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Go Figure!

Figuration in Biblical Interpretation

Edited by

STANLEY D. WALTERS

GO FIGURE!

Figuration in Biblical Interpretation

Princeton Theological Monograph Series 81

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Karl Barth on the *Imago Dei* *Typology and the Sensus Literalis of Holy Scripture*

Craig A. Carter

IN THIS ESSAY, I WANT TO DO TWO THINGS. FIRST, I WANT TO SHOW THAT Barth understood the *sensus literalis* (the literal or plain sense) of Scripture as including the figurative or typological sense, not as a different meaning but as itself part of the literal meaning of the text and, second, I want to discuss the implications of Barth's approach to theological exegesis for contemporary theology. In order to accomplish these two goals, I first will sketch some of Barth's key hermeneutical convictions and then briefly describe his interpretation of the *imago dei* in Genesis 1–2. In doing so I hope to contribute to the debate over the validity of Barth's definition of the image in terms of the fact that God created humanity as male and female. If I have anything original to contribute to this debate, it is my contention that it is the typological interpretation of the human creature in terms of Israel and Jesus, which is developed in Barth's comments on Genesis 2 that is decisive for Barth's interpretation of Genesis 1:26–27. Then, I will offer some reflections on how Barth's approach to theological exegesis offers a way forward that avoids the twin dead ends of liberal and conservative versions of historicism. My view is that Barth's theological exegesis is a like a long, gentle rain on the dry, barren land of historical-critical exegesis and self-referential preaching in the modern Church. In Barth's theological exegesis we can discover, if we take the time to look carefully, a way of handling Scripture that could lead to a revival of preaching in which the life-giving Word of God can be heard by the church, that is preaching in which God speaks and acts to bless His people.

Barth's Theological Interpretation of Scripture

Part of the reason Barth seemed so out of step with both his liberal and conservative contemporaries on the issue of biblical interpretation, both in his early commentary on Romans and also in his *Church Dogmatics*, is that he worked in a different context than they did. He worked in the context of the historical tradition of scriptural interpretation in the Christian Church, not just in the modern context of university-based historical-critical scholarship. Although he was highly skilled in the scholarly study of the Bible, his real interest was in utilizing historical-critical studies in the service of theological exegesis for the sake of the Church and preaching. So, for Barth, the practice of historical-critical studies could never be an end in itself. His treatment of the meaning of the image of God in Genesis 1–2 is both scholarly and theologically insightful. He devotes nearly three hundred pages to a close reading of these two foundational chapters of Scripture.¹ While he interacts continuously with historical critics like Herrman Gunkel and Walther Zimmerli, he also considers the views of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin at every point. For Barth, modern historical-critical studies have not rendered the opinions of the church fathers and the reformers out of date. He found in their writings more of a serious concern for the true subject matter of the text than he found in the writings of the modern historicists. In fact, Barth's quarrel with nineteenth-century, liberal, Protestant higher criticism can be viewed as a disagreement about what the true subject matter of the text is and what effect the subject matter of the text ought to have on the interpretation of the Scriptures.

For Barth, the Bible is about God. Its subject matter is the true and living God who speaks and acts, not a projection of the human imagination or a reconstruction of human scientific investigation. This is what separates Barth from the liberal Protestant tradition and also, strange as it may seem, from the tradition of scholastic orthodoxy as well. Liberalism viewed the Bible as a record of human experiences of the Divine, while orthodoxy viewed it as an inerrant record of historical events. Although Barth readily agrees with liberalism that the Bible is a human book and should be studied using all available methods of historical-critical research,

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/1: The Doctrine of Creation*, edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, translated by J. W. Edwards, O. Bussey and H. Knight (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958) 42–329.

he refuses to see the Bible as *merely* a human book precisely because of that to which it points. For Barth, this is a human book unlike all other books because in it we hear a true witness to God's self-revelation culminating in Jesus Christ. And, although Barth readily agrees with orthodoxy that the Bible conveys the history of revelation, he denies that scientific history, apart from faith, is capable of discerning that to which the texts point. Scholastic orthodoxy constantly veers close to the edge of saying that what the text refers to is accessible to unaided human, scientific reason. To say this is to reduce the Divine to an aspect of the natural world that is open to scientific investigation and human control and to refuse to allow God to be transcendent and free. The undeniably noble intent is to deny a Gnostic division between God and the created order and to affirm that God can act and speak in history. Unfortunately, however, the effect is to overwhelm transcendence with immanence and to make human rational capacity to demonstrate truth the criteria for the reality or unreality of God's action in history. Despite its intention to preserve the transcendence and freedom of God, conservative historicism ends up encasing God within human experience in such a way that, just as in the liberal account of knowing God through human experience, God is reduced to, and encompassed within, the limits of the human, that is, within creaturely limitations.

For Barth, the text conveys not only the historical effects of God's action, but witnesses to God himself because God's being is in His act. The text itself is Barth's focus, as opposed to a reconstruction of what supposedly happened behind the text, to which the text allegedly refers, or the experience of the biblical author. Why? It is because, for Barth, the human speech of the prophets and apostles functions as a witness to Divine self-revelation. Like Calvin, Barth relies on the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit to give us assurance that the Word of God is true and views God the Holy Spirit as working through the text. As he says:

. . . if it is really the case that a reader of the biblical Scriptures is quite helpless in face of the problem of what these Scriptures say and intend and denote in respect of divine revelation, that he sees only an empty spot at the place to which the biblical writers point, then in a singular way this does set in relief the extraordinary nature of the content of what these writings say on the one hand, and on the other the state and status of the reader. But all that it actually proves is that there can be no question of a legitimate understanding of the Bible by this reader, that for the time being, i.e.,

until his relation to what is said in the Bible changes, this reader cannot be regarded as a serious reader and exegete. There can be no question of his exegesis being equally justified with one which is based upon the real substance of the Bible, divine revelation.²

Barth rejects natural theology, both in the form of human experience of God and also in the form of scientific history, as an adequate prism through which to filter revelation. The only way to know God is through theological exegesis of the Bible because the only way to know God is to know Him in His own self-revelation, His own being. For this reason, theology is only truly scientific when it seeks to hear the Word of God (which is the being of God in God's self-revelation) through exegesis of the text. Humility, attentiveness and patience are called for in engaging the Word of God because our only hope of encountering the sovereign God is divine grace. Revelation is always grace for Barth and the interpretation of the Bible is as much a spiritual, as an intellectual endeavor. This is why, for Barth, prayer is essential to correct interpretation.

Barth presented his *Church Dogmatics* as a summary of the biblical witness to revelation and attempted to do biblical, rather than systematic theology.³ As Richard Burnet notes, "Anyone who has read Barth for very long knows that his entire theological enterprise stands or falls on the basis of exegesis."⁴ Over and over again in Barth's writings we are urged to keep close to Scripture and he constantly expresses his displeasure with those who, in their haste to explain what the text must or cannot mean, are

2. Barth, *Church Dogmatics, II/1: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 2d ed., edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975) 469.

3. Barth contrasts his approach to theology with "systematic theology" in the Foreword to the Torchbook Edition of Karl Barth, *Dogmatic in Outline* translated by G. T. Thomas (New York: Harper & Row, 1959). The original lectures in this book were given in the ruins of the University of Bonn in the summer of 1946. Barth defines systematic theology as "an edifice of thought, constructed on certain fundamental conceptions which are selected in accordance with a certain philosophy by a method which corresponds to these conceptions" (5). He says that theology cannot be done under the pressure of such a confinement and must be free to be directed by the witness of the Old and New Testaments. The reader should be careful not to read too much into my use of the term "biblical theology" at this point. I simply mean to draw the same contrast Barth does. It should be noted that not only is Barth not a systematic theologian in this sense, but many writers normally classified as systematic theologians, such as John Calvin, are not actually systematic theologians in this sense of the term either.

4. Richard Brunet, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 10.

unwilling simply to let Scripture have its say. Barth viewed the modern, historical critics as being too hasty with Scripture, too ready to impose modern assumptions on the text, too eager to bring their own questions to the text and not humble enough to sit quietly before the text until it disclosed its own concerns. He tried not to impose a system upon Scripture and then seek prooftexts for what is known in advance to be the case. Instead, he sought to develop a theology that organically arises out of the witness of the Bible and that reflects the shape, limits and preoccupations of the biblical witness, rather than the demands of logic or the prejudices of the culture.

Barth's exegesis has a dynamic quality, as well as a static center. There are two forces at work: one pulling Barth upward toward more daring readings of the text and another pulling him downward to more verbal and modest readings. Let me try to clarify where these two forces originate.⁵ Barth refused to let the original intention of the original author in the original situation be the absolute limit of what the text is allowed to mean, which is to say that he rejected the imperial demand of historicism. He viewed the canonical context as the final, authoritative context in which the text must be interpreted. He also viewed Jesus Christ as the central theme and content of both Testaments. He allowed each Testament to bear its own witness and felt no need to race from the Old to the New Testament in order to make the exegesis "Christian" because he believed that Jesus Christ is as much the theme and message of the prophets of the Old Testament as he is the theme and message of the apostles of the New Testament. Barth's exegesis is thus dynamic and daring in its willingness to see Jesus Christ in the Old Testament. This is where historicism is inadequate because a text embedded in the Old Testament may now have meaning that goes far beyond what the original author could have envisioned or intended in the original situation.

However, Barth remains utterly committed to a literal reading of the text and rejects the reading into the Bible of foreign ideas, philosophical systems and so on. This commitment to a literal reading exerts a restraining force on his exegesis that balances the dynamic pull of Christological interpretation. But the literal sense cannot be reduced simply to the histor-

5. I want to acknowledge the work of Kathryn Greene-McCreight in her wonderful book, *Ad Litteram: How Augustine, Calvin and Barth Read the "Plain Sense" of Genesis 1-3*, Issues in Systematic Theology 5 (New York: Lang, 1999), as having been extremely helpful at this point and in general for this paper.

ical sense for Barth is convinced that Old Testament speaks *literally* about Jesus Christ. We are not free to read in anything we wish; but we are not historicists either. These are the two extremes Barth is concerned to avoid. The interpretation of the two-testament witness of the Holy Scriptures to Jesus the Christ, is guided by the Rule of Faith.

Faithful teachers throughout the history of the Church have interpreted the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments in accordance with the Rule of Faith. Brevard Childs, in his magisterial summary of the history of exegesis, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture*,⁶ has shown that the standard textbook polarity between the supposedly sober, literal approach of the Antiochenes versus the alleged allegorical excesses of the Alexandrians is vastly overstated. In actuality, both schools employed figurative methods of exegesis because both were committed to reading the Old Testament as Christian scripture. Childs also shows that the standard, textbook portrayal of Calvin as a precursor of the historical-critical method is overly simplistic. For Childs, as for Barth, the historicism of the Enlightenment, when it is permitted to elide the spiritual meaning of the text, represents a major break with historic Christian orthodoxy and, therefore, is utterly incompatible with the apostolic tradition. Attempts by liberals to reformulate theology as talk about human experience of the Divine and attempts by both liberals and conservatives to refocus theology on the historical events referred to by the text were strategies developed in response to the Enlightenment, which ultimately fail because they do not challenge its historicist presuppositions. The portrayal of the literalism of the Antiochenes and Calvin was an attempt to enlist them as early examples of historicism by first reducing the definition of the literal to the historical and nothing but the historical and then emphasizing their stress on the literal sense as defined in this way. The difference between pre-modern interpreters and Enlightenment interpreters is that most moderns hold that the literal is nothing more than the historical. This crucial assumption was not held by pre-modern interpreters. In modernity, any attempts to do figurative or spiritual exegesis are left to the department of homiletics and biblical scholars piously avert their eyes at such "homiletical embellishments." Thus, the theological interpretation of Scripture is disconnected from historical exegesis and a wedge is driven between the scholarly study of the Bible and the ecclesial proclamation of Scripture to the detriment

6. Brevard S. Childs, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

of both. Is it any wonder that preaching and theology are both in such disarray today? Is this disconnect between church proclamation and serious study of the Bible not related to what R. R. Reno refers to evocatively as the Western Church lying “in ruins”?⁷ I believe that the recovery of the meaning of the literal sense of Scripture as the two-testament witness to Jesus Christ, interpreted according to the Rule of Faith, is absolutely crucial to the survival of the Church. And this is one reason why Barth’s theology is so important to us today.

We ought to be grateful to Barth and Childs for clarifying for us the difference between a set of historicist philosophical presuppositions, on the one hand, and a concern for the literal meaning of the text, on the other. Equipped with this fundamental and crucial distinction, we are able to see that Barth was completely consistent to reject historicism, while claiming to recognize the authority of the *sensus literalis* of the text and the priority of exegesis in doing theology, all the while reading the Old Testament figuratively as a witness to Jesus Christ. In the next section of this paper, I want to describe an example of Barth’s exegesis, so that we can see concretely how it works.

Barth’s Interpretation of the *Imago Dei* in Its Canonical Context

Barth develops his famous thesis, “creation is the external basis of the covenant; covenant is the internal meaning of creation” from a detailed exegesis of Genesis 1–2. In the first creation narrative (the P account in Genesis 1), he finds support for the thesis that creation is the external basis of the covenant.⁸ In the second creation narrative (the J account in Genesis 2), he finds support for the thesis that covenant is the internal meaning of creation.⁹ In the first creation narrative, we see creation as a grand epic sweep of divine creative power bringing into being everything in the cosmos, but culminating in the creation of humanity on the sixth day. The cosmos is created as a home for the human creature. In the second creation narrative, we have a focus on the Garden of Eden as the special environment created for the human creature and an unpacking of the meaning of

7. This is Russell R. Reno’s term; see *In the Ruins of the Church: Sustaining Faith in an Age of Diminished Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002).

8. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/1*, 94–227.

9. *Ibid.*, 228–329.

humanity being created out of the dust of the earth. Whereas the climax of the first narrative is the creation of humanity as male and female as rulers of the creation in God's name and by His appointment, the climax of the second narrative is the creation of humanity as male and female. The first narrative thus prepares the scene for the unfolding of God's covenant of grace; the second recounts the beginning of the unfolding of the covenant of grace.

In his exegesis of Genesis 1:26 "Let us make man," Barth notes that we have here a pregnant pause, a "divine soliloquy, a consultation"¹⁰ before God acts. He rejects the common interpretation of the plural reference here as being to a heavenly council and notes that the natural sense of the text is not that God consulted someone else or some others, who then faded into the background as God alone performed His creative work. Rather, it seems that whoever the "us" is participates in the creative act jointly. Barth thinks that the author of the saga has felt it necessary to emphasize at this crucial moment that God is not lonely and creating the human creature as an antidote to his loneliness. Wishing to stay with the literal meaning of the text he cautiously states:

He is One, but He is not for that reason one thing. But this being the case, He can become the Creator and therefore have a counterpart outside Himself without any contradiction with His own inner essence, but in confirmation and glorification of His own essence.¹¹

Barth does not read in the whole doctrine of the Trinity as developed in the Fourth century, but he interprets what the text says as implying diversity within the Divine nature (a counterpart outside Himself but not in "contradiction with His own inner essence") that is consistent with the dogma of the Trinity. Barth interprets the words "in our likeness" to mean that God is creating a being whose nature is decisively characterized by the fact that "although it is created by God it is not a new nature to the extent that it has a pattern in the nature of God Himself."¹² Barth sees the human creature as a "genuine counterpart" and "copy" of the divine nature and he views the plurality in the divine nature hinted at here as pictured in the two sexes of the human creature. Here we must pause for a moment

10. *Ibid.*, 182.

11. *Ibid.*, 183.

12. *Ibid.*, 183–84.

and consider objections to Barth's interpretation of the image. Most Old Testament scholars prefer the functional interpretation of the image in which the dominion given to the human pair in vv. 28–30 is taken as the definition of the image, rather than the sexual differentiation of the man and woman.¹³ It is often argued that sexual differentiation does not distinguish humans from the animals, whereas dominion does. But Barth counters that we must see the image as that in the human creature which makes the human creature a genuine counterpart to God, that is, as that which enables the human creature to stand in an "I–Thou" relationship to God. As he puts it: "Neither heaven nor earth, water nor land, nor living creatures from plants upward to land animals, are a "Thou" whom God can confront as an "I," nor do they stand in an "I–Thou" relationship to one another, nor can they enter into such a relationship."¹⁴ The point here is not simply that humans exist in two genders, but that each human, by virtue of being created for relationship (as demonstrated by the way the man and woman find companionship and partnership with one another in an "I–Thou" relationship) is a fitting counterpart for God and can enter into a personal relationship with God. What we are as male and female is what makes us personal and capable of relationships with one another and with God.

Humans are not created in the image of a Unitarian God as independent and self-sufficient single entities. In this sense, the human creature is created in the image of the Triune God. But Barth says in anticipation of his later exegesis of Genesis 2: "The fact that he was created and exists as male and female will also prove to be not only a copy and imitation of his Creator as such, but at the same time a type of the history of the covenant and salvation which will take place between him and His Creator."¹⁵ So we need to turn to Barth's interpretation of the second creation narrative, which presents the creation of the human creature as the creation of the covenant partner of God. There is a dialectical relationship between Barth's exegesis of Genesis 1 and 2, which attempts to do justice to their canonical juxtaposition to one another.

13. See Nathan MacDonald, "The *Imago Dei* and Election: Reading Gen. 1:26–28 and Old Testament Scholarship With Karl Barth" (forthcoming in *The International Journal of Systematic Theology*). I wish to thank Dr. MacDonald for permission to quote from this fine article prior to its publication.

14. Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/1*, 184.

15. *Ibid.*, 186–87.

In a programmatic statement at the beginning of his interpretation of the second creation narrative, Barth says:

The main interest now is not how creation promises, proclaims and prophesies the covenant, but how it prefigures and to that extent anticipates it without being identical with it; not how creation prepares the covenant, but how in doing so it is itself already a unique sign of the covenant and a true sacrament; not Jesus Christ as he is the goal, but Jesus Christ as the beginning . . . of creation.¹⁶

Barth notes the significance of the use of the two-fold name “*Yahweh Elohim*” in Genesis 2, which is not used in Genesis 1, and calls it a key to the “peculiar orientation” of this saga. He comments:

The second creation saga embraces both the history of creation and that of the covenant, both the establishment of the law of God and the revelation of His mercy, both the foundation of the world and that of Israel, both man as such and man elected and called. This is the theological explanation of its peculiarity.¹⁷

Now, heeding the constraints of time and space, we press on to a consideration of Barth’s comments on the creation of humanity as male and female in verses 2:18–25. We begin by noting Barth’s contention that the “account of the creation of man as male and female now forms the climax of the whole.”¹⁸ The fact that Adam was created to cultivate the earth, that God formed him from the earth, that God planted and prepared the Garden with the two trees (2:4–17)—all this leads up to the creation of the human creature “in the basic form of all association and fellowship which is the essence of humanity.”¹⁹ We are asked to notice the thoughtful pause in v. 18 “It is not good for man to be alone, I will make a helpmeet suitable for him,” which reminds us of the earlier pause at Genesis 1:26. The account that follows gives us an insider’s glimpse into the inner meaning of creation itself.

For Barth, the key to understanding these verses is the cry of Adam when God brings the woman to him: “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh” (v. 23). Here Adam does not so much make a choice to

16. *Ibid.*, 232.

17. *Ibid.*, 240.

18. *Ibid.*, 288.

19. *Ibid.*

accept the woman as his partner as to recognize the reality, which confronts him. The account of the creation of the animals and God bringing them to Adam (vv. 19–20) may seem to interrupt the flow of the narrative, but actually it is mentioned to highlight the uniqueness of the partner created for the man. It was not, Barth comments, “a divine experiment which failed,” as if God had hoped Adam would be content with a nice tiger or dog or whatever as his companion. No, the point was that Adam be enabled to “recognize, choose, and confirm the helpmeet ordained and created for him.”²⁰ The author of the saga has not put the woman on the level of the animals by introducing her in this way, but exactly the opposite.

That Adam was caused to fall into a deep sleep, receive a mortal wound, be immediately healed and then be woken up means that he did not participate in the completion of his own creation. Barth elaborates:

The completion of all creation described here, i.e., the completion of man by the creation of woman, is not only one secret but *the* secret, the heart of all the secrets of God the Creator. The whole inner basis of creation, God’s whole covenant with man, which will later be established, realized, and fulfilled historically, is prefigured in this event, in the completing of man’s emergence by the coming of woman to man.²¹

Why is this creation of humanity in the form of male and female so important? Barth notes the statement in v. 24 that the man and the woman were naked and were not ashamed. Barth links this frankly erotic statement to the Song of Songs,²² in which we have a picture of the covenant between God and His people in its perfect, unbroken and joyful condition. It is no accident that the prophets of Israel described the relationship between Yahweh and Israel in terms of marriage and that Israel is always portrayed as an unfaithful wife, while Yahweh is portrayed as a faithful husband.²³ For Barth, “the covenant which is the prototype for human love and marriage is the covenant which in its historical reality was broken by Israel.”²⁴ Barth stresses that we miss the meaning of the prophets if we understand what they said about Yahweh’s love for Israel as if it were a mere symbol

20. *Ibid.*, 293.

21. *Ibid.*, 295.

22. *Ibid.*, 313.

23. *Ibid.*, 315.

24. *Ibid.*, 316.

drawn from the erotic sphere. It would be more accurate (though still wrong) to say that human love is symbolic of Yahweh's covenant love! But Barth stresses that the Song of Songs is not an allegory. "It says exactly what it says. It is undoubtedly and unequivocally an erotic history. But it exists in this concrete context and cannot be detached from it."²⁵ What context does Barth mean? The canonical one, of course: "As an absolutely pure and holy erotic history it has a meaningful place in the Old Testament because its background and context is the history of the covenant."²⁶ Here Barth lets the other shoe drop: "On this basis it is comparatively easy to understand the message of the New Testament as the fulfillment of the Old. In this respect, the Old Testament awaits a fulfillment which is not apparent in the framework of its own message."²⁷

Barth proceeds to give a Christian reading of Genesis 2:18–25 in which Ephesians 5:32 is seen as a commentary on it, and therefore, on the Song of Songs and the prophets as well. "This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church," says Paul. Why not man alone, asks Barth? He answers:

In the wider context we may answer that it is because the man Jesus, the Son of God, whose earthly existence was envisaged at the creation of heaven and earth, and the Son of Man whose manifestation and work were envisaged in the election of Israel, was not to be alone; because in His own followers, in the Church which believes in Him, He was to have His counterpart . . . It was not apart from them but with them that He was the firstborn from the dead. And therefore it was not without but with them that He was already the firstborn of creation.²⁸

The sleep of Adam, the mortal wound, the healing and waking are types of the death and resurrection of Jesus. As Adam gave himself (his rib) for the creation of the woman, Jesus gave his own body on the tree as the means of reconciliation of sinners to God. As Adam jubilantly exclaimed, "This is now bone of my bone . . .," so the Church does not first recognize Jesus, but is first recognized by Jesus. The human creature, Israel, Jesus and the Church are all intertwined in the mind of God, and in God's self-revela-

25. *Ibid.*, 319.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, 321.

tion, and in the witness to that revelation in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Barth summarizes:

When the Old Testament gives dignity to the sexual relationship, it has in view its prototype, the divine likeness of man as male and female which in the plan and election of God is primarily the relationship between Jesus and His Church, secondarily the relationship between Yahweh and Israel, and only finally—although very directly in view of its origin—the relationship between the sexes. It is because Jesus Christ and His Church are the internal basis of creation, and because Jesus Christ is again the basis of the election and call of Israel, that the relation between Yahweh and Israel can and must be described as an erotic relationship.²⁹

Reflections on How Barth Helps Us Move Forward

Now I wish to make some observations about what has been going on here. In his exegesis of the second creation narrative, Barth has (like the Bible itself) essentially repeated himself from a different perspective, while adding to and complementing the meaning of the first creation narrative. In the second creation narrative, the human creature is interpreted as the covenant partner of God and as the type of Israel, which is in turn interpreted as the covenant partner of God and the type of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, as the covenant partner of God who faithfully discharges his covenant responsibilities perfectly, thus fulfills the election of Israel and therefore fulfills the election of the human creature as created by God to be the elect covenant partner of the Creator in the priestly and kingly work of governing creation under the ultimate rule of God. Jesus Christ is therefore the ultimate meaning of what it means to be human and therefore also of what it means to be in the image of God. In his exegesis of the first creation narrative, that is, in his interpretation of the human creature as a personal being capable of “I-Thou” relationships, Barth has given an interpretation of the image of God as consisting in precisely that which is necessary for the human creature to be what the second creation narrative (interpreted typologically) says the human creature is in terms of the covenant. In other words, the personal and relational interpretation of the image given by Barth in his exegesis of the first narrative serves as the basis for the specific calling of the human creature in the second narrative, just

29. *Ibid.*, 322.

as the creation of the physical universe in the first narrative serves as the platform for the unfolding of the covenant typologically prefigured in the second. Those who criticize Barth for his interpretation of the image in sexual terms need to realize that what Barth is really up to is interpreting the meaning of the image of God in Genesis 1 in recognition of the fact that Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 have been placed side by side in the canonical Scriptures, with the first as the context for the second and the second as the explication of the meaning of the first. It is the canonical shape of Genesis (and the Torah and the Bible as a whole in that these are the first two chapters of the Torah and of the entire Bible), that enables Barth to interpret the meaning of the image as he does. As the opening chapters of the Bible, Genesis 1 and 2 must be interpreted in light of the subject matter of the Bible as a whole, which is Jesus Christ. Finally, it should be noted that Barth does not completely reject the rule of the human creature over creation as part of what it means for humans to be humans. But he does reject the impersonal rule of humans in favor of what we could call something like rule-in-relationship, that is, a rule over the earth in the name of, by permission of, and with accountability to God.³⁰

This brings us to the question of what it means to “read into the text” something that is not “there.” Everyone seems to accuse everyone else of doing this and yet everyone seems to do it, at least as viewed from certain vantage points. Has Barth read a meaning derived from the second creation narrative into the first creation narrative and therefore interpreted the image in relational terms, (that is, as humanity being created as male and female and thus fitted for “I-Thou” relationships and as analogous to the Trinitarian relations of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit), rather than functional terms (humanity being given responsibility for ruling creation)? One might be tempted to ask why it has to be either-or and that would be a fair question. But there is another issue and it is the propriety of interpreting the meaning of Genesis 1:26–28 in terms of what we learn from Genesis 2. How can we say that Barth’s interpretation is what Genesis 1 *means*, when he freely admits that the canonical context supplies part of that meaning? Nathan MacDonald, in a fine paper on Barth’s interpretation of the image, points out that Old Testament scholars generally prefer the functional interpretation and regard Barth’s approach as bad exegesis because Barth, in the words

30. It should be noted here that, as Brueggemann points out, “of all the creatures in God’s eight creative acts, God speaks only to human creatures”; Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982) 31.

of Phyllis Bird, “has advanced only a novel and arresting variation of the classical Trinitarian interpretation, an interpretation characterized by the distinctly modern concept of an ‘I-Thou’ relationship, which is foreign to the ancient writer’s thought and intention”³¹ MacDonald also quotes James Barr’s judgment that the functional view is the most influential today and that ancient Near Eastern texts that speak of the king as the divine image and therefore the Divine representative on earth provide the background to the idea of the image. The Priestly writer, Barr contends, has picked up this idea and applied it to the whole of humanity.³² The ironic thing about this procedure is that it opens the door for modern readers to read into the text modern ideas of democracy, human rights and equality, which thus makes the text “relevant.” It also permits the modern reader to read into the text the content of Egyptian or Mesopotamian or Babylonian ideas that may or may not have been in the mind of the writer of the text, even though they were currently existing or historical ideas floating around in the cultural milieu of the ancient Near East.

So there are at least three possible ways that modern readers can read into the text. It could happen that modern readers read modern ideas of democracy and equality into the text by reading it as a royal ideology critique. It could happen that modern readers read into the text ideas that were in the ancient Near Eastern culture, but which did not actually influence the specific writer of this specific text. Or it could happen that readers read into the text concepts derived from other canonical texts which have a literary and typological connection to the text when the text is interpreted in its canonical context. And this is not even to begin to go into the range of possibilities created by the rise of postmodern theories of subjective interpretation. I would agree with the postmodernists, however, that no interpretation of Scripture is entirely objective and scientific in the sense dreamed of by eighteenth-century Enlightenment writers. In order to read some meaning out of the text, one has to read some meaning into the text. This will be disconcerting to liberal and conservative interpreters (mostly biblical scholars) who prize scholarly objectivity and have faith in the historical method. But the real question is: “What shall we read in?” And, from the perspective of Christian faith, it seems clear to me that there can only be one right answer. We ought to read texts in their canonical context

31. As quoted by MacDonald, “The *Imago Dei* and Election.”

32. As quoted in *ibid.*

and the meaning of each text is what the text says when interpreted in its canonical context.

This is not to say that our interpretation is merely arbitrary. To say, as Barth does, that the proper context for understanding the meaning of Genesis 1:26–28 is Genesis 2, the tendency of the prophets of Israel to compare the relationship between Israel and Yahweh to a marriage, the Song of Songs and Ephesians 5, seems no more arbitrary to me than deciding that an Egyptian royal ideology, rather than a Babylonian creation myth, is the decisive background for interpreting the text or than finding the ideals of the French Revolution contained in a three thousand year old biblical text. This is not to say that all interpretations are purely arbitrary, any more than it is to say that interpretation can be purely objective. Biblical interpretation is better understood as an art rather than a science. Barth's approach recognizes the need for prayer and the leading of the Holy Spirit in interpretation. But is this recognition any more than empty pious talk? What, concretely, does it mean to pray and try to be led by the Spirit? Well, could it not be that part of what it means is to allow the Spirit-inspired, providentially-assembled canon of Scripture to constitute the decisive and final context in which biblical texts are interpreted?

What does one make of the kind of typological and canonical exegesis Barth gives us? Although I have called it a gentle rain on the dry, barren land of contemporary exegesis and preaching, I am sure that many others would say it is just all wet. We should ponder hard why this type of exegesis and preaching is not standard fare in our churches and what is the source of the opposition to it. We should ask whether or not the dominance of the historical method in the academy can really be justified in terms of scholarly objectivity as the only scientific method. We should ask ourselves if we really believe that the Bible is one book with one author and if we really are convinced that the apostles were right to see Jesus Christ as the meaning and fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures so that they are rightly to be called the Old Testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We should also ask hard questions of those in the academy and in the church who practice the historical method as if it alone were all that is needed to interpret the Bible in an adequate manner. We should ask whether or not it might not really be the case that without typological interpretation we may very well fail to discern the spiritual meaning of the Bible and thus fail to hear the living Word of the living God. That is the question Barth refuses to allow us to avoid.