

In Pursuit of the Elusively Enigmatic:

The Theodicy of Karl Barth

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How is it that moral and natural evil exist in God's creation? If God is both benevolent and omnipotent, then why is there evil? Why sin? Why suffering? Why would God permit such things? One response to these questions is that of "theodicy," the branch of theology that attempts to provide a rational explanation for the presence and persistence of evil in God's world. In this wide-ranging and thought-provoking article, Ronald Goetz examines the theodicy of the twentieth-century's foremost Protestant theologian, Karl Barth. Goetz sketches the development of Barth's theodicy from his early work through his mature reflections in the Church Dogmatics. He gives special attention to Barth's exegesis of the Book of Job as well as to his famous exposition of the problem of evil and sin in terms of "nothingness" (das Nichtige), the "shadow side" of creation, the "absolutely alien factor" that 'exists' only as that which God does not will or elect. Goetz finds Barth's varied approaches to the problems raised by theodicy inconsistent and unsatisfactory. On one hand, Barth seeks to silence or evade the theodicy question by appeal to the inscrutability of God's person and purpose; on the other, he offers a detailed and highly speculative ontological account of the origins of evil in "nothingness" and of the role of human sin in unleashing nothingness into God's world. Barth's doctrine of sin lays blame for all the evils that afflict God's world entirely on human beings. Goetz rejects this view. He argues that Barth's attempt to revivify an Augustinian-Reformation doctrine of sin not only fails as a theodicy, but clashes with several of Barth's key doctrinal commitments, perhaps most importantly his revolutionary insight that God's sovereignty is a suffering sovereignty. The questions raised by the presence of evil in God's world cannot be answered by human attempts to exculpate God. "The circuitous twists and turns in Barth's various attempts to deal coherently with the problem of theodicy," Goetz writes, "are an unintended testimony to the unshakable reality that if God has the sovereign power to redeem creation, then God's sovereignty is such that all things, from the greatest to the most despicable, are God's ultimate responsibility."

Karl Barth's theology is deeply concerned with the phenomenon of evil, particularly evil in its manifestation as human sin. However, from the beginning of his theological career, Barth approached the "theodicy question" with lofty disdain, preferring to view the issues it raises from a heavenly rather than a human perspective. Humanity's persistence in sin, according to Barth, is paradoxical: the seeming impossibility, in the light of God's graciousness in Jesus Christ, that the human race should continue in rebellion. Indeed, Barth would restrict the problem of human evil to humanity's failure to recognize and acknowledge that God has already won the victory over sin and evil. Any attempt to press the "theodicy question" beyond human responsibility for sin to God's responsibility for creating a world in which evil occurs is, for Barth, a faithless

and presumptuous inquiry. Barth's refusal to stand with those who feel compelled to press the theodicy question, Barth's persistent attempts to rise above the question, are so basic to his theology that I believe they must be understood either as fundamental to his greatness—or at root of his greatest limitation.

In his January 1916 address entitled "The Righteousness of God," Barth was already delineating the broad contours of what would become his lifelong approach to the problem of evil and suffering.¹ While one still finds evidence in this address of Wilhelm Herrmann's influence on Barth,² on the question of theodicy Barth was already beginning to sound like a hard-nosed latter-day Calvinist.

For Barth, God's righteousness is an absolute given. This "fact," he argues, dominates our consciences even though we silence our consciences in our rationalizations and sin. We are both attracted to and repelled by God's righteousness, for in our consciences "it speaks of an existence higher than joy and deeper than pain." The righteousness of God might provide us a true basis on which to go on living; nevertheless, "we suffer from unrighteousness." Moreover, the consequences of our unrighteousness are everywhere evident: "the fiendishness of business competition and the world war, passion and wrongdoing, antagonism between classes and moral depravity within them, economic tyranny above and the slave spirit below." We seek God's righteousness like "a drowning man grasps at a straw." Yet failing to see that it comes only from beyond, we try to establish it ourselves. This is "the tragic, the most fundamental error of mankind."³ In our pride and despair we build a tower of Babel from the bricks of our morality, our state and laws, our false identifications of Christianity with religion, with the nation, with Western civilization.

Against the background of this dire assessment of the idolatry of liberal civilization, Barth addresses the question of the problem of evil. After nearly a year and a half of war, it had surfaced widely in what Barth calls the "quite pointless question whether God is righteous." For many, the "real question" had become how a righteous God could permit the horrors of the war. The key to Barth's argument in early 1916 lies in the imperious rationale he offers in contending that the question, "Is God righteous?" is "pointless." The question is pointless, he insists, because even to attempt to raise it

¹ *The Word of God and the Word of Man* [hereafter: *WGWM*], trans. Douglas Horton (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1978), 9-27.

² Observe, for example, the residue of Herrmann's theology in Barth's celebration of human conscience as "the perfect interpreter of life, the only place between heaven and earth in which God's righteousness is manifest" (*WGWM*, 10). Conscience serves Barth in early 1916 as Emil Brunner's "point of contact" served him in 1934.

³ *WGWM*, 11-14.

entails a contradiction: "For the living God never for a moment manifests himself in our conscience except as a righteous God." To ask of such a God, "Art thou righteous?"⁴ is an elementary logical blunder. Asking this question of the self-evidently righteous God is logically equivalent to asking of a circle, "Art thou round?"

However, the question is indeed legitimate if asked of the god to whom humanity has erected its towers of Babel—the "patron saint of our human righteousness, morality, state, civilization or religion." The idol that we have made in our own image "is not even righteous" and is finally powerless.

He cannot prevent his worshippers, all the distinguished European and American apostles of civilization, welfare, and progress, all zealous citizens and pious Christians, from falling upon one another with fire and sword to the amazement and derision of the poor heathen in India and Africa.⁵

Now that the atrocities of the modern age have exposed our false god's unrighteousness, "it is high time for us to declare ourselves thorough-going doubters, skeptics, scoffers and atheists in regard to him." "Freely and gladly" we ought now to confess, "He is an idol. He is dead."⁶

Instead of issuing a call to the theological barricades, Barth tells us that the death of the liberal god calls, not for premature action, but for our actually meaning it when we pray "Thy will be done." It demands that we be still and listen. The recognition of "God once more as God" can be "won only in fierce inner personal conflict" concerning the "Wholly Other" God whose "will is not a corrected continuation of our own."⁷

Do we possess the humility to recognize the righteousness of God? Barth promises that if we cast off our infantile despair, we will experience a "childlike joyfulness." Such simple joy grows from the recognition "that God is so much greater than we thought." All this is what the Bible calls "faith." In faith Satan falls as lightning from heaven and life becomes meaningful again. "Real love, real sincerity, real progress become possible; morality and culture, state and nation, even religion and the church now become possible. . . ."⁸

Perhaps a simple childlike joy is the beginning of theological wisdom. However, to linger in such childlike joy would also mean the end of theological wisdom—

⁴ WGWM, 21.

⁵ WGWM, 22.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ WGWM, 23-24.

⁸ WGWM, 24-26.

certainly with respect to the problem of evil. For theology—its potential presumptuousness notwithstanding—is childlike wonderment seeking mature understanding. One would hardly expect the likes of a Karl Barth to remain silent! Indeed, he hints that he will have far more to say later: “This childlike and inadequate solution is the beginning of the vast plan of God.”⁹

Is Barth’s resort to childlike faith a tentative venturing forth to a new beginning? Or is it the convenient retreat of one who is still trying to determine where to go next? Perhaps Barth sensed that his assault on the idolatry of modern European culture, though prophetically powerful, entailed a dreadful exacerbation of the problem of evil, particularly at those points where the question “Is God righteous?” is asked most innocently or naïvely. For surely Barth’s highly theological assault on liberal civilization, and his ironic turning of the slaughter of the war against the racism, the Eurocentrism, and the optimistic arrogance of nineteenth-century liberalism smack of intellectual elitism. How could Barth’s argument answer the anguished questions of the peasant parents of a slain young soldier drafted from the nearly medieval countryside of Germany or France or Russia and shipped off from basic training to die without ever tasting the modern corruptions that Barth decried?

To argue that the ruling cultural and economic elite of Europe were getting their intellectual and existential comeuppance in the war seems to ignore the melancholy fact that the majority of the victims of the war were also victims of the ruling order of Europe before the war. Did they not deserve more than a cultural critique for an answer when they cried out, “How can God permit this horror?” Nor was simple childlike faith a real answer. Many ordinary folk stood in mortal distress precisely because their simple childlike faith was being shaken by the war.

January 1916 finds Barth at a crossroads. To the right lies the promise that the “answer” must begin in childlike faith in the righteousness of God—presumably all earthly appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. To the left lies a way that would seem to lead to the very opposite of that childlike faith, i.e., to a highly sophisticated yet brutal dose of theological realism.

A scant nine months after “The Righteousness of God,” Barth is no longer calling for the adoption of childlike faith.¹⁰ Gone, too, is the last vestige of Barth’s liberal Pelagianism: the schema in which faith arises out of *our* humility or *our* simplicity which, when activated by our consciences, will reveal the righteousness of God. All human knowledge of the biblical God’s righteousness is now the gift of the Holy Spirit.

⁹ *WGWM*, 27.

¹⁰ In “The Strange New World within the Bible,” *WGWM*, 28-50.

The Bible answers none of the questions which we, in our quest for life's meaning, first seek to find in it.

When we come to the Bible with our question—How shall I think of God and the universe? How arrive at the divine? How present myself?—it answers us, as it were, “My dear sir, these are *your* problems: you must not ask *me!*”¹¹

The Bible is not about our consciences, our intuitions, our simplicity or lack thereof. “It is not the right human thoughts about God which form the content of the Bible, but the right divine thoughts about men.”¹² We can hope to hear such thoughts only by the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Now Barth operates with a theological epistemology grounded in the imperious sovereignty of the God whose Word and Spirit set the agenda for all faithful human pondering. In order to be sure that we do not underestimate the significance of the fact that God's sovereignty is a sovereignty which is answerable to no one, Barth accentuates what Kierkegaard spoke of as the “teleological suspension of ethical.” Barth confronts us with the God of the Bible who blesses things that would appall even the toughest-minded person.

The Bible frequently astounds us by its remarkable indifference to our conception of good and evil. Abraham, as the highest proof of his faith, desires to sacrifice his son to God; Jacob wins the birthright by a refined deception of his blind father; Elijah slays the four-hundred-and-fifty priests of Baal by the brook of Kishon. Are these examples worthy of esteem and emulation?

By 1920 Barth speaks in uncompromising terms of the imperiousness of the Wholly Other God who is answerable only to himself.¹³ God desires men and women's

. . . *complete* attention, their *entire* obedience. For he must be true to himself; he must be and remain holy. He cannot be grasped, brought under management, and put to use; he cannot serve. He must rule. He must himself grasp, seize, manage, use. He can satisfy no other needs than his own.¹⁴

¹¹ WGWM, 42-43.

¹² WGWM, 43.

¹³ “Biblical Questions, Insights and Vistas,” in WGWM, 51-96.

¹⁴ WGWM, 74.

In “The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching,” written in 1922, Barth’s approach to the problem of evil is to continue to rub our noses in its terrible realities.¹⁵ Barth contends that the abandonment of the Son by the Father on the cross serves as the paradigm of the Father’s providence toward us. When Jesus cried out in godforsakenness,

. . . it was not less but *more* than doubt and despair—as our old dogmatists knew, it was *derelictio*, a being lost and abandoned. To suffer in the Bible means to suffer because of *God*; to sin, to sin against *God*; to doubt, to doubt of *God*; to perish, to perish at the hand of *God*. In other words, that painful awareness of the boundary of mortality which man acquires with more or less certainty in life’s rise and fall becomes, in the Bible, the order of the God of holiness; it is the message of the *cross*, and from it, in this life, there is no escape.¹⁶

The development we see in the early Barth’s approach to the problem of evil reaches its crescendo in the 1922 *Epistle to the Romans*, but the formative essays we have thus far been examining remind us how fundamentally consistent was the unfolding of that development. From the beginning, Barth has a great deal to say about evil and sin; yet his writings on the issue—early or late for that matter—never fully cohere. By 1922, for example, his thinking centered around four quite different approaches:

1. Barth laid blame for the war (and by extension all human evil) on humanity. In our pride and despair, we create false gods, the pursuit of which leads to our justly-deserved ruin—even if we are blind to our transgression. Our sin is so monstrous that it justifies anything that God does to us in response. However, that God chooses to save us makes our complaints doubly unjustified.

2. Barth appealed to the self-authenticating experience of the righteousness of God which preemptively renders the question of theodicy moot. If God’s righteousness is the *sine qua non* of God’s self-disclosure, then the so-called problem of evil is our problem, not God’s. The only legitimate human response to God’s self-authenticating righteousness is to repent of the presumption of ever having raised the theodicy question.

3. In marked contrast to liberalism, which sought to eschew or explain away New Testament language about Christ’s death, Barth deliberately radicalized the stark horror of Christ’s bloody sacrifice. By seeing the “message of the cross” as the key to

¹⁵ WGWM, 97-135.

¹⁶ WGWM, 118-119.

humanity's "painful awareness of . . . life's rise and fall,"¹⁷ Barth approached human tragedy and the problem of evil that grows from it not by attempts to minimize the extent, the effect, and the intractability of evil, but rather by the claim that we can only hope to find its resolution in the cross. The cross of Jesus Christ broadens evil's scope even as it deepens its mystery. If the unjust death of Jesus really was God's plan for our salvation, then it would seem that humanity in its sin worked in appalling harmony with the righteous God to achieve the slaughter of God's Son. Barth relished the stark offensiveness of the cross. Yet he never elaborated a theory of the atonement. Much later, in the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth insisted that the Father's determination to redeem us through the death of the Son was humanly "strange," so strange that it defies all attempts at explanation.¹⁸ Throughout his life, Barth clearly believed that the crucifixion is God's answer to the problem of evil, but he never establishes a clear line between Christian faith in Christ's atoning death and a theodicy.¹⁹

4. In the second edition of the *Epistle to the Romans*, Barth's seeming endorsement of double predestination becomes prominent. Just as in the case of the offensiveness of the crucifixion of Jesus, Barth proceeds on the assumption that a strong offense is the best defense. "Can anything," he asks, "be so revolting to us as the majestic secrecy of one who is incomprehensible, unapproachable, inaccessible, self-sufficient, and completely free?" He insists that even in raising such a question we demonstrate "the utter inadequacy of every notion which men have of God." God's sovereign freedom requires that humanity be offended. "God would not be God, were He not liable to such accusations."²⁰

Stephen H. Webb surely is right in pointing to the clear notes of universalism already present in the early Barth.²¹ For Barth, predestination entails "the eternal victory of election over rejection."²² Curiously, however, Barth clings to the offensiveness of traditional double predestination, even though it carries with it the suggestion that God is "a capricious, spiteful demon, seeking to make fools of us all."²³ Yet, ironically, Barth

¹⁷ WGWM, 119.

¹⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* [hereafter: CD], four vols. in thirteen parts, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956-1975), IV/1, 221.

¹⁹ See my article, "The Slaughter of Jesus Christ and the Culpability of God" (Presidential address to the American Theological Society, Elmhurst College, Elmhurst, Illinois, April 10, 1992).

²⁰ *The Epistle to the Romans*, sixth edition, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 349.

²¹ *Re-figuring Theology: The Rhetoric of Karl Barth* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

²² *Epistle to the Romans*, 347.

²³ *Ibid.*, 349.

himself moved beyond it in order to silence the discussion of theodicy before it could begin. For the “final meaning of ‘Double Predestination’” is that God is “vastly beyond our understanding.”²⁴

As we have suggested, these four approaches to the theodicy question do not easily cohere. For example, consider Barth’s contention that the revelation of God’s self-authenticating, righteous majesty renders moot any experience of suffering and injustice which might appear to falsify the claim that God is righteous. Barth finds strong biblical support for such a theodicy in the poetry sections of the Book of Job. God utterly keeps God’s own counsel. To those few people, such as Job, to whom God chooses to manifest the divine presence, it is only to overwhelm them with a powerful divine majesty—which, of course, answers nothing, but does trivialize any complaining.

However, in engaging the prophets, Barth finds problematic the claim that God’s purpose lies absolutely hidden. The prophets claim that we do know something of the whys and wherefores of human tragedy. We bring grief upon ourselves by our allegiance to idols.²⁵ In contradistinction, for the author of the Book of Job there is

²⁴ Ibid., p. 421. Barth comments on the terrible words from Genesis, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated,” as if he were a traditional Calvinist. “To the believers who trust in the love of God,” he writes, “they have a tender and delightful meaning: to those, however, who prefer to confide in their own works, they appear as a dark cloud. The more a man finds these texts to be harsh, the more he is wedded to his own righteousness” (Ibid., 349-350).

Again, in 1922, as in early 1916, Barth responds to the question as to whether God is righteous by affirming the unshakable righteousness of God—but with a radicalizing emphasis. In 1916, our very experience of God as the One who is righteous renders the question pointless. The question of the righteousness of God can only be directed to an idol. In 1922, Barth again speaks of such an idol, of the “No-God” to whom the question does apply. However, now God’s unbounded will becomes the key to God’s self-evident righteousness. “His will is rather the source and sanction of all good, and it is good only because it is what He wills” (Ibid., 350). Barth pushes the discontinuity between human righteousness and divine righteousness so far (God’s righteousness is “in no sense” human righteousness [Ibid., 351]) that it is hard to see how the phrase “God’s righteousness” can have any human meaning. If Barth means it when he says *in no sense*, then analogy is impossible. Barth here flirts with the *via negativa* in which theology must be an exclusively equivocal discourse.

²⁵ The approach to the problem of evil set forth in the Book of Job is not only in tension with the great prophets, but also with the deuteronomistic tradition’s ossification of the prophets, which may be the prime target of the author. Yet even if deuteronomistic orthodoxy is a leaden codification of the situational insights of the prophets, the fact remains that it attempted to follow the prophets in tracing Israel’s tragedy to her sin. The theology of Job would exclude such a reading. (Ironically, even Job’s

simply no accounting for tragedy. The God who condemns Job for complaining about his suffering, the God who by implication condemns Job's friends for attempting to justify the ways of God to Job in his suffering, would surely also condemn Barth's social analysis insofar as it presumes to shed light on the question of God's righteousness and the war. For Job, existence is an enigma. God's self-disclosure demands silent submission to the inexplicable rigors of existence.

But is this the Christian gospel? The Gospel of John, for example, proclaims that the Word of God, the Word through whom all things were created, "became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (John 1:14, 18). It is difficult to see how one can avoid inferring from this that God wills to be known and that God's creation is not an unintelligible cipher. Indeed, God's fundamental *modus operandi* in the creation, its root purpose, is shining in the face of Jesus.

The New Testament's claim that God is truly revealed in Jesus Christ is of an altogether different order than the claim of the author of Job. The latter portrays God upbraiding and ridiculing the prescientific Job (who does find creation to be an unintelligible cipher) on the grounds that if Job doesn't know everything, then he has no right to complain about anything.²⁶

Where were you when I laid
the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have
understanding. — Job 38:4

prose prologue and epilogue, insofar as they interpret Job's tragedy as a special test, are out of harmony with the prophets. The God of the prophets engaged in no such cruel experiments.)

²⁶ Does God's vastly superior knowledge render Job grossly presumptuous in questioning the way the world works, particularly when the world is inexplicably and grievously grinding Job down? One wonders how the author of Job would phrase God's assault on Job's ignorance were he writing in a modern context. We now know that creation began in the cataclysm of the Big Bang. And we have grasped the fundamentals of evolution and DNA. Moreover, as our scientific knowledge grows, it reveals an increasingly disturbing natural order, an order created in cataclysm and heading toward cataclysm with the evolution of life lubricated by the blood of every sentient being that has ever lived. Charles Darwin found the thought of a God who ruled amidst such cruelty worse than the thought of no God at all.

Job encounters a divine glory that redeems him from his presumptuousness—if “redeems” is the right word—by stupefying and overwhelming him. Jesus Christ, on the other hand, redeems sinners in the revelation of a glory that is most glorious in its redemptive vulnerability and suffering. Jesus did not stupefy and overwhelm his tormentors; on the contrary, he died at their hands. True, we see “in a mirror, dimly,” and we but “know in part”; however, insofar as finitude *can* grasp the truth of God, that truth has lived and has suffered upon the earth as God’s own response to the problem of evil.

To my mind, either God keeps his own counsel, in which case the death of Jesus Christ is but one further manifestation of God’s mystifying providence, or God is revealed in the death of Jesus Christ. In the latter case, the theodicy question remains ever before us, as Jesus himself raised it at his death: “My God, My God why hast thou forsaken me?”

Further, it is crucial to distinguish between the mystery of election and a Job-like claim that God’s purpose is unknowable. Although the doctrine of predestination has often been defended by appeals to the *Deus Absconditus*, it must be noted that the defenders of the doctrine claim to know a great deal about God. For example, predestinarians posit that God has established a two-fold destiny for the human race. They argue that the criteria by which God determines this destiny lie entirely in God and not at all in us. This alone is a great deal to claim to know, and it is a far cry from the Book of Job’s implication that human destiny is an enigma.

The doctrine of double predestination and Barth’s own later radical reformulation of the doctrine of election are doctrines which arise from the conviction that God’s acts in Israel culminating in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ are acts of objective divine self-giving. Thus they provide the basis for true insight into the doings and being of God. To be sure, God’s objectivity in God’s acts is always, as Barth came to speak of it, a “secondary objectivity.” That is, God is present through that which God is not, through earthly events. God is not a wind in the desert; God is not the humanity of Jesus. But by faith, through the promptings of the Holy Spirit, the invisible God makes Himself visible. We can even dare to speak of God’s being available to our reason, although proportionate to the secondary character of God’s objectivity, our language about God, like our doctrine, is always analogical discourse. God has inspired faith, and faith can and must seek understanding.

The Book of Job, on the other hand, provides the spiritual wellspring of a particular variety of liberalism. In the poetry sections of Job, Job does not venture into dogma. The poetry concludes with an autobiographical statement concerning Job’s deeply chastened existence. For a Rudolf Bultmann, though faith affirms that there is a God, doctrines about God or Christ or about the atonement or election are all myths

which seek to make the invisible God visible. Beyond a brute belief in the objective reality of God, God remains the unknown; or, as Bultmann continued to say long after Barth had abandoned the designation, God is the “wholly other.” However, once one crosses the Rubicon and acknowledges that despite the risks, God’s acts, that the promptings of the Holy Spirit and even human faith itself make doctrine necessary, then one cannot legitimately impose the circumspection of the Book of Job episodically, using it to silence some questions while speculating grandly concerning others.

Despite the shock therapy of Barth’s dialectical period, he soon realized that such negation is no substitute for the church’s preaching and teaching duty. It is not enough to oppose heresy; we theologians must also “hazard ourselves to God’s glory in clear and definite words.” If theology is not to bog down in the trivia of existential autobiography, if it is to speak of that which its very name implies, *theos* (God), then it must finally break with ideological existentialism, ancient or modern. It must affirm that God’s mystery is the mystery of a God who comes to earth in order to be known. The Book of Job must be read as Barth came to suggest his *Epistle to the Romans* ought to be read—as a marginal corrective to the excesses of theology, not as theology proper.

To be sure, Barth did not extensively treat the Book of Job in his early dialectical stage; nevertheless, its theology lay always in the background as a means to control the question of theodicy. Throughout his career, whenever the theodicy question threatened to lead him where he did not wish to go, Barth retreated to a Job-like insistence on God’s imperious mystery. This is borne out in his extensive and explicit appeal to the Book of Job toward the end of his career. Here Barth sets up a typology in which Job is seen as a forerunner, however flawed, of Jesus Christ.

Early in his treatment of the Book of Job,²⁷ Barth acknowledges that in its final form the book incorporates a variety of sources. Nonetheless, he takes the canonical form of Job as the object of his exegesis. As a consequence, he does not treat the theological quarrel over the question of theodicy raging between Job’s prose and poetry sections. Instead, from an essentially post-critical perspective, Barth sees in Job a “distant, faint, fragmentary and even strange” foretokening of Jesus Christ, the one who unmasks the “falsehood of man.”²⁸ One immediately senses where Barth wants to take us—toward the view that any human complaint against God’s governance is one or another species of human lies.

²⁷ Found in four “small print” passages of *CD IV/3.1*, 383-388, 398-408, 421-434, 453-461.

²⁸ *CD IV/3.1*, 384.

All is not condemnation, however. Job's last act was to pray for his lying friends; in this, he foretokens "the true Witness," Jesus Christ, who not only unmasks our lies but also intercedes for us.²⁹

How is it that Job is the servant of God while his three friends are theological liars? "The answer," Barth writes, "is that he simply is." Job was elected as such; his three friends were not. "God would not be God if he were not free both to give and to take away."³⁰

Although a type of Jesus Christ, Job is very different. Rejecting those Kenotic Christologies which assert that Christ laid aside infallible knowledge of his own divinity, Barth says that Job's doubts "were very different from the infallibility with which Jesus is already Victor even as he goes to the defeat of Golgotha."³¹

Job's torment is only secondarily related to the disasters that befall him. Job's agony, which "almost drives him mad," is that "he firmly sees his God and not another in what overwhelms him." But he "encounters Him in a form in which He is absolutely alien." Job thus suffers from his "very faithfulness."³² He is not on the verge of denying the existence of God. He knows that God will not abandon him, but he faces the "iron fact" that God persists in remaining in this alien form.³³ His relationship to God is Job's "true grief." Thus Job's theological grief renders "innocuous" the merely pessimistic cries of atheists modern or ancient.³⁴ The free God has changed the terms of the eternal covenant from blessing to suffering. "Job must follow the divine decision with an equally free human decision, i.e., to render suffering obedience to Him."³⁵ Although Job balks at suffering obedience, "it is in the name of God that he complains against God."³⁶ As "God's partner," Job "rightly maintains his righteousness before God." However, he then "blatantly sets himself in the wrong by arrogantly advancing this righteousness as a claim that God should be righteous before him, to his human eyes and according to his human thoughts and standards."³⁷ Indeed, Job "is shameless in his glorious sincerity."³⁸ Job proves himself righteous only as "Yahweh Himself encounters him in the straits" and "puts him in the wrong but in so doing acknowledges him to be faithful

²⁹ Ibid., 386.

³⁰ Ibid., 387.

³¹ Ibid., 388.

³² Ibid., 402.

³³ Ibid., 403.

³⁴ Ibid., 404.

³⁵ Ibid., 405.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 406.

³⁸ Ibid., 407.

to and in accord with his election, thus justifying him."³⁹ Only so humbled does Job win God's bet for God with Satan.

Job's moves from one recognition of divine unknowability to another: "a flight from God unknown in His unknowability to the God whom we hope or are sure is known in the same unknowability."⁴⁰ Only as Job looks "steadily into and not past the hostility with which God encounters him" is he so moved.⁴¹

Job learns "that wisdom and its place and way are known to God alone, that they are accessible to and may be controlled by none but Him."⁴² God's word puts Job in his place—a place that Barth assures us is a good place. To be sure, the word Job receives in God's overpowering, withering, strange and ironic reply "raises more questions than it answers." It would hardly be a suitable word to be spoken at a death bed or to a grieving widow.⁴³ Yet that God, the "incomparable theological Doctor," refuses to speak with "gravity" but with such "humour" demonstrates God's "transcendent freedom" and self-confident "sovereignty."⁴⁴

This side of Barth's theodicy may be summarized as follows: The faithful elect must recognize that their justification lies in absolute submission to a divine reign that can be judged only by its own standards, standards which are incomprehensible except in the sense that the faithful elect always affirm those standards to be invariably right. Since our freedom lies in our obedience, and since God "does not ask for" our "understanding, agreement or applause," we are called to use our freedom to "be content not to know why and to what end" we exist. This, despite the fact that God "always in some degree encounters, confronts and opposes man in a way which is sinister, strange, disquieting and even terrifying."⁴⁵

It would seem that there is nothing more to be said, nothing more that could be said. Yet Barth's theology also features a highly speculative ontological analysis of evil and the problems attendant upon its sinister, parasitic reality.⁴⁶ Curiously, respecting evils of which we apparently have direct experience, Barth declares that we must be "content not to know why and to what end" such things happen. Yet the selfsame Barth is able to speculate expansively about something that is outside all human experience, i.e., the primal origins of evil. Although it was undertaken some years before his Job

³⁹ Ibid., 423.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 424.

⁴¹ Ibid., 425.

⁴² Ibid., 426.

⁴³ Ibid., 429. Barth quoting R. de Pury.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 430.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 431.

⁴⁶ In the chapters on "God and Nothingness" in *CD III/3*, 289-368.

commentaries, “God and Nothingness” is controlled by the same curious combination of humble reticence before and highhanded, imperious evoking of the divine majesty and mystery which we have already observed. Thus Barth’s apparent daring in undertaking an ontological analysis of the primal roots of evil is not so daring after all, since Barth keeps his appeal to God’s abysmal hiddenness as his Jobian ace in the hole. According to Barth, evil has its origins in nothingness (*das Nichtige*). Nothingness is that “stubborn element” and “sinister system” in “world-occurrence” that stands in “opposition and resistance to God’s world-dominion.”⁴⁷ Nothingness is neither a derivation of the positive will and work of God—which would leave the creature “exonerated from all responsibility for its existence, presence and activity”—nor does it derive “solely from the activity of the creature,”⁴⁸ a view that would leave God ineffectually reacting to nothingness that we in our sin generated. Nor is nothingness to be confused with the heights and depths, light and darkness, growth and decay, value and worthlessness, which we daily encounter. There is, to be sure, a negative side to God’s good creation.

Nothingness is or exists in the “peculiar” sense that it is neither God nor God’s creature. Nothingness, as the “shadow side” of creation, has only the paradoxical reality of being that which God does not elect; it is thus that which God rejects when he elects this world and not another. “God wills and therefore opposes what he does not will.”⁴⁹ As such nothingness is a reality utterly *sui generis*. It lives only in that it is “that which God does not will.”⁵⁰ Nothingness, being graceless, is evil.

Nothingness and our participation in nothingness through our sin—thus our becoming victims and servants of nothingness—can only be discovered in the light of Jesus Christ. “In Him alone and in His light real nothingness, the real sin that wages war with God and is assailed and overcome by Him, stands revealed as the sin of man.”⁵¹ Ironically, we do not know what sin is until it is forgiven and overcome. As Jesus Christ forgives the sins of humanity, he also removes the source of our suffering. “The sickness is disclosed with the cure.”⁵²

Although our sin is the “concrete form of nothingness,” in that in sin nothingness becomes humanity’s own act, “nothingness is not exhausted in sin.” While nothingness “has the form of evil and death as well as sin,” it comprehends much more. It is “something wholly anomalous which threatens and imperils existence,” that

⁴⁷ Ibid., 289.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 292.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 351.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 352.

⁵¹ Ibid., 307.

⁵² Ibid., 309.

“absolutely alien factor which is radically opposed” to creation and Creator. Indeed, it is the “comprehensive negation of the creature and its nature,” the “intolerable, life destroying thing[,] . . . that alien power which annihilates creaturely existence and thus discredits and disclaims the Creator.”⁵³

Even though humanity is threatened by nothingness, its defeat and banishment “are primarily and properly God’s own affair.”⁵⁴ Only God “can defend His honour, ensure His creature’s salvation, and maintain His own and His creature’s right.”⁵⁵ We creatures would be no match for the “assailant” nothingness; indeed, we are “already defeated and lost.”⁵⁶ However, despite our having been thus victimized, we are not the most aggrieved party. God is the one who is most offended.⁵⁷

Humanity’s falling in with evil by its sin is essentially an ontological impossibility. When Adam sinned, Barth tells us, he “performed the impossible.” Paradoxically, he undertook a radically new initiative not as a “free agent but as a prisoner.” Human beings are not naturally “capable of sin.”⁵⁸ We were created with no such capacity.

Nothingness, “the ancient menace, danger and destruction, the ancient non-being which obscured and defaced the divine creation of God . . . is consigned to the past in Jesus Christ Because Jesus is Victor, nothingness is routed and extirpated.”⁵⁹ It is only in our spiritual blindness that we imagine that nothingness still has some continued existence. However, even our blindness is not unrelated to God’s permission. We continue to act as if nothingness remained a threat because God permits His “already established” kingdom to remain concealed to us. “He thus permits nothingness to retain its semblance of significance.”⁶⁰ Yet while God allows nothingness to continue to “prey” upon us, “it is forced to serve Him, to serve His Word and work.”⁶¹

We will here be able to probe only a few of the obvious difficulties of this teaching. If nothingness came into being as a kind of primordial by-product of God’s creative initiative, if nothingness had a shadow existence prior to the creation of Adam and Eve, and if it is more powerful than they or we, how can Barth avoid the conclusion

⁵³ Ibid., 310.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 354.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 355.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 358.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 306-307; cf. 359.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 356.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 363.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 367.

⁶¹ Ibid.

that sinners were victims before they became victimizers? Indeed, if God permitted this shadow reality to exist in the first place, and if God ordains that a shadow of this original shadow on creation should continue to this day to be his “servant,” how can Barth avoid granting that God is the agent ultimately responsible not just for good but also for evil and sin? Either this or he is forced to the unspeakable conclusion that God is not all-sovereign; God is thus not fully responsible because God was ontologically unable to forestall the “*sui generis*” shadowy emergence of nothingness. Barth does not seriously confront these implications because he believes his doctrine of sin places on humanity, and humanity alone, the full onus for permitting evil from escaping its shadowy exile and intruding into God’s good creation.

His doctrine of sin, undergirded by his problematic ontology of evil and his Jobian escape mechanisms, strikes me as the key to Barth’s theodicy. Without embracing the whole of Augustine’s doctrine of original sin, Barth preserves many vital Augustinian elements, particularly Augustine’s insistence on a historical, catastrophic fall. To be sure, Barth is not a fundamentalist. He holds the story of the fall to be “saga,” that is, an intuitive and imaginative narration grounded in the prophetic tradition of “events” which “are no longer susceptible as such of historical proof.”⁶² Further, Barth insists there never was a “golden age” and that “the first man was immediately the first sinner.”⁶³ Nevertheless, and no matter how paradoxically, Barth holds that “by the action of the good creatures of God—chaos in all its nothingness is brought into creation, and creation itself is given the character of the chaotic and that which it is not.”⁶⁴ Thus, if for Barth there was no golden age, there was at least a golden Sunday morning. Humans cannot have wrought chaos unless there was an instant in which there was no chaos. Barth clearly functions with a historical fall even if he can only describe it in saga.

Leaving aside for the moment the difficulties that modern science creates for a literal, historical fall, Barth’s claim that human sin brought evil into the world compels the question: How is it that a good and flawless creation could have fallen?

As we have seen, Barth characteristically retreats to paradox. Since the creation was made good in all respects, sin represents an ontological impossibility. Sin is an inconceivable determination made by free beings to enslave themselves. Barth would not so flatter sin by calling it a free choice. He does not employ the dubious “free will defense.” Sin simply makes no sense; it thus remains an “impossible possibility.”⁶⁵

⁶² CD IV/1, 508.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 463.

⁶⁵ CD II/1, 503-505, 532; IV/1, 409-410, 463.

However, much earlier in the *Church Dogmatics*, before he had fully worked out this sin-as-paradox theodicy, Barth ventured beyond the strictures in which he usually conducted the theodicy question. He gave what approaches an ontological explanation as to why God made a creature capable of falling. He argues that only God can be immune to falling.

Without this possibility of defection or of evil, creation would not be distinct from God and therefore not really His creation. The fact that the creature can fall away from God and perish does not imply any imperfection on the part of creation or the Creator. What it does mean positively is that it is something created and is therefore dependent on preserving grace, just as it owes its very existence simply to the grace of its Creator. A creature freed from the possibility of falling away would not really be living as a creature. It could only be a second God – and as no second God exists, it could only be God Himself.⁶⁶

Barth's argument might seem consistent with his lifelong insistence that God keeps a jealous guard on the exclusivity of the divine sovereignty. Yet is not the attempt to offer any explanation in tension with Barth's more characteristic Jobian line of defense that we must "be content not to know why and to what effect" our destiny, in this case our destiny in sin, is as it is?

And what of Barth's argument as such? Barth comes very close to contending that humans must be able to sin in order for God to be God! No wonder Barth rarely permits comprehensive discussion of how a good creation could have fallen if it forces him to such a doctrine. This deviation from his Jobian imperiousness suggests how subversive must be any attempt to defend Barth's doctrine of the origins of sin.

Questions explode to the fore. What sort of divinity is it which could not bear the prospect of a creature graciously created to be as invulnerable to evil in its sphere as God is invulnerable to evil in God's sphere? Does Barth in pushing the exclusivity of God's sovereignty to such lengths suggest a darkness in the jealousy of God?

The best way to deal with the myriad of questions which arise once one starts giving explanations is to cut such argumentation at its root by explaining as little as possible on principle. The God of Barth's usual handling of the theodicy question could never be said to die the death of a thousand ad hoc qualifications. For Barth characteristically refuses to offer the sorts of explanations which need or even can be qualified in the face of evil.

⁶⁶ CD II/1, 503.

I began by suggesting that Karl Barth's stance toward the theodicy question is so basic to his whole theology that it is either a factor vital to his greatness or it is evidence of a severe limitation affecting his whole theological undertaking. I hope it is clear that I lean toward the latter judgment.

One of Barth's greatest contributions to twentieth-century Christian theology lay in his recognition that theology's very reason for being is to aid the church in its preaching task. As theology is faith seeking understanding and forthright clarity, it entails the doing of doctrine. Thus, Barth saw clearly that the classical doctrinal concerns of Christian theology were intimately tied up in the church's mission.

Barth fully understood that our discourse is comprised of imperfect analogies; nevertheless, at his best he was prepared to push those analogies as far as they would go. Thus, for example, while duly insisting upon "the inconceivability of God, the inadequacy of all knowledge of the revealed God"⁶⁷ in his exposition of the doctrine of the Trinity, Barth could go on with highly speculative daring to claim with assurance that as the Father is eternally the Father of the Son, "God's eternal fatherhood, signifies God's mode of existence, in which He is the Originator of His other modes of existence."⁶⁸

Of course God is mysterious. Nevertheless, as Augustine put it, if we must speak so as not to remain silent, then the evoking of mystery must be done with utmost integrity and consistency. There is a difference between a due sense of mystery and theological evasion. It is one thing to argue as far as your understanding will take you and then to confess one's mystification and another to declare a divine paradox in support of one's mystification. It is deeply troubling that Barth can argue so consistently about such things as the threefold life of the one God or of God's eternal election and yet be so paradoxical on the question of the nature of and the ultimate responsibility for evil and sin.

At certain decisive points, Barth leaves the impression that he is trying to defend the indefensible. I cannot here indicate the full range of what I have in mind, but in concluding I will make a few additional remarks about Barth's crucial teachings about the function and origin of sin.

Barth views human sin in the extremes. At one end, he would seem to grant sin's virulence too little significance, holding it to be a fundamentally impossible, utterly

⁶⁷ CD I/1, 426.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 451. One wonders what the author of the Book of Job, whose sense of the abysmal mystery of God influences Barth so radically on the theodicy question, would say about Barth's willingness to speculate on the very nature and eternal being of the Godhead itself?

obsolete mode of human activity. Our sin is that we live in the past as if Jesus Christ had not already atoned for sin and overcome its source, nothingness.

On the other extreme, he gives sin too great an importance. Consistent with his lingering supralapsarian predilections yet in other ways contrary to his whole theological intention, Barth comes close to suggesting that our sin serves a vital function in God's electing purpose. Barth's recognition that "[p]redestination means that from all eternity God has determined upon man's acquittal at His own cost,"⁶⁹ despite its hopeful edifying power, raises its own problems. Since there could be no acquittal without a fall, and "man's acquittal" was eternally predestined, does this not suggest that the fall was in pursuance of some strange necessity required in order that God might bring to perfection humanity's eternal destiny?

Barth confronts this sort of problem with his deeply paradoxical purified supralapsarianism. God willed that "*homo labilis*" should be capable of falling "not in order that he may fall, but in order that when he has fallen he may testify to the fullness of God's glory."⁷⁰ Humanity is thus "the predestined bearer and representative of the divine Yes and the divine No, foreordained to victory over sin and death but also to the bearing of the divine penalty."⁷¹ Thus it would seem that without our having sinned and Christ's having become the one great sinner who is the Judge judged in our place, we might never have adequately grasped and appreciated the "fullness of God's glory" as self-humiliating, suffering love.

Since even that residue of nothingness which God permits to remain is God's servant, must not the same thing be said of human sin? Thus, in a curious, back-alley manner our sin takes on a necessary if secondary revelatory role: its forgiveness helps us grasp—as we could not otherwise have grasped—the depths of God's glorious good will.

Barth does not intend to suggest this, and I am aware that counter texts can be cited in which he would seek in paradox to modify this implication; nevertheless, the harder Barth pushes the sheer sovereignty of the free, predestining God, the more he must affirm that "all things work for good"—even nothingness and thus even sin. However, this recognition in turn renders the catastrophic view of sin curiously incomprehensible; i.e., that we and we alone are responsible through our sin for having brought chaos into an otherwise perfect creation.

Barth's so called "neoorthodoxy" constituted a revolutionary undercutting of some of the most powerful, deeply entrenched elements of Western orthodoxy. Of

⁶⁹ CD II/2, 167.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 141-142.

⁷¹ Ibid., 142.

special import here is his rejection of the ancient dogma of divine impassibility and the Augustinian tradition's teaching of double predestination, a teaching which becomes increasingly problematic without the undergirding of the dogma of divine impassibility.⁷² Barth never radically rethought the orthodox doctrine of sin in a manner that would complement his rethinking of divine impassibility and double predestination. Indeed, Barth, who sometimes indicated that he knew better, never fully escaped the orthodox implication that a strong affirmation of God's sovereign power and holiness requires a subsidiary wallowing in the contention that humanity is a mass of perdition.

It strikes me that in the very recounting of Barth's twentieth-century attempt to revive the Augustinian-Reformation doctrine of the origins of sin, Barth's labyrinthine argument refutes itself. We are told that the all-sovereign God willed that humanity be confronted by the specter of nothingness, itself far more powerful than we, and that while God did not will or command us to fall, it is difficult to imagine how, given the sinister power and guile of nothingness, we could have done otherwise. Indeed, God from all eternity premised his infallible plans on the supposition that we would fall. Christians are supposed to respond to all of this by abjectly confessing that humanity is alone responsible for all the evil which has broken into God's good creation from our first appearance.

Yet should all humanity be incriminated for sin and evil so that God might be exonerated? I find the attempt to exculpate God from all responsibility for the evils and injustices that riddle God's creation by accusing the human race of some primal sin, and the claim that the evils of existence could have been avoided if only we had not sinned, theologically muddled, particularly if one tries to make this case on predestinarian grounds.

Further, theologies that talk about sin in a manner that makes sense only if the fall were somehow a historical event—and theologies engaged in such obscurantism are legion—are apologetically disastrous. Thus, in addition to the internal impossibilities of his theological rationale (and Barth does as well with his revived Augustinianism as anyone could hope to do), there is the problem of Barth's high-handed dismissal of the impact of modern science on our understanding of the story of the fall.⁷³ How can modern science forever be kept at bay? Unless one denies evolutionary theory entirely, one must acknowledge that human life evolved out of a natural order which,

⁷² Only a God who feels no pity and admits no pain can be conceived of as arbitrarily damning great legions of his creatures; only a theology which holds that God is impassible can find such thinking coherent on the face of it.

⁷³ For example in *CD IV/1* (508), he dismisses without discussion any attempt to compare the story "either favourably or unfavourably to scientific palaeontology."

antecedent to our appearance, unqualifiedly set the terms on which all human existence must be worked out. The very notion that we—or Adam and Eve—were once so in control of the terms of existence that at one pivotal moment humanity stood poised before a choice between sinless and sinful existence is, from a scientific perspective, a patent absurdity. There never was a time when we could have opted for sinless innocence.

To be sure, we contribute terribly to the anguish and injustice of the created order. By our sin we make things far worse than they need be. We act out of cowardly self-interest, coldness of heart, and brutal aggressiveness. We are culpable, true enough. However, there is more than enough culpability to go around. It is pure human pride and self-aggrandizement to suggest that our puny sins are the root of all evil. Barth is right; God permits evil. What frustrates me is his retreat from the implications that follow from such an acknowledgement.

If God is not the almighty sovereign Lord, then God cannot redeem and death gets the last word and nothingness wins. A limited deity is not the God whom Jesus called Father, for the Lord and Father of Jesus Christ is a God of the living. The circuitous twists and turns in Barth's various attempts to deal coherently with the problem of theodicy are an unintended testimony to the unshakable reality that if God has the sovereign power to redeem creation, then God's sovereignty is such that all things, from the greatest to the most despicable, are God's ultimate responsibility. There is no way to escape this. "I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe" (Isa. 45:6b-7a).

Barth's revolutionary realization that the majesty of God is a suffering majesty challenges Western orthodoxy at every point; and yet, anchored as it is in the sovereignty of the God of Israel, the God and Father of Jesus Christ, it preserves and magnifies the highest intention of orthodoxy. My difficulty with Barth is that he does not permit the suffering of God to affect his theology across the board.

Barth cannot decide whether God has from the beginning held evil and sin in tow—and that therefore the myth of the catastrophic fall cannot relieve God of the ultimate burden for these realities—or whether the intrusion of evil into the creation is wholly our doing—in which case Barth is stuck with the ontological absurdity that against God's will and without God's permission we brought into the world that which did not formerly exist—sin. Barth employs both these lines of argument, in addition to his Jobian defense, on an ad hoc basis wherever the dyke of God's pristine innocence seems to be leaking.

Without minimizing the brutal reality of sin, Barth's attempt to preserve intact a Reformation understanding of sin clashes with his doctrine of divine suffering; further, it obscures one of Barth's greatest contributions—his recognition of the intimate

partnership that exists between God and humanity as that partnership, established in the creation, is reconfirmed and radicalized in Jesus Christ, he in whom “the fact is once for all established that God does not exist without man.” Indeed, God “wants to be man’s partner, his almighty and compassionate Saviour.”⁷⁴

But what is the nature of this partnership established in Jesus Christ? Too often the partnership envisioned by Barth between us and God, the “almighty and compassionate Saviour,” is a partnership in which our freedom and contribution to the success of the partnership lie finally in our preordained acceptance of the salvation of that which God, out of God’s all-engulfing graciousness, has done for us from all eternity. Due to our catastrophic sinfulness, we really have nothing but our submissive obedience to contribute to God’s creative purpose. As such, our being “swamped in grace” may not be so gracious after all.

As I read the Bible, our partnership with the self-giving, gracious, freedom-engendering God entails that we are destined to make a real contribution to God’s evolving plan in creation. There is more at stake than mere restoration. Indeed, there never was a perfect moment in the history of creation from which there was a historical fall. In God’s gracious ordination, through our arts and sciences, in our cultural and historical determinations, we are privileged to contribute to the creation of our own humanity. I think the Bible speaks of God’s suffering love and radical self-giving in ways which require a recognition that in our partnership with God, God has ceded to us creative obligations which are not limited to our faithful acceptance of our salvation.

The problem of evil can only be faced in the sort of partnership entailed in the recognition that as Barth himself put it, “God is human.”⁷⁵ Which means that after the inevitable finger pointing is done, ranging from the accusations of “protest atheists” against God to the accusations of the most resolute Augustinians against humanity, God and humanity are finally going to have to work out their disputes in a creation that has universal redemption as its goal. God has dared to risk all on the assumption that we can indeed work out a destiny satisfactory to all. The ultimate question is whether love has the power to overcome the suffering and injustice and resentment which has been the cost of God’s risky enterprise. Can the final end justify the terrible means by which that end is being accomplished?

⁷⁴ *The Humanity of God*, trans. John Newton Thomas and Thomas Weiser (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1962), 50.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 52, 64.