
“Salvation Is of the Jews”

The Legacy and Limitations of Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Israel and the Church

Introduction

Karl Barth has been described as a “theological Everest,”¹ and any attempt at Christian theological reflection in the twenty-first century must reckon with his impact and influence. From beginning to end, the content of Barth’s theology is deeply informed by and connected to the historical circumstances in which he lived and wrote. In fact, Barth’s theology is only properly understood when it is placed in its historical context. Though Barth’s theology is organized systematically, what lies behind the system is the social and political context in which he lived.² For these reasons, Timothy

1. Colin Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message* (London: Tyndale, 1967), 9.

2. See Timothy Gorrige, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 292–301. Gorrige includes an appendix entitled “Barth’s Work in Context” in which he provides a helpful timeline that charts each year from the year Barth first published theology (1909) until his death (1968). For each year, he includes major historical events, cultural

Gorringe claims that “Barth must be read ‘prophetically’ rather than ‘systematically,’ as a theologian who is above all concerned with the way in which God’s Word shapes history, rather than in setting out an account of the divine essence.”³

Latent within Barth’s theology and constant throughout his entire career is his intense and active interest in and engagement with politics and social ethics. Barth was continually assessing the situation of his time and writing theology that was highly relevant to his social, political, and religious context; these elements determined the form and structure of his theology. Barth’s practice of exegeting his surroundings in order to express his theological ideas—constructing theology with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other—buttresses both the logic and the delivery of his theological system. For this reason Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt postulates that Barth’s methodology is his theological biography⁴

His development as a theologian was deeply connected with the historical setting that encircled him, and for the purposes of the present study, it is significant to note that Barth’s writing is informed

novelties, significant events in Barth’s life, Barth’s publications, and other significant publications.

3. Gorringe, *Karl Barth*, 8.

4. Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, *Theologie und Sozialismus: Das Beispiel Karl Barths*, 3rd ed. (Munich: Kaiser, 1985), 230. In reflecting on his own theological method, Barth explains:

As far as I can recall there was no stage in my theological career when I had more than the very next step forward in mind and planned for it. On each occasion this step developed from the steps which I had already taken, and followed from my view of what was possible and necessary in each changing situation . . . I used what I thought that I had learned and understood so far to cope with this or that situation, with some complex of biblical or historical or doctrinal questions, often with some subject presented to me from outside, often in fact by a topical subject, e. g. a political issue. It was always something new that got hold of me, rather than the other way around. . . . I hardly ever had anything like a programme to follow at all costs. My thinking, writing and speaking developed from reacting to people, events and circumstances with which I was involved, with their questions and their riddles.

(Cited in Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994], 418–21.)

by three of the four major historical factors I noted at the beginning of the last chapter.⁵

With regard to the specific focus of this study, Barth is among the most significant Christian pioneers of the new Jewish-Christian encounter, and both the context and the content of Barth's writings open new theological avenues for conceiving of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Barth's theology sets the course for a Christian understanding of salvation history, election, and Christian mission in which Israel figures prominently. In the words of Mark Lindsay, “While it would be disingenuous to suggest that Barth was a deliberate pioneer of interfaith theological dialogue in the same sense as people like Paul van Buren and Hans Küng, it would be equally incorrect to suggest that Barth was entirely ambivalent about the state of Jewish-Christian relations, or that he did not work hard to eliminate the anti-Jewish elements that had for so long contaminated the Church's teaching.”⁶ In a book entitled *Prospects for Post-Holocaust Theology*, Stephen Haynes claims that “it is not an exaggeration to say that Barth's understanding of Israel has had the kind of influence on Protestant theology that ‘*Nostra aetate*’ has had on Catholic thinking about Israel.”⁷

In my attempt to trace the theological origins of the new Jewish-Christian encounter, Barth's impact upon twentieth-century construals of Israel and the church positions his theology as our starting point. With Marshall's framing question in mind, my assessment of Barth focuses upon the extent to which he upholds both the universal, ecclesially-mediated saving mission of Christ as

5. These four major shifts are the demise of Christendom, the Holocaust, the creation of the modern state of Israel and the emergence of Messianic Judaism. See pp. 2–3 above.

6. Mark Lindsay, *Barth, Israel, and Jesus: Karl Barth's Theology of Israel* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 5.

7. Stephen Haynes, *Prospects for Post-Holocaust Theology* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 48.

well as the irrevocable election of Israel (which necessarily entails the ongoing practice of Judaism).⁸

My investigation of Barth's Christology, as well as his treatment of Israel as a people and Judaism as a religion, is undergirded by two specific loci of Barth's thought: election and ethics. For this reason, my explication of Barth's work will focus primarily on the *Church Dogmatics*—volume II/2 in particular.⁹ While my assessment of Barth will not be limited to his thoughts in this volume, it will serve as the foundation of the discussion as I seek to put Barth's theology in conversation with Marshall's question. In order to put this particular section of Barth's theology in context, the following is a brief review of the structure of the *Dogmatics*. In volume I, Barth lays the framework for his entire theological project by explicating the threefold form of the word of God and establishing the trinitarian grid that informs his theological program. Volume II is dedicated to Barth's doctrine of God, with the second half of this volume expounding the two overarching concepts that anchor this particular study: the "Election of God" (§32–§35) and the "Command of God" (§36–§39). Within these pages Barth offers his most thorough reflections on "Israel and the Church" and "Gospel and Law." In volumes III, IV, and what would have been V, Barth lays out the three primary movements of his theology: creation, reconciliation, and redemption. Building upon the theological groundwork of volumes I and II, the later sections of the *Dogmatics* reflect Barth's thought in its most thorough and developed form.

With regard to my particular doctrinal focus, the fact that Barth treats election and ethics in the same volume reveals one of the

8. For a fuller explanation of Marshall's criteria, see the introduction of this study (esp. pp. 4–16).

9. For a treatment of Barth's view of Israel from his earlier work, see Douglas Harink, "Barth's Apocalyptic Exegesis and the Question of Israel in *Römerbrief*, Chapters 9–11," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 5–18.

central thrusts of his entire theological system. As Barth lays out his doctrine of election, he characteristically begins with Jesus Christ, who is both the elect man and the electing God. For Barth, the election of the community of God (Israel and the church) and the election of the individual take place within the election of Christ. While, according to Barth, “the doctrine of election is the sum of the Gospel,”¹⁰ one cannot speak of the gospel without in the same breath speaking about the law. In electing human beings, God calls them to obedience and responsibility. In Barth’s words: “It is as He makes Himself responsible for man that God makes man, too, responsible. Ruling grace is commanding grace. . . . The one Word of God is both Gospel and Law.”¹¹ Just as God is made known in his acts, so too is humanity. Humans, therefore, cannot remain neutral in the face of God’s election, which claims them in their entirety. According to Barth, “The love of God in Jesus Christ intends and seeks and wills us in our totality.”¹²

Thus, for Barth, election and ethics are inseparable. God’s election of Jesus Christ is God’s primary self-disclosing act, and humanity’s inclusion in that election necessarily implies its accountability. Humanity’s election is actualized in its recognition of and obedience to the claim and command of God. As Barth puts it, “God actualises His covenant with man by giving him commands, and man experiences this actualisation by the acceptance of these commands.”¹³ Human beings—whether they recognize it or not—are elected in Jesus Christ to be covenant-partners with God and are therefore placed under the divine command.¹⁴ As we will see, this

10. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. T. F. Torrance and G. W. Bromiley, trans. G. W. Bromiley, 14 vols. (London: T&T Clark, 2004), II/2: 3.

11. *CD* II/2: 511.

12. *CD* II/2: 662.

13. *CD* II/2: 679.

14. *CD* II/2: 656.

tight connection between election and ethics significantly undergirds Barth's ecclesiological framework and thereby informs his contribution to providing an answer to Marshall's question. As we gain an increasingly clear understanding of these facets of Barth's thought throughout this chapter, explication will gradually give way to assessment and critique.

The Election of God in Barth's Theology

The Election of Jesus Christ

Barth posits that theology must begin with Jesus Christ,¹⁵ and his discussion of election is therefore christologically grounded. God's movement toward humanity in Christ creates an irrevocable partnership that is constitutive of God's very being. God's election of Christ is "the decree of God behind and above which there can be no earlier or higher decree and beside which there can be no other, since all others serve only the fulfillment of this decree."¹⁶ As Barth discusses in volume III of *Church Dogmatics*, all of creation provides the setting for the divine-human covenant relationship, which is grounded in the election of Christ. In Barth's words, "The purpose and therefore the meaning of creation is to make possible the history of God's covenant with man which has its beginning, its centre and its culmination in Jesus Christ."¹⁷

The election of Christ makes manifest God's decision to be

15. See *CD II/2*: 4.

16. *CD II/2*: 94. For Bruce McCormack's account of the Trinitarian implications of Barth's doctrine of election, see "Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 92–110. For an alternate assessment, see George Hunsinger, "Election and the Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth," *Modern Theology* 24, no. 2 (April 2008): 179–98. McCormack offers a direct response to Hunsinger's theses in "Election and the Trinity: Theses in Response to George Hunsinger," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63, no. 2 (March 2010): 203–24.

17. *CD III/1*: 42.

gracious toward humanity, and this grace of God forms the very heart of the gospel: “In the beginning, before time and space as we know them, before creation, before there was any reality distinct from God which could be the object of the love of God or the setting for His acts in freedom, God anticipated and determined within Himself . . . that the goal and meaning of all His dealings with the as yet non-existent universe should be the fact that in His Son He would be gracious towards man, uniting Himself with him.”¹⁸ As the “subject and object” of this determination, Christ is the election of God’s covenant with humanity.¹⁹

One of Barth’s theological innovations is to fuse a doctrine of predestination with Christology. For Barth, God’s act of predestination is self-referential. As the electing God, Christ is the “will of God in action” and the “Reconciler between God and man.”²⁰ As the elect man, Christ’s “election is the original and all-inclusive election,” which “has as its object and content . . . the salvation of all men.”²¹ Christ thus absorbs both the positive and negative aspects of a traditional doctrine of predestination. In Christ, God takes upon himself judgment and rejection and exalts humanity to covenant relationship with God. As Barth puts it, “Predestination means that from all eternity God has determined upon man’s acquittal at His own cost.” Thus, “predestination is the non-rejection of man . . . because it is the rejection of the Son of God.”²²

The Election of the Community

It is within the context of the election of Jesus Christ that Barth treats the election of humanity. Ultimately, the love of God in Jesus

18. *CD II/2*: 101.

19. *CD II/2*: 102.

20. *CD II/2*: 104–5.

21. *CD II/2*: 116.

22. *CD II/2*: 167.

Christ is aimed teleologically at “the election of the many (from whom none is excluded).”²³ However, the biblical narrative does not allow us to move directly from the election of Christ to the election of universal humanity or that of individual persons. Rather, according to Scripture, there is a “mediate and mediating” election of the community that forms the “natural and historical environment of Jesus Christ,” whose commission is to point beyond itself “to the fellowship of all men in face of which it is a witness and herald.”²⁴ Having been chosen to summon the whole world to faith in Christ, the elect community forms the “inner circle” around Jesus Christ. The election of the inner circle takes place within the election of Jesus Christ, and the outer circle’s awareness of its own election is “mediated, conditioned and bounded by the election of the community.”²⁵

The unity of the elect community is grounded in the unity of Christ, though it is likewise twofold in nature. As Christ is both the “son of Abraham and David, the Messiah of Israel” and the “Head and Lord of the Church,” so the elect community consists of Israel (“in the whole range of its history in past and future, *ante* and *post Christum natum*”) and the church (of Jews and Gentiles, “from its revelation at Pentecost to its fulfillment by the second coming of Christ”).²⁶ Furthermore, the twofold nature of the elect community reflects the judgment and exaltation of Christ’s own election. Just as Christ the crucified Messiah of Israel witnesses to the judgment that God takes upon himself, so Israel, “the people of the Jews which resists its divine election,” exhibits “the unwillingness, incapacity and unworthiness of man with respect to the love of God” and the “justice

23. *CD II/2*: 195.

24. *CD II/2*: 196.

25. *CD II/2*: 197.

26. *CD II/2*: 197–98.

of the divine judgment on man borne by God Himself.”²⁷ Israel thus represents the “passing form” of the community of God; they hear the promise of God but do not put faith in it.²⁸ Likewise, “as Jesus Christ the crucified Messiah of Israel shows Himself in his resurrection to be the Lord of the Church,” so the church as the “coming form” of the community (which emerges as the old form passes away) “can recognize and confess the divine mercy shown to man”; they not only hear the divine word but believe it.²⁹

The correspondences between Israel, the church, and the election of Christ extend yet further. Israel represents the elect man (who turns away from the electing God) while the church represents the electing God (who turns toward the elect man). As Christ’s election is the election to death and to life, so “Israel’s determination is the praise of the mercy of God in the passing, the death, the setting aside of the old man, of the man who resists his election and therefore God.”³⁰ Israel discloses that God takes upon himself “the frailty of the flesh, suffering, dying, death, in order to take it away from man, in order to clothe man instead with His glory.”³¹ Israel’s history of suffering reveals the depth of human need and therefore the depth of divine mercy that cannot be thwarted. Though Israel, through Christ, has already passed from death to life, it refuses to accept and actualize this reality. Israel persists in a “perverse” and “cheerless” service, existing as “the personification of a half-vulnerable, half-gruesome relic, of a miraculously preserved antique, of human whimsicality.”³² And yet, even (and especially) in this way Israel testifies to the mercy of God, who took on and accepted this flesh, snatching it from ruin.

27. *CD II/2*: 198.

28. *CD II/2*: 233–36.

29. *CD II/2*: 199.

30. *CD II/2*: 260.

31. *CD II/2*: 261.

32. *CD II/2*: 263.

The church, on the other hand, is “the perfect form of the one community of God,”³³ reflecting God’s mercy in turning to and electing humanity. It accomplishes this as it recognizes its unity and interrelationship with Israel. Even as the church “waits for the conversion of Israel,”³⁴ it confesses the unity of God’s mercy that embraces the one elect community. The church bears witness to the life that follows death, to freedom for the captives, and to glad tidings for the sick, distressed, and wayward. As the church recognizes its preexistence in Israel and its ongoing interrelationship with Israel, it welcomes “the positive confirmation of the election of all Israel,” and “it will be glad to have in its midst Christians from the Jews also.”³⁵

Despite the Jews’ resistance to their election and the church’s calling on the ground of its election, both Israel and the church are elect in Christ: “We cannot, therefore, call the Jews the ‘rejected’ and the Church the ‘elected’ community. The object of election is neither Israel for itself nor the Church for itself, but both together in their unity. . . . What is elected in Jesus Christ (His ‘body’) is the community which has the twofold form of Israel and the Church.”³⁶ Israel’s specific service within the elect community is to witness to the judgment from which God has rescued humanity and to reveal the fact that God elects fellowship with an obdurate people who have everything to receive from him.³⁷ To the extent that Israel refuses to “enter the Church” and become obedient to its election, it creates a schism in the midst of the community of God, acting as though “it had still another special determination and future beside and out with the Church.”³⁸ Israel’s obstinacy is displayed in its upholding “the

33. *CD II/2*: 264.

34. *CD II/2*: 213.

35. *CD II/2*: 267.

36. *CD II/2*: 199.

37. *CD II/2*: 206.

38. *CD II/2*: 208. See also *ibid.*, 262–63.

Synagogue . . . even though the conclusion of its history is confirmed by the fall of Jerusalem.”³⁹

However, even in its inaccurate hearing of God’s word and resistance to its election, Israel is a witness to God’s sovereign election in that God’s mercy overcomes humanity’s revolt. As God chooses humanity for communion with Godself, “He does this by electing flesh and blood from Judah-Israel to be His tabernacle and the Church of Jews and Gentiles to be His sanctuary, to declare to the world His gracious turning.”⁴⁰ Thus, Israel and the church—together in their unity and differentiation—are the “mediate and mediating object of the divine election.”⁴¹

Barth’s treatment of the election of the community is accompanied by a running exegesis of Romans 9–11.⁴² Even as Paul expects and waits for the conversion of the Jews, he insists that Israel has not been written out of the people of God. As Barth explains in regard to Rom. 10:2, even though Israel’s zeal stems from unbelief, “that [the members of the Synagogue] are the people of the true God and that the true God is their God is not effaced by their guilt. It cannot be effaced at all because it is based on God’s election.”⁴³ Commenting on the proscription against boasting in Rom. 11:17, Barth writes the following with regard to the people of Israel:

It is incontestable that this people as such is the holy people of God: the

39. *CD II/2*: 208. For Barth, the term “Synagogue” is used to designate post-biblical Judaism that does not yield to Christ. It is consistently portrayed in negative terms, offering a foil to the truly obedient community and life. The synagogue is a “Synagogue of death” that has “proved unserviceable in relation to what God willed,” persisting in “unbelief” and “resistance” (*ibid.*, 264, 280–81, 287).

40. *CD II/2*: 211.

41. *CD II/2*: 201.

42. While Barth’s exegesis is rich and thought-provoking, in the words of Geoffrey Bromiley, “The expositions of Romans 9–11, even admitting the difficult nature of the passage, are not always clear, are hard to follow in relation to the general theme, and do not in every case have the necessary cogency.” Geoffrey Bromiley, *Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 97.

43. *CD II/2*: 243.

people with whom God has dealt in His grace and in His wrath; in the midst of whom He has blessed and judged, enlightened and hardened, accepted and rejected; whose cause either way He has made his own, and has not ceased to make His own, and will not cease to make His own. They are all of them by nature sanctified by Him, sanctified as ancestors and kinsmen of the one Holy One in Israel, in a sense that Gentiles are not by nature, not even the best of Gentiles, not even the Gentile Christians, not even the best of Gentile Christians, in spite of their membership of the Church, in spite of the fact that they too are now sanctified by the Holy One of Israel and have become Israel. Each member of the people of Israel as such still continues to participate in the holiness which can be that of no other people, in the holiness of the natural root who because He is the Last and therefore also the First is called Jesus. This holiness the Gentile Christian has to respect in every Jew as such without exception.⁴⁴

With regard to the law, Barth explains that Israel's obedience to the law is grounded in its relationship to God: "The Law itself can be kept and fulfilled only in this relationship and apprehension, i.e., only in faith."⁴⁵ However, according to Barth's reading of Romans, this is precisely what Israel lacked. Specifically, Israel "did not want to rely on the promise, on the mercy of God, but on itself, on its own willing and running in the direction of the promised fulfillment. . . . Therefore, having all, it lacked all."⁴⁶

Israel's self-reliance is evidenced by its refusal to accept Jesus Christ, the one to whom the law points and through whom the law is fulfilled: "The Jew who now in his zeal for God has rejected and crucified Jesus Christ . . . remains all too faithful to his way of work-righteousness, of storming heaven and hell, and therefore of active unbelief."⁴⁷ According to Barth, to fulfill the righteousness required by the law is tantamount to confessing Jesus Christ as Lord.⁴⁸ The

44. *CD II/2*: 287.

45. *CD II/2*: 241.

46. *CD II/2*: 241.

47. *CD II/2*: 247.

“apostolic message of God’s mercy actualised in Jesus Christ does not speak of any new revelation. And again, the one old revelation of God in which Israel participates is as such the message which is proclaimed by the apostles.”⁴⁹ In other words, that the law is summed up by faith in Christ is not an addition to Israel’s understanding of the law. Therefore, the “Synagogue does not have to choose between the authority to which it knows and declares itself to be responsible and another newly arisen and not in any sense obligatory quantity. It has to choose between fulfillment and non-fulfillment in face of the authority recognised by itself. That it chooses non-fulfillment is its guilt—the guilt of unbelieving Israel.”⁵⁰ Again, as Barth explains concisely: “The demand addressed through the Law to the Jews had found its final point in the demand for confession. What God requires from Israel is that along with the Church, being merged in the Church, and thus by attesting itself as Israel and establishing its election, it should confess Jesus as Lord.”⁵¹

However, as Barth insists all along, Israel’s disobedience confirms rather than nullifies its election. The “concentration and consistency” of Paul’s use of Scripture is meant to demonstrate that “the meaning of [Israel’s] election is that in the very act of becoming guilty towards God it must genuinely magnify His faithfulness.”⁵²

The Election of the Individual

While the traditional Christian doctrine of predestination has always considered primary the private relationship between God and individual human beings,⁵³ Barth explains that this aspect of election

48. *CD II/2*: 247

49. *CD II/2*: 247.

50. *CD II/2*: 247.

51. *CD II/2*: 250.

52. *CD II/2*: 258–59.

53. *CD II/2*: 306.