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“Salvation is from the Jews”: Karl Barth’s Rejection of Liberal Protestantism’s Neo-Marcionism



Karl Barth is quite possibly the most important Christian theologian of the twentieth century. His impact can be observed across a broad spectrum of innovations such as his reimagining of John Calvin’s doctrine of election or his involvement in important ecumenical dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church. However, his most lasting intellectual achievement came through his rejuvenation of a Protestant orthodoxy that had been left fallow. His resuscitation of Protestant orthodoxy followed the nineteenth century, a century that had dramatically changed the nature of Protestant theology. Many scholars have written concerning Barth’s cultural context, his relationship with the Reformed tradition, and his Christology among other topics, but scholarship is rather lacking in regards to his treatment of the Hebrew Bible. It is my contention that Barth’s elevation of the Hebrew Bible and rejection of neo-Marcionism was his most essential contribution to Protestant theology. This change both rejuvenated the Bible in Protestantism and changed Protestant theological conceptions of Judaism and Jews.

Understanding Barth's theology requires familiarity with Friedrich Schleiermacher and Adolf von Harnack. These two theologians, who bookend the nineteenth century, were proponents of the theology Barth argued against. Schleiermacher is necessary to understanding Barth as theologians today still note the antagonism between the two.¹ Schleiermacher reevaluated the concept of religion. As a part of this process, he made sharp distinctions between Judaism and Christianity, suggesting they had completely different revelations.² As a result, the New Testament was his measure for dogmatic theology.³ Schleiermacher also pointed to a "scientific" method of dogmatic theology that rooted itself in grounds outside of scripture.⁴ However, he still viewed the New Testament as essential to his work, allowing space for the Bible in theology. This new use of the Christian Bible excluded the Hebrew Bible. Schleiermacher actually argued for removing the Hebrew Bible from the canon; this argument preserved itself through the century when Adolf von Harnack became the new standard bearer for liberal Protestant theology.⁵ Harnack firmly stood within a tradition commenced by Schleiermacher. Central to Harnack's approach to the Bible was the use of historical analysis to discover the important truth contained within the Gospels.⁶ This approach was a response to the Enlightenment's focus on scientific methodologies, which created a less theological, more historical hermeneutic to discover spiritual truths.⁷ This hermeneutic attempted to separate

¹ B.A. Gerrish, *Christian Faith: Dogmatics in Outline* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 6.

² Michael A. Meyer, "Judaism and Christianity," in *German-Jewish History in Modern Times: Volume 2 Emancipation and Acculturation 1780-1871*, edited by Michael A. Meyer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 171.

³ Gerrish, *Christian Faith*, 25.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Paul E. Capetz, "The Old Testament as a Witness to Jesus Christ: Historical Criticism and Theological Exegesis of the Bible according to Karl Barth," *The Journal of Religion* 90.4 (October 2010), 477.

⁶ W.H.C. Frend, "Church Historians of the Early Twentieth Century: Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930)," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 52.1 (January 2001), 96.

⁷ Stanley J. Grenz, "From Liberalism to Postliberalism: Theology in the Twentieth Century," *Review and Expositor* 96 (1999), 386.

“divine truth” from the cultural biases of the author. Historical study became the central tool of the theologian. However, the Hebrew Bible was seen as purely Jewish in character and irrelevant to Christian theology.⁸ Thus, Harnack further entrenched Schleiermacher’s conclusions, which asserted a vast difference between the two faiths.

This hostility to the Hebrew Bible is neo-Marcionism. Marcion was a second century Christian thinker who argued for a dualistic understanding of the Bible, in which Jesus revealed the supreme good God, while the Hebrew Scriptures revealed an evil, lesser God.⁹ Though Schleiermacher and Harnack never espoused dualism, they share Marcion’s aversion to the Hebrew Bible. Marcion rejected the canonical status of the Hebrew Bible.¹⁰ This exclusion was revitalized by Schleiermacher and Harnack. Interestingly, Harnack focused a lot of his historical research on Marcion.¹¹ Not only did Harnack study Marcion, but viewed him as a true follower of the Gospel of Jesus.¹² The influence of Marcion on a theologian so far after his time indicates the uneasiness of Christian theology with the Hebrew Bible. Though for centuries a balance had been struck, it was finally ruptured within liberal Protestantism during the nineteenth century.

This adoption of neo-Marcionism should not be separated from cultural developments in Germany. The Luther Bible became the organizing principle for German culture and nationalism during the nineteenth century.¹³ Furthermore, a more anthropological approach to theology widened the gap between theology and the Bible.¹⁴ Gerrish describes Schleiermacher’s idea of religions as a “universal phenomenon of human consciousness” with Christianity being a more

⁸ Capetz, “The Old Testament,” 477.

⁹ Paul Foster, “Marcion: His Life, Works, Beliefs, and Impact,” *The Expository Times* 121.6, 277.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 273.

¹¹ Frend, “Church Historians,” 85.

¹² *Ibid.*, 89.

¹³ Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible*, 240.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 229.

particular feeling of dependence upon Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁵ Schleiermacher's anthropological theology also encouraged intertwining religion and culture within the German imagination.¹⁶ Harnack inherited this tradition of a cultural religion, which shaped his support of the First World War. During the war, Harnack maintained a loyal, nearly uncritical, allegiance to the German state.¹⁷ He also helped draft the Kaiser's proclamation of Germany's entrance into the conflict.¹⁸ It was this support that drove Karl Barth, once a disciple of Harnack, away from the liberal Protestant school of thought commencing a new age of theological thought.¹⁹

What resulted was Barth's complete rejection of the Enlightenment-informed approach to scripture. Barth saw intellectual production, even historical methodologies, as suspect due to humanity's sinful nature.²⁰ He viewed the historical method of exegesis as insufficient, claiming that the underlying questions of historical study are often left unresolved.²¹ Instead, Barth offered a vision of God that was "utterly unapproachable except by means of divine self-revelation."²² This emphasis on God's self-revelation does not necessarily re-elevate the Bible. If one's theological starting point is that the only way to know God is through divine self-revelation, then that revelation can take any number of forms. Barth's definition of the word of God does appear to exclude the Bible. In *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* he writes, "the Word of God is the Word that God spoke, speaks, and will speak in the midst of all men."²³ This definition also

¹⁵ Gerrish, *Christian Faith*, 7.

¹⁶ Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible*, 231.

¹⁷ Frend, "Church Historians," 99.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁹ Eberhard Busch, *Barth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 3.

²⁰ Frend, "Church Historians," 100.

²¹ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 35.

²² Grenz, "From Liberalism to Postliberalism," 387.

²³ Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963), 18.

suggests a serious point of departure from a closed canon (on this point, Barth refers back to the Reformers who cut the Apocrypha and held other books of the Bible suspect).²⁴

Barth's distinction between the word of God and the Bible still appears to separate the Bible from theological inquiry. His solution, to put it simply, is to view the Bible as a report of God's revelation.²⁵ This would easily connect the Bible to the first part of Barth's definition of the word of God, "the Word that God spoke."²⁶ A close reading of his theology suggests the Bible's importance to his definition of the word of God. Not only is the Bible the record of God's revelation, but "the promise of future divine revelation, which can make her proclamation a duty upon the Church."²⁷ The Bible is not purely historical, thus motivating its present hearers to proclaim it. Though Barth's understanding of the word of God might be of God's revelation beyond the written word, the Bible is essential in communicating God's word throughout time. Barth has been able to circumvent the Enlightenment's challenge by viewing the Bible as a sign of a greater revelation, not the revelation itself. This reintroduced theological exegesis after a century of theologians mainly focused on historical criticism of the text.

Though his approach was different, Barth's treatment of the Hebrew Bible is most indicative of his departure from nineteenth century theology. In many ways Barth, Schleiermacher, and Harnack shared an appreciation for the New Testament. However, Barth was far removed from Harnack's and Schleiermacher's positions on the Hebrew Bible. One need only look into his discussions of the word of God to find them littered with references to the Hebrew Bible.²⁸ Moreover, it is not just references to the Hebrew Bible that Barth found useful.

²⁴ Capetz, "The Old Testament," 485.

²⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Volume I: The Doctrine of the Word of God Part 1* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1960), 129.

²⁶ Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 18.

²⁷ Barth, *CD I:1*, 120.

²⁸ Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 28-30. A prominent example of this.

A thorough analysis of his theology finds that the Hebrew Bible is a thematic element in his thought regarding divine revelation. Barth asserts, “the Old Testament like the New Testament is the witness to revelation.”²⁹ Unlike his predecessors, Barth rejects national elements of theology through his interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. The covenant with Israel is not God’s acceptance of a national religion, but rather God’s election of certain people.³⁰ In other words, God is not subject to the consciousness of the Israelites, but the Israelites become subject to God’s covenant. Central to Barth’s understanding of the word of God is the divine self-revelation to humanity, and Barth claims the Hebrew Bible as an equal part in revelation as the New Testament.³¹ This produced a significantly less anthropological theology.



²⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Volume I: The Doctrine of the Word of God Part 2* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1963), 80.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

³¹ Capetz, “The Old Testament,” 482.

This brings us to the issue of how Karl Barth theologically unified the Hebrew Bible and New Testament while regarding them equally within the canon. One mechanism Barth uses is a Christocentric hermeneutic. Paul E. Capetz, a professor of historical theology, who has devoted an article to Barth's Hebrew Bible hermeneutic in comparison with Harnack and Schleiermacher, asserts that Barth views the Old Testament through the lens of Jesus of Nazareth.³² Jesus Christ became the center of both testaments, which means to reject one is to reject God's revelation through Christ.³³ Barth's Christocentric approach should not be viewed as rejecting the Jewish character of the Hebrew Bible. Barth not only recognized the Jewish character of the Hebrew Bible, but also the Jewish character of the New Testament.³⁴ However, the implication of Barth's Christocentric hermeneutic is to reject the New Testament is to reject God's revelation. Barth says as much and maybe goes a bit further, suggesting that there is a contest over who reads the "real Old Testament."³⁵

This interpretation obviously creates its own host of problems.³⁶ However, it is important to note Barth interprets the Hebrew Bible as an account of God's covenant with Israel. Barth actually makes an explicit distinction between the Hebrew Bible's witness and God's revelation in Jesus stating, "this covenant attested in the Old Testament is God's revelation, because it is expectation of the revelation of Jesus Christ."³⁷ The expectation distinguishes between God's revelation in the Torah from God's revelation in Jesus. This distinction is important as Barth views the covenant espoused in the Hebrew Bible as building towards Jesus, but not done at the

³² Ibid., 481-482.

³³ Ibid., 485.

³⁴ Barth, *CD I:2*, 510.

³⁵ Ibid., 93.

³⁶ Capetz, "The Old Testament," 493. Capetz offers a more in depth critique of Barth's hermeneutic, arguing that a Christocentric approach invalidates Jewish readings of the Hebrew Bible rather than neglecting the Hebrew Bible altogether (as in the case of Schleiermacher and Harnack).

³⁷ Barth, *CD I:2*, 81.

expense of the previous revelation in the Torah. Though revelation is foundational in Barth's theology, revelation derives its importance for humanity through covenant. The covenantal unity of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, in Barth's mind, is as significant as the concept of revelation. In Jeremiah 31:31 it reads, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah (NRSV)." Barth's reading of this text does not suggest the replacement of the old covenant, but that the new covenant merely causes a change in its "economy."³⁸ Barth insists that the formula in Jeremiah 31:33, "I will be their God, and they shall be my people (NRSV)" is the substance of all the covenants recounted in the Hebrew Bible.³⁹ God does not break his covenant with Israel, but reworks it so that it is extended to all of humanity and unbreakable.⁴⁰ The economy of the covenant should not be seen as determining the scope of the covenant, but the means through which God overcomes the failures of those in covenant with God. For Barth, this includes both Jews and Christians. Barth asserts that God has chosen and formed the people of Israel.⁴¹ Busch observes in Barth that through the expansion of this covenant "the church, which has been called from among the Gentiles, can and must marvel that she too has been called."⁴² Furthermore, Barth sees this idea of covenant as central to the Gospel.⁴³ While revelation is clearly important to Barth's theology, it is only important insofar as it communicates God's covenant.

Both Christianity and Judaism make starkly different claims about the meanings of the Hebrew Bible and tensions arise around these disagreements. This disagreement is simply with regards to the Messiah. The disagreement over whether Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah or not is

³⁸ Busch, *Barth*, 39-40.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴¹ Barth, *CD I:2*, 81.

⁴² Busch, *Barth*, 42.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

central to the differing interpretations of the Hebrew Bible. This is the point of Barth's divergence with Judaism and should not be considered unique to Barth as it is a point of divergence from Judaism for all Christians. However, it does allow us to reappraise Barth's comments regarding Jewish interpretations of the Hebrew Bible.

This Christian anticipation of the completion of God's plan betrays another mechanism Barth utilizes for connecting the Hebrew Bible to Christianity. Barth connects the Bible to the preaching of the church claiming that the Bible functions as a "Church document, proclamation in writing."⁴⁴ The current preaching of the church is then seen as an extension of the proclamation of the Bible, therefore; the proclamation is not just an extension of the apostles, but also Jeremiah.⁴⁵ This mechanism further reclaims the Hebrew Bible for Protestant Christianity while rejecting neo-Marcionism. In many respects, it strengthens the bond between Judaism and Christianity through a shared anticipation. This shared anticipation is cemented by Barth's comparison of the Christian theologian's task to the work of the prophets and figures of the Hebrew Bible. In *The Word of God and the Word of Man* he makes this comparison fairly explicitly by stating, "We are with Moses in the wilderness."⁴⁶ He then proceeds, before advancing his argument or addressing any New Testament texts, to recount the call stories of Moses, Gideon, Samuel, and Elijah.⁴⁷ Clearly, Barth sees a connection between the Church and its theologians to the experience of the ancient Israelites. However, this is not to suggest that Barth saw Jewish interpretations on equal footing with Christian ones. As discussed above, he saw the Jewish approach to the covenant's economy as empty without the inclusion of Jesus. Nothing exhibits Barth's paradoxical approach to Jewish interpretations as his insistence that

⁴⁴ Barth, *CD I:1*, 114.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Barth, *The Word of God*, 28.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 28-30.

Christian theology stood to benefit from Jewish thought in their “pure” knowledge of the text and their “unconverted” status.⁴⁸

Barth’s mechanisms for connecting the Hebrew Bible and New Testament reopens painful debates between Christians and Jews. Barth’s contribution to this debate must be viewed contextually. The nineteenth century saw many Jews attempt to become culturally German while maintaining their Jewish identity.⁴⁹ These attempts faced significant challenges, particularly when theologians were involved. Schleiermacher viewed Christianity and Judaism as two disconnected religions—more importantly two disconnected revelations—and removed any common ground between the two.⁵⁰ It should also be noted that Schleiermacher felt that Christianity was a “higher form of monotheism.”⁵¹ German intellectuals often viewed religion and culture as inextricably linked, and Schleiermacher was an inspiration for determining the Christian nature of German culture.⁵² As Jews attempted to bridge a devastating gap between them and Christians, Christian theologians pulled away. Barth’s theology should be seen as a response to this tradition, and the subsequent racial anti-Semitism of early twentieth century Europe. Barth observed the rise of racial anti-Semitism being connected to an idea of “Jewish blood.”⁵³ However, he viewed this problem in theological terms. Barth asserts that, for the non-Jew, the Jew represents both God’s judgment and mercy, as a result this paradox drives the non-Jew to alienate the Jew through a “biological and moral alienation, working out his perverted

⁴⁸ Barth, *CD I:2*, 80.

⁴⁹ Michael A. Meyer, “Becoming German, Remaining Jewish,” in *German-Jewish History in Modern Times: Volume 2 Emancipation and Acculturation 1780-1871*, edited by Michael A. Meyer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 199.

⁵⁰ Meyer, “Judaism and Christianity,” 171.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible*, 231.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

hostility.”⁵⁴ Barth responds claiming the Jewish nature of the Bible requires the Christian to “openly accept the language and thought and history of the Jews.”⁵⁵ This leads to his conclusion that the Bible is a “product of...the Jewish spirit.”⁵⁶ The theological consequence is Christians must “become Jews.”⁵⁷ These conclusions represent a significant shift for his time.

We should not overestimate Barth’s contribution to Jewish-Christians relations. Others, particularly Reinhold Niebuhr, were more formidable contributors to Jewish-Christian dialogue.⁵⁸ However, Barth’s continuing influence warrants closer inspection of his use of the Hebrew Bible. Through Barth’s insistence on the significance of the Hebrew Bible, it experienced a revival in Protestant theology, thus repudiating a century of theology that marginalized and rejected Judaism. Barth recognized the shared scriptures and attempted to reconcile the two faiths. His rejection of neo-Marcionism and its implications for Jewish-Christian dialogue is a relatively unexplored aspect of his work. This lacuna regarding Barth’s approach to the Hebrew Bible might be an indicator of a latent neo-Marcionism within current Protestant theology. The study of Christian approaches to the Hebrew Bible has implications for continuing Jewish-Christian dialogue and should not be neglected. The life and work of Karl Barth might offer insight into how Christians can engage the Hebrew Bible, while recognizing it as a shared text with Judaism.

⁵⁴ Barth, *CD I:2*, 511.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Barth, *CD I:2*, 510.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ David Novak, “Karl Barth on Divine Command: A Jewish Response,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54.4 (November 2001), 463.

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