'the Bible's function in the Christian community' because Barth uses the words 'Holy Scripture', and in doing so points to such a functional understanding.

³See G. Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, where Hunsinger shows how 'particularism' is a recurrent 'motif' or 'mode of thought' running 'throughout the *Church Dogmatics* and [shaping] the doctrinal content of Barth's mature theology as a whole' (p. 4).

On the other hand, we should be guilty of a fundamental misunderstanding of the whole New Testament message if, because the history of the resurrection [*Auferstehungsgeschichte*] is not 'Historie' in this sense, we tried to interpret it as though it had never happened at all, or not happened in time and space in the same way as the death of Jesus Christ, or finally had happened only in faith or in the form of the formation and development of faith.⁴

In Barth's view, it must be maintained that the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead was a real event in history. And, as I argued in Chapters 1 and 2 (contradicting many of his critics), Barth does take the word 'history' seriously (while refusing to accept the hegemony of modern historical method), believing that valid evidence is available for belief that the resurrection occurred in history. The nature of this evidence is testimony, and Chapters 3 and 4 were given to showing that, generally speaking, testimony can be treated as valid evidence. It follows, therefore, that, if Barth intends this approach with regard to Jesus' resurrection, he should at least occasionally consider whether the 'testimonial mechanism' functioned adequately in this case. It will not take long to show that he does so.

He does not, of course, give such considerations a central place in his *Dogmatik*. As I have already demonstrated,⁵ the resurrection is materially of first importance to Barth's theology, but the *Dogmatik* is structured according to theological themes or *loci*, not according to events. It is theology written for the church, which, in order to be the church, must already believe in Jesus' resurrection.

Nevertheless, consideration of the 'testimonial mechanism' there is. One of the best examples is found in *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* III/2, where Barth enters into debate with Rudolph Bultmann. The debate arises because, as part of his discussion of human nature as temporally conditioned, Barth affirms that Jesus is 'Lord of time'. That Jesus is Lord of time, he argues, is demonstrated and established by the event of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This is because, although Jesus had a *lifetime* like all other humans, in his resurrection he transcended death, the temporal limit of that lifetime. Thus, Jesus' resurrection 'shows us as nothing else can...that even as a man in His time Jesus is the Lord of all time.'⁶

The ins and outs of this argument do not matter here. What does matter is, first, Barth's view that the argument only works if Jesus' resurrection was, in and of itself, a real event in history, and, secondly, his awareness of Bultmann's recent challenge to the idea that Jesus' resurrection was a 'real event'. As Barth understands it, Bultmann treats the NT language of resurrection as 'mythological garb' for the process of coming to faith of the disciples, 'the Easter history is merely the first chapter in the history of faith [*Glaubensgeschichte*], and the Easter time the first period in the age of faith'.⁷ The 'act of God' was not a physical resurrection of a dead body, but was the rise of faith of the disciples. Barth, for his part, 'maintain[s] the direct opposite...Jesus Himself did rise again and appear to His disciples...This is the act of God'.⁸

⁴CD IV/1, p. 336 (KD, pp. 370-71).

⁵See Chapter 1.

⁶CD III/2, p. 441 (KD, p. 530).

⁷CD III/2, p. 445 (KD, p. 533).

⁸CD III/2, p. 445 (KD, p. 534).

But on what grounds does Barth 'maintain the direct opposite'? In part, as we saw in Chapter 1,⁹ he offers the negative grounds that, without a distinct 'act of God' in which to believe, the first disciples' faith would have been groundless. If the 'act of God' was in fact identical with their 'rise of faith', then in reality they were alone and had no basis for their belief that God had acted. In that case the Christian faith as a whole would be a foundationless edifice.

But, aside from this argument about the terrible consequences of Bultmann's position, Barth does offer positive grounds for maintaining the opposite. These are that,

when the New Testament speaks of the event of Easter it really means the Easter history [*Ostergeschichte*] and the Easter time [*Ostertzeit*]. We are in the sphere of history and time [*Geschichte und Zeit*] no less than in the case of the words and acts and even the death of Jesus...[I]t happened 'once upon a time' that He was among them as the Resurrected. This, too, was an event.¹⁰

This is what the New Testament writings *really say*,¹¹ argues Barth. It is their witness:

This statement holds good whatever our personal attitude may be to this later history [sc. the history of the period of Jesus' resurrection]. Its truth does not depend on our own acceptance or rejection of the Easter story, or whether we prefer to accept it differently from the way in which the New Testament describes it, or to interpret it in a different sense...[W]hatever our own personal attitude to the resurrection may be (and there are many alternatives to choose from), we can at least agree on one point...To put it sharply, while we could imagine a New Testament containing only the history of Easter and its message, we could not possibly imagine a New Testament without it. For the history and message of Easter contains everything else, while without it everything else would be left in the air as a mere abstraction. Everything else in the New Testament contains and presupposes the resurrection. It is the key to the whole. We can agree to this quite apart from our own personal attitude to the resurrection.¹²

In other words, whatever else the New Testament does, it functions as a witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ being a real event in history. Those who hear the witness may, in Barth's opinion, disregard or reinterpret that testimony and take up other positions, but they should at least agree that this is the content of the testimony.

But we need to go a little further, and ask whether Barth offers reasons why we should choose to accept the New Testament testimony, rather than disregard or reinterpret it. The first reason he offers in fact takes the form of repudiation of what he understands to be Bultmann's position. This position is the best current representative of the choice to reinterpret the testimony. If that best representative is unconvincing then we are thrown back on the other two options, either to accept or disregard it. Barth finds Bultmann unconvincing for four reasons:

1. For Bultmann a 'real' resurrection would be a 'nature-miracle', which as such is incompatible with the Christian understanding of human existence. To Barth this is no reason to reject Jesus' resurrection, since whether the resurrection happened must

⁹Pp. 25-27.

¹⁰CD III/2, p. 442 (KD, p. 530; emphasis shown in KD but not in CD).

¹¹In Chapter 8 I discuss issues such as 'multiple meanings and interpretations' and the 'intentional fallacy'.

¹²CD III/2, pp. 442-43 (KD, p. 531).

be decided *before* the Christian understanding of human existence is developed. In other words, Bultmann's exegesis is forced into an 'anthropological strait-jacket', which is a result of his systematic conclusions, not historical considerations.¹³

2. Bultmann's argument that Jesus' resurrection cannot be accepted as historical because it cannot be verified by modern historical method has been dealt with in Chapter 1. In summary: Barth does not accept the hegemony of this method and so rejects Bultmann's position. However, he does consider Jesus' resurrection to have 'a tiny "*historisch*" margin.'¹⁴

3. Bultmann asserts that acceptance of the resurrection testimony 'is merely a blind acceptance of a piece of mythology...a dishonest *sacrificium intellectus*'. But Barth rejoins that the first disciples 'were not able to accept it because the prevailing mythical world-view made it easier to accept then than it is supposed to be today. Even in those days the Easter message seems to be utterly "incredible"...not only to the educated Areopagites, but even to the original disciples.'¹⁵ Notice the parallels between Barth's criticism of Bultmann here and Coady's criticisms of Bradley described in the previous chapter. Coady criticises Bradley for thinking that the different world-views of witnesses in the past render their testimony useless. On the contrary, there is a 'crucial role for very plain mere observation', no matter what the world-view. Barth argues that the first disciples believed *regardless of* their world-view, not because of it: they believed because of *what they had observed*, and for no other reason.

4. Barth argues that, hand-in-hand with this argument, goes Bultmann's belief in a uniform and final scientific modern world-view, which all modern people hold and which is incompatible with the NT world-view 'of demons and spirits'. To believe in science is to render impossible honest belief in demons and spirits. Barth questions first of all whether the modern world-view is as uniform and final as Bultmann believes.¹⁶ Subsequent studies in the sociology and philosophy of science have demonstrated the strength of this point. But much more important than this, says Barth, is the possibility that modern people may be compelled in all honesty to accept the evidence for something which goes against their scientific beliefs, namely Jesus' resurrection. This need not imply a rejection of science or an acceptance of ancient, mythical world-views: Barth asks,

[What if modern people] recognise a duty of honesty which, for all this respect for the discoveries of modern science, is even more compelling than that of accepting without question the promptings of common sense? What if they felt themselves in a position to give a free and glad and quite factual assent not to a *fides implicita* in a world of spirits and demons but to faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead? What if they have no alternative but to do this?¹⁷

Barth concludes that 'these are the decisive reasons why, in spite of Bultmann, we must still accept the resurrection of Jesus, and his subsequent appearances to His

¹³CD III/2, pp.445-46 (KD, pp. 534-35).

¹⁴CD III/2, p. 446 (KD, p. 535).

¹⁵CD III/2, pp. 446-47 (KD, pp. 535-36).

¹⁶CD III/2, p. 447 (KD, p. 536).

¹⁷CD III/2, p. 447 (KD, p. 536). Barth rams home his point by a fifth argument, in which he asserts that Christians should never allow world-views, whether modern or ancient, to determine their theology. Instead they should be eclectic, making use of whatever language, symbols, etc., will express that theology best.

disciples, as genuine history [*geschehen Geschichte*] in its own particular time [*besonderen Zeit*].¹⁸

It is important to repeat that, according to my argument in the previous chapter, it is normal for those who share the kind of view proposed by Coady to operate with the tacit assumption that testimonial evidence should be accepted as a source of knowledge unless there is reason to think that the testimony mechanism has malfunctioned. This tacit assumption is present in Barth and is not explicitly stated. However, Barth is explicit in considering whether the mechanism has malfunctioned. This, then, becomes the second reason offered by Barth as to why we should accept the New Testament testimony: the testimony mechanism does not appear to have malfunctioned. Or, put more precisely, things which might appear to indicate malfunctioning can in fact be better explained in another way.

There certainly are features of the resurrection narratives that *might* point in the direction of malfunction. Barth frankly admits that the evidence they supply is 'fragmentary and contradictory', and that the narratives contain 'a good deal that is not to be taken literally but typically'.¹⁹ (The example he gives is the statement of Acts 1.3 that the appearances took place over a forty day period. The period is symbolic, connected, for example to the forty days of the flood in Genesis and the forty day temptation of Jesus.)

But these features are better explained by the nature, or content, of the resurrection event than by the assertion that it did not occur. As we saw in Chapter 1, Barth argues that the period of Jesus' resurrection is the supreme moment of the Word of God, the time when God unambiguously reveals himself in the world. As such, its content is not knowable by ordinary human means, that is, by historical method, since by definition historical method does not recognize God in the world. Therefore, Barth says, 'it is clearly impossible to extract a "*Historie*" in our sense of the concept from the various accounts of the resurrection'.²⁰ In fact, 'The narratives are not meant to be taken as "*Historie*" in our sense of the concept'.²¹

In other words, the fragmentary, contradictory and symbolic nature of the resurrection narratives is a clue to the nature of what they witness to, and not a reason to reject that witness.

This leads us to Barth's third reason why we should accept, rather than reject or reinterpret the NT testimony. It is a matter of hermeneutics. In considering this matter we will begin to see how Barth makes the move from treating the NT as testimony to the resurrection in particular to treating the Bible as testimony to revelation in general.

¹⁸CD III/2, p. 447 (KD, p. 537).

¹⁹CD III/2, p. 452 (KD, p. 542).

²⁰KD III/2, p. 542 (CD III/2, p. 452). This is one of the occasions on which the official English translation is highly misleading, since it translates *Historie* as 'a nucleus of genuine history'.

²¹KD III/2, p. 542 (CD III/2, p. 452). We should also note that a very similar argument appears in KD IV/1, pp. 368-72 (CD, pp. 333-37), where Barth again is concerned to demonstrate that the resurrection of Jesus 'in fact happened. It has happened in the same sense as His crucifixion and His death, in the human sphere and human time, as an actual event within the world with an objective content (p. 333).

b. Testimony and Hermeneutics

At one stage in his argument with Bultmann, Barth makes the following unamplified, and therefore rather cryptic remark: 'In our view, we do violence [*höchste Gewalt antun*] to the texts of the New Testament if we take a different line [sc. from acceptance of the testimony], as Bultmann does.'²² What does he mean by this?

The Witness of the Resurrection Accounts

We need to remember that, for Barth, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not a mere resuscitation of a human corpse. Such a resuscitation would certainly be a very important 'nature-miracle', but it would not be what makes the resurrection of Jesus important:

It is rather measly, and at all events is not appropriate to the understanding of New Testament view and thought, to describe the literal sense of the texts as understanding the resurrection of Jesus from the dead as a 'nature-miracle', thereby attempting to discredit it. It is right in as far as we necessarily have to do, in the appearance of God, with the whole apprehensible existence of the man Jesus, and therefore 'nature', i.e., Jesus' body, has a part in this event...Yet it was not that it included 'nature' [*die 'Natur' umfaßte*], not that it took place as a bodily resurrection [*liebliche Auferstehung geschah*], which made it what it was. No, it was because God Himself, the Creator...was now manifested in this resurrection, that it was necessary for this event really and apprehensibly [*wirklich und wahrnehmbar*] to include nature, and therefore this resurrection had to be a bodily resurrection.²³

The resurrection of Jesus is pre-eminently the self-manifestation of God in the world.

We saw above that Barth considers it impossible 'to extract a "Historie" from the various accounts of the resurrection'. This is because the resurrection accounts speak primarily of an event in history [*Geschichte*] which, unlike other events, has no separable 'creaturely [*katürlich*]' element that can be perceived by historical (or any other human) method. Certainly, Jesus' resurrection was physical, natural, creaturely. For Jesus Christ was a human being. But in the period of the resurrection and the subsequent appearances, God demonstrated his oneness with his creature. He demonstrated that in Jesus he had taken human nature into himself.²⁴

In Barth's view, the eye-witnesses of Jesus' resurrection appearances encountered an event in which God's presence and action was, as it were, made entirely obvious. Jesus' resurrection was the final and full 'unveiling [*Enthüllung*]' of what before had been 'veiled [*Verhüllung*]'.²⁵ By contrast, in every other event in history God's presence and action is by no means obvious. Everywhere else it is to some degree 'veiled'. For 'God is different from the world [*von der Welt verschieden*]', and

²²CD III/2, p. 445 (KD, p. 534).

²³KD III/2, p. 541 (CD, p. 451; the CD translation is rather inaccurate here).

²⁴'As the Creator condescended to be a creature, He did not make the creature Creator, but in its unity of existence with His Son He adopted it into fellowship with His being as God [*in die Gemeinschaft mit seinem Sein als Gott...aufgenommen*], Creator and Lord...His resurrection and ascension were the first, particular, temporary revelation [*die erste, partikuläre, vorübergehende Offenbarung*] of this action'; '[T]he act of God in which the Son of God becomes identical with the man Jesus of Nazareth, and therefore unites human essence with His divine essence, and therefore exalts the human into fellowship with the divine...[this act] has been manifested a first time, particularly and provisionally, in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ' (CD IV/2, pp. 100, 107 [KD, pp. 110-11, 118]; my italics).

²⁵See, e.g., KD I/2, p. 42 (CD, p. 38).

therefore, 'He does not belong to the sphere of what man as a creature can know directly' and because 'He is the Holy One to see whom, even indirectly, other eyes are needed than these eyes of ours which are corrupted by sin.'²⁶ To 'neutral observers'²⁷ encountering these events, and to those later investigating them by *historisch* method, all that would be apparent would be their creaturely elements.

The sole content of Jesus' resurrection is God's acting,²⁸ and is therefore *unhistorisch*.²⁹ The resurrection accounts, in other words, report to us (or testify) something which we cannot know or perceive in any other way. They report God's self-manifestation in the newly-living Jesus. They witness to God's unambiguous self-revelation. In this respect, Jesus' resurrection is utterly unique, it is *sui generis*: 'we must understand the event of Easter as the true and original and typical act of revelation [*die eigentliche, ursprüngliche, exemplarische Offenbarungstat*], and therefore as an act of God *sui generis*'.³⁰

The Witness of Other Texts

However, while the resurrection accounts testify to the *pre-eminent* event of God's self-revelation, the resurrection is not the *only* event of God's self-revelation. There have been other moments in which God has acted, revealing himself to human beings. But these other occasions were ambiguous, because they contained separable 'creaturely' elements that could be perceived by purely human methods. These 'creaturely' elements are open to historical investigation and verification. It is possible to perceive the event, therefore, without perceiving God's self-revelation in it.

Barth's understanding is that the Bible witnesses to God's self-revelation in these events and not to the events in and of themselves. Of course, just as it was necessary for the resurrection of Jesus to be a physical, 'natural' event, it was necessary that these occasions of God's self-revelation were also physical, 'natural' events. But the Bible's interest is in the events as revelation, not the events as historical events *per se* (i.e., not as *Historie*). Thus, we have here Barth's move from the particular matter of how the resurrection accounts function to the general matter of how other texts function in Christian theological interpretation. The resurrection accounts witness to 'the true and original and typical act of revelation', while the other texts of the Bible witness to God's other acts of revelation, and the Bible as a whole witnesses to the fulness of God's self-revelation.

This makes sense of Barth's claim that, 'at its decisive centre [the Bible] attests the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead'.³¹ It also provides an initial, provisional answer to why Barth believed Bultmann's approach did 'violence to the texts of the New Testament'. The New Testament texts tell us that Jesus' resurrection was a real

²⁶CD I/1, p. 320 (KD, p. 338).

²⁷I am using this term to leave room for the fact that some people, according to Barth, are nevertheless enabled to 'see the Holy One'. These people are the biblical witnesses.

²⁸CD IV/1, p. 302 (KD, p. 333): 'on the third day, Easter Day, He [Jesus] came among them again in such a way that his presence as the man He had been (hadbeen!) was and could be *exclusively and therefore unequivocally* [*ausschließlich und also unzweideutig*] the act of God without any component of human will and action' (italics in KD, not CD).

²⁹The resurrection 'takes place, but it obviously does so without our being able...to ascribe to it a "historical [*historisch*]" character' (KD IV/1, p. 331 [CD, p. 300]).

³⁰KD IV/1, p. 336 (CD, p. 304).

³¹KD I/2, p. 538 (CD, p. 486).

act of God, independent of the first disciples' faith. Bultmann's approach (according to Barth, at any rate) says that, despite what the New Testament tells us, the act of God was identical with the first disciples' faith, that the real meaning of the New Testament is that the 'resurrection' was really the 'rise of faith' in the first disciples. Thus, the meaning of the texts is different from what they say, from their witness. To assert such a disjunction between 'meaning' and 'saying' is what I understand Barth to mean by 'doing violence to the texts'. I will return to this matter in a while, when I consider Barth's discussion of general hermeneutics.

Witness to What?

But all of this raises a problem. In Chapters 3 and 4 the discussion centred around the possibility of testimony as a source of knowledge for *whether or not events had happened*. (For the sake of brevity, I will call this, 'knowledge of historicity'.) But now I am describing testimony as a source of knowledge of something rather more than historicity. For Barth, it is not merely a question of an event's having happened, but of God's action in that event. With respect to Jesus' resurrection, it is not a question of whether an extraordinary 'nature-miracle' has happened (though that does matter), the rising of a person from the dead. It is a matter of the 'inner meaning' of that event. For Barth, biblical testimony is a source of knowledge, not just of events but more importantly of God's self-revelation in history. Therefore the problem is: Is it legitimate to claim that testimony can be a source of this sort of knowledge?

To answer that question we need to look again at what I established in Chapters 3 and 4. First, I concluded in Chapter 3, from an analysis of Barth's use of testimony language, that he intends testimony to be understood in a normal sense. The Bible witnesses by normal human means, and we are to seek to understand the witness in the same way as we would understand other testimony.³² Thus, the question becomes, 'Is it legitimate to claim that the testimonial mechanism operating in the normal way can be a source of knowledge of revelation?'

Secondly, although in Chapter 4 I concentrated mostly on the narrow question of whether testimony provides knowledge of the *occurrence* of events, I did also begin to consider the question of testimony to the meaning of events. This arose out of Coady's discussion of the nature of descriptions of events. Coady points out that when people observe past events they are not mere passive tape recorders; rather, they make active judgments and inferences which are an integral part of their observations, and which may or may not be helpful when we hear their reports of the events.³³ The function of witnessing involves both active and passive elements. To repeat some words already quoted from Coady:

That we are active, selective, interpretive in what we perceive and recount is not only consistent with our also being in part passive, receptive, and recorder-like but it actually seems to require it. Unless we register quite a lot we cannot act, select, and interpret at all. The real story is quite complex and multi-layered; neither the picture of wholly passive registration nor that of furiously active invention is adequate.³⁴

³²See Chapter 3.

³³See Chapter 4.

³⁴*Testimony*, p. 268.

Being a witness, therefore, involves not just saying whether or not 'an event' occurred, but also what the content of that event was, what its 'inner meaning' was, and so on. Take the example I constructed in which Brown tells the court how Jones, on the day he murdered his wife, was not his usual jovial self, but behaved very seriously. To Brown, who knew Jones, the content of the event was 'Jones' behaving in a solemn manner', and its inner meaning was that something had happened to make him behave that way. But to another observer, who did not know Jones, this might not even have constituted 'an event', since as far as this observer was concerned Jones may have been behaving perfectly normally.

It seems reasonable to me, having established this, to say that the testimonial mechanism, when it functions properly, is potentially a source of knowledge of more than historicity. It can provide knowledge of the content and meaning of events. How far it actually does so will depend on the particularities of each case. Presumably, it will especially depend on how well the witnesses performed the active, selective and interpretative elements of their observations. I assume that no human being will ever perform these elements perfectly, and so no testimony will ever provide perfect knowledge of an event. On the other hand, on the assumption that a 'witness' is not in fact a 'false witness' (i.e., someone whose aim is to deceive), it seems likely that most testimony will provide at least some useful knowledge.

Of course, this is a long way from proving that testimony can provide knowledge of *revelation*. I have sought to show only that testimony has to do with meaning and content, and not just historicity. Obviously enough, the human activity of judgment about and interpretation of events is not the same thing as the divine activity of self-revelation in events. Therefore, I have shown only that, when Barth treats the Bible as testimony, he is justified in not restricting himself to questions of historicity. To treat the Bible as testimony is to take seriously what its authors have to say about meaning and content. To interpret the Bible is to wrestle with such things and, in so doing, to come to an understanding of that to which the authors testify. This is what the historical critics had failed to do, and what Barth made a first attempt at doing in his commentary on Romans. It is in the second preface to that work that we find his famous comment on Calvin's Bible interpretation:

how energetically Calvin, having first established what stands in the text, sets himself to re-think the whole material and to wrestle with it, till the walls which separate the sixteenth century from the first become transparent! Paul speaks, and the man of the sixteenth century hears. The conversation between the original record and the reader moves round the subject-matter, until a distinction between yesterday and today becomes impossible.³⁵

Barth is in no way short-circuiting the hermeneutical problem here. He is perfectly well aware that there is a gap between first and sixteenth centuries, and yet another gap between first and twentieth centuries. That is why Calvin had to energetically rethink the material and wrestle with it. And that is why Calvin's commentary would not do for the twentieth century, and Barth had to write his own, rethinking and wrestling himself. But Barth nevertheless believes that the hermeneutical problem is not insurmountable.³⁶ Through serious interpretation of the

³⁵*The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 7.

³⁶Cf. CD IV/1, pp. 287-95.

text, the reader can come face to face with that to which the text testifies, the subject-matter itself.

It is Barth's conviction that this subject-matter is God's self-revelation. The question therefore remains whether testimony can provide knowledge of revelation, whether testimony is able to bridge the gap between God's self-revelation and those who have not directly experienced it. If it can do so, then we must go on to ask whether and how far the writings of the Bible can reasonably be treated as specific instances of such testimony: whether the Bible is able to bridge the gap between the present reader and God's past self-revelation.

With regard to the first question, I have argued that testimony is capable of providing knowledge not just of the historicity of events, but also of their inner content and meaning. Using Coady's terminology to give a little more precision, the element of the witness's activity known as 'passive registration' or 'mere observation', can provide knowledge of the historicity of events, while the 'active, selective and interpretative elements' can provide knowledge of content and meaning. It would seem, therefore, that testimony is of a suitable *form* to provide knowledge of the divine content and meaning of events in which God has acted. To use the terminology introduced in Chapter 2, testimony has a suitable form for declaring the *unhistorisch* but nevertheless *geschichtlich* side of such events.

What we need to consider, therefore, is whether the witness of revelatory events can have knowledge of God's self-revelation. If the witness can have such knowledge, testimony is a suitable form to pass it on to others, and the logic of Barth's decision to treat the Bible as testimony becomes apparent.

All I intend to do here is briefly outline Barth's understanding of how the witness can have knowledge of revelation.

Knowledge of Revelation

One of the points he emphasizes very strongly is that no human being has an innate capacity for knowledge of God. Human beings are capable only of knowledge of things of this world. But God is not of this world, he is its creator. He is the unknowable, incomprehensible God. Since revelation is God's *self-revelation*, this remains true when a human being witnesses a revelatory event. It remains true that the witness, even when confronted by the Word of God, has no innate capacity for knowledge of God. It follows, therefore, that the witness must be given such a capacity in and by the event itself:

[T]he Word of God is what it is as it is concretely spoken to this or that specific man. The question is how these men to whom it is concretely spoken can know it. And our answer must be that they can do so when the ability is given to them by the Word itself [*wenn und indem ihnen dieses Können durch das Wort selbst gegeben wird*].³⁷

The giving of this capacity Barth describes as the work of the Holy Spirit in the event of revelation. The Holy Spirit imparts to the witness the ability to hear and understand the revelatory aspect of the event. The Spirit enables the witness to know God:

God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit, especially in revelation, is God Himself to the extent that He can not only come to man but also be in man, *and thus open up*

³⁷CD I/1, p. 196 (KD, p. 204).

man and make him capable and ready for Himself [so den Menschen für sich selbst öffnen bereit und fähig machen], and thus achieve His revelation in him[und so seine Offenbarung an ihm vollstrecken kann].³⁸

Part of the work of the Holy Spirit, therefore, is to open up for the original witnesses the meaning and content of God's self-revealing activity. The Holy Spirit makes such knowledge possible and actual. The Holy Spirit enables the witness to be successful in his or her active interpretation of the event he or she has passively observed.³⁹

The importance of this for our discussion is as follows. I have established that, *in general*, testimony is a valid means of obtaining knowledge from a witness about the meaning and content of what the witness has experienced. I have also established that, in Barth's view, certain human beings who experience God's revelatory activity, *in that particular case*, can and do know the meaning and content of that activity. If these two premises are true, it is reasonable to say that the testimony of such witnesses can provide us with knowledge of God's self-revelation.⁴⁰

This understanding enables us to make sense of an assertion of Barth's already quoted in Chapter 1. I noted there that there comes a moment in theology when the Bible is no longer criticised but is simply heard. This is the moment when we are faced with the testimony of the original witnesses. For Barth, theological interpretation

rests on the assumption that the message which Scripture has to give us, even in its apparently most debatable and least assimilable parts, is in all circumstances truer and more important than the best and most necessary things that we ourselves have said or can say. In that it is the divinely ordained and authorised witness to revelation, it has the claim to be interpreted in this sense...⁴¹

This is the kind of statement that has led many critics to accuse Barth of fideism. If they mean by this that Barth asks people to 'just believe', without any evidential basis, then they have misunderstood. If I am right that Barth shares the kind of view of testimony I have been outlining, then testimony is itself evidence.

However, as I made clear in Chapter 3, treatment of testimony as having evidential value does require an element of trust in the witness. In this sense, Barth's theology and Bible interpretation do involve a considerable degree of 'faith'. But I do not consider this to justify the accusation of fideism.

Testimony and Lessing's Ditch

It is also worth noting before we move on, that this understanding of testimony provides the basis for Barth's reply to Lessing's 'wide, ugly ditch'. Lessing, according to Barth,⁴² argued that no matter how true the Bible is, there is a gap between us and it which we cannot cross. This gap or ditch is not the problem of historical

³⁸CD I/1, p. 450, my italics (KD, p. 473).

³⁹At this point, I am addressing the matter, as it were, from God's side. I am describing how, in Barth's view, God makes knowledge of revelation possible. In Chapter 8, in the discussion of *Sage* and the role of imagination, I describe the matter from the other side. That is, I describe Barth's view of how knowledge of revelation is possible from the human side, from the side of the witnesses.

⁴⁰Barth adds the proviso, of course, that we also must be recipients of the work of the Holy Spirit providing us with the capacity to know God. I have already dealt in Chapter 3 with the objection that this proviso constitutes a mystification of the processes of interpretation.

⁴¹CD I/2, p. 719.

⁴²See KD I/1, pp. 151-52 (CD, pp. 146-47).

understanding. Lessing considered himself able to leap the centuries back to the time of the Bible and able to understand that time.

Rather, the gap is this: even if it is true that the biblical witnesses experienced God, that experience is not our experience. Even if Jeremiah and Paul were in touch with the divine, what does that have to do with our experiencing the divine? Barth uses the term 'contemporaneity [*Gleichzeitigkeit*]' to designate the possibility of our experiencing what they experienced. And he summarizes Lessing's argument thus: 'His problem...was the non-contemporaneity between Christ, the apostles and ourselves.'⁴³

In this, Barth considers Lessing to have been entirely right. God revealed himself in Christ to the apostles, and so they had an experience of God of which we are unable to avail ourselves: the non-contemporaneity, 'he rightly saw', was 'impossible to overcome'.⁴⁴ But Lessing, according to Barth, failed to see that, while we are unable to overcome the gap from our side, it is possible for it to be bridged from the other side.

This possibility Barth calls the 'contingent contemporaneity [*kontingente Gleichzeitigkeit*]' of the Word of God.⁴⁵ By this phrase he indicates that, when we read the testimony of the witnesses, God may choose to speak through that testimony, and so we become contemporaneous with his Word. It is contingent because God remains free not to speak. Lessing's 'ugly, wide ditch' remains, therefore, because God must always remain free.⁴⁶ And it cannot be overcome by us, not even by some Kierkegaardian 'leap of faith'. It is overcome only by God graciously choosing to speak and act.

When God does choose to speak, he does so via testimony, which tells us about the content and meaning of what the apostles and prophets experienced. This testimony allows us to see and hear what they saw and heard. It makes us contemporaneous with them, and so contemporaneous with the self-revelation of God.

Testimony and Mystery

I demonstrated in Chapter 3 that Barth did not intend this to be a mystification of the reading process, and we are in position now to see why it is not.

The matter turns on Barth's understanding of a particular hermeneutical point. He makes this point most clearly in his analysis of the thinking of Anselm of Canterbury.⁴⁷ Barth notes that, when Anselm deliberates upon the concept of 'the Name of God', it is possible to argue that this concept is meaningless. The reason revolves around the question of how words have meaning. Words only have

⁴³KD I/1, p. 152 (CD, p. 147).

⁴⁴KD I/1, p. (CD, p. 147).

⁴⁵KD I/1, p. 150 (CD, p. 145).

⁴⁶Though we must immediately add that, for Barth, Lessing's problem is only a 'technicality' (KD IV/1, pp. 319-21 [CD, pp. 290-92]), since it has already been overcome in Jesus Christ. For, in the most important sense, God has already made us contemporaneous with him by electing us in Jesus Christ. Thus, 'The movement of flight into Lessing's problem is unnecessary. In and with the overcoming of the real and spiritual problem of the relationship between Jesus Christ and us, the technical problem [*has technishce Problem*] of the relationship between the then and there and the now and here is also soluble and has in fact been solved' (CD IV/1, p. 293 [KD, p. 322]).

⁴⁷*Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*.

meaning, in Barth's view,⁴⁸ when the person reading or hearing the word already has some grasp on the reality to which it refers. For example, when I read the sentence 'The strawberry tasted good', I only understand the sentence if I have experienced strawberries for myself.

Therefore, says Barth, when Anselm discussed 'the Name of God', it in itself 'could not provide him with knowledge of God unless some extension of what that word is meant to denote were also given to him from another source'.⁴⁹ For language about God to be meaningful, in other words, a person must have some sort of experience of God. It is not possible to overcome the problem in any other way. With other objects we can overcome lack of experience of them by means of analogy. If I did not know what a strawberry was, somebody could describe it to me by means of analogy to fruit that I had eaten. But God is completely unlike anything else, and attempting to speak of him by analogy will not work.

Nevertheless, Barth maintains that it is possible to speak of God *when God makes it possible*. He makes it possible by making himself present to a person who is hearing or reading words of which he is the referent. When this happens, human words about God become a word spoken by God to humans, the Word of God.⁵⁰ And so God becomes 'contingently contemporaneous'. Thus, for Barth, ultimately, the content of the Bible is summed up in the incarnation, God with us:

The prophetic and apostolic word is the word, witness, proclamation and preaching [*Wort, Zeugnis, Verkündigung und Predigt*] of Jesus Christ...The promise of this Word is thus Immanuel, God with us...Holy Scripture declares, attests and proclaims it [*sagt, beseugt, verkündigt es*]. And by its declaration, attestation and proclamation it promises that it applies to us also and to us specifically.⁵¹

In my view, there is no mystification of the reading process here. This is because God makes himself present *as the referent of the words*. The words remain exactly what they are, human words seeking to describe what the witness saw:⁵²

Imprisoned in thankfulness and hope we must dare to face the humanity of the biblical texts...—we must dare really to face it, i.e., to let the text speak to us as it stands, to let it say all that it has to say in its vocabulary and context, to allow the apostles and prophets to say again here and now to us what they said there and then. That is how it will always be when they do

⁴⁸I do not propose to go into other linguistic theories here.

⁴⁹Anselm, p. 79.

⁵⁰In his excellent article 'Historical Criticism and Dogmatic Interest in Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis of the New Testament', Bruce McCormack explicates this process in terms of the *analogia fidei* ('analogy of faith'):

'Analogy of faith,' as Barth employs it, refers most fundamentally to a correspondence between an act of God and an act of a human subject. The act in question on the divine side is God's act of self-revelation; on the human side, it is faith in that revelation (or the knowledge of faith). 'Analogy of faith' means that in the event of revelation, an analogical relationship is established between the content of the divine speaking and the content of the human hearing in faith. The analogy works strictly from above to below (p. 331).

⁵¹CD I/1, pp. 107-108 (KD, p. 110).

⁵²Notice how in the following quotation in which Barth is emphasizing that it is *God* who makes himself present, this is nevertheless so in the context of the *humanity* of the Bible: 'The fact that God's own address becomes an event in the human word of the Bible is...God's affair and not ours. This is what we mean when we call the Bible God's Word...[I]f the prophets and apostles tell us what they have to tell us, if their word imposes itself on us...all this is God's decision and not ours...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 (CD I/1, p. 109 [KD, p. 112]).

what we cannot force them to do and speak the word of God in their human words [*in ihren menschlichen Worten Gottes Wort sagen*].⁵³

If God chooses to make the words *his* Word, he does so by enabling the reader or hearer to successfully comprehend what the witness saw.⁵⁴ This is where the mystery lies, in God's enabling the person to successfully comprehend that which is incomprehensible, God's self-revelation. There is no question of the words coming to mean something else at this moment, or of the person having some sort of mystical experience divorced from the meaning of the words.⁵⁵

This point is clarified by comparing what happens when God does speak with what happens when he does not. Barth notes that,

We can think of an object by thinking of the word that describes it, that is by obeying the directions which our thinking receives from the sign language of this word and so considering what claims to be the thought of the object concerned.⁵⁶

That is, when we read (or hear), the words enable us to form a conception for ourselves (an *esse in intellectu*) of that which they are describing. This is what happens on *every* occasion. But, on the occasions when the words do not become the Word of God, this is *all* that happens. On such occasions,

nothing but this awareness, this *esse in intellectu*, results from hearing the Christian proclamation and...the *vox significans rem* [the word signifying a thing] does its work in vain because the man is not aware of the *res* [sc. the thing in itself] that it signifies.⁵⁷

⁵³CD I/2, p. 533 (KD, pp. 592-93).

⁵⁴This is the point which Baxter has missed when she complains that, 'The fact is that for Barth all historical witness is reliable in so far as God speaks through it, and unreliable in so far as it is human and therefore errant words. The author's intended meaning is important only because it is the witness which God chooses to use' ('The Movement from Exegesis to Dogmatics in the Theology of Karl Barth, with special reference to Romans, Philippians and Church Dogmatics', p. 89). If this is right, God might just as well choose any other writing or the biblical writings read in any other way. God might, for example, say just the same things through Keat's poetry or even the Sun newspaper. Or he might speak just as well through the Bible interpreted according to the methods of David Koresh, as through the Bible interpreted according to the 'author's intended meaning'.

But Baxter has construed Barth's position wrongly. It is not a case of all meanings being potentially the same until God 'just happens' to choose one rather than the others. The author's intended meaning is important because *that* meaning 're-presents' to us what the witness originally saw. And it is in the form of what the witness originally saw that God makes himself present. In other words, it is as God revealed himself to the original witnesses that he reveals himself through their testimony now.

A report in the Sun newspaper about the 1995 Wimbledon tennis final simply would not do that job, since the tennis match was not an event in which God revealed himself to those watching and nor was the Sun's report seeking to tell us about any such revelation. Nor would the Gospel of Matthew read, for example, as the story of an early Christian community do the job. According to Barth's scheme of things, the Gospel of Matthew must be read as witness to what God has done in Jesus Christ if it is to be the Word of God to us.

⁵⁵This successful comprehension is what Barth calls 'the subjective reality of revelation [*die subjektive Wirklichkeit der Offenbarung*]' (CD I/2, p. 235 [KD, p. 256]) when 'they are convinced by God Himself' (p. 236 [KD, p. 257]). He goes on to reiterate that nothing other than this takes place: 'We may be tempted to think that it means something else as well. By the testimony of the Holy Spirit we may be tempted—as happens often enough—to understand some hidden communication of revelational content in addition to and beyond the divine sign-giving.' But if we are tempted in this way, then, 'We are not convinced by God Himself...[for] the Holy Spirit is not only the Spirit of the Father but also the Spirit of the Word' (p. 236 [KD, pp. 257-58]).

⁵⁶Anselm, p. 163.

⁵⁷Anselm, pp. 24-25. This, I believe, is the point that D. Kelsey has missed in his argument (see Chapter 3) that, for Barth, the Bible makes God present to the reader by rendering God (or Jesus) as an agent of the Bible narrative. Rather, in these Anselmian terms the Bible renders the *esse in intellectu*, but not the *res*. Only God himself can make the reader aware of the *res*. It is not a function of the nature of the text as narrative.

On the occasions when God does speak, he speaks by and in virtue of the person becoming aware through the signifiers of the *res*, the thing signified, which is, of course, God's self-revelation.⁵⁸

This 'becoming aware of the *res*' is the only additional element. And it is crucial to realise that the person who 'becomes aware' does not, as it were, receive an additional piece of information. This person does not get to see something additional that is not described by the words. Rather, God makes himself present in the form of the *esse in intellectu*. The words enable us to achieve a particular conception or understanding, and it is in the form of that particular conception or understanding that God makes himself present.

There is therefore no question of Barth's argument leading to a kind of 'private interpretation' to which only the privileged few have access. Those who have heard the Word of God have heard it in and through the 'conceptions' that the words make possible. These 'conceptions' are entirely available to those who have not heard the Word of God. Those who have not heard are able to form exactly the same conceptions as those who have. Therefore, it is a matter of interpretation open to all. The difference is that the 'hearers' have been enabled to 'perceive' the 'thing' which the conceptions signify, and so they affirm the truth of the words.

It is in this light that we should understand Barth's following words:

From our point of view, the revealed truth has, as it were, an inner text which of course simply asserts that what to us is the outward text is the truth. This inner text can be found only within the outward text, but cannot simply be heard or read along with the outward text, for it can be sought and found only by virtue of a distinct intention and act and also—and this is decisive—only by virtue of special grace.⁵⁹

I have laboured this point because it addresses two common and related misunderstandings of Barth. The first has specifically to do with the historical question. In the light of his seemingly ambiguous attitude towards historical criticism, critics often ask about Barth's estimation of the historical status of biblical stories. Critics often claim that the stories' historical status is unimportant to Barth because he believes that the living, resurrected Christ speaks through the stories anyway and this makes historical status irrelevant.

David Ford says that when Barth

goes on to claim that '[Christ] speaks for Himself whenever He is spoken of and His story is told and heard' [CD IV/1, p. 227] he is implicitly ruling out the question of the reliability of the accounts as theologically irrelevant.⁶⁰

And Christina Baxter concludes that,

not even the story of Jesus is established by historical methods... Verification depends not on veracity, but on Christ: he 'verifies Scripture simply by the fact that He is its content...' [CD IV/2, p. 675].⁶¹

⁵⁸Thus, 'We remember that the Word is not bound to the sign-giving. But we also remember that we are bound to the sign-giving' (CD I/2, p. 236 [KD, p. 258]).

⁵⁹*Anselm*, p. 41. It would take too long to go into the issue of biblical authority in this context. However, I want to point out that it is 'the outer text', the *esse in intellectu*, which all people have in common, that would be authoritative. In other words, Barth's hermeneutics do not create a situation in which some can claim to have perceived 'the inner text' and on that basis to have special access to what is truly authoritative in scripture. This is the point that D. Kelsey misses in *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*. See Chapter 3.

⁶⁰*Barth and God's Story*, p. 38.

⁶¹'Movement', p. 176

In my view, Ford is wrong: Barth implicitly rules *in*, not out, the question of reliability. It is ruled *in*, because Christ 'speaks for Himself' in the sense of making himself present *in the form in which he originally revealed himself*. If the story were fiction it would not be his story, the story of the one who had revealed himself in history, and so he would not make himself present through the words of the story. Thus, if the story can be shown to be unreliable, then Christ's speaking through it cannot be expected. Theologically, this is entirely relevant.⁶²

Baxter is closer to the truth. The story of Jesus is not established by historical methods, for the reasons I set out in Chapter 2. And 'verification', in the sense of confirmation of the truth of the Jesus story, can only be by means of Jesus' making himself present to the hearer of the story. But, as I showed in Chapter 2, this does not rule out verification of certain aspects of the story, such as the '*historisch* margin' of the resurrection, and the fact of the existence of a man called Jesus from Nazareth, and the fact that he was crucified. Historical criticism remains relevant in this sense. But it is never able to provide confirmation of the truth of the story. So, when Baxter implies that 'veracity' is divorced from 'verification' in Barth's theology, I think she has reached a wrong conclusion. Jesus will, by the nature of the case, only verify a veracious story. That is, he will only make himself present in a story of which he (in the form of his original revelation) is the content. Thus, 'He verifies Scripture simply by the fact that He, *Jesus Christ*, is its content; that as it is spoken and heard He Himself is present as the living Lord of the Church... Concretely *there*, that is, in the form attested there, He is revealed and may be known.'⁶³

The second misunderstanding is that Barth introduces mystifications into the hermeneutical process. It is my argument that he does not. That I am right is confirmed in a number of ways. First there is Barth's avowed readiness to change his mind on theological conclusions if it could be shown that his Bible interpretation was at fault, or if somebody could offer a better interpretation.⁶⁴ Along with this goes the fact that he always provides justification for his interpretation. These justifications are *reasoned* justifications, and therefore are in principle open to falsification.

In addition, there is an important theological side to this openness of interpretation. It is encapsulated by Barth in the phrase, 'the secularity [*welthaftigkeit*]

⁶²This is one reason why I consider Ford's overall interpretation of Barth to be inadequate. His thesis is that, 'Barth is claiming that God chooses to bring people to faith through certain stories; that this does not depend on being able to verify the stories historically or affirm them as inerrant; but that it does depend on us following the stories carefully and trusting that their subject, who is still alive to confirm them, is rendered adequately for God's purpose' (*Barth and God's Story*, p 22). He has misunderstood Barth because of a methodological mistake. He has looked in isolation at the way Barth sometimes interprets biblical narratives, and has extrapolated from what he sees there to a characterisation of Barth's complete hermeneutical position. He has done this without adequate consideration either of Barth's theoretical discussions of the nature of interpretation or of the very considerable volume of Barth's actual interpretation of biblical texts other than narrative interpretation. Ford does acknowledge he has taken a rather partial approach, in that he has not taken into account KD I/1-2, arguing that this is justified because after these volumes there was a 'change in Barth's own concept of revelation' from a model 'of a strongly I-thou, confronting and verbal nature' to one in which 'the mediation of the story becomes more pervasive' (*ibid.*, p. 24). But the weakness of this argument is, it seems to me, revealed in Ford's very next sentence: 'There is no dichotomy; it is a matter of emphasis, and the change might be ascribed to the subject matter of the later volumes; and it is possible to demonstrate retrospectively the continuity of his hermeneutics; but for my purposes a lengthy analysis of 1.1, 2 is superfluous' (*ibid.*) By contrast, in this thesis I have sought an interpretation which takes account of the whole *Dogmatik* and all the significant elements. I address the issue of Barth's narrative interpretation in Chapter 8.

⁶³KD IV/2, p. 764 (CD, p. 675); Barth's emphasis.

⁶⁴See, for example, KD II/2, p. 434 (CD, p. 393).

of the Word of God'.⁶⁵ By this he means that, even when God does make himself present, the form in which he is present is always secular. It is always a form which is of this world, creaturely not divine. And it remains in this form, even for the person who receives it as the Word of God. It does not, at this moment, become something else. A first-century person who met Jesus Christ and realised he was the revelation of God did not actually come to see anything different from the person who thought he was just a carpenter's son from Nazareth. The former saw a man from Nazareth, but in faith came to know him as the Son of God. He or she did not see something of which the latter was refused a view. Thus again, this time because of the secularity of the Word of God, there is no question of 'private interpretations', or of mystification of the processes of understanding.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, there is a mystery. This mystery resides in the nature of God's self-revelation as secular. For secular means not just 'creaturely', it also means 'sinful', since this world has been invaded by sin. The mystery, therefore, is that in and through taking a form which is not of itself, which in fact contradicts itself, God's Word does in fact speak:

[I]n all applications of the proposition that proclamation, or Scripture or revelation is God's Word we must have regard to the fact that this is true only in this twofold indirectness. In the speaking and receiving of God's Word what is involved is not just an act of God generally, and not just an act of God in creaturely reality as such, but an act of God in the reality which contradicts God, which conceals Him, and in which His revelation is not just His act but His miraculous act, the tearing of an untearably thick veil, i.e., His mystery.⁶⁷

Barth takes Paul's argument in 1 Cor. 1.18–2.10 as confirmation that this is correct. What Paul preaches is 'the word of the cross', which is indeed the wisdom and power of God, but which from the creaturely point of view can only be folly. God is revealed in something which contradicts and conceals God, and this is a mystery. It is a mystery which we have no capacity to pierce. The mystery must interpret itself to us: 'The real interpretation of its form can only be that which God's Word gives itself.'⁶⁸ Elsewhere this is described as the action of the Holy Spirit. Human understanding, Bible interpretation and the hermeneutical process all operate perfectly normally to bring us face to face with the mystery. But it is then only by the work of the Holy Spirit that the mystery is pierced and a person perceives God's revelation.

In my view it is crucial to realise that it is this mystery to which Barth points so often and in so many ways. But this has been confused by many of his interpreters with mystification of the processes of understanding. Barth's intention, at any rate, has been to locate the mystery in God's action, not in human actions or understanding. The Bible witnesses to the mystery, but is not in itself mysterious. Any mystification of the hermeneutical process, therefore, would prevent us from perceiving the real mystery, and that would run counter to Barth's purposes. That is

⁶⁵See KD I/1, pp. 171-80 (CD, pp. 165-74).

⁶⁶I am again leaving aside the question of faith here. It would take me too far from my subject. It is certainly true that for Barth faith is a gift from God, but it is also true that it is a free act of obedience (see Chapter 3), and therefore not a mystification.

⁶⁷CD I/1, p. 168 (KD, p. 174).

⁶⁸CD I/1, p. 167 (KD, p. 173).

the logic of Barth's theory, and it will provide us with a good test of his practice. If his Bible interpretation is in fact 'mystificatory' in any way, then it will be right to criticise it as such.

Of course, it remains true that in Barth's scheme of things there are those who hear and those who do not, those who receive the Word and those who do not. And so there are 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. But this is not due to 'something strange' happening in the human processes of understanding.⁶⁹ It is due to the mystery of God's self-revelation on one side and the human response on the other side. The response can be either obedience and faith or disobedience and unbelief.

This means that, in describing the one moment of a person hearing the Word of God, two seemingly irreconcilable aspects must be held together: the Holy Spirit's action in the person and the person's freely given faith and obedience. With respect to the reading of the Bible, Barth understands these two aspects to be held together in the doctrine of inspiration.⁷⁰ We should note that Barth is in no way denying the human side when he emphasises the divine side of this moment. The two must be held in tension. Faith is a gift from God, yet it is also, and within that fact, a freely made human act. The action of the Spirit does not remove the need for human action.

It is not the place (even if it were possible) to resolve this tension here. I wish only to stress that Barth's emphasis on the work of the Spirit should not mislead us into thinking he desired to do away with the need for ordinary human understanding,⁷¹ interpretation and hermeneutics. His affirmation of the doctrine of inspiration does not lead to 'pneumatic exegesis'. Rather, it leads to a very

⁶⁹Of course, from Barth's point of view only the insiders achieve full understanding, since only they perceive the truth, that what they are faced with this revelation, is *The Truth*. But this is the end result, a value judgment. It is not the process of understanding.

Thomas Provence ('The Hermeneutics of Karl Barth') has misunderstood Barth to this effect. He seems to think (see pp. 333-61) that Barth intends his conception of the work of the Holy Spirit as providing a hermeneutical method or principle. But in fact Barth never says this. His discussions of the work of the Spirit come in response to the question, 'How do we encounter God?', not, 'How do we interpret Scripture?' Thus, the passage which Provence treats as of paramount importance for *hermeneutics* (KD I/2, pp. 571-73 [CD, pp. 514-17]) comes in a section in which Barth deals with how Scripture can be the Word of God (entitled 'Scripture as the Word of God'), *not* in the later section ('Freedom under the Word') where Barth lays out his understanding of how to interpret Scripture. Barth makes the point clear in the passage in question. He says,

In the so-called doctrine of inspiration the point at issue was and is how far, i.e., on the basis of what relationship between the Holy Spirit as God opening up man's ears and mouth for His Word and the Bible, the latter can be read and understood and expounded as a human witness of His revelation as the Word of God and therefore in the strict sense as Holy Scripture (p. 514 [KD, p. 571]).

In other words, What is the nature of the relationship between the work of the Spirit and the Bible when we hear the Word of God through the Bible's words? The answer to that question will enable us to know, 'how far...the latter can be read...as a human witness of His revelation'. Thus, attention to the work of the Spirit does not provide us with a hermeneutical method, it only tells us how far our hermeneutical method (or methods) enable us to read the Bible as witness to revelation. Barth wants to emphasise, once again, that such methods *do* succeed in this aim, but only *if* and *when* God chooses. So he concludes, 'the doctrine of inspiration will always have to describe the relation between the Holy Spirit and the Bible in such a way that the whole reality of the unity between the two is safeguarded no less than the fact that this unity is a free act of the grace of God (CD I/2, p. 514 [KD, p. 571]).

⁷⁰See Chapter 3.

⁷¹Provence is a good example of those who have been misled this way. He thinks that, with respect to Bible interpretation, Barth believed 'that Scripture may be understood only by the work of the Spirit' ('Hermeneutics', p. 334). Of course, in the sense I have explained, that the Spirit enables us to understand *the mystery to which the Bible witnesses*, Barth would agree. But Provence thinks Barth means that the Spirit is needed 'to make the Bible understandable' (p. 348). On my construction, Barth sees the Bible itself as 'humanly understandable', but not that to which it testifies.

determined concentration on treating the Bible text as a human product. 'When we speak of the inspiration of the Bible or when we confess that the Bible is the Word of God', then we affirm that when a person hears the Word of God,

God Himself now says what the text says. The work of God is done through this text. The miracle of God takes place in this text formed of human words. This text in all its humanity, including all the fallibility which belongs to it, is the object of this work and miracle. By the decision of God this text is now taken and used. And in the mystery of God it takes place that here and now this text acquires this determination. *Yet it is still this text as such [dieser Text als solche] of which all this has to be said...If God speaks to man, He really speaks the language of this concrete human word of man [wirklich die Sprache dieses konkreten Menschenwortes].*⁷²

c. Conclusion

In this chapter I have confirmed that Barth does indeed treat the 'testimonial mechanism' in the kind of way I laid out in Chapters 3 and 4. That is, he treats it as a valid form of evidence which can provide us with knowledge. I have also considered the implications of the claim that testimony can provide knowledge of God when the Holy Spirit enables it to do so. I have taken a considerable amount of space arguing that this latter qualification does not mean a mystification of the hermeneutical process.

It is time now to turn from these considerations of Barth's theoretical position to analysis of whether his position can be reasonably applied to the Bible in practice. I want to ask whether the proposition, 'The Bible can be treated as testimony to revelation', fits the actual character of the Bible. I will approach this matter in part by looking at actual examples of Barth's interpretation found in *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*. It should be noted that in so doing I am not focusing so much on making judgments about whether these are good examples of interpretation as on discovering the way Barth applied his understanding with regard to the Bible and testimony to particular texts.

⁷²CD I/2, p. 532 (KD, pp. 591-92); my emphasis.

PART III:

TESTIMONY

AND THE BIBLE

6.

Variety in the Bible

As the modern era of biblical studies has developed, a number of features of the Bible have been brought to ordinary peoples' attention for perhaps the first time. We have become aware of diversity of morality, worldview and theology among its writers, of historical inaccuracies, of textual difficulties, of question marks about authorship and dating of documents, and so on. The consensus seems to be that this awareness has caused us to question, perhaps as never before,¹ whether the Bible really ought to be authoritative for faith and theology. It is a question that must be taken very seriously. For many people the only possible answer is, 'No, the Bible is not suitable.' In the following chapters, I intend to consider whether Barth's proposal might lead us to conclude otherwise.

a. *Variety and System*

In his book *Wolf in the Sheepfold—The Bible as a Problem for Christianity*,² R.P. Carroll spells out in a number of ways the difficulties Christian theology faces in its use of the Bible today. One feature of the Bible he emphasizes is the variety and even contradiction in its language about God. This feature, he says, is at odds with theology's inevitable attempt to systematize:

the problem of the Bible for theology is in the first instance the presence of contradictions in the Bible. Not discrepancies of account or contradictions in narratives about historical events—the Bible has many of these—but contradictions in the representation of God. Theology is about God, so a source for doing theology which contains contradictions is invariably problematic. Discourse about God cannot tolerate formal contradictions. A philosophical system which was content to entertain such contradictions would itself be seen as a contradiction in terms (an oxymoron).³

Certainly, Carroll has touched upon what has to be ranked as one of Christian theology's greatest challenges. The Bible contains stories and poems, letters and prophecies, and little of this could be described as systematic theology. The transformation of the former into the latter is highly problematic. The feeling among many modern Bible scholars is that those who attempt such transformation almost

¹Though I am wary of the way people from before the modern era are stereo-typed as naive, unquestioning, 'child-like' figures and we 'moderns' become wise, critical 'grown-ups' by contrast.

²R.P. Carroll, *Wolf in the Sheepfold—The Bible as a Problem for Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1991).

³*Wolf in the Sheepfold*, p. 41.

inevitably misrepresent the Bible's nature and mislead people as to how the Bible can and should be read.⁴

Can treating the Bible as testimony enable the theologian to deal with the problem, and so avoid distortion of the Bible's nature? I believe it can.

What is 'Systematization'?

First, we need to be precise as to the nature of the problem. I need to clarify just what sort of 'systematization' Barth intends theological use of the Bible to involve. (There are, of course, an almost endless number of other theological uses of the Bible, ranging from fundamentalist to Marxist readings, but they cannot concern me here.)

I have already set out in Chapters 1 and 2 why, for Barth, theology is theology within the tradition of the Church—why it is *Christian* theology—so I will not go over that ground again. But what is the nature of this theology? He sets out his understanding of the matter right at the beginning of the *Dogmatics*. Theology, he says, is our attempt to test whether the Church's talk about God is based upon and consistent with God's self-revelation (Jesus Christ) and so enables us to know him:

The criterion [*Das Kriterium*] of Christian speech...is Jesus Christ, God in His gracious revealing and reconciling address to humanity. Does Christian speech originate with [*herkommt*] Him? Does it lead [*hinführt*] to Him? Is it conformable [*gemäß*] to Him?

These three questions describe three distinct but intimately related areas of theology:

None of these questions stands apart from the other, but each is to be put independently and with all possible force. Thus theology as biblical theology is the question of the basis, as practical theology the question of the goal and as dogmatic theology the question of the content [*Inhalt*] of the distinctive speech [*eigentümlichen Rede*] of the Church.⁵

Thus, biblical theology's first and controlling question is whether what we say about God can reasonably be derived from what we know about God's self-revealing activity. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, what we know about God's self-revealing activity is what we derive from reflection⁶ upon the testimony of those who witnessed that activity. Put in shorthand, biblical theology asks whether theological assertions are derived from the witness of the Bible.

Consequently, biblical theology's first question is *not* to ask whether theological assertions contradict each other. If theological assertions contradict each other, then the question must be raised whether they can be talking about the one God, who is not self-contradictory. *That* is a question to be asked by dogmatic theology, since dogmatic theology asks whether and how far theological statements are conformable to God.

Now the key point is this: in Barth's view, dogmatic theology must be subordinate to biblical theology—thus, if two theological assertions contradict each other, but both are based on Scripture, then dogmatic theology must allow them to

⁴This, I take it, is what lies behind the often heard appeal (found, for example, on the back cover of Carroll's *Wolf in the Sheepfold*) for the Bible to be set free 'from the dogmatic constraints which have done so much to suppress its true nature and value'.

⁵KD I/1, pp. 2-3 (CD, pp. 4-5).

⁶This is the word Barth uses to designate the second in his three phases of biblical interpretation. Reflection (or *meditatio*) is 'the middle point between [*der Mitte zwischen*] *sensus* and *usus*, *explicatio* and *applicatio* (KD I/2, p. 815 [CD, 727]).

stand. The reason is that God's self-revelation is the final criterion and ultimate truth for Christian theology:

According to Holy Scripture God's revelation is a ground which has no higher or deeper ground above or below it [*ein Grund, der keinerlei höheren oder tieferen Grund*] but is an absolute ground in itself, and therefore for man a court from which there can be no possible appeal to a higher court. Its reality and truth [*Wirklichkeit und Wahrheit*] do not rest on a superior reality and truth...God's revelation has its reality and truth wholly and in every respect—both ontically and noetically [*also ontisch und noetisch*—within itself.⁷

George Hunsinger uses the terminology of 'correspondence' (of theological statements to revelation) and 'coherence' (of theological statements with each other) to describe the result: Correspondence takes precedence over coherence whenever coherence in itself would strive for a maximal satisfaction at the expense of correspondence. For it is the correspondence that makes the coherence theologically meaningful.⁸

'Systematization', therefore, does not require a complete lack of contradiction in theology's statements about God. Carroll is operating with a different conception of theology. He essentially sees theology as philosophy about God, presumably independent of reliance upon testimony to revelation. And so he says that, 'Discourse about God cannot tolerate formal contradictions. A philosophical system which was content to entertain such contradictions would itself be seen as a contradiction in terms (an oxymoron).'

What 'systematization' is, for Barth, is a set of what Hunsinger calls 'rationalist procedures' which serve to make clear theology's own particular and intrinsic rationality:

Theology as a set of internal logical and cognitive relations can...be explained by noting several 'rationalist' procedures: deriving, grounding, ordering, testing, and assimilating.⁹

This particular and intrinsic rationality seeks to remove *unnecessary* contradictions from theology. But it recognizes that, if it is to maintain its grounding in God's revelation, some contradictory statements may have to be allowed.

Thus, the problem of the Bible's nature for Carroll's kind of theology is, as he implies, a seemingly intractable one, and philosophical theology might be better leaving the Bible out of its consideration.¹⁰ But the problem is a somewhat different, though nevertheless real, one for Barth's theology. This problem lies not so much at the end of the process, but at the beginning. The problem is not the presence of contradictions between dogmatists' theological assertions, but the presence of

⁷CD I/1, p. 305 (KD, p. 321).

⁸*How to Read Karl Barth—The Shape of His Theology*, p. 225.

⁹*Karl Barth*, p. 55.

¹⁰Carroll says as much on page 56 of *Wolf in the Sheepfold*: 'Theology may function happily without the Bible because it does not need the Bible in order to do its work'. Unfortunately, he fails to see the possibility that Christian theology might be of a different nature, in which the Bible (or more precisely, that to which the Bible witnesses) is necessary. So he can only see it as a terrible accident of history that Christian theology has become dependent on the Bible: 'The sheer unsuitability of the Bible as a source from which to do (philosophical) theology has been known for a long time—Spinoza has splendidly analysed it—but *Christian theology has inherited the Bible from a different culture and has nailed itself to that cross*' (p. 56, my italics)!

contradictions¹¹ in the Bible's language about God. If this language is grounded in God's self-revelation, does it not imply that God is self-contradictory? Or, looked at from the other point of view, do contradictions not imply that the different authors of the Bible are actually talking about different gods?

However, *this* problem is not an intractable one. Its solution is found in the nature of testimony.

b. *Variety and Testimony*

It is instructive to note, first of all, that contradiction and variety between texts turns out in practice to be beneficial for, and not an embarrassment to, Barth's Bible interpretation.

Christina Baxter describes the different approaches to interpretation which Barth uses to move from exegesis to dogmatic conclusions. She groups these approaches according to how he makes use of biblical 'concepts', 'themes', 'theological statements', 'story', 'typology', 'allegory and analogy'.¹² In the first two approaches in particular, variety between texts proves fruitful. In KD IV/2, for example, Barth assesses what different parts of the New Testament have to say about the theme of 'faith'.¹³ He does not allow the only voice to be that of Paul (or even that of Paul as interpreted by Luther!), but gives considerable space to 'faith' in the Gospels. He notes that 'faith' in the Gospels and 'faith' elsewhere in the New Testament seem very different. The former might appear to be belief in the possibility of miracles and that Jesus can do them. Barth says this is a possible explanation of Jesus' question to the blind men who wanted healing, 'Do you believe I am able to do this?' (Mt. 9.28).¹⁴ Such an interpretation could point for support to Jesus' words, 'Your faith has saved you' (Lk. 7.50), or, 'Your faith has made you well' (Mt. 9.22).

However, says Barth, 'It is surely evident that if this explanation of the question is correct, the way in which the word "faith" is here (and in other passages) used by Jesus according to the tradition is very different from the use of πιστις and πιστευειν in the rest of the New Testament'.¹⁵ This gives us pause for thought, as it were, and causes us to ask whether there is an alternative explanation. So Barth returns to 'faith' in the Gospels. He points out that in the healing of the blind men in Matthew 9, the blind men cry out, 'Have mercy on us, Son of David', and he argues that,

They do not turn to a wonderworker who, if he had not been Jesus of Nazareth, might well have been someone else...Therefore what they are asked [sc. by Jesus] is whether they did really believe this (τουτο) as their cry seemed to suggest. Did they really believe that the Son of David and therefore the God of Israel [*und also der Gott Israels*] had come, and that he would have mercy on them, and could take their misery from them and dismiss it from the world?¹⁶

¹¹And, we could add, the presence of variety. Outright contradictions are relatively few in number in the Bible, but variety and diversity are everywhere to be found. Contradiction is only the extreme of this. But if testimony can 'cope' with contradiction, then it can 'cope' with variety.

¹²See 'The Movement from Exegesis to Dogmatics in the Theology of Karl Barth, with special reference to Romans, Philippians and Church Dogmatics', pp. 127-216.

¹³See KD IV/2, pp. 258-68 (CD, pp. 233-42).

¹⁴See KD IV/1, p. 259 (CD, p. 234).

¹⁵CD IV/1, p. 235 (KD, p. 260).

¹⁶CD IV/1, p. 235 (KD, pp. 260-61).

Barth goes on to conclude that this is representative of the kind of 'faith' that is commended by the Gospels:

Generally speaking, is faith not always the privileged and characteristic act of sufferers, people afflicted with a vital physical need in their relationship to the faithful God of Israel who fulfils his promise—that is, concretely, in the relationship of the sufferers to Jesus the Deliverer, in whom the hope of Israel has found its fulfilment? When we are told in these passages that men believed, this means that they...stood in this *relationship*. They *belonged* already to Jesus the Deliverer because they were already *found* by Him before they knew Him...They had the freedom—this is the particular point of these passages—to throw themselves and their vital physical need at His feet as it were, and in His person at the feet of the faithful God of Israel.¹⁷

This is an example of how an appreciation of variety in the Bible (this time between 'faith' in the Gospels and 'faith' elsewhere) has led Barth to reach a more profound interpretation of a text than he might otherwise have done. But variety also—and this is my main point—leads Barth to reach more profound dogmatic conclusions. This is illustrated by a further stage in his argument.

He asks, 'what is really meant by the formula: "Thy faith hath saved thee"?' And he says, 'The general reference of the formula is to man's salvation generally from the power of darkness, but also and concretely from the specific physical ailments which afflict him...Of this salvation the formula seems to say that it is altogether the act and work of man, of his faith.'¹⁸

But there is a problem:

The contradiction to which this gives rise seems unavoidable and intolerable. For is it not Jesus, and in what He says and does God, who saves man in both the general and concrete sense? "Jesus Christ maketh thee whole" (Acts 9.34), says Peter to Aeneas. How is it, then, that in this formula man's faith can be called the saviour?¹⁹

A clue to the solution is found in the conclusion reached earlier about 'faith' in the Gospels, that when 'we are told in these passages that men believed, this means that they were in this relationship...They belonged already to Jesus the Deliverer'. When taken in conjunction with what is said elsewhere, this means that,

throughout the New Testament faith is only *secondarily* described as a disposition or attitude or act of man. It is this, but the decisive thing is that it also reaches behind this whole sphere to a *primary* thing from which it proceeds as a human action when man is awakened and called to it. In the New Testament sense, the word 'faith' does not only describe the believing thought and knowledge and confession and activity of man. It also embraces the presupposition of all these things, which as such does not belong to the mental sphere [*nicht mentaler*], but the sphere of reality [*realer natur*]. We have called it the factual, objective, ontological standing [*faktischen, objektiven, seinsmäßigen Stand*] of man—not all men, but certain men—in a concrete relationship [*konkreten Verbundenheit*] with Jesus Christ and the God who is active and revealed in Him. Those who believe do so in this status—because, as Paul says, they are 'in Christ,' they belong to Him, they are set at His side. It is in virtue of this that they believe.²⁰

¹⁷KD IV/1, p. 261 (CD, pp. 235-36); Barth's emphasis.

¹⁸CD IV/1, p. 240 (KD, pp. 265-66).

¹⁹CD IV/1, p. 240 (KD, p. 266).

²⁰CD IV/1, pp. 240-41 (KD, p. 266).

In this way the apparent contradiction between 'faith' in the Gospels and 'faith' in Paul, for example, contributes to Barth reaching profound dogmatic conclusions. It is not a question of seeing faith *either* as, for example, an active disposition of the mind obtaining benefits for itself *or* as a passive dependence on benefits provided by God. Faith, he argues, really is a free human act, but it is an act dependent on and made possible by God's gracious act of setting the human in relationship with him. Barth explains it as follows:

The act or work of their faith derives from their being [*aus seinem Sein*], just as a shoot does from a root. Who can say where the root ends and the shoot begins?...Is not the only sure distinction between the two the fact that the one is visible and the other is not? Those who believe in the New Testament sense do so, as their own free act, because they have the freedom to do so from the One in whom they believe. And in the exercise of this freedom they reach back [*greift er*] to that which is before their faith and independent of it [*vor und unabhängig von*].²¹

All this provides a good illustration of my original point, that variety in the Bible is beneficial to Barth. It enables him to reach conclusions that do not have their basis in any one text, but which nevertheless are derived in a reasonable way from biblical texts.

But what of actual (as opposed to apparent) contradiction? Can that also be beneficial to Barth? The answer is, 'It depends'. It depends on what sort of contradiction is involved. If the contradiction is at the level of historical detail, then, most often, it is a matter of indifference. In a collection of human writings produced at times in the past when exact historical accuracy was not a matter of interest, Barth expects to find inconsistencies of detail. What matters, he thinks, is the Bible's claim that God has done certain things at certain times in history, even if those times cannot be exactly dated and perfectly described:

If the time and place are largely obscure for us 'historically,' if the individual data the Bible offers concerning them are subject to 'historical' criticism, this is not surprising in the documents of a time and culture that had no knowledge at all of a historical question in our sense...Nevertheless...the Bible by what it calls revelation always means a specific event at a specific time and place. Thus, even if according to the standards of modern historiography it does in certain instances, having no interest in this regard, commit 'errors [*Irren*]' in what it says about the time and place, the important thing is not the more or less 'correct' content but the very fact of these statements.²²

Historical inaccuracies must not be allowed to prevent us from hearing what the Bible wants to tell us about God's revelation in history. For the Bible does mean to narrate history,²³ i.e., not to tell of a relation between God and man that exists generally in every time and place and that is always in process, but to tell of an event that takes place there and only there, then and only then,

²¹CD IV/1, p. 241 (KD, p. 266). Barth goes on to say that this is how we can make sense of such statements as 'Your faith has saved you': 'the experience of the divine act of mercy even in the physical sphere is not merely promised to his faith, but that faith itself is that which accomplishes it, the saviour'.

²²CD I/1, pp. 325-26 (KD, p. 344). Barth uses the adjective *historisch* throughout this passage for 'historical', indicating by it modern secular historical method. I describe the issues surrounding this terminology in Chapters 2 and 8.

²³The German word used here is *Historie*. Again, see the discussions of terminology in Chapters 2 and 8.

between God and certain very specific men...*To hear the Bible as witness to revelation is to hear about this history*²⁴ *through the Bible.*²⁵

Often, therefore, Barth makes no mention, when interpreting a text, of difficulties scholars have raised about it. This does not mean he is unaware of the difficulties, merely that he considers them trivial and irrelevant to his purpose. However, at other times he does mention them. For example, he knows that there are difficulties with the synoptic account of the temptation of Jesus. First, there is the question of the internal coherence of the three episodes that make up the account: 'Are these three little stories the original sequence of the story in which they now appear...? They are a little disjointed and may go back to three sources which were originally different.' And second, there is the difference between Matthew's and Luke's versions: 'The order and climax are different in the two Evangelists.'²⁶

The first problem is about historical accuracy. Barth accepts that the three episodes (the temptation to turn stone to bread, the temptation to throw himself off the temple, and the temptation to gain control of the world) may in fact come from three independent sources, and so may be three versions of one original temptation episode.²⁷ If correct, this reconstruction provides us with important evidence about the composition of the Gospels and about what lies behind them. What matters for dogmatic theology, though, is the witness of the episodes to the temptation which Jesus faced, and in this respect, 'there is a thread which runs through them all and confirms their identity in substance.' This thread is that Jesus is tempted to take a different path from that ordained by God, 'a direction which will not need to have the cross as its end and goal...All the three stories assembled by Matthew and Luke speak in different ways of this temptation.'²⁸ In the face of this temptation, Jesus remains obedient.²⁹

The second problem is the difference between Matthew and Luke. They use the same material, but use it differently in order to say different things about Jesus' temptation. The contrast between Matthew and Luke can tell us much, for example, about the interests of the authors of these books. But again, Barth is only interested in the witness to revelation. He decides that for his purpose at this point, it will be best to follow Luke: 'The order and climax are different in the two Evangelists. At a first

²⁴German: *solcher Geschichte*.

²⁵CD I/1, p. 326 (KD, p. 344).

²⁶CD IV/1, p. 261 (KD, p. 287).

²⁷I take it this is the implication when Barth speaks of, '...the story of His temptation in the wilderness, which...is developed *in threefold form* in Mt. 4.1f. and Lk. 4.1f.' (p. 260 [KD, p. 286]; my italics). (I think it would probably also be consistent with Barth's general approach to allow the possibility that the wilderness temptation is representative, not of one event but of the reality of temptation which Jesus faced at all times. In that case, the story is a 'legend' which witnesses to a historical reality.)

²⁸CD IV/1, p. 261 (KD, p. 287).

²⁹Another example of Barth's awareness of historical contradictions is found in his comparison of the accounts of the anointing at Bethany. In Jn 12 it is Judas who takes offence at 'waste' of money involved in using so much ointment. But in Mk 14 it is just 'some' who were indignant, while in Mt. 26 it is 'the disciples'. Barth says, 'the historical complications in which we may find ourselves because of this discrepancy are of little consequence compared with the instruction which is yielded by the inconsistency' (CD II/2, p. 471 [KD, p. 523]). The discrepancy tells us, 'that what Judas said on this occasion could have been said by others of Jesus' company' (p. 472 [KD, p. 523]). Barth's larger point is that although it was in fact Judas who betrayed Jesus, all of the disciples, and indeed all human beings, had it within them to reject Jesus. Barth does not reach this conclusion on the basis of this discrepancy, he reaches it from elsewhere; but having reached it, the discrepancies surrounding the anointing tradition are well suited to illustrating it.

glance those of Matthew seem to be logically and pragmatically [*logisch und pragmatisch*] the more illuminating [*einleuchtender*]. But here we will follow that of Luke, for on a closer inspection it is the more instructive [*lehrreicher*].³⁰

The reason Barth finds Luke more instructive is the order of the three temptations. The second temptation in Luke is the offer to Jesus of kingship over all the world, while the third is the suggestion that Jesus throw himself off the temple. 'In the last decades', says Barth,

we have become accustomed to think of the seeking and attaining of totalitarian dominion as the worst of all evils, as that which is specifically demonic. But if the climax in Luke is right, there is something even worse and just as demonic.

The third and climactic temptation in Luke is Satan's urging of Jesus to throw himself from the temple. This, says Barth,

is not just a matter of a miraculous display to reveal the Messiahship of Jesus. It is often interpreted in this way, but by a reading into the text rather than out of it. The text itself makes no mention whatever of spectators. It is rather a question of the testing and proving, of the final assuring of his relationship to God...[Had Jesus leapt from the temple it] would have been His own will to make use of God in His own favour...He would have committed the supreme act of tempting God Himself...He would have demanded that He should be the most false of all false gods, the god of the religious man...[But] Jesus did not do this. He rejected the supreme ecstasy and satisfaction of religion as the supreme form of sin.³¹

Barth says a considerable amount more about the temptations than this, but I have supplied this very full quote because it provides an excellent example of how Barth's interpretation of the Bible as witness works.

The typical features are as follows:

1. Barth takes historical critical conclusions about texts seriously and makes use of historical critical ideas where they provide help in interpreting the text.³² In this case, on the basis of source critical and redaction critical ideas, he concludes that Luke is not setting out the temptations 'as they happened', but rather that he deliberately orders them so as to emphasise the meaning of the temptation Jesus faced.
2. Barth is concerned to give due weight to the details of the text. Here, for example, he points out that no crowds are mentioned—suggesting that Luke does not indicate a public display of messiahship—and that the temple provides a religious rather than secular setting; and he goes on to offer an interpretation consonant with Jesus' words, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'

³⁰CD IV/1, p. 261 (KD, pp. 287-88).

³¹CD IV/1, pp. 263-64 (KD, pp. 289-90).

³²Baxter's thesis demonstrates this point at length. She summarizes her conclusion as follows: 'For Barth, historical criticism is never superfluous, but equally never essential; never an end in itself, although it may be an invaluable tool in the struggle to see the "Word in the words"'. This interpretation of Barth to which the investigation has led, suggests that many commentators have misunderstood his practice' ('Movement', p. 72) and, 'Barth does not reject historical criticism out of hand, nor does he accept it entirely. He treads a middle, discriminating path. While he is happy for the method to continue independently, he always questions whether it is methodologically appropriate. Only where, in his judgment, it passes that test, can it be an aid to exegesis' (p. 77).

3. Barth does not remain at the level of 'pure exegesis', but instead offers interpretation which cannot be obtained from the text alone. The text itself does not say that tempting God is the supreme sin. Nor does it say that it is religion which can take the form of the supreme sin. All it does is place third Satan's suggestion that Jesus throw himself from the temple. But the details of the text which Barth mentions (the location at the temple, Satan's quotation of Scripture, and the nature of Satan's demand that Jesus commit an act demonstrating total confidence in God) do suggest that the temptation is of a religious nature. So, because he has established elsewhere³³ that religion (when it takes the form of self-centred presumption upon God) is the supreme form of sin, Barth feels justified in offering an interpretation to this effect here.

This third feature is described by George Hunsinger as 'a kind of doctrinal-hermeneutical feedback loop', through which,

the results of doctrinal construction, having arisen (however complexly) from scripture, can be brought to bear on the interpretation of scripture. The result, in the hands of a master like Barth, can be a hermeneutic of close textual readings richly informed by doctrinal considerations not immediately suggested by the text itself but rather by a deepened appreciation for the larger dogmatic or hermeneutical context.

What is particularly interesting is that Hunsinger next says, 'Derived from a complex of exegetically based doctrines and doctrinally based exegesis, it is the sort of reading which can be the despair of literalists and technicians while yet enhancing the faith and preaching of the church.'³⁴ Hunsinger seems here (though I am not sure he intends it) to be saying that Barth fails to overcome the commonly-accepted oppositions of 'faith and reason', 'academia and church', 'theory and practice'.³⁵ It is my thesis that the concept of 'testimony to revelation' provides the theoretical basis by which these kinds of dichotomy can be overcome, and by which Barth's interpretative approach can be defended from criticism from that point of view.

Presumably, when academics 'despair' at Barth's 'exegesis', they do so because they cannot see justifiable reasons for the conclusions he reaches from texts. But if we consider Barth's interpretation of the temptations from the 'testimony to revelation' point of view, we will see that such reasons are present.

Barth concludes his interpretation of the temple temptation as follows:

Adamic man reaches his supreme form in religious self-sacrifice [*religiöser Selbsthingabe*] as the most perfect kind of self-glorification [*Selbstverherrlichung*], in which God is in fact most completely impressed into the service of man, in which He is most completely denied under cover of the most complete acknowledgment of God and one's fellows. Jesus did

³³See KD I/2, pp. 324-56 (CD, p. 297-325).

³⁴*Karl Barth*, p. 57.

³⁵Of course, the 'faith and reason' opposition has arisen only in modern times, as a result of the way religion came to be understood in the light of Kant's epistemology. It is therefore worth noting some words from the conclusion of McCormack's biography of Barth: 'however critical Barth may have been of modern theology, it is of the utmost importance...to see that dialectical theology in the form in which it was taught by Barth was a thoroughly *modern* option. It was, after all, only by presupposing the legitimacy of Kantian epistemology that he was enabled to envision the dialectic of veiling and unveiling in God's Self-revelation in the form he did' (*Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, p. 466). Barth's theology (at least at the level of epistemology) does not require us to take the side of 'faith' and reject modern forms of reason. 'Faith versus reason' is a false dichotomy.

not do this. He rejected the supreme ecstasy and satisfaction of religion as the supreme form of sin. And in so doing He remained faithful to the baptism of John. He remained the One in whom God is well-pleased. He remained sinless. He remained in obedience. In our place He achieved the righteousness which had to be achieved in His person for the justification of the world with God, the only righteousness that was necessary.³⁶

I have noted already the details in the text which make Barth think Luke's third temptation has a religious nature. Obviously, the assertion that Jesus resisted the temptation also comes from the text itself. But the different parts of the rest of his conclusion do not do so. They are as follows:

1. The epitome of sinful humanity ('Adamic man') is the person who seeks self-glorification by an act of religious self-sacrifice, and in so doing presumes upon God.
2. Jesus, in rejecting the specific temptation of throwing himself from the temple, succeeded in not participating in this epitome of sinful humanity.
3. Jesus thus remained sinless and obedient.
4. He therefore achieved the righteousness necessary for justification and reconciliation.

Taking these in order, Barth (as I have already mentioned) has established elsewhere³⁷ that religion (when it takes the form of self-centred presumption upon God) is the supreme form of sin. I do not propose to go into the details of how he establishes this. It is a complex matter. The key point for us is that he asserts that he has established it 'from the revelation attested in Holy Scripture'.³⁸ It is a truth, in other words, based on testimony to revelation. Now, since revelation is the self-revelation of the one God, what is true in one place must be true everywhere. Therefore, it is legitimate to apply a truth established from one part of the testimony to another part. In our case, Barth takes a truth established from a number of Old and New Testament witnesses and applies it to Luke's witness. He has shown from the text of Luke 4 that the temptation is of a religious nature, and this is his justification for applying a conclusion about religion that he has reached elsewhere. Point 2, in other words, is a logical deduction from combining point 1 with the text.

This is similar to the way barristers marshal their witnesses. In the recent O.J. Simpson murder trial in Los Angeles, one of the most important aspects of the case was the timing of events on the evening of the murder. At one moment in the evening, a man known as Kato, who was staying in the guest house on Simpson's grounds, heard noises made by somebody moving about in the grounds. Kato himself was unsure at what time he heard these noises. But, he heard them while he was engaged in a half hour long telephone conversation. From the testimony of the person with whom Kato was speaking, the prosecution established the exact time he broke off conversation because of the noises. In this way, the prosecution applied the testimony of one person to the testimony of another in order to establish an important point, the time that an unaccounted for person was moving around in Simpson's grounds.

³⁶CD IV/1, pp. 263-64 (KD, p. 280).

³⁷KD I/2, pp. 324-56 (CD, pp. 297-325).

³⁸KD I/2, p. 328 (CD, p. 301).

Points 3 and 4 above have elements which work in a similar way to what I have described for point 1. That is, they are applications of truth claims established elsewhere to the text currently being interpreted. These claims are that Jesus was sinless and obedient (in point 2), and that righteousness was necessary for justification and reconciliation (in point 3). But, the important thing is how Barth considers points 3 and 4 to be related to the text of Luke 4. He makes the points based on the idea that the temple temptation is the ultimate one; and, in this respect, we need to note an important phrase. Barth says, 'the Lucan order, in which this is the last and supreme temptation, is most edifying [*geistvoll*].'³⁹

In other words, Barth regards the status of what he is going to say on the basis of the Lucan order, not as derivation of dogmatic truths, but as 'edifying'. By 'edifying', he means that the subsequent interpretation he offers is not intended to prove, but rather to illustrate something. This is a little different from the status of points 1 and 2. Together, 1 and 2 constitute the dogmatic conclusion, derived from interpretation of the temple temptation episode, that Jesus did not succumb to sin in its worst form. Points 3 and 4, on the other hand, constitute an illustration of dogmatic truths which are derived from elsewhere and are, as it were, only suggested by the Lucan order.

Barth asks the question, 'What would it have meant if Jesus had taken this leap [sc. from the temple]?' The Lucan order suggests that this is the climactic moment, that had Jesus taken the leap it would have been a matter of great import. The question, 'What would have happened...?' is not demanded by the text, but it is nevertheless a useful one to ask. When asked, it provides a way of illustrating some key points about the meaning of Jesus' mission.

Had Jesus succumbed, he would have committed sin in its supreme form. The fact that he did not do so at this moment of extreme testing is representative of the claim, found elsewhere in the New Testament witness, that he was sinless. And the converse is that at this 'defining moment' he remained obedient and achieved the righteousness which is beyond the righteousness of all others. Therefore, 'In our place He achieved the righteousness which had to be achieved in His person for the justification of the world with God, the only righteousness that was necessary.'⁴⁰

The concepts of 'justification', 'reconciliation' and 'righteousness' are more Pauline than Lucan. But, for Barth, Luke 4 is more than a literary composition, and it is more than a historical record. It is testimony to a reality other than itself, and it is testimony to the meaning of that reality. This reality, God's self-revelation, is what Paul also witnesses to. So, because Paul and Luke testify to the same revelation, it is legitimate to interpret one in the light of the other. This is why it was important for me to show earlier that testimony need not be restricted to 'what happened', to matters of historicity, but that it can also relate to meaning. What Luke says about the meaning of the temptations and what Paul says about the 'total' meaning of the Christ-event are illuminated by each other and together provide a richer interpretation and theology than they might do otherwise.

It becomes apparent from this consideration that the view that the different witnesses testify to the same matter, to God's self-revelation, is fundamental to Barth's interpretation. This is what Barth understands to be expressed in the church's

³⁹CD IV/1, p. 263 (KD, p. 290).

⁴⁰CD IV/1, p. 264 (KD, p. 290).

establishment of the canon. The 'fixing of the Canon', he argues, 'is the fundamental act [*grundlegende Akt*] of Church confession'.⁴¹ I will return to this matter in the next chapter.

What this consideration of Barth's interpretation of Luke 4 has illustrated is that, in this example at least, Barth's Bible interpretation does make good sense when understood as interpretation of the Bible *as testimony to revelation*. It is my contention that the tendency of 'literalists and technicians' to despair in the face of it should be resisted. So should the tendency to place it in the supposed domain of faith divorced from reason. Those who do place it there have not made any progress in understanding beyond that of Jülicher in the 1920s, who, on reading Barth's Romans commentary, assigned it to the realm of 'Practical Theology' and accused Barth of being an 'esoteric personage'.⁴² In my opinion, Barth's work must be understood as an attempt to show why and how the divorce of faith from reason can be resisted.⁴³

c. *Conclusion*

We have been considering how variety in the Bible is treated in Barth's interpretation. But we now need to consider the possibility that on occasion this variety actually amounts to outright contradiction. How does Barth deal with this possibility?

I raised this question earlier when I noted that Barth chooses to follow Luke's ordering of the temptations rather than Matthew's. In that case, it became clear that Barth follows Luke because it is more 'instructive' and 'edifying' to do so. It is not that he considers Luke right and Matthew wrong in terms of chronological order. That is a trivial matter. He follows Luke because it is more useful for the particular subject he is discussing. I presume that on another occasion, with a different subject, he might have found Matthew more useful. It seems to me that this is a reasonable approach.

It is important to be precise here. In terms of *chronological* order, Matthew and Luke cannot both be right. But, in terms of the *meaning* of the temptations, it seems reasonable to offer an interpretation of Matthew with the temple temptation second in order to make one point and of Luke with it third in order to make a different point. For example, Barth interprets Luke in such a way as to make religious temptation the supreme form of temptation. But elsewhere in the *Dogmatik*, Barth offers a brief interpretation of Mt. 4.1-11 in the context of a different subject, namely the nature of the Son of God's humanity. In Matthew, the climactic temptation is the offer of world dominion if Jesus will worship Satan. Jesus' refusal of this temptation consisted in his refusal to exercise 'His Sonship to God in the manner and style of a human hero for His own advantage and glory'.⁴⁴ Jesus replies to Satan that worship and service shall be given to God alone (v. 10), and this defines the nature of true obedience, which is the key feature of Jesus' humanity.

What we have, then, is on the one hand an interpretation of Luke in which the order of the temptations indicates something about the supreme form which temptation takes. On the other hand, we have an interpretation of Matthew in which

⁴¹KD I/2, pp. 666-67 (CD, p. 597).

⁴²See K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 9.

⁴³As his book *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* shows, he considered one of the major tasks of modern theology to be the attempt to overcome this Enlightenment problem.

⁴⁴CD I/2, p. 157 (KD, p. 171).

the different order of the temptations tells us something about the nature of obedience. Interpreted this way, for Barth, there is no substantial (as opposed to trivial) contradiction between Luke and Matthew. We will need to look elsewhere, then, for what Barth considers to be an example of substantial contradiction. This will be taken up in the next chapter.

7.

Contradiction in the Bible

a. *Fallen Angels*

An example of, what I called at the end of the previous chapter, 'substantial contradiction' occurs in KD III/3, §51.3, where Barth considers the biblical theme of 'angels'. He notes that there has been a 'view constantly held in ancient and modern times that the demons are "fallen angels [*gefallene Engel*]"'.¹ This view contradicts a dogmatic conclusion he reached in the previous section (§50) of III/3, that evil should be understood as 'nothingness' (*das Nichtige*), that is, as non-being.² He argues that,

Just as the word 'nonsense' does not denote a species of sense, but that which is negated and excluded by sense, so *angeli mali* are not a particular species of angels, but the reality which is condemned, negated and excluded by the opposing angels which as such are *angeli boni*.³

The idea of fallen angels is rejected because Barth considers the Bible to witness to angels as beings created by God: if demons were fallen angels then they would be created beings and so not 'non-being'.

However, Barth does recognize that there are some biblical texts which could form a basis for the fallen angels idea. He mentions Gen. 6.1-4, Jude 6 and 2 Pet. 2.4.⁴ These stand over against another set of biblical texts which form the basis for Barth's conclusion that evil is *das Nichtige* and demons are therefore, as it were, 'non-being'. This is what I called earlier a 'substantial contradiction'. So how does Barth deal with it?

First of all, he argues that some texts are only apparently contradictory. This is because, although they appear to speak of demons as angels, this is 'simply a manner of speech [*Redeweise*]'.⁵ These include Mt. 25.41, Rev. 12.7, 2 Cor. 12.7, Rom. 8.38. For this to be consistent with Barth's interpretative principles, it is necessary to argue that in none of these verses does their author intend to assert anything about the ontology or origin of demons. If they did intend to assert such a thing, then it would be a part of their witness and it would have to be dealt with correspondingly. If, on the other hand, it is 'simply a manner of speech', then it can reasonably be discounted. In that case, it is parallel, for example, to Jesus' use of 'fire' as a description of hell, where we

¹CD III/3, p. 530 (KD, p. 622).

²See KD III/3, pp. 327-425 (CD, pp. 289-368). Unfortunately, there is not enough space to explain this conclusion here. Nor is it appropriate to discuss whether Barth's argument is logically sound. My purpose is to discuss how he treats *what he considers to be* a substantial contradiction within the Bible; it is not to discuss whether Barth was wrong to think of it as a substantial contradiction (an assertion made by a number of his conservative critics).

³CD III/3, p. 520 (KD, p. 610).

⁴See KD III/3, p. 622 (CD, p. 530).

⁵CD III/3, p. 520.

need not say that Jesus intended to teach that hell will be a place containing physical fire.

Interestingly, though, it is not necessary to argue that the author did not *believe* that demons were fallen angels. This will become clear if we take a look at some correspondence exchanged between Barth and his friend Walter Baumgartner, the Old Testament specialist.⁶ When, in 1950, KD III/3 was first published in Germany, Baumgartner immediately read the section (§51) on angels and wrote to Barth commenting on it from his perspective as a biblical scholar. He criticised Barth for not taking seriously enough the prevalence of the idea of fallen angels in the Bible. In Baumgartner's opinion, 'the Bible recognises throughout both evil *and fallen* angels'.⁷ The traditional association of demons with angels is not, as Barth thinks, 'merely an "old, unfortunate association"', but in fact a result of agreement with the Bible'.⁸

One of the texts Baumgartner pointed to was Gen. 6.1-4, where, 'the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were fair; and they took to wife such of them as they chose' (v. 2). For Baumgartner, it is a text which Barth had not dealt with sufficiently. Barth had made only two brief comments on it in KD III/3. He had noted that the passage in ancient and modern times has been related to the angel-fall theory,⁹ and he had argued that this 'difficult passage in Gen. 6, which speaks of the sons of God in v. 2 and v. 4, is a special case which probably does not belong to this series [sc. of passages in the OT referring to angels as sons of God] and cannot therefore be adduced in this connexion'.¹⁰

In his letter, Baumgartner suggested that the passage is part of a theme (admittedly found mainly in non-canonical writings) which, 'alongside Gen. 3 gives a different explanation of the existence of sin and suffering on earth', 'a rival explanation'.¹¹ This rival explanation blames sin and suffering on the action of angels rather than humans. Barth in his reply agreed that, 'it is a question of a parallel with Gen. 3'. But, rather than being about angels, he thinks Gen. 6.1-4 is an alternative (presumably mythological) version of how the fall came about in human beings:

I do not find an 'angel-fall' placed here in contrast to the fall of humanity (Gen. 6 is still not interested in the activities of these 'sons of God!'), but here and there are two distinct conceptions of the origin of sin in *humanity*.¹²

In other words, the issue is not what kind of mythic speculation lay behind the phrase 'sons of God' before it was used in Genesis 6, nor how the phrase was used afterwards in interpretation of the passage, but how the phrase functions in the passage as it lies in Genesis. And in his view, it functions there as part of an alternative description of how sin originated in humanity. It is not a faithful reading *of the text in context* to make it part of a theory of an angel-fall.

In a second letter, Baumgartner clarified his view, responding with partial agreement: 'with Gen. 6.1-4, I also do not want to speak of an "angel-fall"; "Angel"

⁶The correspondence is found in R. Smend (ed.), 'Karl Barth und Walter Baumgartner. Ein Briefwechsel über das Alte Testament', in E. Jüngel (ed.), *Zur Theologie Karl Barths Beiträge aus Anlass seines 100. Geburtstags* (ZTK 6; Tübingen: Mohr, 1986), pp. 240-71.

⁷'[D]ie Bibel kennt durchaus auch böse *und gefallene* Engel' (Smend [ed.], 'Karl Barth', p. 263, Baumgartner's italics).

⁸Smend (ed.), 'Karl Barth', p. 261.

⁹KD III/3, p. 622 (CD, p. 530).

¹⁰CD III/3, p. 455 (KD, p. 531).

¹¹Smend (ed.), 'Karl Barth', p. 262.

¹²Smend (ed.), 'Karl Barth', p. 265, Barth's italics.

does not suit those men very well, and also from what follows it is not the word for them.¹³ But he nevertheless added that, 'it is certainly the point of departure'. His clarified argument is that a tradition of an angel-fall began with interpretation of this passage, and that this tradition recurs later in the Bible. In particular, 'the "angel-fall" is presupposed in three passages in the O and NT and therefore demands rather thorough treatment',¹⁴ 'though the detailed story is only present in the Apocrypha, which themselves are much more interested in angelology.'¹⁵ The passages he cites are Isa. 24.21-22, Jude 6 and 2 Pet. 2.4.¹⁶

That an angel-fall is presupposed in some Bible passages and is therefore believed by some biblical authors is readily admitted by Barth. He knows that the biblical authors shared the beliefs of others of their time. However, he defends himself against Baumgartner's criticism that 'you avoid matters unsympathetic to you'.¹⁷ He replies:

As if what characterises *the* 'biblical' idea is what it has in common with the hypothetical preceding stages and again with the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, what it is as a member of an evolutionary line! Rather, it is 'sympathetic' to me to hold on to the fact that the OT texts themselves, as they stand, *distinguish* themselves from those things preceding and following and speak of something *of their own*, something which is *no longer* the primitive idea and *not yet* its development.¹⁸

For Barth, the biblical texts are undoubtedly in part a product of this evolutionary line, but they are also partly a product of their authors' encountering something different. They are the result of an encounter with revelation, which comes from outside the historical continuum. The dogmatician must read the texts for their witness to this revelation, not for the light which they shed on the common beliefs of the time, which is the approach legitimately taken by historical critics. Barth feels that Baumgartner does not sufficiently appreciate this distinction:

What would be necessary here would be a thorough reassessment of the question from the point of view of the relationship between the historical-exegetical and the dogmatically-orientated investigation and interpretation of biblical truth, for example the relationship between 'inventory [*Bestandesaufnahme*]' and the elaboration [*Herausarbeitung*] of responsible Christian knowledge.¹⁹

For the dogmatician, the issue is not whether the authors held certain beliefs or not, but whether a particular belief was intended to be a part of their witness to revelation, or whether it was merely referred to incidentally in the process of witnessing to something else. Thus, he asks Baumgartner,

Where does the OT *interest* itself...in the 'fall of angels'? Where does this happen such that one could express the opinion that the theory in question is something which the texts, as they stand, *themselves say*—not only incidentally say, but *want* to say. Precisely this, what the texts *themselves want to say*, has my 'sympathy'!²⁰

¹³Smend (ed.), 'Karl Barth', p. 268.

¹⁴Smend (ed.), 'Karl Barth', p. 268.

¹⁵Smend (ed.), 'Karl Barth', p. 262.

¹⁶See Smend (ed.), 'Karl Barth', p. 262.

¹⁷Smend (ed.), 'Karl Barth', p. 264.

¹⁸Smend (ed.), 'Karl Barth', p. 266, Barth's italics.

¹⁹Smend (ed.), 'Karl Barth', p. 266.

²⁰Smend (ed.), 'Karl Barth', p. 267, Barth's italics.

It seems to me that this is a viable hermeneutical distinction if we think in terms of testimony. A person may, in the course of giving testimony in court, for example, mention a belief they hold which is not strictly relevant to the issue at stake. The court must seek to distinguish between what is relevant and what is not. Of course, it is also possible that the person may mention a belief that indicates they are prejudiced, for example, in which case the belief would be relevant in a different way. I will return to these matters in a while,²¹ but I want first to finish with the specific matter of the angel-fall.

The problem for Barth's refusal 'to consider the "fall of angels" as an element of the biblical doctrine of angels'²² is that the three texts which Baumgartner mentions, Isa. 24.21-22, Jude 6 and 2 Pet. 2.4, appear to refer to the angel-fall in a way which is more than incidental. They do not actually describe an angel-fall, but all three do seem to assert that some angels will be judged by God and punished, and 2 Pet. 2.4 explicitly speaks of some angels' having sinned. If this is right, then there does seem to be some ground for saying that angels' having sinned (and therefore an angel-fall) is a material part of the biblical witness to revelation, rather than an incidental reference. This brings us up against what I called earlier 'a substantial contradiction'.

Unfortunately, Barth and Baumgartner continued their discussion on this matter in oral conversation²³ rather than by correspondence, so we do not know how Barth responded. However, as I mentioned earlier, he had commented on Jude 6 and 2 Pet. 2.4 in KD III/3. On Jude 6, he had said it pointed '[m]ost strongly of all' in the direction of an angel-fall, while along the same lines,

[w]e might also refer to 2 Pet. 2.4 with its reference to angels who sinned. But these texts are so uncertain and obscure [*zu unsicher und zu dunkel*] that it is inadvisable to allow them to push us in this direction. However they may be expounded, against their exposition along these lines there has to be set the intolerable artificiality [*unerträgliche Künstlichkeit*] with which attempts have been made to use them as a basis for the development of the doctrine of a fall of angels and therefore of an explanation of the existence of the devil and demons. And literally all the insights which we have gained concerning the being and ministry of angels, and developed at least concerning the character and activity of demons are necessarily false if this doctrine is correct.²⁴

It seems to me that Barth envisages two strands within the biblical witness whose logical endpoints give dogmatic conclusions which stand in absolute contradiction.²⁵ He has followed one strand, which (as he sought to establish in the previous section) relies on the biblical witness to a God who creates all existing things (including angels) but who would not create anything evil, and which therefore leads to the conclusion that demons (which are evil) cannot be fallen angels.²⁶ He therefore

²¹See the discussion of 'fallible worldviews' below.

²²Smend (ed.), 'Karl Barth', p. 266.

²³See the concluding paragraphs of letters 10 and 11 (Smend [ed.], 'Karl Barth', pp. 267, 9).

²⁴CD III/3, p. 530 (KD, pp. 622-23).

²⁵As opposed to what we might call 'apparent contradiction'

²⁶It might be objected that the belief that demons are fallen angels functions in exactly this way. That is, their evil is a result of their falling and therefore cannot be blamed on God's creating them. However, Barth sees demons as manifestations of utter evil, which is different from the relative corruption that might result from a 'fall'. If the essence of their being (or non-being) is evil, then it cannot be explained by their having 'fallen'.

refuses to follow another strand in the biblical witness which might lead to the conclusion that demons *are* fallen angels.

He offers two grounds for this refusal. There is the 'intolerable artificiality' with which those who have asserted an angel-fall have treated the texts. By this I take him to mean that the texts are forced into a system which seems alien to the meaning of the texts read in context. He does not have a better dogmatic reading of them to offer himself ('However they may have to be expounded...'), but he considers the dogmatic readings of which he knows, such as those of the early Church Fathers, to be unsatisfactory.

Normally speaking, the unacceptable way texts have been dealt with by others does not prevent Barth from offering his own preferred interpretation of them. A good example is his rejection of the standard Calvinist reading of texts relating to predestination and his new reading of the same texts based on a new christological understanding of election.²⁷ Nor, as I explained at the beginning of this chapter, would the presence of contradiction between dogmatic conclusions necessarily prevent him from asserting such conclusions. Coherence is, where necessary, sacrificed for the sake of correspondence. However, it would appear that with the matter of demons Barth is sacrificing correspondence with one strand of biblical revelation for the sake of coherence. He considers it impossible to assert both that evil is not created and that demons are fallen angels, and he refuses to do so.²⁸

Thus he offers the materially much more important grounds for his refusal that, the 'texts are so uncertain and obscure that it is inadvisable to allow them to push us in this direction'. This is not an unreasonable point, it seems to me. Jude 6 and 2 Pet. 2.4 are certainly out on what we might call the 'fuzzy edges' of the canon. I will return to the question of the canon in a while. However, for the moment I want to add a little more detail to what this tells us about how Barth envisages the biblical witness. I said a moment ago that he envisages two strands within the biblical witness that stand in contradiction to each other, one leading to the conclusion that demons cannot be fallen angels, the other strand leading to the conclusion that they are. It is apparent now that he sees the former strand as being the major one and the latter as very minor, 'uncertain and obscure'.

This is how Barth conceives the whole of the Bible. It is a collection of many varied strands, some of which are of major importance, some lesser. Most strands, he trusts, will be of value in leading us towards the truth. But some it will be best to ignore. It is impossible (and not even desirable) for any one theologian to follow every one of the strands which has value. For example, in KD IV/1, having spent quite some time on the theme 'The Judge Judged in our Place', Barth notes that he has used a forensic framework which has a

²⁷See KD II/2, §§32-35.

²⁸Baxter criticises Barth for this refusal, concluding that, 'One is forced to the conclusion that Barth has abandoned his usual principle of taking all of Scripture seriously, in favour of an exposition of the nature and status of evil which he found philosophically more acceptable than the *prima facie* biblical view of demons' ('Barth—A Truly Biblical Theologian?', p. 6). However, it seems to me that Barth sees his choice as being between two biblical themes, not between what is philosophically acceptable and what is biblical.

particularly good basis in the Bible...But exegesis reminds us that in the New Testament there are other standpoints and terminologies which might equally be considered as guiding principles for dogmatics.²⁹

He goes on to assert that theologians, cannot speak down from heaven in the language of God but only on earth as strictly and exactly as we can in a human language, *as the New Testament writers themselves did [neutestamentlichen Schriftstellen selbst getan haben]—the variety [die Uneinheitlichkeit] of the standpoints and concepts which they adopted being the attestation [ist der Zeuge].*³⁰

Barth then goes on to mention 'a military view of the work of Jesus Christ', a financial view and a cultic view, which, in addition to the forensic view are found in the New Testament as ways of witnessing to what God has done in Jesus Christ.³¹ These are all strands which can be legitimately followed by the dogmatician, who needs to realise, that

In all its contexts theology can speak only approximately. It is a matter of finding and keeping to those lines which are relatively the best, which correspond best to what we want to express.³²

These different strands are not contradictory but complementary. What Barth has said by means of forensic language, for example, 'if it is said correctly, cannot be anything other than that which could and can be said in the images and categories of cultic language. Jesus Christ took our place as Judge. We can say the same thing in this way. He is the Priest who represented us.'³³

Nevertheless, it remains true that in at least one case (namely, the idea of fallen angels) Barth considers that he has found a minor strand which is not complementary but contradictory. The question therefore arises as to how this relates to the claim that the whole Bible is testimony to revelation and Barth's assertions that the witnesses which make up the Bible in the end testify to the same matter, to God's self-revelation. It is at this point that we will do best to turn to the question of *canon*.

b. *Canon*

Barth's first discussion of canon in the *Dogmatik* comes in KD I/1, §4.2, in a section entitled 'The Word of God Written [*Das geschriebene Wort Gottes*]'. He asserts there that Holy Scripture,

tells us what is the past revelation [*schon geschehene Offenbarung*] of God that we have to recollect [*zu erinnern*]. It does so in the first instance simply by the fact that it is the Canon [*daß sie Kanon ist*].³⁴

There follows immediately a short excursus:

Κανων means rod, then ruler, standard, model, assigned district. In the ecclesiastical vocabulary of the first three hundred years it was used for that which stands fast as normative, i.e. apostolic, in the Church, the *regula fidei*, i.e., the norm of faith [*die Norm des Glaubens*], or the Church's doctrine of faith. From this (only apparently) wider concept of the κανων της αφληθειας or της πιστεως there then develops from the 4th century onwards

²⁹CD IV/1, p. 273 (KD, p. 301).

³⁰CD IV/1, p. 274 (KD, p. 301); my emphasis.

³¹CD IV/1, pp. 274-75 (KD, pp. 302-303).

³²CD IV/1, p. 274 (KD, p. 301).

³³CD IV/1, p. 275 (KD, pp. 302-303).

³⁴CD I/1, p. 101 (KD, p. 103).

the more specialised idea of the Canon of Holy Scripture, i.e., the list of books which are recognised as normative, because apostolic.³⁵

We have here the three key elements of Barth's understanding of canon. First, whatever is Holy Scripture is so (theologically speaking, and passing over historical issues about the formation of the canon) because it 'tells us what is the past revelation of God'. Secondly, the general concept of canon refers to what is normative for the Christian faith. Thirdly, the particular concept of the Christian canon refers to those actual writings which the church believes to be normative for its faith because they do indeed 'tell us what is the past revelation of God'. (This phrase is, of course, saying essentially the same thing as the phrases 'witnesses to God's self-revelation', 'testifies to Jesus Christ',³⁶ while emphasising the past aspect.)

All three elements are vital for Christian dogmatic interpretation, determining what elements in the text are brought into focus and what ignored, and determining how the elements brought into focus are to be interpreted. This becomes clear when we move to §§19–21 of KD I/2, which are given to discussion of 'Holy Scripture'. The whole section is given over to detailed consideration of what it means to treat 'Scripture as a Witness to Divine Revelation [*Die Schrift als Zeugnis von Gottes Offenbarung*]' (this is the title of the first subsection of §19). I will now seek to explain how what Barth has to say in this section relates to what I earlier called 'contradictory strands' within the Bible.

In the second subsection of §19 Barth sets out 'to clarify...the meaning and scope of the positive side of our basic principle, that Scripture is the witness of divine revelation'.³⁷ The first clarification he offers is of the third element given above, that the abstract idea 'Scripture is the witness of divine revelation' is believed by the Church to attain reality in the particular writings which it calls 'canonical':

If we say that Scripture is this witness, or if we say that this witness is Scripture, we say this in the Church and with the Church, i.e., we say it of that Scripture which the Church has discovered and acknowledged as Holy Scripture, of canonical Scripture.³⁸

This is a belief and decision of the Church, not an absolutely certain fact. Barth considers that 'the fixing of the canon is the fundamental act of Church confession'.³⁹ It is therefore something to be taken extremely seriously, something to be given the utmost respect. But it is nevertheless a belief and decision which could be in error. The church has sought to discover and acknowledge those writings which witness to divine revelation. But it is always possible that it wrongly included some writings and wrongly excluded others. The Church could only reach its decision about the canon,

³⁵CD I/1, p. 101 (KD, p. 103).

³⁶It is worth noting that this concept of canon remained basically the same throughout the long period time over which Barth wrote the *Dogmatik*. For example, we find in KD IV/1 the following assertion: 'The apostolic Church is the Church which accepts and reads the Scriptures in their specific character as the direct attestation of Jesus Christ alive yesterday and to-day [*unmittelbare Bezeugung des gestern und heute lebenden Jesus Christus*], respecting them as canon and following their direction' (p. 722 [KD, pp. 806-807]).

³⁷CD I/2, p. 473 (KD, pp. 523-34).

³⁸CD I/2, p. 473 (KD, p. 524).

³⁹KD I/2, pp. 666-67 (CD, p. 597).

to the best of its knowledge and judgment, in the venture and obedience of faith, but also in all the relativity of a human knowledge [*menschlichen Erkenntnis*] of the truth which God has opened up [*eröffneten*] to men.⁴⁰

After these words comes an excursus on the history of the establishment of the canon which begins as follows:

As is well known, the establishment of the Canon has had a long and complicated history. Basically, we cannot yet say that that history is closed.⁴¹

Barth's point is that the classical distinction between the inspiration of certain books by God and the Church's recognition of such books must be taken seriously. The possibility must be acknowledged that the Church could have erred in its recognition, and that decisions made may have to be revised: 'The insight that the concrete form of the Canon is not closed absolutely [*keine absolut*], but only very relatively [*in höchster Relativität*], cannot be denied even with a view to the future.'⁴²

But these considerations do not mean that the individual interpreter can lightly dismiss unpalatable parts of the Bible from the canon:

It is clear that such a change in the constitution of the Canon, if it arises as a practical question, can take place meaningfully and legitimately only as an action of the Church, that is, in the form of an orderly and responsible decision by an ecclesiastical body capable of handling it. As long as no such new decision is publicly reached in the Church, we have steadfastly to accept the force and validity [*Kraft und Geltung*] of decisions already taken both in respect of the dogmas and also of the Canon.⁴³

Nevertheless, the individual does have considerable freedom:

Individuals may think and indeed say what they like [sc. about the constitution of the canon] on theological or historical grounds [*theologischer oder historischen Gründen*]. But what they think and say (assuming it is a serious and well-founded opinion) can have only the character of a private and non-binding anticipation [*einer privaten und unverbindlichen Vorauserwägung*] of such an action by the Church...The individual in the Church certainly cannot and should not accept it as Holy Scripture just because the Church does. The individual can and should be obedient to Holy Scripture only as it reveals itself to him.⁴⁴

Thus, Barth sees a distinction between the judgments of the Church as a collective body and the private judgments of the individual Bible interpreter (and, at least in theory, this is every Christian). The individual may consider that a part or parts of the Bible do not witness to God's self-revelation. The interpreter may reach the private judgment that such and such part of the Bible is a 'contradictory strand'. What should the interpreter do in this situation?

The point which Barth immediately makes is that, as a private judgment, it must be ordered below the judgment of the Church. The individual is free to hold to it, but must remember

that Scripture is the Word of God for and to [*für und an*] the Church, and that therefore it is only in and with the Church that one can take up a meaningful and legitimate position towards Scripture. In every case,

⁴⁰CD I/2, p. 473 (CD, p. 524).

⁴¹CD I/2, p. 473 (CD, p. 524).

⁴²CD I/2, p. 476 (CD, p. 527). These words are followed by an excursus highlighting the doubts which Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and others appeared to have about certain New Testament books.

⁴³KD I/2, p. 530 (CD, pp. 478-79).

⁴⁴KD I/2, p. 530 (CD, pp. 478-79).

whatever the individual's private (and perhaps dissenting) judgment may be, even a dissenting private judgment of faith, one must always listen to the Church. The so far unaltered judgment [*nicht veränderte Urteil*] of the Church radically precedes [*grundsätzlich vorgehen*] the judgment of the individual.⁴⁵

What Barth envisages, therefore, is the following procedure: When an individual first begins to interpret Scripture, he or she does so as a new convert in the Christian church. At that point, he or she must listen to the prompting of the church that such and such writings are truly Scripture, and goes to those writings in order to hear their witness to revelation. He or she must come to those writings with the serious expectation that they will indeed provide such a witness and so must seek to interpret them accordingly. However, it may be that, despite coming to the writings with such an attitude, the individual finds him or herself unable to hear any witness to revelation in certain of the writings. In that case, the interpreter has two basic options. Barth sets them out in an excursus. It is likely, he says, that, as individuals, we shall find the further witness of revelation which the Church promises us only in definite parts of the Canon indicated to us, but in others we shall not find it. It may and probably will be the case that we are not able to find it in the greater part of the Canon indicated to us. But assuming that this is so, it is much more important to establish the positive side: that we have actually found it in one, even if only a small, part of what is proposed. If this is really the case, if we think we have received a direct confirmation [*eine direkte Bestätigung*] in respect of at any rate a smaller part of what is proposed (let us say in respect of certain psalms, or gospels, or epistles, or even specific passages in these books), this may incline us to judge favourably in respect of the rest of what is proposed.⁴⁶

Therefore, the first, and most likely option for most people, is to accept that they do not at present hear the witness to revelation in some parts of the Bible, but to reserve the possibility that they may yet do so, particularly, perhaps, with the help of other interpreters. Barth points out that the reason for our failure to hear the witness may, after all, lie not with the canon but with ourselves. Consequently, Barth advises us, 'not to cease but to continue searching for the witness of the Word of God in those parts of the proposed Canon so far closed to us'.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, because the individual's beliefs are unlikely ever to be absolutely identical with the official belief (or confession) of the Church, 'we all have to reckon with the fact that for us definite and perhaps very large parts of the Church's canon will be closed to our life's end'. What is more, 'if we believe that in all honesty we are not conscious of any fault of our own in this matter—why should we not ultimately form our own negative *private opinion* [*Privatansicht*] respecting this or that part of the Canon closed to us in this way?'⁴⁸

The first basic option, therefore, for the individual who is unable to perceive a witness to revelation in certain parts of the Bible is to hold the *private opinion* that those parts do not in fact provide such a witness. Such an opinion, though it may be held to the interpreter's life end, must nevertheless always remain open to the possibility of revision in the light of new understanding. But what does Barth mean

⁴⁵KD I/2, p. 530 (CD, p. 479).

⁴⁶CD I/2, p. 599 (KD, p. 669).

⁴⁷CD I/2, p. 600 (KD, p. 670).

⁴⁸CD I/2, p. 600 (KD, p. 670; emphasis in German original but not in the English translation).

by a 'private opinion'? Does he mean that it must never be expressed to another person? If we consider the second basic option he describes for the interpreter, we will see that he does not.

The second basic option is for the interpreter, being convinced of the rightness of his or her judgment, to press the Church to change its public opinion as to what is canonical. 'This possibility', says Barth, 'is not excluded.' Though the interpreter will need to be very sure:

We can make a serious protest against the Church's Canon only when we are so sure of it in content [*inhaltlich so gewiß*] that we are bold to submit it to the judgment of the Church, not merely as our private opinion, but with the responsible intention [*verantwortlichen Absicht*] of replacing, renewing and correcting the Church's confession in relation to the Canon by a new one.⁴⁹

Notice the phrase, 'not merely as our private opinion'. This indicates that Barth by no means considers it the duty of the interpreter to remain quiet about his or her private opinion. Indeed, the phrase, 'private opinion' is somewhat misleading, because Barth sees it as an important part of the process that such opinions be submitted for the public attention of other members of the Church.⁵⁰ Presumably, if such opinions were to attain so much support that a consensus was reached, it would become a real possibility that the Church would judge that a change in its public opinion of what is canonical is necessary. Barth acknowledges, of course, that this is a very serious and difficult matter:

[H]ow serious and difficult [*ernst und schwer*] it is may be seen from the fact that Luther did not use it in respect of his well-known doubts on the Epistle of James...And it is also worth noting that out of modern biblical criticism which has been so radical in the sphere of private opinions and discussions the desire for a new confession in relation to the Canon has not emerged and confronted the Church in such a way that it has seriously had to take up the question of a new definition of the Canon.⁵¹

We are now well-placed to consider the actual matter of Barth's discussion of 'fallen angels'. I noted earlier that he considers there to be a minor strand in the Bible referring to fallen angels which contradicts the witness to revelation of the rest of the Bible. Christina Baxter argues this is 'not consistent with Barth's inclusive intentions avowed elsewhere', and, 'one is forced to the conclusion that Barth has abandoned his usual principle of taking all of Scripture seriously'.⁵²

⁴⁹CD I/2, p. 600 (KD, p. 671).

⁵⁰It is worth noting at this point that, in my view, this takes the sting out of the criticism made, for example, by Werner Jeanrond ('Karl Barth's Hermeneutics', pp. 80-97) that, 'Nowhere does Barth deal with the possibility and the consequences of a pluralism or even conflict of interpretations', and that 'This fact...must weaken our trust in his own particular retrieval of the Biblical message' (p. 96). It is true that Barth does not spend a great deal of time discussing such things as pluralism and conflict of interpretation and the question of philosophical presuppositions and method involved in these, and instead gets on with actual interpretation and the setting out of his own view. (An exchange between F. Gogarten and Barth seems pertinent here: Gogarten asked, 'Why don't you do anything about the necessary business of getting your presuppositions clear?', and Barth responded, 'When will you get down to business?' [quoted in Busch, *Karl Barth*, p. 194].) But nevertheless, it seems to me that Barth's distinction between 'private opinion' and corporate interpretation, particularly when coupled with his understanding of the search for truth in the church being eschatological (that is, always revisable and never complete until the end of history), mean that Barth provides adequate space for pluralism and the conflict of interpretations.

⁵¹CD I/2, pp. 600-601 (KD, p. 671).

⁵²'Barth', pp. 5, 6.

But this is to misunderstand Barth's conception of the interpretative procedure as I have outlined it. He offers his view that demons are not fallen angels as a *privatansicht* for the consideration of others. He acknowledges in this that he is opposing 'the view constantly held in ancient and modern times'.⁵³ And, presumably, he hopes to convince others to change their view. At the same time (and this is part of what Baxter finds difficult) he acknowledges that he is in effect ignoring certain biblical texts, especially Jude 6 and 2 Pet. 2.4.⁵⁴ He is admitting an inability to perceive a witness to revelation in these texts. At the same time, using the phrase 'However they [sc. these texts] may have to be expounded...', he indicates the possibility of someone offering an interpretation of them which would change this situation. He is therefore simply participating in the interpretative process.

It is worth adding that Barth is not here going so far as to offer a 'private opinion' that Jude and 2 Peter are non-canonical. He makes positive use of other texts from these epistles quite often elsewhere in the *Dogmatik*.⁵⁵ This suggests to me that he is happy with their canonicity, but that he considers them to contain at least one element which, by virtue of its contradicting the main witness of Scripture to revelation, is not authoritative for faith. Thus we cannot conclude that the problem of the presence of truly contradictory strands within the Bible is simply resolved for Barth by considering the books which contain them to be non-canonical. That would be possible only if there were no strands within those books which did witness to revelation.⁵⁶

This discussion of canon, therefore, has not provided an easy solution to the problem of substantial contradiction within the Bible. Nevertheless, it has moved us forward somewhat. We can now see that Barth's hermeneutical position allows for the presence of contradiction within the Bible and provides for a spectrum of practical responses to it. At one end of the spectrum, the interpreter may simply leave aside the contradiction and move elsewhere in the Bible, waiting on further enlightenment with respect to the problem. At the other end, the interpreter may conclude that a certain contradiction is utterly irresolvable and may press the church to remove it from the canon. In between these extremes come the debates among individual interpreters.

c. *Contradiction and Testimony*

With this in mind, I want to conclude this discussion of substantial contradiction by looking at it once again from the point of view of testimony. As we have seen, for Barth, the biblical writings are canonical because their authors were witnesses of God's self-revelation. The biblical writings are the reports of these witnesses. If Barth is right in this regard, then it will be useful to consider the issue of contradiction in the light of what Coady says about the active interpretation and the passive observation of witnesses.

⁵³CD III/3, p. 530 (KD, p. 622).

⁵⁴See CD III/3, p. 530 (KD, p. 622).

⁵⁵See, for example, the use of 2 Pet. 1.1 in CD II/1, p. 384 and Jude 3 in CD II/2, p. 483.

⁵⁶As a matter of interest, only one book of the Protestant Canon, namely Esther, is not mentioned anywhere in Barth's *Dogmatik*, and since the *Dogmatik* is an unfinished work it is impossible to be sure that even that book would not have been of use to Barth at some stage.

As we saw in Chapter 4, Coady shows that both active interpretation and passive observation are essential constituents, both when a witness observes an event and when he or she reports on it. I argued in Chapter 5 that the reports of the biblical witnesses therefore contain elements which are the result of passive observation of God's self-revelation and elements which are the results of active interpretation of what has been observed. We also saw in Chapter 4 that, in addition, and colouring the active interpretation, are elements in the reports which result from the influence of the witnesses' worldviews. On the assumption that the biblical witnesses do indeed witness God's self-revelation, it is obvious that, by definition, the passive observation of one witness will never substantially contradict the passive observation of another witness, since God's self-revelation is never contradictory.⁵⁷ But what of the other two constituents, active interpretation and worldview?

First of all, we need to clearly distinguish between 'worldview' on the one hand and both 'passive observation' and 'active interpretation' on the other. 'Worldview' refers to the complex of thought and understanding, both conscious and subconscious, which the witness holds prior to his or her observation of the revelatory event. 'Passive observation' and 'active interpretation' refer to the observation and the thought processes which go on during and after the event by which the witness attains his or her understanding of the event. This distinction is crucial, because, in the case of the biblical witnesses, Barth understands both 'passive observation' and 'active interpretation' to have been taken up by the Holy Spirit into the divine revelatory process, while the witnesses' worldviews were simply part of what it was for them to be sinful humans. That is, each of the biblical witnesses was enabled by God's Holy Spirit to successfully 'actively interpret' as God's self-revelation the events which they 'passively observed' where otherwise they could not have done so, given their prevailing worldviews.

Once a revelatory event has taken place, it must lead to at least a partial change in the witness's worldview. Nevertheless, the new worldview will contain much that was part of the old one. As time passes and the witness reflects on the revelatory event, there will be an ongoing process of reinterpreting the old in the light of it. Again, Jesus' resurrection is paradigmatic: because of it, the first disciples reached a radically new worldview, but there was also much in the new worldview which stood in continuity with the old. The New Testament reveals a process of reinterpretation of Jewish and Hellenistic heritage in the light of the Christ event.

The writings of the biblical witnesses can therefore be seen, as it were, as 'snapshots' of this ongoing process of reinterpretation. Each 'snapshot' will focus on the revelatory events but also contain elements of the old worldview. Many of these elements will stand in substantial contradiction to God's self-revelation. I say 'many', and not 'all', because some elements of the old worldview may well have resulted from previous revelatory events. For example, as a result of previous revelation to the Jews, it was part of the first disciples' worldview that God is one. That particular element of their old worldview was held to be consonant with the new revelation. Nevertheless, many elements will stand in contradiction to God's self-revelation.

⁵⁷The unity of revelation guarantees [*gewährleistet*] the unity of the biblical witness in spite of and in all its multiplicity [*Mannigfaltigkeit*] and even contradictoriness [*Gegensätzlichkeit*] (KD I/1, p. 120 [CD, p. 117]).

Barth discusses the presence of these contradictory elements under the rubric, 'the humanity [*Menschlichkeit*] of the Bible'. He notes that as human beings the biblical authors held worldviews which were fallible, criticizable by other (also fallible) human beings, and that they therefore had a 'capacity for errors':

Each in his own way and degree, they shared the culture of their age and environment, whose form and content could be contested by other ages and environments, and at certain points can still appear debatable to us. In the biblical view of the world [*Weltbild*] and man we are constantly coming up against presuppositions which are not ours, and statements and judgments which we cannot accept...Instead of talking about the 'errors [*Irrtümern*]' of the biblical authors in this sphere, if we want to go to the heart of things it is better to speak of their 'capacity for errors [*Irrtumsfähigkeit*]'. For in the last resort even in relation to the general view of the world [*Weltbild*] and of man the insight and knowledge of our age can be neither divine nor solomonic.⁵⁸

The biblical authors had no choice but to express whatever they wanted to say in terms which they owed to their fallible worldviews. Even their theological assertions were affected:

[T]he vulnerability [*Anfechtbarkeit*] of the Bible, i.e., its capacity for error, also extends to its religious or theological content. The significance of a fact which was known to the early antiquity weighs on us more heavily to-day than formerly: that in their attestation of divine revelation (from the standpoint of the history of religion) the biblical authors shared the outlook and spoke the language of their own day. Not only part but all that they say is historically related and conditioned [*verhängt und bedingt*].⁵⁹

In consequence, we are able to subject the Bible 'to all kinds of immanent criticism, not only in respect of its philosophical, historical and ethical content, but even of its religious and theological'.⁶⁰ This is the inevitable result of the Bible being a human witness to revelation and not divine self-revelation itself. The Bible,

is there and always there as a sign [*Zeichen*], as a human and temporal word [*menschlich zeitliches Wort*]—and therefore as a word which is conditioned and limited [*bedingt und auch beschränkt*]. It witnesses to God's revelation, but that does not mean that God's revelation is now before us in any kind of divine revealedness [*göttlichen Offenbarkeit*]. The Bible is not a book of oracles [*kein Orakelbuch*]; it is not an instrument of direct impartation [*kein Organ direkter mitteilung*]. It is genuine witness.⁶¹

All this leads me to conclude that, in terms of what I am discussing at present, Barth's conception of the Bible as 'genuine witness' is able successfully to deal with the issue of substantial contradiction. The various worldviews which the biblical witnesses necessarily bring with them to their writings have elements within them which stand in substantial contradiction to God's self-revelation. They are elements that are due to the witnesses' participation in sinful humanity. And they lead to errors of all kinds being found in the Bible, from philosophical, historical and moral

⁵⁸CD I/2, p. 508 (KD, p. 564). It is important to be clear that by the last two sentences of this quotation, Barth does not mean that the biblical authors had the capacity to err, but in fact never did err in the biblical writings. He means rather that it is wise not to be too sure of the correctness of our own worldview against which we measure the biblical one and declare it to be in error. By speaking of a biblical 'capacity for errors' instead of 'errors', we reserve the possibility that in particular instances it is we who are in error and not the Bible.

⁵⁹CD I/2, p. 509 (KD, p. 565).

⁶⁰CD I/2, p. 507 (KD, p. 562).

⁶¹CD I/2, p. 507 (KD, p. 562).

matters to religious and theological ones. These errors range from being trivial to standing in substantial contradiction to God's self-revelation.

This obviously has important implications for present-day theological Bible interpretation, but it would take me too far from my subject to deal with them here. Instead, I want to end this chapter by considering a passage in KD I/2 which appears to vitiate my argument. I am thinking of the fourth of eight concluding summaries found in §19.2 which Barth offers about the belief that the Bible is the Word of God. The opening sentence of this fourth summary declares that, when we assert that the Bible is the Word of God, 'we must not compromise either directly or indirectly the humanity of [the Bible's] form [*die Menschlichkeit ihrer Gestalt*] and the possibility of the offence which can be taken at it'.⁶² As we have seen, Barth has established earlier the nature of this offence, namely the authors' 'capacity for error' (which I described in terms of 'worldview'). But now, in this concluding summary Barth goes further. He speaks of 'the offence' in terms of the *acts* of witnessing themselves. He speaks of the receiving and then the reporting of revelation, being acts of sin:

the prophets and apostles as such, even in their office, even in their function as witnesses, even in the act of writing down their witness, were real, historical men as we are, and therefore *sinful in their action* [*in ihrem Tun sündige*], and capable and *actually guilty of error* [*tatsächlich irrende*] in their spoken and written word.⁶³

And a few sentences later he states that the witnesses, can be at fault in any word, and have been at fault in every word [*haben sie auch in jedem Wort gefehlt*].⁶⁴

If we think of the three aspects of witnessing which I have highlighted, namely observation, interpretation and worldview, it seems that Barth's words here cannot be limited to worldviews and must be applied to the witnesses' active interpretation (and perhaps also to their observation). That would contradict my previous conclusion that the errors in the Bible, ranging from the trivial to substantial contradictions, are due solely to the corrupting effect of the witnesses' worldviews. So, if my argument is to stand, I need to show that Barth has made a mistake here, that he has said more than is consistent with what he has already established.

That can be done fairly easily by comparing what Barth has said a few pages earlier about *theopneustia* or 'inspiration'. We saw in Chapter 3 that Barth sees 'inspiration' as having three aspects: (1) the Spirit enables the witness to perceive revelation and (2) to communicate what has been perceived, and (3) the Spirit enables the reader (or hearer) also to perceive the revelation through what is communicated.⁶⁵ In Barth's view it is right to affirm that the second aspect extends even as far as all the individual words of Scripture:

If in their concrete existence and therefore in their concrete speaking the witnesses of revelation belong to revelation, if they spoke by the Spirit what they knew by the Spirit, and if we really have to hear them and therefore their words—then self-evidently we have to hear all their words with the same measure of respect [*alle ihre Worte mit dem gleichen Respekt*]. It would be arbitrary [*willkürlich*] to relate their inspiration only to such parts of their

⁶²CD I/2, p. 528 (KD, p. 587).

⁶³CD I/2, p. 529 (KD, p. 562; emphasis added).

⁶⁴CD I/2, p. 530 (KD, p. 588).

⁶⁵See Chapter 3.

witness as perhaps appear important to us, or not to their words as such but only to the views and thoughts [*Meinungen und Gedanken*] which evoke them...[T]he inspiration of the biblical witnesses...can and must be regarded quite definitely not merely as real but as verbal inspiration [*als Realinspiration nicht nur, sondern wirklich als Verbalinspiration*].⁶⁶

As we saw in Chapter 3, Barth explicates inspiration in terms of freely rendered obedience.⁶⁷ 'Theopneustia', he says,

in the bounds of biblical thinking cannot mean anything but the special attitude of obedience [*besondere Gehorsamstellung*] in those who are elected and called to this special service.⁶⁸

The upshot must be that every word which the witnesses wrote is the direct result of acts of obedience and (which is the same thing from another point of view) inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Obedience to God is inimical to sin, and the action of the Holy Spirit (being truth) is inimical to falsity. In my view, that rules out the possibility of saying that every word is at fault and the direct result of a sinful action. Thus, I conclude that Barth made a mistake in saying just that in the sentences I quoted above. We should understand his words there as being rhetorically driven beyond what is consistent with his basic understanding of the Bible as witness to revelation.

As occasionally happens with Barth, he has allowed his rhetoric to go too far. In order to be sure that his readers, particularly those with a highly conservative view of Scripture, face up squarely to 'the offence' of the Bible, he has said a little too much. That rhetoric is driving things, is, I think, clear in the following quotation:

To the bold postulate, that if their word is to be the Word of God they must be inerrant in every word, *we oppose the even bolder assertion, that...they can be at fault in any word [in jedem Wort fehlen], and have been at fault in every word, and yet...being justified and sanctified by grace alone, they have still spoken the Word of God in their fallible and erring human word.*⁶⁹

In his concern to deny the need for a doctrine of inerrancy, Barth ventures more than he would have otherwise. The consequence is an aberration, the assertion of what amounts to an absurdity, namely that by a miracle, though every word is false, every word also speaks truth. This absurdity, and the miracle which is supposed to resolve it, is very different from the mystery which I described in Chapter 5, whereby God re-presents himself to a person when that person hears or reads the human words of which God is the referent.⁷⁰ I showed in Chapter 5 that, according to Barth's hermeneutic of testimony, the mystery lies in God's enabling the person successfully to comprehend that which is incomprehensible, God's self-revelation, and that there is no question of the words coming to mean something else at this moment.

Barth could have said what he needed to say in the problematic passage, the fourth summary of §19.2, in terms of this mystery, but instead his rhetoric led him to assert an absurdity. This absurdity, when treated as representative of Barth's thinking rather than as an aberration, provides a measure of justification for some of

⁶⁶CD I/2, pp. 517-18 (KD, pp. 574-75).

⁶⁷See p. 60.

⁶⁸CD I/2, p. 505 (KD, p. 560).

⁶⁹CD I/2, pp. 529-30 (KD, p. 588); emphasis added.

⁷⁰See pp. 104ff.

the misinterpretations of Barth which I described in Chapter 3. We can think, for example, of Runia's criticism, that, according to Barth,

God reveals Himself through a witness that in fact speaks quite differently from what it ought to say! In other words, the propositional aspect of the revelation (which is inherent in the scriptural idea of revelation) is here *sacrificed to the personal existential aspect* of the meeting with God. But these two aspects can never be separated. God reveals Himself in no other place than in this witness and in the actual words of this witness. As soon as we give this up we are back in the morass of subjectivism.⁷¹

We can also think of Thiselton's criticism that,

at times it seems to be implied that the Spirit's communication of the Word of God is somehow independent of all ordinary processes of human understanding.⁷²

Finally, I suspect Barth would have avoided these misinterpretations if, in the course of affirming 'the offence' of the Bible, he had confined his language to 'capacity for error' and distinguished that from the language of 'sin' and 'guilt' and 'falsity'. It seems to me that this is a useful and workable distinction. Surely a person can make a 'genuine mistake' without thereby sinning! And surely it is possible for a person to say something which conveys truth, though it may, for example, be framed in terms of an erring worldview.⁷³ If it is not possible then one wonders how Barth could make the following kind of statement:

If we accept the witness of Holy Scripture, then implicitly we accept that its authors, quite irrespective of their human and historical conditionedness [*menschlichen und geschichtlichen Bedingtheit*], are objectively true, reliable and trustworthy witnesses [*objektiv rechte, treue, wahrhaftige Zeugen*].⁷⁴

With that statement this chapter comes to an end. It is time to turn now to consider some other characteristics of the Bible which might cause problems for the idea that the Bible is 'testimony'.

⁷¹K. Runia, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture*, p. 177; my italics.

⁷²A.C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, p. 89.

⁷³In saying this I believe I am being consistent with the 'critical realist' position which I discussed in Chapter 4, p. 84 n. 61.

⁷⁴KD III/3, p. 227 (CD III/3, p. 201).

8.

The Bible as Literature

In the previous two chapters, I dealt with the question of whether an understanding of the Bible as testimony enables Barth to deal with the presence of variety and contradiction in the Bible. I argued that it does and, by implication, that it has the potential to provide a viable approach for modern interpreters. But there is another aspect of the Bible that has come to the fore in recent times which modern interpreters need to recognize. It is what I will call its 'literariness'. For a long while, the historical-critical paradigm dominated academic interpretation: the Bible was treated as an historical source book. But in recent decades, perhaps beginning in the early 1970s, it has come to be treated by many academics as a literary product, to be read primarily for what it does as literature (or—to take the readerly rather than textual angle—for what it and readers do to each other in their mutual interaction).

a. *Initial Observations*

Barth's theological enterprise, ending as it did in the 1960s, was untouched by this development. His understanding of the Bible as testimony to revelation was developed within and in response to the historical-critical framework. And, as I showed in Chapters 1 and 2, 'history' continued to be a key element in his strategy. Indeed, I argued there that Barth sought to do theology based on rational and historical interpretation of the Bible. In essence, this is because he understands revelation to have the character of events, to happen in history. Such an approach to interpretation, it might be thought, will underplay the literariness of the Bible. It will distort the nature of the Bible as literature as it seeks to 'squeeze out' historical information of it.

It can come as something of a surprise, therefore, to realize that a number of recent studies of Barth's Bible interpretation in the *Dogmatik* have discovered an affinity between his approach and modern literary approaches. David Ford has argued that Barth's use of the Bible can best be understood as being similar to 'literary criticism of the genre of realistic narrative'.¹ David Kelsey thinks that, 'it is as

¹Barth's Interpretation of the Bible', p. 56. On p. 76, Ford says, 'The literary genre that seems to be most fruitful as a comparative model is that of the realistic novel.'

It is worth noting that Ford goes further than using this as a comparative model. His thesis is that, although 'Barth's exegesis covers the whole Bible and displays a great variety of hermeneutical skills and principles', nevertheless 'he uses one dominant approach which provides the structure of argument and much of the content of his whole theology' (p. 56), namely this literary-critical-type approach. That is going too far. The approach to the text which Ford fixes on is only one method which Barth uses in his

though Barth took scripture to be one vast, loosely structured non-fictional novel,² and some narrative theologians, such as Mark Wallace,³ have found parallels between Barth's approach and their own.

Although these critics have not taken enough account of matters I raised in earlier chapters, their conclusions do point up the presence of two features of *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* which are pertinent. First, there are the numerous comments by Barth about the nature of interpretation which resonate with recent literary critical theories.

Interpretation Theory

We can think, for example, of his rejection of the possibility of presuppositionless and 'objective' interpretation:

No interpreter, even in his observation and description [*Beobachten und Darstellen*], is merely an observer and describer. No one is in the position, objectively and abstractly [*objektiv und abstrakt*], merely to observe and describe what is there.⁴

We really are not in a position to free ourselves of our own shadow, that is, to make the so-called *sacrificium intellectus*. How can we objectively understand [*objektiv verstehen*] the text without thereby being subjective

attempt to explicate the witness of the Bible to revelation. Certainly it is an important method but, as Baxter has demonstrated, there are a number of other approaches which are also important. She lists (and then considers in detail) six ways in which Barth construes biblical texts in order to enable him to move to theological conclusions in the *Dogmatik*: 1. Concepts (e.g. detailed analysis of the appearance in the Bible of such words [often abstract nouns] as 'faith', 'Lord' and 'grace'); 2. Themes (e.g. tracing of themes such as 'election and rejection' and 'reconciliation'); 3. Theological Statements (e.g. where great weight is placed on a single statement such as Jn 1.14); 4. Story (e.g. stories in the Gospels are read realistically); 5. Typology (e.g., following Hebrews, Melchizedek is a type of Christ); and 6. Allegory and Analogy (e.g. some parables are read allegorically) (see Baxter, 'The Movement from Exegesis to Dogmatics in the Theology of Karl Barth, with special reference to Romans, Philippians and Church Dogmatics', pp. 126-216). The construal of texts as 'story' is only one of these methods, and the first three are at least as important in the *Dogmatik* (while the last one is of much lesser importance—on the fifth, typology, I have said a little in Chapter 2). Indeed, Baxter considers that, 'There is a good deal of evidence to suggest that [Barth's use of theological statements] is the formative and definitive method in the *Church Dogmatics*' (p. 165). And so she too thinks that Ford's view 'must be denied' (p. 165). I agree with Baxter that construing texts as theological statements is perhaps the most important of the methods, and would want to add that this is because theological statements are the simplest and most direct means of 'accessing' the biblical writers' witness to revelation. However, it is important to remember that it is not the only method, and what is said by theological statement is read by Barth in the light of what is said in other ways (and vice versa). Another comment from Baxter is useful here: 'It must be recognised that many of the biblical stories, even the stories about Jesus are theologically mute. Doctrine is only possible because those who witnessed the events understood them to be significant and conveyed that significance by interpretative remarks, found in the stories, or in other documents which reflect on the events. Hence it must be recognised that the overt theological statements of Scripture are the "keys" to unlock the significance of the stories. Barth certainly regards them as such' (p. 166).

²*The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, p. 48.

³Wallace says,

We see a fundamental affinity between Barth's antihistoricist hermeneutic and current literary interpretations of the Bible: the Bible's meaning is not located in the historical realities or authorial intentions behind the text, but in the language-specific realities spoken of within the text. Barth stands alongside both New Critical and current deconstructive critics of the Bible in maintaining that all literary creations, the Bible included, are primarily works of art, not by-products of history—as such, they possess a life of their own, a life relatively independent from the cultural and authorial milieus that produced them. Possessing semantic autonomy, the 'literary work exists, in a sense, outside of history, in a kind of aesthetic preserve' where the text's surplus of meaning escapes the finite conditions that gave rise to it in the first place' ('Karl Barth's Hermeneutic: A Way Beyond the Impasse', *Journal of Religion* 68 [1988], p. 403).

The understanding of Barth as 'anti-historicist' is incorrect, as we have seen; as is the suggestion that Barth is not interested in authorial intention.

⁴KD I/2, p. 815 (CD, p. 727).

[*subjektiv*] (that is, using our own thinking)? How can we let it speak to us without at least moving our lips (as indeed the readers of antiquity did visibly and audibly) and ourselves speaking with it. The interpreter can do nothing else. Even in what he says as an observer and describer, he will at every step betray the fact that—consciously or unconsciously, in sophisticated or primitive fashion, consistently or inconsistently—he has approached the text with a particular epistemology [*bestimmten Erkenntnistheorie*], logic and ethics, with particular ideas and ideals concerning the relations of God, the world and man [*hinsichtlich des Verhältnisses von Gott, Welt und Mensch*], and that as a reader and interpreter of the text he cannot simply deny these. Everyone has a philosophy, that is, a personal conception concerning the basic nature and relationship of all things—even if it is a popular, aphoristic, irregular and eclectically vacillating philosophy. This is true even of the simplest Bible reader (and perhaps with special strength and tenacity). But it is definitely true of the educated Bible reader, who in appearance [*scheinbar*] and according to his programme is wholly devoted to observation.⁵

There is much here that seems compatible with postmodern critiques. (Though in my view it is going too far, as some do, to assert that Barth was the first postmodern theologian.) And there are things Barth writes which seem similar to specific literary theories. For example, the previous quotation is preceded by this sentence:

Above what is observed, there inevitably arises—like the second rainbow which is distinct from the first, though related to and dependent upon it—the picture contemplated [*das nachgedachte Bild*], in which the reader or hearer tries, as it were, to assimilate the former.⁶

By 'the first rainbow', Barth seems to mean something like that which would be produced by the implied (or ideal) reader proposed in reader-response theories, while by 'the second rainbow' he seems to mean something like that which is produced by real readers.⁷

To that we can add language which speaks of the church in terms seemingly resonant of Stanley Fish's 'interpretative communities':

[The Christian interpreter] has to remember that Scripture is the Word of God for and to [*für und an*] the Church, and that therefore it is only in and with the Church that one can take up a meaningful and legitimate position towards Scripture. In every case, whatever the individual's private (and perhaps dissenting) judgment may be, even a dissenting private judgment of faith, one must always listen to the Church. The so far unaltered

⁵KD I/2, p. 816 (CD, pp. 727-28). It seems extraordinary that the writer of such a passage can continue to be represented by some as espousing 'presuppositionless' interpretation and theology. They do so, of course, because they have read Barth's rejection of Bultmann's particular use of existentialist presuppositions (or 'preunderstandings') in conjunction with Barth's doctrine of the Word of God as self-revealing, and have supposed him to be rejecting all presuppositions whatsoever. Thus D.E. Nineham thinks that Barth's position is one in which 'no "pre-understandings", conditioned by the cultures of a fallen world, enter in as distorting media, and so the revelation is the pure word of God'. Nineham therefore thinks there is internal inconsistency in Barth revealed,

in the controversy between Barth and Bultmann. It is true that Barth is more eclectic in his approach towards modern attitudes and philosophies than is Bultmann—at any rate the Bultmann Barth sees; he may change his spectacles more often, but it surely remains true that the Gospel he, or any other, derives from the Bible depends on the spectacles through which they read the text ('The Use of the Bible in Modern Theology', p. 191).

⁶KD I/2, p. 817 (CD, p. 727).

⁷It also seems that, in speaking of 'pictures' and 'rainbows', Barth is aware of the something like the semiotic distinction between 'signified' and 'referent'.

judgment [*nicht veränderte Urteil*] of the Church radically precedes [*grundsätzlich vorangehen*] the judgment of the individual...⁸

And,

The exegesis which is, if I may use the expression, preordered to Dogmatics must be an attempt to understand Holy Scripture within the pale of the Church: it must therefore be theological exegesis ...Theological exegesis is an exegesis carried out under a quite definite presupposition. This is, firstly, that the reader of the Old and New Testaments remembers that in this book the Church has up to now heard God's Word; and secondly that this reader or investigator reads in the expectation that he himself will also for his time hear God's Word. The place of theological exegesis lies right between this remembrance and this expectation...Therefore, that exegesis which is norm for Dogmatics is not an exegesis that is without presuppositions. There is no such thing.⁹

The parallels between this kind of language and reader-response criticism should not blind us to the fact that there are also very important differences.¹⁰ Nevertheless, some parallels do seem to be present.

Thus, there are in Barth's discussions of interpretation ideas which have an affinity with recent recognition of the Bible's literariness. There are also, it must be added, some ideas which seem less compatible, such as his use of 'authorial intention' as an interpretative tool.¹¹ I will return to that issue later, but first I want to sketch out the second feature in the *Dogmatik* which has attracted some literary critics. This is the nature of some of Barth's interpretation of some biblical texts.¹²

Interpretation of Biblical Narrative

In his book *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, Hans Frei argued that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the nature of the Gospels as realistic narrative was seriously

⁸KD I/2, p. 530 (CD, p. 479). This, by the way, provides the basis on which I would suggest Barthian-type interpretation can approach the problem of the 'hermeneutical circle'. Generally speaking, and put simply, the problem is that no reader can understand a text without already knowing in some sense what the text is talking about. Every reader therefore determines, in one way or another, what they get out of a text by the presuppositions they come to it with. However, this sort of description of the problem seems to posit, as an ideal, text and reader standing together in isolation from all else. And that is not the situation as Barth perceives it. Christian readers rightly come to the text with certain presuppositions and expectations already in place by virtue of their being members of the Church, and look to the text for certain things to happen. Barth, in other words, foregrounds the hermeneutical circle, and sees it as a virtue, rather than an obstacle to be overcome. This clearly raises a number of issues, such as the question of the Bible's authority, which cannot be dealt with here.

⁹*Credo*, pp. 177-78. This quotation does not come from *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, but it was written in 1935, and so falls within the *Dogmatik* period and can be regarded as representative of Barth's approach in this period.

¹⁰For example, reader-response critics are talking (in the first instance at least) about the experience of reading texts as literature, perhaps simply for the sake of pleasure or perhaps to 'educate oneself' and so on, while Barth is talking about reading texts as authoritative Scripture and specifically for the sake of theological construction. In addition, Barth holds strongly to the notion of authorial intention, which tends to be denigrated in reader-response theories. I will return to this issue later in the chapter.

¹¹P. McGlasson's comment on the presence of 'similarities and differences' in Barth's Bible interpretation is very useful:

I see no reason to align Barth's version of 'how to do things with words' with any other particular version. He can at times be favorably compared to New Criticism among literary critics, to performative utterance philosophers, or to a cultural anthropologist like Clifford Geertz. But Barth's enterprise is sufficiently field-specific that it would be difficult to specify precisely any shared features beyond family resemblances (*Jesus and Judas—Biblical Exegesis in Barth*, p. 120 n. 2).

¹²The word 'some' appears twice in this sentence in order to emphasize that Barth engages much of the time in interpretation which is not accounted for in the following discussion. This fact is not sufficiently recognized by Ford, for example.

underplayed. Frei puts this down to two main reasons. First, the Gospels' 'history-likeness (literal meaning)' was confused with 'history (ostensive reference)', and so realistic reading came to mean critical reconstruction of the events to which the text referred. Secondly, the meaning of stories found in the Gospels was located either in the ideas they illustrated or in the subjectivity of their narrators or readers.¹³ This again caused what the stories said as narrative and as parts of larger narrative to be ignored. Frei suggested that, almost alone among modern interpreters, Barth overcame this blindness to the importance of narrative.

Building on this suggestion, David Ford argues that Barth's interpretative 'procedure has much in common with literary criticism of the genre of realistic narrative',¹⁴ especially in 'his interpretation of certain biblical narratives, notably the Gospels but also the creation stories and also those Old Testament narratives to which he appeals in support of his doctrine of election'.¹⁵ Ford demonstrates that with these texts Barth does not follow the procedure which has been dominant in theology, namely the attempt at historical reconstruction of what lies behind the texts, but instead asks literary questions of them.

A good example of Barth's approach to narrative is found in his reading of 1 Kings 13 in a section of KD II/2 entitled 'The Elect and the Rejected [*Der Erwählte und der Verworfenene*]' . The reading comes in a series of readings of Old Testament texts in which Barth highlights the nature of God's activity towards individuals as characterized by election of one and rejection of another.¹⁶ So the series begins with a reading of Genesis 4 as a story about Abel as the elected one, in that 'the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering' (v. 4), but also in some way as rejected, in that the result is his death; at the same time, it is a story about Cain as the rejected one ('for Cain and his offering he had no regard', v. 5), but nevertheless in some way he is elect, since God promises to protect his life (v. 15). Thus, 'For all the fact that their situations are so different and non-interchangeable, Abel and Cain do very largely enough stand for one another in their own place and fashion.' And, 'We must remember this in some sense "classical" example when we proceed to examine the biblical situations in which the election of one man as distinct from another is concerned.'¹⁷

With this in mind, Barth turns to 1 Kings 13 for an 'illustration of the differentiating election [*unterscheidende Wählen*] of God'.¹⁸ He briefly considers historical-critical questions, suggesting that the chapter is 'drawn from another source than its context', perhaps a source 'similar to the Elisha-cycle at the beginning of 2 Kings',¹⁹ but he quickly turns to literary considerations. 'The story', he says, 'is that of the highly dramatic and complex confrontation between a nameless man of God from Judah...and a prophet in Bethel'. And its 'peculiar theme...is the manner in which the man of God and the prophet belong together, do not belong together, and

¹³See Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 8-12.

¹⁴'Barth's Interpretation', p. 57.

¹⁵'Barth's Interpretation', p. 56.

¹⁶KD II/2, pp. 391-453 (CD, pp. 354-409).

¹⁷CD II/2, p. 355 (KD, p. 391).

¹⁸CD II/2, p. 393 (KD, p. 434).

¹⁹CD II/2, p. 393 (KD, p. 435).

eventually and finally do belong together; and how the same is true of Judah and Israel'.²⁰

Barth follows this summary with four pages of careful retelling of the story, in which he emphasizes three crises: first, the prophet lies to the man of God (v. 17); second, the lying prophet is given a true word from the Lord (v. 20); third, when calamity comes on the man of God, the prophet arranges his burial and to be buried alongside him. Barth asserts that these three crises are moments of role-reversal. First, the man of God rejects the word he has earlier received from God in favour of the prophet's lie, and so 'the man of God from Judah wavers and falls'.²¹ Second, the lying prophet brings a true word that the man of God has disobeyed and will be judged. 'The roles are reversed. He who had previously spoken the truth must now hear the word of the Lord from the mouth of the liar.'²² The man of God is then killed by a lion and his carcass left in the road (v. 24). But that is not all, for the prophet 'does not let the matter rest with this reversal of roles'.²³ He brings the body back to mourn over it and bury it (v. 29), and provides for his own body to be buried alongside it (v. 31), because he believes that the judgment the man of God had declared earlier 'shall surely come to pass' (v. 32). 'Evidently', says Barth,

the roles are exchanged once more. Just as the sin and judgment of the man of God from Judah have in no way altered his mission, so they have not altered his value or his superiority over the prophet of Bethel. For it is not merely to honour him that the latter conveys him to his own grave, and buries him. It is in order in this way to create a refuge for himself.²⁴

Paul McGlasson summarizes what Barth has done in this reading:

The series of crisscrossing relations brought forth in the three main crises yield a structure, or a picture—in this case a dual picture. On the right is the picture of the man of God from Judah, blessed with the Word of God and the promise of grace, and yet finally rebellious and cast violently into the grave. On the left is the old prophet of Bethel, a sham prophet of a rejected nation, and yet blessed with the Word of God and the hope of a future in the grave of the man of God...

And finally, Barth completes the analysis by pointing out the complementary relationship of the two figures in the story. Each is a kind of mirror image of the other...²⁵

Yet Barth actually thinks there is a good deal more to the story than this. Bearing in mind the context of the chapter in the larger story of 1 and 2 Kings, over the next eleven pages²⁶ he considers what the chapter also says about the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah and their (relative) election and rejection by God, asserting that,

When we consider the complex nature of this story we may well ask, but cannot decide, what the real problem is. Is it the contrast between the real man of God and the man of the prophetic guild, or is it that between the realms of Judah and Israel?—for both problems are so interwoven in the story that we obviously have to consider both in order to understand it.²⁷

What is more,

²⁰CD II/2, p. 393 (KD, p. 435).

²¹CD II/2, p. 396 (KD, p. 438).

²²CD II/2, p. 396 (KD, p. 438).

²³CD II/2, p. 397 (KD, p. 439).

²⁴CD II/2, p. 397 (KD, p. 439).

²⁵*Jesus and Judas*, p. 29.

²⁶CD II/2, pp. 398-408 (KD, pp. 439-51).

²⁷CD II/2, p. 397 (KD, p. 439).

it is also difficult to decide which of the figures, representing the two sides, stands, as it were, in the centre as the victorious hero of the story: the man of Judah or the man of Bethel; or behind them the royal sinner Jeroboam, or the prophesied royal reformer and avenger Josiah...²⁸

Thus (for the sake of clarity), McGlasson has simplified somewhat. It is not just a dual picture for Barth. Rather, 'If in spite of this [sc. the complexities and undecideabilities] we try to understand the whole, while keeping the intertwined threads apart, *two double-pictures* emerge...'²⁹ Barth reads each of these pictures as independent but also qualifying each other:

We therefore go on to ask how far these two double-pictures belong to one another, and how far they are opposed, not merely mutely but eloquently—speaking of what in all its distinctions is in itself the one will of God for Israel, of that which makes divided Israel more than ever His people.³⁰

I do not intend to provide a critique of Barth's reading of 1 Kings 13. My purpose has been to indicate an interpretation in which Barth has been highly sensitive to, and made considerable use of, the 'literariness' of a biblical text. It is an example of his ability to read text *as text* (as opposed to reading it, for example, as historical source), and to draw theological points from literary features of the text. It would certainly be possible to read 1 Kings 13 in other ways, perhaps applying different types of literary criticism, and perhaps to criticize Barth's reading on that basis. But my point here is that in this reading, as in a number of other readings, Barth is aware of, and makes use of, the literary nature of the Bible.

This raises the question whether in doing so he is still treating the Bible as witness to revelation. Or to put it another way, How far is using a text in its literary aspect consonant with using it as testimony? For, generally speaking, when texts are treated as literary products, their link to events in history (the stuff of testimony) tends to become problematized. Beginning with Structuralism and New Criticism, modern literary theory has pressed the difficulty of moving from literary readings to assertions about texts' historical referents and authors. Put simply (and perhaps simplistically), according to much literary theory to read a text literarily is to read what it (or what text and reader in conjunction) says about a world which it (or it and reader) creates. It is not to read what the author of the text said about his or her world. But to read a text as testimony is to attempt to do just that, to read what the human witness said about that which they witnessed.

To put the matter rather starkly, on the one hand Barth says,

²⁸CD II/2, p. 398 (KD, p. 440).

²⁹CD II/2, p. 398 (KD, p. 440; emphasis in KD, not in CD). For this reason, I disagree slightly (though only slightly) with McGlasson's conclusion that, 'Barth seizes on this dual picture as such for the message, the "real subject," the *witness* of the chapter. What it wants to say it says by painting this picture of the elected and the rejected, the man of God and the old prophet' (*Jesus and Judas*, p. 29). Rather, I would say that Barth draws this picture from the chapter, from its witness. And at the same time, Barth considers the community aspect of the chapter, the two kingdoms who stand behind the two individuals, to be just as important, and that therefore there are 'two double pictures'. With this qualification in mind, I would endorse McGlasson's conclusion about how Barth's reading of the text flows over into his theology of election: 'God rejects, God elects; and yet the result of this divine rule is not dualistic, but dialectical; not fatalistic, but flexible; not the steady, unchanging, absolute condition of death, but the fluid and relative uncertainty of life. This is the witness of the text. But the text is this witness; it does not contain it like a vessel contains a substance. It is a question of reading the text the right way, not reading the text and then doing something else' (*Jesus and Judas*, p. 29).

³⁰CD II/2, p. 404-405 (KD, p. 446).

the revelation to which the biblical witnesses direct their gaze as they look and point away from themselves is to be distinguished [*unterscheidet*] from the word of the witnesses in exactly the same way as an event itself is to be distinguished from even the best and most faithful account [*dem besten, getreuesten Bericht*] of it.³¹

And in saying this he assumes the referential function of testimony. Yet on the other hand, in reading text *as text*, Barth appears at times to treat the Bible like the New Critics treated their texts, and so to be vulnerable to the fact that 'the New Critics tended to suggest that literature had no referential function at all—to put it baldly, that literature was not *about anything*'.³² Put like this, the matter appears extremely problematic. But in the following sections I will explain why I do not consider the difficulty insurmountable.³³

³¹CD I/1, p. 113 (KD, p. 116).

³²J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament—Method in Biblical Study* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984), p.159 (his emphasis).

³³One solution, which I do not accept, might be simply to assert that the problem of the loss of any link between text and referent is overcome from the other side. That is, that God, the ultimate referent of Scripture, makes himself present to the reader in faith. Versions of this solution are offered by some narrative theologians, who argue that, regardless of referents, texts do something, creating meaning as they are read, and when the texts are Scripture, God presumably validates this meaning in some way.

Two other versions of the solution are offered with specific reference to Barth by Baxter and Ford. Baxter says that, in reading all Bible narratives 'realistically' and as 'rendering' Christ, 'Barth has effectively argued that as long as one encounters Christ in the story it does not matter whether the event happened just like that...Hence Barth is actually saying "Believe it happened this way"' ('Movement', p. 177). And 'Barth reads Scripture realistically because he regards it as a theologically accurate account whose witness God guarantees and uses to reveal Himself. For Barth, theological reliability does not depend on historical reliability, hence he makes no effort to establish the latter' (*ibid.*). Thus Baxter thinks that the problem of lack of link between text and historical referent is solved, in Barth's theology, by God's present action.

Ford's account of Barth is highly complex (though, I think, not entirely coherent), seeking to do justice to the complexity in Barth, and there is much in it that is very useful. But on this issue (and it is a vital one) he has misunderstood Barth. Speaking of Barth's interpretation of the Gospels, he notes, rightly, that Barth denies that their referent is the figure of Jesus reconstructed (or reconstructable) by historical critics. But Ford thinks that Barth offers as 'an alternative referent...Jesus Christ alive now' ('Barth's Interpretation', p. 72). He seems to be saying that, for Barth, the Gospels are like a story told by a real man supposedly about events in his past which may well be fictional, but which convey truths about him, and by hearing his story we can get to know what he is like: 'in this story as it is told, the referent is not just a historical or imagined character but one who is alive now as the same person...[T]he story is simply the means of knowing someone who is present himself to speak through it' (*ibid.*). And, Barth 'answers the question of how to experience and prove this reality by saying that prayer is the way...The argument amounts to an assertion that this is in fact how the story "works", or, in Barth's terms, to the affirmation of Christ's self-authentication by speaking for himself' (*ibid.*). There is some truth in both Ford's and Baxter's positions, but they are nevertheless misleading. As we have seen throughout, Barth does think that there is no possibility of knowing God other than by his making himself known, i.e., other than by his 'self-authentication'. But this does not alter the fact that, for Barth, the referent of the Gospels remains the Jesus of history (though not the 'Jesus of the historians'), a fact which is obscured, if not denied, by Ford's assertion that the referent is 'Jesus Christ alive now'. Ford's misunderstanding has arisen (at least partly) from a misreading of an excursus in KD IV/1, §59 (pp. 246-50 [CD, pp. 224-28]), which he thinks provides 'the most revealing indication of how Barth interprets the gospel story' (*ibid.*, p. 71). The problem is that, while this phrase rightly encapsulates what Barth does in the excursus (i.e. explains how he interprets *the gospel story*), Ford then reads the excursus as Barth's account of how he interprets *the Gospels*. So, for example, Ford says, 'Barth's main point is that the pattern of the synoptic Gospels represents the pattern of the Atonement' (*ibid.*). That is not so. Barth's main point is that Jesus' life-'story' is the 'story' of atonement or of 'The judge judged in our place' (the title of the section), and that this 'story' (the 'gospel history' [*evangelischen Geschichte*] as Barth calls it) can be seen in the synoptic Gospels, although it is easily overlook[ed], *especially in the form in which it is represented in the synoptic Gospels*' (CD IV/1, p. 224 [KD, p. 246]; my emphasis). The effect of Ford's misreading is that when Barth asserts that 'the Easter story' is the 'real commentary [*eigentliche Kommentar*]' on the rest of Jesus' life-story (*ibid.*, p. 227 [KD, p. 249]), Ford thinks Barth is talking about the resurrection validating the synoptic Gospel accounts. But in fact Barth is saying that the resurrection

b. Sage as Testimony

Throughout his writing of *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Barth makes use of the German term *Sage*. As often happens in the *Dogmatik*, he takes the concept from elsewhere (in this case, from the work of Gunkel and others) and, at first without explaining this is what he is doing,³⁴ recasts the term for his own use, keeping some elements of the old usage, rejecting others and adding some of his own. The key elements which Barth takes over from Gunkel are *Sage's* dependence on tradition and imagination. As Barth conceives it, *Sage*, using traditional elements, is 'imaginative story-telling'.³⁵ At

shows that it is indeed true that the life (which includes the death) of Jesus is the life of 'the Judge judged in our place'.

It is easy to be confused by the translators' terminology (they translate *Ostergeschichte* as 'Easter story' and *Geschichte* sometimes as 'story', rather than the preferable 'history', on p. 227 [KD, p. 249], for example) and by Barth's terminology (of *Ostererzählung*, 'Easter narrative'). He speaks of 'narrative' in order to say that an event (Jesus' resurrection) is telling us something. He is talking about the event itself, and not (directly) about the narratives of Matthew, Mark and Luke about the event.

In addition to this, Ford elsewhere seems to confuse Barth's refusal to participate in full-blown historical criticism with a lack of interest in the historical referent. For example, speaking of Barth's interpretation of passages in the New Testament referring to the fate of Judas Iscariot, Ford says, 'Barth's method here... can be contrasted with the historian's. The latter would take the meaning of the passages to be their reference to certain historical events. So he would distinguish the narratives from their referent, to try to determine the referent, and then reinterpret the passage on that basis. For Barth *the historical referent is not the meaning of the passages*, and even when there are clear contradictions they can yield a unified meaning. The ultimate basis of this unity is the will of God...' (*Barth and God's Story*, p. 89, my emphasis). This assumes that what the historian can reconstruct is the historical referent. But Barth does not accept that with respect to the material of the Bible. For the Bible speaks of historical events which have a side to them (perhaps the most important side) that modern historical (*historisch*) method cannot acknowledge and therefore cannot reconstruct (see Chapter 2). As I show below, Barth considers that, in reading biblical narrative as he does, he is listening to what it says about this (*unhistorisch*) side of the historical (*geschichtlich*) referent.

Both Baxter and Ford offer accounts of where they think Barth's interpretative practice leads for a theoretical position on the problematic link between text and historical referent. Unfortunately, they both miss the point I made in Chapter 5, that for Barth, the belief that the Bible is witness means that its referent is specifically God's self-revelation in history. Therefore, Barth would be operating contrary to his whole approach if he were to cut the link between text and historical referent and instead locate the basis of the meaning in, for example, 'the will of God' as Ford suggests in the above quote, or in 'God's guarantee' as Baxter suggests.

This is not to deny, of course, that the text can only become fully meaningful for the reader by the free will of God. But as I showed in Chapter 5, if God chooses to make the word *his* Word, he does so by enabling the reader or hearer to successfully comprehend what the witness saw. Thus, present meaning is dependent on God's past acts of self-revelation, the texts' historical referent. In the following quotation, Barth puts this in terms of 'being' and 'becoming':

[Jesus' resurrection] tells us that all the significance which Jesus... can acquire for individual men by means and as a result of proclamation (which has Him as its origin and object), has its basis and truth and practical and theoretical power in the fact that he is significant *in and by Himself*... What is significant in itself has the power to *become* significant and *will* in fact become significant. But only that can *become* significant which *is* already significant, and in such a way that this being [*Sein*] is the power of the corresponding becoming [*Werdens*] (CD IV/1, p. 227 [KD, p. 249], Barth's emphasis, shown in KD but not in the translation).

³⁴Later in the *Dogmatik* he does explain that, 'As far as I can see and understand (cf. the competent articles in RGG² by H. Gunkel, W. Baumgartner, O. Rühle, P. Tillich and R. Bultmann), modern ethnology and religious science cannot give us any illuminating and acknowledged clarification, distinction and co-ordination of the terms myth, saga, fable, legend and anecdote, let alone any useful definition of their relationship to the concepts of history and historicist history [*zu den Begriffen der Geschichte und der Historie*]. The non-specialist must try to find his own bearings in this sphere' (KD III/1, p. 88). This passage, by the way, is an example of a number of important places where the official English translation has difficulty coping with the distinctions between *Geschichte* and *Historie*. In CD III/1, p. 81, *zu den Begriffen der Geschichte und der Historie* is rendered 'to history and historical scholarship'.

³⁵In this conception of *Sage* as 'story-telling', Barth also seems to be influenced by the etymology of the word itself. In this connection, a translators' footnote (on p. 42 of CD III/1,) explaining why they have translated *Sage* as 'saga' is interesting: 'A more natural rendering of *Sage*, which is from the same root as

the same time, he shows little interest in the form-critical focus on orality, on the pretextual stage (although he does not deny its existence), and he also rejects a tight restriction of the term to texts whose pretextual form was that of *Sage*. He does this on the one hand because he is not seeking to reconstruct texts' prehistories, but rather to read them as they stand. He does it, on the other hand, because, in his view, all accounts of past events (real or not, and whether they have prehistories as *Sages* or not) include an element of story-telling:

'*Sage*'...³⁶ can only indicate the more or less intrusive part of the narrator [*Erzähler*] or narrators in a history narrated [*einer Geschichte erzählten*]. There is no narrated history in which, according to the general idea of *historisch* truth, we do not have to reckon with this part of the narrator, and so with *Sage*-like or legendary elements. This applies also to the histories narrated in the Bible.³⁷

Without a teller, obviously enough, the histories of past events are not told. Without narration, 'they would have to be without temporal form',³⁸ the histories would not exist.

All accounts of past events, Barth asserts, have *Sage*-like elements provided by the narrator. What he must mean by this (and admittedly he is rather confusing here) is that *Sage* is the element of an account in which the narrators, as it were, put their gloss on events. That is, *Sage* consists in the narrator telling what the event or events 'mean'. This 'telling of meaning' might be done implicitly (perhaps simply by the ordering of the sequence of events, or by leaving some things out and including others, and so on) or explicitly. With respect to the biblical accounts, the 'telling of meaning' is an explanation of the 'divine side' (*göttlicher Seite*³⁹) of the events to which the accounts refer.

In this first discussion of *Sage* in the *Dogmatik*, then, it seems that Barth is using the term in two ways. First, as a loose reference to a type of literary genre characterized by imaginative story-telling, and second (and strongly modifying the first) as a way of referring to something that is present in all history-type writing, the narrator's assertion of meaning. The texts which Barth places in the *Sage* genre seem to be those which are made up almost entirely of the 'telling of meaning', but always with some historical referent in the account. These two ways of using the term persist (and are often intermingled) throughout the *Dogmatik*. I propose to distinguish between the two usages by speaking on the one hand of the *concept* of *Sage*, and on the other hand of the *genre* of *Sage*. We need to recognize that the former is much more important for Barth than the latter and, in his view, provides the reason why,

sagen (to say or tell) would perhaps be tale or story. If *saga* is retained as a closer equivalent, it is in the precise sense given on pp. 81 ff. [sc. of CD III/1], and in indication of the distinctive *genre* there perceived.—ED.' In order to keep the possibilities open, throughout this chapter I have simply retained the German word.

³⁶The words I have missed out here are 'or "legend"'. Barth treats 'legend' as a sub-category of *saga*: 'Legend and anecdote are to be regarded as a degenerate form of *saga*' (CD III/1, p. 81 [KD, p. 88]).

³⁷KD I/1, p. 345, my translation. The English translation (CD I/1, p. 327) is rather imprecise and misleading at this point because the translators have not recognized that *Geschichte* as *history* is the key issue in the excursus. For example, *einer erzählten Geschichte* is rendered 'the story told', and *keiner erzählten Geschichte* simply as 'no story'. In my view *Geschichte* should be rendered as *history* throughout. When Barth wants to speak of the story in the text he uses *Bericht*.

For more discussion of the assertion that history-telling involves story-telling, see pages 158-59 below, especially note 97.

³⁸KD I/1, p. 345 (CD I/1, p. 327).

³⁹See KD I/1, p. 345 for the term.

The judgment that a biblical history [*eine biblische Geschichte*] should be understood either as a whole or in part as *Sage* or legend need not be an attack on the substance [*die Substanz*] of the biblical witness.⁴⁰ In order to understand this, we need to consider in detail what he means by the concept of *Sage*.

The Concept of Sage

Barth defines the concept of *Sage* in contradistinction to (his definition of⁴¹) the concept of myth. Myth, he says, 'is portrayal of certain fundamental relations of human existence [*Grundverhältnisse der menschlichen Existenz*]' which apply 'always and everywhere'. Myth describes these relations 'in their connections [*Beziehungen*] to their own origins and conditions [*Ursprüngen und Bedingungen*] in the natural and historical cosmos or in the divine'.⁴² That is, myth, though often taking the form of stories about gods, has as its subject the general nature of the human existence in the universe. It is expressed in narrative form, but has the same subject as modern philosophical speculation:

The distinction between myth and speculation proper consists only in that in speculation the form of narrative is stripped off again like a garment that has become too tight, so that what is presented in myth as fact [*Faktum*] is now elevated [*Vorgeführte*] to the sphere of pure idea [*reinen Idee*] or concept, and the present and acknowledged wealth of the origins and relations of human existence is now portrayed in its 'in and for itself [*an und für sich*]'. Myth is the preparatory form of speculation and speculation is the essence of myth come to light.⁴³

Barth is not saying that either myth or philosophical speculation are necessarily bad or false.⁴⁴ Indeed, on occasion he speaks highly sympathetically (though always with qualifications) of both.⁴⁵ He is not denying that myth may say valuable things about 'the essential principles of the general realities and relationships of the natural and spiritual cosmos which, in distinction from concrete history, are not confined to definite times and places'.⁴⁶ But he is saying that by its nature myth does not speak

⁴⁰KD I/1, p. 345 (CD I/1, p. 327).

⁴¹As Ford puts it, 'clearly many definitions of myth would include Barth's "saga" without prejudging the issue of the occurrence of creation' and his definition of *Sage* is 'idiosyncratic' ('Barth's Interpretation', p. 68). However, as we have seen in his use of other concepts, this is nothing new in Barth! In Barth's defence it is worth noting his comment that, 'The customary definition that myth is the story of the gods is only superficial' (CD III/1, p. 84 [KD, p. 91]). Many Old Testament experts agree, and feel a need to 'deepen our definition of myth' (G.M. Tucker, *Form Criticism of the Old Testament* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971], p. 27). In Tucker's subsequent discussion of the work of B.S. Childs and B.W. Anderson it is interesting how much of what is said resonates with Barth's discussions.

⁴²KD I/1, p. 346 (CD I/1, p. 327).

⁴³KD I/1, p. 346 (CD I/1, p. 328).

⁴⁴Although he does imply (perhaps thinking of Kant) that they may overstep the limits of human understanding 'on the assumption that man knows all these things and can present them thus or thus, that he controls them, that in the last resort they are his things' (CD I/1, p. 327 [KD, p. 345]).

⁴⁵See, for example, the discussion in CD I/2, pp. 727-28 (KD, pp. 815-16), of the inevitability, and indeed usefulness, of philosophy in the thinking of all theologians. In addition, notice the assertion, 'if we are not to dispute the grace and finally the incarnation of the Word of God, we cannot basically contest the use of philosophy in the interpretation of scripture' (pp. 729-30 [KD, p. 818]). Or the discussion of the need for interpreters of myth, 'spurred on by its cheerful play...[to] press on to its true non-historical [*geschichtslosen*], timeless and abstract sense, to a perception of the eternal truth presented in the play. How can we understand myth if we ignore this demand and do not try to meet it? Myth has always arisen and still arises from the higher recognition, divination and poetic understanding of this kind of eternal truth. It has always been a worthy *alter ego* of philosophy' (CD III/1, p. 85 [KD, p. 92]).

⁴⁶CD III/1, p. 84 (KD, p. 91). The whole of this passage is very important:

The customary definition that myth is the story of the gods is only superficial. In myth both the gods and the story are not the real point at issue, but only point to it. The real object and content

about God's self-revelation in history. Myth is concerned with 'what purports to be always and everywhere true',⁴⁷ and does not recognize the possibility of God's having acted in a particular place at a particular time. Myth 'does not intend to be history [*Geschichte*] but only pretends to be such'.⁴⁸

Consequently, 'The judgment that a biblical history should be understood as myth is necessarily an attack on the substance of the biblical witness.'⁴⁹ For this reason, Barth offers *Sage* as an alternative concept⁵⁰ on which to base an alternative reading strategy. It is important to realize that he is not actually arguing that *Sage* is an empirically distinguishable genre from myth. *Sage* and myth take the same form: they both appear to be narratives about past events. Therefore, 'one cannot prevent a historian from applying the category of myth to certain reported incidents in the Bible'.⁵¹

It might be possible, Barth suggests, to challenge such a move on 'empirical' grounds. It could be asked whether in its present context in the Bible a supposedly mythical story is actually intended to have a different function from myth. A story which originally was told as myth and then was incorporated into the Bible might, in its new context, mean something else, and to read it as myth would be to ignore this new context:

One might ask, of course, whether the supposed myths have really been found in the text and not somewhere behind the text, whether the context in which the passage concerned finds its point has not been dissolved, whether what it says in the context has not been ignored on the assumption that so-called 'sources' of a special character and independent content underlie the biblical text...In a word, one might ask whether the verdict 'myth' as applied to the biblical texts is not even from the purely '*historisch*' standpoint a mistaken verdict because it can perhaps be made only when there is a failure to hear what the real biblical texts are trying to say...as biblical texts.⁵²

But whether a challenge of this nature is made or not, the real issue for Barth is one of reading strategy. To read the Bible, or parts of it, as myth, is not to read it as testimony to God's acts of revelation, and so,

the historian who resolves on this verdict must realize that if this verdict is possible for him he has as it were read the Bible outside the Christian Church, that he is not asking about revelation but about something else.⁵³

Such a strategy can be followed, and indeed,

It is really quite natural that an age whose thought, feeling and action are so highly mythical as the so-called modern period that culminates in the

[*Gegenstand und Inhalt*] of myth are the essential principles of the general realities and relationships [*Wirklichkeiten und Verhältnisse*] of the natural and spiritual cosmos which, in distinction from concrete history [*konkreten Geschichte*], are not confined to definite times and places [*bestimmte Zeiten und Orte*]. The clothing of their dialectic and cyclical movement in stories of the gods is the form of myth.

⁴⁷CD I/1, p. 327 (KD, p. 346).

⁴⁸CD I/1, p. 327 (KD, pp. 345-46).

⁴⁹KD I/1, p. 345 (CD, p. 327).

⁵⁰See also CD III/1, p. 81 (KD, p. 88): 'If the concept of myth proves inadequate...it is obvious that the only concept to describe the biblical history of creation is that of *Sage*.'

⁵¹KD I/1, p. 346 (CD, p. 328).

⁵²CD I/1, p. 328 (KD, pp. 346-47). It may well be that Barth is thinking here of Gunkel's characterization of many parts of Genesis as 'faded myths'.

⁵³CD I/1, p. 328 (KD, p. 47).

Enlightenment (including Idealism and Romanticism) should seek myth in the Bible too—and find it.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, such a strategy is inimical to Barth's: 'We can only declare that the interpretation of the Bible as the witness to revelation and the interpretation of the Bible as the witness to myth are mutually exclusive.'⁵⁵

With these distinctions from myth in mind, we are now in position to consider Barth's substantive understanding of *Sage*. First, and most importantly, while myth seeks to speak about what is 'always and everywhere true', *Sage* seeks (or intends) to speak about particular events which have happened in history. Thus, while myth's narrative form can easily be 'stripped off again', *Sage*'s narrative form is necessary to it, since *Sage* speaks about events.

But what is the nature of this 'speaking about'? It is certainly not an historically accurate retelling of what a human being who had been present as an observer would have seen. At this level, there is a 'fundamental uncertainty [*grundsätzliche Ungesicherheit*] in general historicity [*allgemeinen Geschichtlichkeit*]' . The details of the *Sage* may not have 'happened as the narrative says',⁵⁶ and some details may not even have happened at all.⁵⁷ Instead, the details of the *Sage* speak about the divine side of the event to which the *Sage* refers. For example, Barth thinks that the statement in Acts 1.3 that Jesus' resurrection appearances took place over a period of forty days does 'not offer precise chronological information as to the duration of the appearances'.⁵⁸ Rather, in the light of the parallels with forty day periods in the Old

⁵⁴CD I/1, p. 328 (KD, p. 47).

⁵⁵CD I/1, pp. 328-29 (KD, p. 47).

⁵⁶CD I/1, p. 327 (KD, p. 45).

⁵⁷In this sentence I am actually saying more than the passage in KD I/1 from which I am quoting will allow. Barth says only that *Sage* 'eludes any sure declaration that it happened as the narrative says'. It is my view that the logic of Barth's position points in the direction I have described but that at this point Barth is unwilling to go that far. Instead, he seems to embark on a 'damage limitation exercise' in which he allows only that modern historical method can reach negative judgments of probability but not of certainty about the biblical accounts: 'it is by nature only a judgment of probability'; 'the question of the particular historicity of the story at issue is at least not answered negatively'.

What Barth is seeking to safeguard here is his assertion that the biblical accounts always have their origin in, and (at least in some way) reference to, God's actions in history; for example, that the resurrection stories have their origin in God's act of raising Jesus from the dead and that their referent is the raised Jesus. I have discussed the issues surrounding this in Chapter 2, where I argued that Barth seeks to take canons of reason and history seriously, but nevertheless reserves the right to reject historians' judgments about the possibility of God's acting in history. However, by using the sort of language he uses here, Barth seems to confuse the idea that the stories have as their origin and reference acts of God with the idea that things must have happened just as the biblical stories say, even if modern historians might judge to the contrary. *This* sounds like special pleading.

Coming as it did in CD I/1, and with the translation of the next volume not available until 17 years later, and subsequent volumes even later, I find it unsurprising that this language led to a virtual consensus among the majority of English-speaking scholars in the 1940s-70s that Barth's use of *Sage* is evidence of his 'unnatural' (John Bowden's word in his biography *Karl Barth*, p. 115) use of the Bible and of his refusal to take historical criticism seriously.

I have already shown that in later volumes Barth does not require that everything happened 'just as the biblical stories say'. For example, in Chapter 5 I noted that in KD III/2 he argues the evidence which the resurrection stories (which he considers are *Sage*) supply is 'fragmentary and contradictory', and that they contain 'a good deal that is not to be taken literally but typically' (p. 542 [CD, p. 452]). And indeed, even in the passage in question in KD I/1, there is the important sentence, "*Sage*"...can only indicate the more or less intrusive part of the narrator or narrators in a history narrated' (KD I/1, p. 345). Which can only mean that a good deal of the content of a *Sage* derives from the narrator's 'additions' to what actually happened.

⁵⁸KD III/2, p. 542 (CD, p. 452).

Testament, this detail is to be taken symbolically.⁵⁹ When discussing issues to do with historical scholarship, Barth most often refers to this 'divine side' as *praehistorisch* or *unhistorisch*.⁶⁰ Neither term is strictly satisfactory, since *unhistorisch* might be thought to imply something which has not actually happened and *praehistorisch* something previous to known history.

The second major feature of *Sage* therefore, is that it speaks about *Praehistorie*, or the divine side of certain historical events, but by means of details which need not themselves be 'historical'. That is, *Sage* speaks by imaginative story-telling.

In KD I/1, in order to distinguish between judgments about the historicity of the details of imaginative stories and judgments about the historicity of that to which the stories refer, Barth introduces another (confusing) terminological distinction. He speaks of 'general historicity [*allgemeinen Geschichtlichkeit*]' and 'special historicity [*besonderen Geschichtlichkeit*]'. Every event in history, including those in which God is involved, has what Barth calls temporal form (*zeitliche Gestalt*⁶¹), and this temporal form is referred to by the 'general concept of history'. Therefore,

Even histories [*Geschichten*] which took place between [*ereignet haben*] God and humans...come under this general concept of history [*allgemeinen Begriff von Geschichte*] on their human side [*menschlichen Seite*]...⁶²

'General historicity' refers to the question of whether an alleged event actually had temporal form, that is, whether it actually occurred in the past. Thus if an event is to be affirmed in terms of 'general historicity', there must be evidence for its having had temporal form. But the temporal form of an event is not the same thing as the event's *praehistorisch* or 'divine side'. So events or

histories which took place between God and man...do not fall under this general concept [of history] on their divine side [*gottlichen Seite*].⁶³

Consequently, if a text, for example, speaks only or almost entirely of the divine side of an alleged event, and provides little or no evidence of its temporal form, then it may be impossible to answer in the affirmative in terms of 'general historicity'.

⁵⁹Unfortunately, Barth does not say what he thinks the symbolic meaning might be. Perhaps it could be speaking of the appearances as a time of transition between two epochs, as was the forty day period of the Flood.

⁶⁰Indeed, to be precise, *Praehistorie* is not exactly co-ordinated with the 'divine side' of events. *Praehistorie* also includes other things which are *unhistorisch* but not divine, i.e. things which are not observable but which are nevertheless real.

'Creation history is *unhistorisch*, or more precisely, *praehistorisch* history.' But, because God is omnipresent, this does not just apply to creation history: 'in its immediacy to God, all history is *unhistorisch*' (KD III/1, p. 87 [CD, p. 80]). 'Alongside the *historisch* view of history there is always a legitimate *unhistorisch* or *praehistorisch* one and with it the *unhistorisch* or *praehistorisch* form of history depiction called *Sage*' (KD III/1, p. 88 [CD, p. 81]). That is, creation history is pure prehistory (*keinen Praehistorie*' [KD III/1, p. 99]), but all of history has an element of *Praehistorie*, and much of the time the Bible speaks of this. Unfortunately, Barth confuses the terminology still further in this matter by using *Sage* as a synonym for *Praehistorie*: 'That it does actually contain a good deal of *Sage*...is due to the nature and theme of the biblical witness. It also contains *Historie*, but usually with a more or less strong wrapping of *Sage*. How could it be otherwise where the immediacy of *Geschichte* to God is so to the fore, as in the events which the Bible relates?' (KD III/1, p. 88 [CD, p. 81]).

⁶¹It is worth noting that Barth uses this term throughout, but that at one point the translators render it 'temporal side', implying that Barth envisages a non-temporal side. That is not the case. By definition, an event in history is wholly temporal in form, and Barth sticks strictly to that understanding throughout the *Dogmatik*. See R.H. Roberts, 'Karl Barth's Doctrine of Time: Its Nature and Implications', in Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth—Studies*, pp. 88-146.

⁶²KD I/1, p. 345 (CD, p. 326).

⁶³KD I/1, p. 326 (CD, p. 326).

At this point, in my opinion, Barth makes a mistake. He wants to continue to speak of events in which God has acted as having happened in history, even if we cannot affirm their 'general historicity' for lack of evidence about their temporal form. And so (and this is the mistake), he introduces the term 'special historicity'.⁶⁴ In my view the term does not clarify matters. It seems to imply that there is something particular, something special *about the temporal form* of those events which have 'special historicity'. That is not what Barth means. The point of his argument is that there is a class of events which have temporal form just like all others, but which also have a divine side, which are *praehistorisch*. When the Bible provides testimony to the divine side of these events, Barth suggests we speak in terms of their 'special historicity'.

What he is referring to as 'special historicity' is not, as the term seems to imply, the events' temporal form, but their 'divine side'. Thus he says,

'Historisch judgment' can only relate to temporal form...On the *special* historicity of the history [*Geschichte*] reported in the biblical witness, no genuinely '*historisch*' judgment can be given.⁶⁵

Of course, because the events always have temporal form, enough evidence of that form may be available for us to reach a positive judgment on the basis of modern historical method that the alleged event did happen. But this is not the same thing as hearing the reports about the divine side:

hearing a history which is witnessed to in the Bible as a revelation event—and this is less obvious—is not dependent on '*historisch*' judgment about its temporal form. The judgment, according to which a biblical history may be said to be probably 'history' in the sense of the general concept of historical truth, is not necessarily the judgment of faith with regard to the biblical witness. For the judgment may be reached without understanding this biblical history in its specialness, i.e. as history between God and man.⁶⁶

In my view, Barth could have made all these points without introducing the term 'special historicity'. Instead, he should have spoken of events which have temporal form but which have a particularity (or 'specialness') in that they have a divine side. And indeed, as far as I can tell, Barth does not use the term 'special historicity' again in the *Dogmatik* after KD I/1, even when he is speaking of the concept of *Sage*. Instead he speaks of *Praehistorie* in the above sense, or of *unhistorische Geschichte*, which has the sense of historical events that are not and in some cases cannot be confirmed by modern historical method. I therefore do not consider 'special historicity' to be a feature of the concept of *Sage*.

Genesis 1-2

I propose now to turn to the paradigmatic case in the *Dogmatik* where Barth embarks on the reading strategy of treating a text as *Sage*, namely to KD III/1, §41, where he sets out his doctrine of creation. There he deals with Genesis 1-2, treating the chapters as being of the genre of *Sage*, that is, as examples of imaginative storytelling. We will see that the two major features of the concept of *Sage* are present: 1. *Sage* seeks to speak about particular events which have happened in history; 2. it

⁶⁴It is this mistake of terminology which has misled Thomas Provenance into thinking that Barth believes in 'two kinds of history' ('The Hermeneutics of Karl Barth', p. 229).

⁶⁵KD I/1, p. 345, Barth's emphasis (CD I/1, p. 326).

⁶⁶KD I/1, p. 345 (CD, pp. 326-27).

speaks about that which is *praehistorisch*, the divine side of certain historical events, but by means of details which need not themselves be 'historical'.

The creation of the universe is one of the very few events which Barth considers to be by its nature incapable of confirmation by modern historical method (the others being Christ's resurrection and, once it has occurred, Christ's second coming). This is because such method speaks only of that 'which is accessible to man because it is visible and perceptible' and of that which 'as an event prior to and side by side with which there are other events of the same basic type with which it can be compared and integrated'.⁶⁷ Creation does not have such content since it is the act of God in which the creaturely is being produced and does not yet exist as such. 'Its only content is God the Creator.' Therefore, it is not 'history' according to the construct of modern historical method:

it is not '*Historie*', and there can be no '*Historie*' of it.⁶⁸

Nevertheless, creation is the beginning of time and so is the beginning of actual history (*Geschichte*, as opposed to the modern construct *Historie*):

For this reason, it can only be real but unconfirmable-by-historical-method history [*unhistorische Geschichte*].⁶⁹

In consequence, accounts describing creation can only do so in a way unacceptable to modern historical method: they are '*unhistorische Geschichtsschreibung*'. They do so by means of the only language at their disposal, language about things which are 'visible and perceptible'. Therefore, they do so by seeming to describe events which stand 'side by side with...other events of the same basic type' and with which they 'can be compared and integrated'. Barth quotes W. Zimmerli: ' "The narrative of creation seeks to tell in a visible manner about the wholly invisible operations of God. That something comes out of nothing is utterly indescribable"'.⁷⁰

The history of creation,

has no comparable or supporting points in any other history. For what *could* actually be perceptible and comprehensible and therefore '*historisch*' in this *Geschichte*?⁷¹

It is in light of these considerations that Barth proposes reading Genesis 1–2:

[W]e can only say that the creation history in itself and as such is by its nature wholly '*unhistorisch*' and that the biblical reports are by their nature also wholly '*unhistorisch*' reports and must be read and understood as such.⁷²

And he makes it clear that he proposes this on the basis of a consideration of the nature of creation (he is 'espousing a theological proposition'⁷³), not on the basis of historical critical conclusions (presumably based on scientific conclusions about the origins of the universe). If Genesis 1 and 2 really are about creation (rather than being timeless myths about, for example, the nature of humanity's existence in the universe) then they must by nature be *unhistorisch*.

Clarifying further, Barth explains that 'the content of the biblical histories of creation' (plural because Gen. 1 and Gen. 2 are two accounts of the same thing)—this

⁶⁷KD III/1, p. 84 (CD, p. 78).

⁶⁸KD III/1, p. 84 (CD, p. 78).

⁶⁹KD III/1, p. 84 (CD, p. 78).

⁷⁰KD III/1, p. 84 (CD, p. 78).

⁷¹KD III/1, p. 86 (CD, p. 79); Barth's emphasis.

⁷²KD III/1, p. 86 (CD, p. 79).

⁷³KD III/1, p. 86 (CD, p. 79).

content 'as such has a definite *praehistorisch* character: obviously in the sense of being pre-natural-history'. By which he means they speak about 'an occurrence in time, but an occurrence which is the emergence of the presuppositions of all further history'.⁷⁴

By all of this, Barth is making it clear how he intends to read Genesis 1 and 2. (Or how he intends *not* to read them!) He intends to read them as telling us nothing about the natural causal origins of the universe or of humanity. He does not consider the 'days' of Genesis 1 to tell us anything about the time it took for planets and plants and animals to reach their existent forms or anything about the order in which this occurred (stars after the earth, for example). Nor does Genesis 2 tell us anything about the natural causes of the existence of the first human beings. Nor does it tell us that these first human beings were the Adam and Eve of the story.⁷⁵ The details of the story, in other words, did not happen in the literal sense of their words. God did not physically pick up some earth and form a human being out of it. The details of the story, however, do tell us about things which God did.

For example, Gen. 2.21-22 does not mean that the first female who existed in history was physically made from a rib-bone of the first existent male. Rather it means (among other things) that in the emergence of human creatures, God caused female to be with respect to male, 'not merely another human being, but a being which he can and must recognise as part of himself'.⁷⁶ That is, God created human beings such that their humanity consists in part in the co-existence of male and female.⁷⁷

So both the creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2, 'are portrayals of concrete events important as such. These events are *praehistorisch*. They deal with the emergence of creation as such. Thus both accounts are pure *Sage*'.⁷⁸ Consequently, although the details of the stories did not actually happen in the literal sense of the stories' words, Barth thinks they should be taken extremely seriously, even in one sense, 'literally':

All their utterances should be taken literally [*wörtlich*]: not in a shallow but a deep sense; not in a narrow but an inclusive sense; yet in such a way that the obvious meaning of the direct narration should always be given its proper weight...⁷⁹

⁷⁴KD III/1, p. 86 (CD, p. 79). It is worth noting that on occasion Barth calls this creative 'emergence' *Urgeschichte* (e.g. KD III/1, p. 98, where it is rendered 'primal history' by the translators [CD, p. 90]). When he uses this term in the *Dogmatik* it has a different meaning to that which it had in the *Romans* commentary. In the *Romans* commentary he used the term to refer, not to the 'creative emergence' with which history began, but to the relationship of all revelation to all history. At that time, Barth conceived of revelation as never becoming a part of ordinary history, but of only touching history 'tangentially', as it were. *Urgeschichte* was a kind of realm adjoined to history but not part of history. As early as KD I/2, Barth repudiated his use of the term in that sense, as he did the term 'qualified history [*qualifizierter Geschichte*]' (p. 58).

⁷⁵There is, however, great ambiguity in Barth on this point. It is my view that the logic of his position points in this direction, but it must be admitted that at times he does say things which at least appear to be, and perhaps are, contradictory. For example, in KD IV/1 (p. 569 [CD, p. 510]) he speaks of the biblical tradition viewing humans as being physically descended from Adam, and does not dissent from this view. Unfortunately, it would take me too far from my task to address this problem any further here.

⁷⁶CD III/1, p. 296 (KD, p. 338).

⁷⁷Although it is not the subject of my study, it is worth noting that Barth's doctrine of the male-female relationship and the image of God has a number of weak points in the light of feminist insights. See E. Frykberg's excellent study, *Karl Barth's Theological Anthropology: An Analogical Critique Regarding Gender Relations* (Studies in Reformed Theology and History, 1.3; Princeton, NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary Press, 1993).

⁷⁸CD III/1, p. 84 (KD, p. 91).

⁷⁹CD III/1, p. 84 (KD, pp. 91-92).

And so, for much of the time, it sounds as though Barth thinks the details of the story did actually happen in the literal sense of the words.⁸⁰ For example, later in KD III/1, §41 there is a section of extended interpretation of Gen. 2.18-25 in which are found many phrases like, 'God first brings the animals to man',⁸¹ 'The Lord caused a deep sleep to fall on man', 'He took one of the ribs, replacing it with flesh, and formed woman from this rib'.⁸² Sometimes Barth slightly qualifies these phrases by saying, for example, 'this creation of woman is *described* in the following way',⁸³ and sometimes he does not, giving the impression that he thinks it actually happened that way.

This latter impression is given because of a rather pragmatic twofold consideration. First, as we have seen, Barth thinks a creation account consists in an attempt to describe the indescribable. Human language does not have the capacity to speak directly of the divine creative acts. Even the highly sophisticated language of philosophy is incapable of doing so. (Indeed, this is the case not just with creation, but with all God's activity and with his very being.) Secondly, although at times it may appear otherwise, the scientific enterprise is engaged in a different task from investigating the creative acts themselves, and the language of science is designed for a different task.

Therefore, in the attempt to describe the creative acts we must speak by analogy. So there can be no fundamental objection to Genesis 2, for example, speaking in terms of people being created 'out of earth' and then 'out of bone'. Since *no* human language is adequate, it would be pointless (and perhaps misleading) to speak in more 'ethereal' terms. Barth is content to use the more 'earthy' and 'realistic' language provided by the creation accounts themselves:

in the central portion of this book a good deal will be said about 'naive' Hebrew Sage [*naiver* hebräischer 'Sage']...The relevant task of dogmatics at this point has been found exclusively in repeating the Sage and I have found this task far finer and far more rewarding than all the dilettante entanglements in which I might otherwise have found myself. There is free scope for natural science beyond what theology describes as the work of the Creator.⁸⁴

⁸⁰It is perhaps worth adding that Barth seems to treat the account of 'the fall' in Gen. 3 in a similarly ambiguous way. He gives the appearance of reading Gen. 3 completely realistically, speaking, for example, of Adam and Eve there as 'the first human pair' (KD III/1, p. 321 [CD, p. 281]). But he also says, 'The meaning of Adam is simply man, and as the bearer of this name which denotes the being and essence of all other men, Adam appears in the Genesis story as the man who owes his existence directly to the creative will and Word and act of God without any human intervention, the man *whoto that extent* is the first man [*der erste, der Urmensch*]' (CD IV/1, pp. 507-508 [KD, p. 566]; my italics). In my opinion, Barth reads 'the fall' as follows: just as Gen. 1-2 speak of the emergence of the presuppositions of natural history, Gen. 3 speaks of the emergence of the presuppositions of fallen history. Barth calls this latter 'world-history': 'There is a *world-history* [*Weltgeschichte*] which is grounded in and determined by the rejection and ignoring of the will and Word and work of God' (KD IV/1, p. 563 [CD, p. 505]), and 'The biblical Sage says that world-history began with the pride and fall of man' (KD IV/1, p. 566 [CD, p. 508]). (In this connection, by the way, Barth rejects any notion of 'hereditary sin', see KD IV/1, pp. 556-58 [CD, pp. 499-501].)

⁸¹CD III/1, p. 292 (KD, p. 334).

⁸²CD III/1, p. 294 (KD, p. 336).

⁸³CD III/1, p. 294 (KD, p. 336); my emphasis.

⁸⁴CD III/1, pp. ix-x (KD, pp. ix-x). The continuation of the quotation is interesting: 'And theology can and must move freely where science which really is science, and not secretly a pagan *Gnosis* or religion, has its appointed limit. I am of the opinion, however that future workers in the field of the Christian doctrine of creation will find many problems worth pondering in defining the point and manner of this twofold boundary.'

Similarly, there can be no fundamental objection to using anthropomorphic language (once it is recognized that this is what it is) to speak of God and his activity, since no language is more suitable than any other for this task:

The danger is pressing, and has even become acute, that we may over-emphasise the impropriety of what are in the narrowest sense to be called 'anthropomorphisms'...The further we move away from the witness of the Holy Scriptures to the sphere of general conjectures about God, so much the purer, we think, is the air of thought...But, if it lets itself be guided by its object, theology ought to try to evade these anthropomorphisms least of all...[S]piritual—i.e., abstract—concepts are just as anthropomorphic as those which indicate concrete perception...The difficulty, explains Athanasius, lies in the fact that we can say of man that he creates, he is, and that we can only say the same of God, although God's being and creating is not like that of man but very different...⁸⁵

So Barth is not afraid, for example, of repeating Gen. 2.7's language of God's 'breathing'.

In his interpretation of creation *Sage*, then, Barth is content to repeat and re-use the language of the *Sage*. To that, we can add that he is also content to repeat the *form* of *Sage*, namely, narration. As we have seen, this is because narrative is the best form by which to speak of God's *activity*, of what God did.⁸⁶ But this is not limited to Barth's interpretation of the creation *Sage*. To reword P. McGlasson's comment slightly: 'much of Barth's interpretation is quite literally retelling'.⁸⁷

The Authoring of Sage

There is, of course, a difference between the creation *Sages* and the other biblical narratives, in that the creation *Sages* are describing a unique moment, the beginning of history. But they are also similar because the referent of the creation *Sages*, which is *Praehistorie*,⁸⁸ divine activity, is also present in that which other biblical texts narrate. Since Barth's interest is primarily in this divine activity, his treatment of the creation *Sages* is paradigmatic of his reading of much of the other narrative in the Bible, as I mentioned earlier.

We are therefore now in position to return to the questions I posed earlier. In recognizing the literary nature of the Bible, is Barth still treating the Bible as witness to revelation? How far is his use of the text in its literary aspect consonant with using it as testimony to occurrence in history? We are part way to an answer, in that I have established that Barth's use of the Bible in its literary aspect is intended to discover what it has to say, not so much about *historisch* occurrence but, in the form of *Sage*,

⁸⁵CD II/1, p. 222.

⁸⁶See also CD III/1, p. 87 (KD, p. 94): '[*Sage*] does not merely use narrative as an accepted form. It is itself a narrative through and through. It has no philosophical system as an accompanying *alter ego* whose language can express abstractly what it says concretely. What it says can be said only in the form of its own narrative and what follows.'

⁸⁷*Jesus and Judas*, p. 23. I have substituted the word 'interpretation' for 'exegesis', because the word 'exegesis' tends to connote ideas of objectivity in many peoples' minds which 'interpretation' does not. Barth was happy to use the word exegesis himself, but at the same time said:

There is a notion that complete impartiality is the most fitting and indeed the normal disposition for true exegesis, because it guarantees a complete absence of prejudice. For a short time, around 1910, this idea threatened to achieve almost canonical status in Protestant theology. But now we can quite calmly describe it as merely comical (CD I/2, p. 469 [KD, p. 519]).

⁸⁸In the creation *Sages*, this is their *only* referent. Or, as Barth puts it, their content is pure *Praehistorie* (KD III/1, p. 99 [CD III/1, p. 91]). In other narratives, this is not so. They narrate both *Historie* and *Praehistorie*.

about *praehistorisch* occurrence. But what does Barth envisage as the origins of testimony to this *Praehistorie*? How, in other words, is *Sage* authored? It cannot come about simply through a person's having observed an event and then testifying to what they saw, since the *praehistorisch* side of an event is, by definition, unobservable.

The answer, says Barth, is to be found in the nature of *Praehistorie* and its potential connection to the realm of imagination. *Praehistorie*, though it is unobservable, is an element within the created universe, and so we can have knowledge of it:

The *praehistorisch* sphere belongs as such to the created world, and so the relationship between it and other spheres of this world is not in principle closed and nor is its recognition in principle impossible. It is inaccessible only to our observing experience and to the concepts of understanding which connect these experiences.

And we can attain knowledge, he argues, not only through sense perception and reasoning based on that perception, but also through the operation of our imaginations:

[T]he human ability to know is not exhausted by the ability to observe and conceive. Imagination [*Phantasie*] belongs, legitimately in its own way, to the human ability to know.⁸⁹

In other words, just as sense perception corresponds to and can provide knowledge of that which is observable—*Historie*—imagination corresponds to and can provide knowledge of that which is unobservable—*Praehistorie*. Imagination does, of course, often do otherwise. It often, for example, does not correspond to anything external to the person who is imagining. That is, it often has no existent object. But in Barth's view it *can* have an object, it *can* be about something which has happened external to the one imagining. The term which Barth applies to this operation of imagination is 'divination'.⁹⁰

In the paradigmatic case, that of the creation *Sages*, 'Divination means the view of historical [*geschichtlich*] emergence which precedes "historical" history [*historischen Geschichte*]...'.⁹¹ The term 'divination' should not mislead us into thinking that Barth sees it as a divine gift. In itself, divination is an entirely human ability. With respect to the creation *Sages*, for example, he suggests that their 'view of historical emergence' was 'surmised [*erraten*] from that which emerged and in which "historical" history takes place'.⁹² Divination, in other words, is an imagining of the nature of *Praehistorie* on the basis of the imaginer's experience of the world. This divination takes expression in the form of poetry, or poetic *Sage*, which can be both good and bad:

There is, of course, also empty, false, worthless and dangerous *Sage*. But that is not because it is *Sage*, but because it is bad *Sage*, the false poetry of a futile divination [*Divination*], the result of misunderstanding of genuinely historical roots and origins.⁹³

Such a surmised understanding (or misunderstanding, as the case may be) of the nature of creation may well then be expressed in terms derived and reshaped from folk stories and myths. Thus, (citing Gunkel, Delitzsch and Eichrodt) Barth thinks

⁸⁹KD III/1, p. 99 (CD, p. 91). Following this come the well-known words: 'A man without imagination is more of an invalid than one who lacks a leg!'

⁹⁰The word is the same in English and German.

⁹¹KD III/1, p. 90 (CD, p. 83).

⁹²KD III/1, p. 90 (CD, p. 83).

⁹³KD III/1, p. 90 (CD, p. 83).

there is 'no question of a direct dependent relationship' between Genesis 1–2 and the *Enuma Elish* epic, but that there is 'a common relationship to still older traditions from which Gen. 1 and 2 and these Babylonian texts may perhaps derive'.⁹⁴ Having explained why he reads the *Enuma Elish* as timeless myth portraying 'the constantly recurrent change of relationships' within the universe,⁹⁵ Barth argues that,

If there is a connexion with the Babylonian myth or its older sources, it is a critical connexion. Everything is so different that the only choice is either to see in the Jewish rendering a complete caricature of the Babylonian, or in the Babylonian a complete caricature of the Jewish, according to the standpoint adopted.⁹⁶

As Barth sees it, then, the following process occurs: a person imaginatively surmises, from their experience and knowledge of the present state of things, the nature of the *Praehistorie* of creation. This is 'divination'. They then express their understanding of *Praehistorie* by means of imaginative story-telling. This story-telling may well make use of elements of other stories and myths known to the teller. The end result is *Sage*.

And divination is not limited to the creation *Sages*. The biblical history-tellers (*Geschichtsdarstellers*) undertook 'not only "*historisch*" but also divinatory and poetical activity'.⁹⁷ For they wished to speak of much more than *Historie*. In fact, that is true with the majority of the Bible:

That it does actually contain a good deal of *Sage* (and even legend and anecdote) is due to the nature and theme of the biblical witness. It also contains *Historie*, but usually with a more or less strong wrapping of *Sage*. How could it be otherwise where the immediacy of *Geschichte* to God is so to the fore, as in the events which the Bible relates? On the other hand, it also contains a good deal of *Sage* with *historisch* wrapping, and again this is not surprising when by far the greater part of the events related by it take place in the sphere where *Historie* and *historisch* accounts are at least possible in principle. To put it cautiously, it contains little pure *Historie* and little pure *Sage*, and little of both that can be unequivocally recognised as the one or the other. The two elements are usually mixed. In the Bible we usually have to reckon with both *Historie* and *Sage*.⁹⁸

⁹⁴KD III/1, p. 95 (CD, p. 87).

⁹⁵CD III/1, p. 88 (KD, p. 97).

⁹⁶CD III/1, p. 89 (KD, p. 97).

⁹⁷KD III/1, p. 91 (CD, p. 83). Barth is by no means alone in thinking of the biblical historiography (such as that found in 1 and 2 Kings) in this way. Many modern biblical scholars use terms like 'artistry', 'craft' and 'fictionality' to refer to the biblical history-tellers' activity. They use these terms without prejudice to the question of the historicity of the narratives. In particular, they do not use the term 'fiction' in contradistinction to the term 'fact', as might happen in popular usage. See V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Leicester: Apollos, 1994), esp. pp. 58-87. Long thinks historiography 'might fairly be described as a kind of verbal representational art' (*ibid.*, p. 63). He distinguishes between 'historicized fiction', in which

the weight of emphasis falls on *fiction*, suggesting that whatever bits of factual information may be included the story itself is nonfactual (as, for example, in a historical novel). In 'fictionalized history,' on the other hand, the weight falls on *history*, the claim being that the story is a real representation of a real event in the past, whatever fictionalizing may be involved in the crafting of the narrative (*ibid.*, pp. 61-62).

⁹⁸KD III/1, pp. 88-89 (CD, pp. 81-82). We get more detail of what Barth means in a (not-so-short!) 'short hermeneutical observation' which he offers in explanation of his interpretation of Numbers 13-14 (KD IV/2, pp. 578-79 [CD, pp. 478-79]):

...Num. 13-14—the *Historie* of the spies whom Moses sent to investigate the promised land.

Why '*Historie*'? This requires a short hermeneutical observation...The term '*Historie*' is to be understood in its older naive meaning in which—regardless of distinctions that can be made between the historically provable, the *Sage*-like and that which has in a later synthesizing view been

In terms of the authoring of these sort of texts, there are similarities with but also differences from the creation *Sages*. Perhaps the crucial difference is that while no human being could have been present at the creation events, there were witnesses to most, if not all, of the other events narrated in the Bible. This means that, while understanding of the creation events could come only from divination 'after the fact', some or all understanding of other events could come from human experience of them. So, for example, events in the history of the nation of Israel were experienced by certain Jews, and their accounts of them could be passed on orally or in written form. On the other hand, and here are the similarities, these accounts, and the redaction of these accounts into biblical narratives, also contain the results of 'divination' by their authors. That is, they may contain elements which are not necessarily accurate in *historisch* terms, but which do speak about the *prae-historisch* side of the events.⁹⁹ Thus, Barth is not concerned in any of his readings of biblical narratives with 'peeling off' these details in order to reach a *historisch* core. This is ultimately also the explanation of why he refused to participate in the 'quest for the *historisch* Jesus' in his readings of the Gospels.

The Inspiration of Biblical Narratives

Finally, and most crucially, while divination and the resulting *Sages* are in and of themselves entirely human activities, in the case of biblical divination and *Sage* (as with all biblical testimony) they arise from the witness being encountered by God's self-revelation, in this case encountered in the realm of *Praehistorie* and imagination:

consciously fashioned, for example as a 'made up story'—it denotes a historical narration [*Geschichtserzählung*] that is received, maintained and handed down in a particular kerygmatic sense. In relation to the reading of biblical histories it is possible, of course, to ask concerning the above distinctions and indeed to hypothetically describe them. But in doing so, the kerygmatic sense in which they are told will be removed. Indeed, the more definitely the distinctions are made and the more normative they are regarded for the purpose of exposition, the more surely this sense will be lost. To do justice to this sense, we must either not have asked at all concerning these distinctions, or, having asked, must have ceased to do so. We must continue (or return once again) to naively read these histories in their unity and wholeness. Then (and in no other way!) will they say what they want to say. Certainly there belongs to the *Historie* of the spies some '*historisch*' material (to do with the citing of names of persons and cities and localities) and some *Sage*-like material (to do with mention of the branch of grapes carried by two men, and of the giant first-inhabitants of Canaan). And certainly there is also that which has its origin in the synthesizing view (fusing past and present, not wholly but almost, into one) of history, which is so distinctive a feature of historical writing in the Old and New Testament alike. It is to the element which originates in this latter way that we must be specially attentive in our reading of these histories if we are to understand the texts, for it usually tells us why they were adopted into the texts. But in relation to this, if we are careful readers, we will not ignore the '*historisch*' elements or indeed reject that which is *Sage*-like. When the distinctions have been made, they can be put aside again and the whole read (with a tested and critical naivety!) as the whole the text professes it to be.

(I have translated '*erfundenen*' as 'made up story', but Barth has placed the word in quotation marks which may indicate that he is referring to a technical use of the word by Old Testament specialists. I have been unable to establish whether this is so or not.)

⁹⁹Compare the following:

The fact that the statement "God reveals himself" is the confession of a miracle that has happened certainly does not imply a blind credence in all the miracle stories related in the Bible. If we confess *the miracle*, we may very well, at least partially and by degrees, accept additional light from the miracles as necessary signs of the miracle. But even if we confess the miracle, why should we not constantly find this or that one of the miracles obscure, why should we not be constantly taken aback by them? It is really not laid upon us to take everything in the Bible as true *in globo*, but it is laid upon us *to listen to its testimony* when we actually hear it (CD I/2, p. 65 [KD, pp. 71-72]; my emphasis).

The biblical creation-history is pure *Sage*...Precisely in this form it is part of the biblical witness and therefore as such is part of the witness to God's self-revelation...The real mystery and miracle of the biblical creation-history (and in principle the same is true of every other biblical text) consists in the fact that—in this particular aspect—we now see man in one of his possibilities of perception and presentation confronted with this object [sc. God's self-revelation] and engaged in explanation of this reality. The Israelite man who (not without a connection between his view and that of the rest of the ancient Orient) conceived and formed this *Sage*, has been encountered by God the Lord, the creator of heaven and earth. This encounter has taken place in speech and action in the sphere of *Praehistorie*, so that from an unknown quantity God has become known.¹⁰⁰

It is the assumption that this 'encounter' has taken place which stands behind Barth's reading of *Sage*. This is no different from the assumption which stands behind all Barth's other reading of the Bible. It is what I described in Chapter 5 as his understanding of how the witness can have knowledge of revelation. It is the work of the Holy Spirit, opening up for the original witnesses the meaning and content of God's activity.¹⁰¹ This is Barth's understanding of 'inspiration'.

Summary

Therefore, in his reading of *Sage*, the following features are present: 1. *Sage* is read as speaking about happenings within history (in this case *prae-historisch* happenings); 2. it is read as doing so intentionally (as opposed to myth, which intends to speak of 'timeless' matters); 3. it is read as an entirely human product (in this case a product of human imagination), but 4. biblical *Sage* is assumed to be rooted in the witness's encounter with the divine (in this case, perceived by the witness in the realm of the imagination), and therefore to be rooted in God's self-revelation. The first three points are all features present in my discussion of testimony in earlier chapters, and the fourth is what is particular about *biblical* testimony as Barth conceives it. It is true to say, therefore, that Barth's approach to interpreting elements within the Bible as *Sage* is consistent with his overall concern to treat the Bible as testimony.

c. Intention and Historical Reference

Towards the beginning of this chapter, I raised the question whether it is viable in the light of modern literary theory to treat a text in its 'literariness'—to treat a text *as text*—and at the same time to hold to the ideas of authorial intention and historical reference. For those who hold strongly to the New Critics' emphasis on 'the autonomy of the text', it is folly to remain committed to such ideas. Interpreters are urged instead to focus purely on 'the rhetoric of the text'.¹⁰²

I noted earlier that ideas of intention and reference are integral to the concept of text as witness. We have seen that this remains true even with *Sage*. Yet, if it is

¹⁰⁰KD III/1, pp. 99-100 (CD, pp. 90-91).

¹⁰¹On this see Chapter 5. It is not possible to go into it in depth here, but it is along these lines that the other genres of the Bible are included in Barth's overall rubric of the Bible as witness to God's self-revelation in history. Paul's theology in his epistles can be treated, for example, as his testimony (resulting from his imaginative deliberation) to the meaning and implications (the *unhistorisch* side) of the 'Christ-event'.

¹⁰²M. Weiss took such an approach in his book *The Bible from Within: The Method of Total Interpretation* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984). See also D. Gunn, *The Story of King David: Genre and Interpretation* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978) and A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983).

accepted that the text is 'autonomous', then it must also be accepted that the text is unable to say what its author wanted it to say or to refer to that which its author wanted it to refer to. The autonomous text is therefore unable to function as the written deposit of the witnesses to God's revelation. To take one example, if the Gospel of Mark is treated as autonomous text then it cannot provide a link to those who knew Jesus of Nazareth, who walked and talked with him, for the link with historical events has been cut. Nor can it be treated as telling us what its author wants us to know about Jesus. This clearly cuts to the heart of Barth's strategy. If the strategy is to remain viable, it needs to be shown that the argument for 'the autonomy of the text' is not as secure as some regard it.

In what follows, I attempt only to raise questions about the argument, not to offer a complete refutation of it (which would be beyond the compass of this thesis). My purpose (I use the word deliberately) is to show that literary theories of the autonomy of the text need not be accepted by all those who wish to be sensitive to the literary nature of the Bible. In many ways, the situation is parallel to that outlined in the conclusion to Chapter 2. We saw there that Barth's view of 'history' is one which stands in a different (though not unrelated) rational tradition to that of secular historical method. Similarly, Barth's interpretation requires a view of literature which stands in a different tradition from the one in which perhaps the majority of modern literary theorists are found.¹⁰³

So, then, are there reasons why theories of the autonomy of the text need not be accepted by all rational persons? There is no doubt that modern literary theory has problematized authorial intention and historical reference for many people. It has been interested especially in plurality and ambiguity of meaning. It has shown that for every text there is a plurality of possible readings, and that it is impossible to demonstrate that a particular text has only one meaning.¹⁰⁴ In the world of biblical studies, this came as something of a shock. For a long time, while historical criticism held the field, biblical studies sought to 'pin down' the meaning of each and every text. And it sought to pin down the meaning by using authorial intention and

¹⁰³One major voice dissenting from the majority position is E.D. Hirsch Jr (whose views are set out most systematically in his *Validity in Interpretation* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967]). In what follows, there are a number of similarities with (but also a few differences from) Hirsch's position.

¹⁰⁴E.D. Hirsch would argue that the plurality of readings result only in plural significances but need not imply plural meanings. He tends to speak of a text having one meaning only and a different significance for each critic (see, e.g. 'Faulty Perspectives', in D. Lodge [ed.], *Modern Criticism and Theory—A Reader* [London: Longman, 1988], pp. 254-63 [262-63]). He argues that every critic must first, in what he calls the precritical stage, understand (or 'construe') a text before going on to offer their own critique (*ibid.*, p. 259). This implies that it ought to be possible to agree on what 'the meaning' is: 'If a Marxist critic construes a text differently from a formalist critic, that is an irrelevant accident... Marxist critics and formalist critics may be equally able to understand what a text means' (*ibid.*). This seems to imply that 'meaning' is something 'objective', something standing apart from the reader's own contribution to the process of understanding but which is nevertheless discernible by the reader. In my view, this is the weakest part of Hirsch's position. It is clear that in practice readers do not agree. Reader-response theory has shown why this is: each reader understands (or 'construes' a text)—and so reaches meaning—in a way that is influenced by his or her 'community of interpretation' and by his or her own unique perspective. Hirsch does not take enough account of the reader's own contribution to the 'precritical' construal of the text. Nevertheless, although it is a mistake to assert the existence of a unitary, discernible meaning, I believe Hirsch is right to warn against flight to a completely relativist position. I explain below why I believe it is still the case that in the 'precritical' stage different readers attempt to construe the text according to the writer's intention, and are able to debate their construals on this basis.

historical reference. Biblical studies has learnt that, far from there being just one reading of, say, Mark's Gospel, it can be read in many seemingly irreconcilable ways.

But it is a mistake to allow this sense of shock to lead us into thinking it no longer possible to read *according to* authorial intention and historical reference.¹⁰⁵ Modern literary theory has shown that this is not the only possible reading strategy, but it has not shown it to be impossible. Indeed, a good deal of (perhaps all) literary theory requires it.¹⁰⁶ Feminist criticism and Deconstruction, for example, both make use of it. A feminist critique of a biblical text will often begin by asserting the text's patriarchal ideology, an assertion sustained on the basis of intention and the text's historical referents. Some deconstructionists would dispute it, but deconstructive reading also proceeds by first describing an author's intention, only then going on to deconstruct it.¹⁰⁷ Whether in the rarefied atmosphere of literary-theoretical studies or in more

¹⁰⁵It is important to stress that I am not arguing here for readings as reconstructions of the author's intention (or of the historical situation behind the text). Perfect reconstruction is an impossible goal. It is nevertheless necessary (necessary even for readings which set themselves against the author's intention—as I indicate in the following note) to make certain inferences from texts to author's intentions and to allow those inferences to guide the reading. For instance, when I receive a letter from my friend in Barnsley, I infer from the fact of the letter's arrival that my friend wishes to communicate with me. I therefore construe the lines and dots on the paper as writing and proceed to try to understand what it says. If there is a spelling mistake, I continue to assume it was my friend's intention to communicate to me and so I reconstruct the misspelled word so as to cause it to make sense in its context. Similarly, if the writer uses an ambiguous word, I seek to narrow down what the writer might intend by it, perhaps making use of what knowledge I have of my friend. So, in the sentence, 'Yestreday I went to town' I would reconstruct the group of letters 'yestreday' as 'yesterday', and understand the sentence to indicate that on the day before writing my friend went into Barnsley town centre. Such a reading would be reading according to authorial intention. It would be possible to go on and read against my friend's intention, perhaps playing, for example, on the ambiguity of 'to town', which could refer to any town in Britain.

Obviously, with many texts we do not have as much knowledge about authors as I do about my friend in Barnsley. Nevertheless, we can always make *some* assumptions, even if it is only that the text's author intended to communicate something by it. It was on the basis of this minimal assumption that Egyptologists began to understand how hieroglyphics work and so to read ancient Egyptian texts. Had they not been guided by it—that is, had they not pursued a reading strategy based on ideas of authorial intention—they would have made no progress. Having begun to understand the texts, they then were able to infer more about their authors, which in turn enabled them to understand the texts better. No doubt it would now be possible to pursue a deconstructive or feminist reading of them, for example. But such readings are dependent on the initial strategy of reading according to authorial intention.

¹⁰⁶E.D. Hirsch argues that 'No matter how much critics may differ in critical approach, they must understand a text through the same precritical approach if they are to understand it at all' ('Faulty Perspectives', p. 260). The 'precritical approach', which all critics must base their interpretations on, is the construal of the text according to authorial intention: 'Of course, as some critics insist, the reader can become a self-imagining author. But a text cannot be *interpreted* from a perspective different from the original author's' (*ibid.*, p. 262).

¹⁰⁷A good example of recognition by a biblical scholar of the place of intention in her own deconstructive and feminist reading is found in the work of Y. Sherwood on Hosea 1–3 (*The Prostitute and the Prophet—Hosea's Marriage in Literary-Theoretical Perspective* [GCT, 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996]). As well as recognising the place of authorial intention in her own work, Sherwood notes that, 'The deconstructive reader of classical texts and the feminist reader of androcentric texts...[b]oth deny the control of authorial intention and yet both imply its existence, for implicit in both reading strategies is a sense that these readings are transgressive and subvert intended meanings' (*Prostitute*, p. 294).

It is sometimes disputed that deconstructive readings imply authorial intention. It is argued that deconstruction can proceed by focusing simply on texts themselves. However, it is significant that the 'father' of Deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, writes in terms of the author's (in this case Rousseau's) meaning, intention and beliefs in his classic treatment, *Of Grammatology*. He reconstructs these from Rousseau's writings. He says, for example, that 'Rousseau no doubt believed in the figurative initiation of language, but he believed no less, as we shall see, in a progress toward literal (proper) meaning' *Of Grammatology* [trans. G.C. Spivak; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977], p. 107). The fact that Derrida goes on (on the basis of Rousseau's own writings) to deconstruct the latter belief, and to argue that all 'meaning' is figurative rather than literal, does not erase his description of what Rousseau believed and his reconstruction of it from the text. This is not a thesis on Derrida, so the following

down-to-earth contexts, texts are constantly read in the modern world with the author's intention in mind. As E.D. Hirsch Jr puts it,

Every act of interpretation involves...at least two perspectives, that of the author and that of the interpreter. The perspectives are entertained both at once, as in normal binocular vision. Far from being an extraordinary or illusory feat, this entertaining of two perspectives at once is the ground of all human intercourse, and a universal fact of speech which the linguists have called the 'doubling of personality.'¹⁰⁸

Of course, authorial intention (and historical reference) is no longer (if it ever really was) allowed to 'rule the roost' in literary interpretation. Other interests and concerns are rightly given a hearing, critics feel free to dissent from the author's intended meaning, and so on. Nevertheless, it remains possible to pursue a reading strategy which seeks to remain in consonance with authorial intention and historical reference.¹⁰⁹ This is not to say that it is ever possible to determine entirely the author's

quotation from Christopher Norris will have to suffice as further substantiation of the presence of authorial intention in Derrida's argument (and, indeed, in Norris's own argument):

Rousseau...treats of writing as the 'supplement' of spoken language...For Derrida, the 'supplementarity' of writing is indeed the root of the matter, but not in the derogatory sense that Rousseau intended. Writing is the example *par excellence* of a supplement which enters into the heart of all intelligible discourse and comes to define its very nature and condition. Derrida shows that Rousseau's essay submits to this reversal...A whole strange thematics of the supplement runs through the detail of Rousseau's argument like a guilty obsession and twists *his implications* against *their vowed intent* (*Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* [London: Routledge, repr. 1986 [orig. 1982], p. 33; my emphasis).

Sometimes, however, deconstructionists write in such a way as to avoid discussion of authorial intention. Instead, they anthropomorphize the text, presumably in the belief that they are treating it as autonomous. Nevertheless, the procedure remains the same: what the text 'intends' to say is set out and then deconstructed from contrary points within the text. An example in the realm of biblical studies is David Clines's deconstruction of the book of Esther ('Reading Esther from Left to Right: Contemporary Strategies for Reading a Biblical Text', in D.J.A. Clines, S.E. Fowl and S.E. Porter [eds.], *The Bible in Three Dimensions* [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990], pp. 31-52). He first sets out four examples of occurrences in the book in which 'we see the reality of Jewish solidarity' and treats these as representative (*ibid.*, p. 47). He states that 'it is quintessential to the standpoint of the narrative that Jews should maintain their racial identity' and 'the narrative sees itself as promoting racial identity', and argues that the narrative, 'celebrates...a deliverance achieved through denying one's Jewishness' (*ibid.*; my emphasis).

The question has to be on what basis the four examples of 'Jewish solidarity' can be justified as representative. It cannot be on a numerical basis, since Clines's deconstruction is based on two occasions on which Esther denies her Jewishness and two occasions on which Mordecai causes Jewish solidarity to be threatened by divulgence of his Jewishness (giving a total of four counterexamples). Why, if the text is 'autonomous', should these four examples not be treated as representative and it be stated that 'the standpoint of the narrative' is that Jewish racial identity should be denied? The answer presumably is that Clines infers from the book's presence in the Hebrew canon that its author intended the four examples of Jewish solidarity to represent his or her message. Clines's anthropomorphic language must not be allowed to mislead us. Narratives cannot 'see themselves as', nor do they have 'standpoints'. It is the reader who sees the markers in the texts as pointing in one way or another. Narratives in themselves are just lines and dots on a page. In truth, when we read the book of Esther according to certain assumptions about its author's intentions we reconstruct a narrative which encourages us to take up the standpoint that 'Jews should maintain their racial identity'. From the other side of the text, as it were, the author of Esther 'sees him or herself as' promoting racial identity. This is not to deny Clines's point that the narrative of Esther also contains the seeds of a possible deconstruction, in that in it deliverance is achieved through Esther concealing her own Jewishness on occasion. I am only arguing that the deconstruction works on the basis of implicit assumptions about authorial intention.

¹⁰⁸ 'Faulty Perspectives', pp. 262-63.

¹⁰⁹ Sometimes Barth's famous hermeneutical discussions in the first three Prefaces to his Romans commentary (*The Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 1-20) are thought to constitute a rejection of this strategy. Certainly they are an assault on the tendency of historical critics of the time to be satisfied with as full as possible a reconstruction of the original text, of Paul's biography, psychology and so on, and to call this 'interpretation'. But Barth's argument is not that this is a 'wrong way'; it is simply that it is not in itself true interpretation. Rather, historical criticism is the first step on the way to interpretation:

I have nothing whatever to say against historical criticism. I recognize it, and state once more that it is both necessary and justified. My complaint is that recent commentators confine themselves to an

intention or to gain a perfect understanding of the text's historical referent. Indeed, in some cases very little can be known. There are practical difficulties, such as lack of information about a text's historical setting and lack of knowledge about the language in which it was written. There are also less obvious difficulties, such as the fact that (as shown by reader-response criticism) reading is an active process of attributing meaning to texts in which the reader's own context and assumptions are just as important as the text's.¹¹⁰ But despite this, readers can choose to give authorial intention and historical reference an important place.¹¹¹

Indeed, I would argue that most, if not all, reading strategies at least begin in this way. Derrida's deconstructive reading of Rousseau begins, for example, by asserting that Rousseau intended to show in his *Essay on the Origin of Languages* that writing is subordinate to speech. Derrida's subsequent subversion of Rousseau's intention, therefore, does not mean that Rousseau's writings cannot be understood according to his intentions.¹¹² Put in general terms, modern literary theory has problematized the ideas of authorial intention and historical reference insofar as it has demonstrated the impossibility of reaching one 'objective',¹¹³ determinate meaning based upon them.

interpretation of the text which seems to me to be no commentary at all, but merely the first step towards a commentary (*ibid.*, p. 6).

True interpretation involves much more. Barth is disappointed that the leading historical critics of the day failed to see this:

When...I examine their attempts at genuine understanding and interpretation, I am again and again surprised how little they even claim for their work. By genuine understanding and interpretation I mean that creative energy which Luther exercised with intuitive certainty in his exegesis... (*ibid.*, p. 7)

It is a creative energy with which the reader grapples with the 'subject-matter' of the text, rather than being satisfied with mere reconstruction of Paul's intention: 'The conversation between the original record and the reader moves round the subject-matter' (*ibid.*). This was the revolutionary hermeneutical move which Barth introduced (or at least re-introduced). Yet there is no suggestion that this 'creative energy' necessitates a rejection of the author and a move towards 'the autonomy of the text'. Rather, the reader engages with the 'subject-matter' by reading *along with* Paul. To do otherwise is to fail to engage with whatever it was that Paul had engaged with. On the assumption that the 'subject-matter' was indeed God's self-revelation—and therefore that the author has an inestimable advantage over us—Barth framed this (very controversially) in terms of 'utter loyalty to the author': 'Anything short of utter loyalty means a commentary ON Paul's Epistle to the Romans, not a commentary so far as is possible WITH him' (*ibid.*, p. 17).

¹¹⁰Again, Barth was fully aware of the difficulty of the task right from the beginning of his academic career. See, for example, the discussion in the Preface to the Second Edition of the Romans commentary of the assumptions which he and all interpreters bring to the text, including his most important assumption of all, that behind the text really does lie God's self-revelation. Note also his awareness of the only 'relative certainty' of the interpretative enterprise:

Whether these assumptions are justified or not becomes clear in the course of the investigation, when each verse comes to be examined and interpreted. That the assumptions are certainly justified is at the end only a relative certainty. They cannot be proven. In this uncertainty my fundamental assumption is, of course, included. For the present, however, I assume that in the Epistle to the Romans Paul did speak of Jesus Christ, and not of someone else (*The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 10).

¹¹¹A classic example of such a strategy being used is found in the English legal system. Cases often go to the higher courts of appeal when the application of a particular clause of an Act of Parliament is in dispute. On such occasions, judges are required to 'ascertain the will of Parliament' which stands behind the writing of the clause. Clearly, it would be possible for legal theorists to operate a different reading strategy. They might 'deconstruct' the text, for example. But it nevertheless remains possible for the judges to attempt to resolve the dispute on the basis of 'intention'.

¹¹²See note 107 for substantiation of this claim. Derrida's deconstruction is certainly a reading of the text and not a full scale reconstruction of Rousseau's intention, but it is nevertheless a reading that begins with assertion of (and therefore an implied reconstruction of) Rousseau's intention.

¹¹³The idea of 'objectivity' has, of course, been a powerful one in modernity, particularly in academic institutions. Within biblical studies there has been strong reaction among some who take a literary-theoretical approach against supposedly 'objective' theological readings of biblical texts. Recently, 'metacommentary' has been a popular approach to the unmasking of this 'objectivity'. Commentaries

But it has not demonstrated the impossibility of pursuing a reading strategy which seeks to be in accordance with them.

For each text, instead of there being one 'objective' reading, there will be a 'family' of readings all based on this strategy. They will not be full-scale reconstructions of the author's intention, but they will be readings constrained by assumptions about it. So, for example, there might be a family of readings of 'justification' in Romans. One reading might see 'justification' as being primarily about who is included in the people of God (i.e. as being about corporate membership), while another might see it as being primarily about an individual's achievement of righteousness before God (i.e. as being about personal salvation). However, both conclusions will be reached by an attempt to understand what Paul intended by the term, and debate between the two positions will be pursued on that basis.

During the above section on 'Sage as Testimony', I showed that Barth introduces the concept of *Sage* into his discussions for the sake of intention and historical reference. But I also showed that Barth is aware that in doing this he is pursuing a reading strategy, and that it is possible to read the texts in other ways, as myth for example. Having explained why I consider theories about the autonomy of the text do not render Barth's strategy impossible, I will now offer some further reasons why it might be considered an attractive strategy for modern interpreters.

Recently, Pieter Craffert has argued that, 'one can accept the idea that texts have multiple meanings without totally abandoning the idea that somehow they also have fixed meanings—that is if one chooses them to have those'.¹¹⁴ While much of modern literary theory emphasizes reading of texts from the interpreter's perspective, it is possible to attempt by a process of reflection to escape 'the perspective of the subject by learning a new perspective',¹¹⁵ namely the perspective of the historical author of the text. For Craffert, this type of

historical interpretation has nothing to do with either objectively reconstructing the past or with discovering a single objective meaning from an ancient text. On the contrary, trying to recover the historical meaning of the New Testament documents merely opens up the possibility of various interpretations of a document which all aim at historicizing that document in terms of its pastness.¹¹⁶

Craffert asserts that it is important from an ethical point of view not to ignore this type of historical interpretation. The ethics of reading is something which has been stressed by many branches of modern literary theory. But usually it has been stressed from the side of readers, not authors. Feminist criticism, for example, stresses the importance of reading in a way that is not oppressive to women. This

(and similar writings) on books of the Bible are shown to be often almost anything but objective. However, it seems to me that on occasion 'metacommentators' have been unfair. I would say that the majority of Bible commentators have not written with the intention of 'pure objectivity'. Rather they have mostly written for a community (usually for the non-academic members of a particular church) which believes in the authority of the text read according to authorial intention. Claims to 'objectivity' by these commentators are usually claims to allow authorial intention prior importance over the sectarian interests of the community. This is not the same thing as the post-Enlightenment claim to 'objectivity' based on reason alone—though it is often heard (and ridiculed) as such in the academy.

¹¹⁴P.F. Craffert, 'Reading and Divine Sanction: The Ethics of Interpreting the New Testament in the New South Africa', in S.E. Porter and M. Olbrichts (eds.), *Rhetoric, Scripture and Theology* (JSNTSup, 131; Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1996), pp. 54-71 (62).

¹¹⁵'Reading', p. 62.

¹¹⁶'Reading', p. 63.

kind of ethical reading is very important. But at the same time it is ethically right to engage in historical interpretation. This is because of the 'principle of respect for the person and words of other human beings'.¹¹⁷ Authors of texts are other human beings. As such, we should respect them and seek to understand what they intended to say through their texts. We are free to disagree with what they want to say, but we do have the 'moral responsibility of respecting the otherness of the other irrespective of whether one agrees with it or not'.¹¹⁸

There is much in this which resonates with Barth's championing of a hermeneutics which respects what the Other has to say. Barth, of course, was not faced with modern literary approaches and their stress on the readerly side of the equation. However, he did argue that a good deal of historical-critical interpretation tended to ignore whatever it was that the author of a text was talking about and to focus instead on such matters as the author's personality or psychology or belief system, or, more generally, on what the text can tell us about the history or sociology of the times, and so on. Such investigations have value, but interpretation should not stop there. Good interpretation will press on two stages further: first to a listening to what the author actually wants to say and, then, to a grappling for ourselves with the subject the author is discussing.

Like Craffert, Barth uses the idea of 'historical interpretation'.¹¹⁹ In a section we have visited often, that on 'Holy Scripture' in KD I/2 (§§19–21), he asserts that we must 'take the humanity of the Bible wholly seriously', and that, 'The requirement that the Bible should be read, understood and expounded historically is therefore correct and cannot be taken too seriously'. It follows that, first,

The requirement of an 'historical' interpretation of the Bible must mean that we have to take it for what it undoubtedly is and is meant to be: a human speaking by specific people in specific times to specific situations, in a language with a specific intention.¹²⁰

Secondly, we must press on to grapple with *die Sache*, with the subject about which the author is seeking to speak:

If we wish to take the humanity of the Bible wholly seriously, we must deal seriously with the fact that as a human word it says something specific, that as a human word it refers to something beyond itself, that it has a subject [*eine Sache*], that it refers to an object. In this respect too it is a genuine human word. What human word does not do this?¹²¹

Barth justifies this approach, in terms reminiscent of Craffert, out of the need to respect the Other. He continues:

¹¹⁷'Reading', p. 63.

¹¹⁸'Reading', p. 65.

¹¹⁹*Historischen Verständnis* (e.g. KD I/2, p. 518); also *der Andere* (e.g. KD I/2, p. 514). As far as I can tell, Craffert attributes his use of the terms to E.D.Hirsch, Jr (see 'Reading', p. 62). I do not know if he is aware of the similarities to Barth.

¹²⁰KD I/2, p. 513 (CD, p. 464). Barth uses the word *historisch* here. But he goes on to indicate that he is not using it here in the technical sense I have described earlier: 'If the word "historical" is a modern word, the thing itself was not discovered in modern times. And if the more exact definition of what is "historical" in this sense is liable to change and has actually changed at times, it is still quite clear that when and wherever the Bible has been really read and expounded, in this sense it has been read "historically" and not unhistorically, i.e., its concrete humanity has not been ignored.' In view of what he says elsewhere, I think Barth's use of *historisch* is rather confusing here. But he uses the term in order to emphasize his agreement with one major emphasis of the modern demand for *historisch* interpretation, namely the emphasis on the 'concrete humanity' of the Bible.

¹²¹KD I/2, p. 513 (CD, p. 464).

We do not speak for the sake of speaking, but for the sake of that which we are referring to by our speech...Therefore, to hear a human word spoken to us does not only require cognition of the word as such. Its understanding cannot consist only in our examining the nature of its presuppositions and situation, its linguistic sense and its intention, and its concrete context, so as to discover this or that opinion which the Other [*der Andere*] has said to us.¹²²

This is the first stage, and it is crucial to understanding. But,

We can speak meaningfully of the hearing of a human word only when its function as reference (through the word) to what is signified or intended is clear to us, and when this function becomes an event for us—which is when, by means of this human word, we ourselves to some degree perceive that which is signified or intended. Then and only then has the Other spoken to me, and then and only then have I heard him.¹²³

I have said a good deal about this second stage of interpretation with respect to coming to 'perceive' God's self-revelation in earlier chapters. The only additional point I wish to make about it here is that, even if the first stage of interpretation—the hearing of what the author says—were determinate (which it is not), this second stage is bound to lead to multiple interpretations. Every interpreter is different to every other and is located in a different historical context from every previous interpreter. So each interpreter must come to terms afresh with *die Sache* and must offer a new interpretation for the new historical situation. Therefore, it is inscribed into Barth's position that interpretation (and with it dogmatics) is an ongoing and open-ended process.¹²⁴

Finally, intention and reference enable us to understand (though never perfectly) that which the Other wished to say by means of written words and to begin to grapple with the object of their witness. Barth espouses a reading strategy which operates on this basis. I have shown in this chapter, how it is a strategy which can be applied to the Bible even in its literary aspect, despite the questions raised by modern literary theories.

d. *Conclusion*

At times, Barth is confusing in his use of terminology, particularly with respect to the various words he uses relating to history. The difficulties come about for a number of reasons. First, Barth attempts to continue dialogue with the post-Enlightenment secular approach to history while maintaining Christian theology's independence in the light of its particular object. This attempt at dialogue leads, for example, to a qualified acceptance of the secular concept of *Historie* and the creation of a related term, *Praehistorie*, in order to provide a way of explaining how certain particularities of Christian theology are related to the secular concept. The need to maintain

¹²²KD I/2, p. 513 (CD, p. 464).

¹²³KD I/2, p. 514 (CD, pp. 464-65).

¹²⁴Thus in CD I/2, p. 657 (KD, p. 737) we find:

Dogma in the Evangelical sense is the Church counter-witness to this [sc. Holy Scripture's] witness of revelation. This means there can never be a final word, but only a word which is imperative and binding and authoritative until it is succeeded by something else. The Church confesses, and it also appropriates earlier and other confessions. But even as it does so, it remains open to the possibility that it may be better instructed by the Word of God, that it may know it better and therefore confess it better. In its confessing it has always before it the *theschaton* of the praise of God in its consummation.

independence, on the other hand, can at times lead to direct conflict with the secular concept (as sometimes occurs with the privileging of *Geschichte* over *Historie*).

Secondly, Barth tends to take terms used by others and give them his own rather idiosyncratic meanings. He picked up the term *Sage* from the form-critical work of scholars like Gunkel, where it operated mainly as a literary genre describing small sections of the Bible and their origins. But Barth recast it for his own use as a concept describing something (testimony to *Praehistorie*) which runs through many genres of the Bible, thus enabling him to interpret the Bible within its literary aspect while maintaining his overall approach of treating the Bible as testimony. Even so, he continued to speak, on occasion, of *Sage* as a genre.

I have tried to describe what is, despite the terminological difficulties, an underlying stream of consistent thought. Barth holds to the conviction that Christian theology must be founded in God's activity of self-revelation in history and that the Bible should be read by the Christian theologian as testimony to this activity. His treatment of the Bible in its 'literariness' is consistent with this. He seeks to treat texts with what he calls a 'tested and critical naivety':¹²⁵ he is aware that texts often have a mixture of *historisch* and *unhistorisch* elements, and that they often have a complicated pretextual history, but he believes that it is the text in its wholeness which provides the author's witness to God's revelation in history.

¹²⁵This is the idea from which R. Smend developed his description of Barth's 'post-critical interpretation'. See 'Nachkritische Schriftauslegung', pp. 215-37.

Conclusion

Free theologians begin comfortably and cheerfully with the Bible, not because they are dyed with some orthodoxy old or new, not because they must...but because they have the gift and permission to do so; not because they do not read and value other books, both spiritual and secular, both serious and stimulating...but because they hear in the Bible the witness to the free God and free people, and because as students of the Bible they may themselves become witnesses to divine and human freedom.¹

Statements like this one can be found throughout Karl Barth's writings. They emphasise his conviction that the Bible ought to be central to Christian theology. In this thesis I have tried to test how that conviction works itself out in Barth's own theology. Therefore much of the thesis has focused on describing and explaining Barth's strategy of Bible interpretation in *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*. I have also tried to test how far his strategy is a viable one in the modern situation—a situation characterised by new insights into the nature of historical investigation and the nature of the Bible. This has given the thesis a second focus. The two foci are worked out in the following way.

In Part I, I showed that Barth sought a strategy of interpretation that would be true to history. We saw in Chapter 1 that for him the Christian understanding of 'history' is dependent on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This led to the conclusion, explained in Chapter 2, that Bible interpretation which is true to history is interpretation in the light of Jesus' resurrection. Modern secular theory has tended to deny the validity of such an approach, arguing that history must be understood in a different way. If modern secular theory is right in this, then Barth's strategy is not viable. However, at the end of Part I, making use of Alisdair MacIntyre's discussion of the nature of rationality, I argued that Barth stands in a tradition of enquiry that is different from, but no less rational than, that of modern secular theorists. I concluded that, if our criteria are that interpretation ought to be rational and historical, then the strategy remains viable.

In Part II, I looked further into the matter of rationality, asking whether Barth's strategy is one which provides good reasons on which to base assertions. In Chapter 3, I described his treatment of the Bible as testimony and argued that he saw testimony as providing a means to knowledge (albeit, in the case of biblical

¹From an address Karl Barth gave to the Society for Evangelical Theology on September 21, 1953. Quoted in R.J. Erler and R. Marquard (eds.), *A Karl Barth Reader* (trans. G.W. Bromiley; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), p. 13.

testimony, a very particular means to a very particular knowledge—knowledge of God's self-revelation). In Chapter 4, making use of philosopher C.A.J. Coady's work, I provided a defence of this approach in response to modern epistemological assertions. Chapter 5 was given to detailed consideration of how an appreciation of testimony applies to Barth's interpretation. I concluded that testimony provides an epistemologically-sound basis for Barth's strategy, and therefore that on this criterion too his strategy is viable in the modern situation.

In Part III, I discussed examples of Barth's Bible interpretation and, in the light of them, asked whether his strategy is capable of taking account of modern insights into the nature of the Bible. Chapter 6 was given to discussion of the tremendous variety found in the Bible and Chapter 7 asked what happens if variety becomes outright contradiction. Finally, in Chapter 8, I discussed issues surrounding the recognition that the Bible is literature. I concluded that, in each case, Barth's approach enabled him to deal successfully with the problems and challenges raised by the nature of the Bible.

All of this leads me to conclude that Karl Barth's strategy of Bible interpretation comes to terms with, but does not surrender to, the major problems raised by modernity for Christian interpretation of the Bible. That is, it is a strategy which does not run away from the general epistemological questions first asked by Kant² or from the historical questions asked by the myriad of historical critics of the last three centuries. In this sense, Barth's strategy can properly be described as 'modern', and the criticism that his is an attempt to return to pre-modern approaches can be rejected.

However, this does not mean that his strategy is 'modern' in the sense that it is wholly given over to and typical of modern categories. Barth's use of testimony as a source of knowledge goes against the individualism of modern epistemologies and his understanding of history is very different from that of many modern historians. To this can be added some specifically Christian theological features, such as his characterisation of the theological enterprise as 'faith seeking understanding' (which is radically different from any categories provided by the Enlightenment) and his dependence on God having acted in history (which requires rejection of many of the Deist ideas that informed the Enlightenment).³

¹I find it reassuring that Bruce McCormack has reached a similar conclusion about Barth's theological approach as a whole in his recently published intellectual biography *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (*passim*).

²The differences from modernism almost inevitably lead on to the question of whether Barth should be described as 'postmodern'. It is a question which could only be satisfactorily addressed in another thesis, but I will offer a tentative sketch here. I have hinted on a few occasions that it would not be right to call Barth 'postmodern'. There are, to be sure, features of his theology that are amenable to some varieties of postmodernism: his self-conscious rejection of an 'objective, tradition-free' understanding of history in favour of an understanding from within the Christian tradition (Chapter 2) and his sensitivity to narrative in the Bible are two examples I discussed which postmodernist theologians have picked up on. Nevertheless, it is a mistake to call Barth 'postmodern'. The reason is that though he is critical of modernity he is critical of it in a different way, and for different reasons, than postmodernism.

Unfortunately, I can only touch on one of the major differences here (which almost inevitably means I will be unable to do justice to postmodernism or to Barth). This is that postmodernism makes its starting point in the enormous plurality characterising modern life and thought and has as its endpoint the rejection of all meta-narratives. Barth, on the other hand, begins with the extremely specific matter of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and develops what to postmodernists looks suspiciously like a meta-narrative. Whether it is in fact a 'meta-narrative' in the postmodernist sense I doubt. This is because, for postmodernism, a 'meta-narrative' is something which regards itself to be 'the whole truth'. Barth,

The Bible, Barth's theology and general interpretative issues are each extremely rich and complex things, and so the questions that could be asked of Barth's strategy of Bible interpretation are almost endless. Indeed, in addition to the questions I addressed in depth in the thesis and the criticisms I offered, there were a number of other questions and criticisms which I mentioned but into which it was impossible to go in any detail.⁴ Therefore, any conclusion can only be somewhat tentative. Nevertheless, for the reasons given above, I have reached the conclusion that his is a strategy which enables the Bible to have a central place in Christian theology and which at the same time comes to terms with (without surrendering to) the modern situation.

however, understands theology's search for truth to be eschatologically-conditioned (see Chapter 6). That is, theology will never have 'the whole truth' until the end of history. Whatever theology says now it says only provisionally. Therefore, although it attempts to provide as full a description of reality as it can, it knows that its description is not complete and is liable to be false in parts. In any case, whether or not what Barth offers is a 'meta-narrative', the difference between Barth and postmodernism is so great that to call him 'postmodern' is to misrepresent his position almost entirely.

⁴One question I would particularly like to have considered further is, What are the implications of Barth's acceptance of the fallibility of the biblical witnesses for the authority of the Bible in the church, particularly in view of his acceptance of substantial variety and contradiction in the Bible (see Chapters 6 and 7)?

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