

RICHARD E. BURNETT

Karl Barth's
Theological Exegesis

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen
zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe*

145

Mohr Siebeck

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Richard E. Burnett

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The Hermeneutical Principals
of the Römerbrief Period

Mohr Siebeck

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for

Martha

Foreword

The hermeneutics of Karl Barth have never been well understood in the English-speaking world. Two major interpretive approaches dominated the scene up through the mid-1990s. The first, reflecting a preoccupation with the debates over demythologization in the 1950s, began with the assumption that Barth's hermeneutics can best be understood through a comparison with Rudolf Bultmann. The glaring weakness of this approach was that Barth's hermeneutics were not allowed to become a subject of interest in their own right. The focus was too narrow, too restrictive, to allow that to happen. Barth's early exegetical work was of some interest – but only insofar as it could be shown to have influenced Bultmann in the same period. And his later reflections were dismissed by means of labels like “revelational hermeneutics.” This was the approach favoured by theological ‘liberals.’ It was typically wedded to a depiction of Barth's theological development which posited a shift away from dialectical theology towards a dogmatic theology grounded in a method of analogy around 1931) – which strengthened the tendency towards dismissal of Barth's later hermeneutical reflections as the product of a ‘neo-orthodox’ or kerymatic theologian.

When a reaction finally set in to this one-sided approach, it made itself guilty of a new one-sidedness. The so-called ‘Yale School’, reacting against the almost exclusive concentration of ‘liberals’ on Barth's theoretical statements on hermeneutics, looked almost completely away from such statements in order to focus attention upon Barth's actual exegesis of Scriptural passages. In defense of this procedure, it was frequently pointed out that Barth himself had said that the proper order was first exegesis and then hermeneutics (as an a posteriori reflection on a prior engagement with texts). But such a defense fails to convince. Once Barth has done the work of reflecting on the hermeneutics implicit in his exegetical procedures, ought we not to take such theoretical statements seriously? We might wish to repeat the experiment, passing through his exegesis to his ‘theory’ to see if the ‘theory’ is justified by his practice. But surely, that would still require close attention to the ‘theory’ as well? More often than not, however, the Yale theologians contented themselves with teasing their own theories out of Barth's exegetical practice. Not surprisingly, given their preoccupation with exegesis, they regularly concluded that Barth really had no hermeneutical ‘principles’ at all in any customary sense of the word. His hermeneutics were strictly ad hoc in character; the description of strategies devised for use in relation to particular textual challenges

without further prescriptive value. The claim was made that Barth understood biblical texts to have the character of a 'realistic narrative' – something between a factual report and a symbolic expression of the interior condition of an author – which rendered interpretation of them largely immune to any systematic (well-ordered) hermeneutical approach. Interest in the referent of biblical language waned. Attention was focussed instead on questions concerning the power of language to disclose meaning and to form persons, and the use of language as tools for socializing new members into religious communities. In raising these questions, the Yale School helped prepare the way for more recent 'postmodern' readings of Barth's hermeneutics. There is a certain irony in this; the members of the Yale School were much more conservative than their 'postmodern' successors. Indeed, I do not think I do this movement an injustice when I describe it as the last (and, in many ways, the greatest) achievement of American 'neo-orthodoxy.' The one thing it shared with its 'liberal' counterpart was the picture of Barth's development in terms of a 'second conversion' – though in this case, the alleged departure from dialectical theology was valued positively.

What has changed since these efforts were made is that most Barth scholars today recognize that the thought of a 'second turn' or 'break' in Barth's development cannot stand up to close scrutiny. Barth was and remained a dialectical theologian. The significance of this advance for an understanding of Barth's hermeneutics is not far to seek. One cannot expect to arrive at an adequate understanding of Barth's hermeneutics if one begins with the assumption that Barth's early reflections on hermeneutics were joined to the later only on the formal level of similar interests and motives. There is a material continuity which evidences itself throughout, from the first Romans commentary right on through the Church Dogmatics.

The present work marks the dawn of a new era. Against depictions of Barth's early theology as merely exegetical and lacking in the kind of serious hermeneutical reflection that characterized Bultmann's work in the same period, Richard Burnett mines the unpublished drafts of the preface to the first edition of Romans to show: 1) that it is not the case that Barth's hermeneutics were formed only as a grudging response to unexpected criticism and that, therefore, he never took any real interest in the subject; 2) that the first is true because Barth's hermeneutical commitments did not come late but were very close to fully formed as early as 1918; 3) that Barth did indeed have hermeneutical 'principles' which were understood by him to be relevant for interpreting not just the Bible but any piece of literature whatsoever; and 4) that Barth remained attached to these 'principles' well after 1931 (demonstrating the continuity in his thinking on the subject). Most importantly, Burnett has initiated a much needed effort to bring Barth into conversation with Schleiermacher, depicting Barth's efforts in the field of hermeneutics as an attempt to

overcome the Schleiermacherian tradition from within. More work will need to be done in this area, but Burnett has pointed the way forward.

The highest compliment I can pay to Richard Burnett is that he has achieved in this work a living incarnation of the kind of hermeneutics Karl Barth advocated. Watching him wrestle, page after page, with the meaning of the preface drafts is like watching someone try to wring every last drop of water out of a wet towel; it's almost exhausting to watch and I am sure it was exhausting to do. This is the kind of thing that only happens where love is the driving motivation. To his credit, Burnett never loses sight of the need for 'creativity' and 'elasticity' in the interpretive process. The results are compelling and constitute a serious challenge to those who would grant to Barth but a small role in the history of hermeneutics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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Preface

The present volume is only a slightly revised version of my 2001 doctoral dissertation, written for Princeton Theological Seminary. It represents my attempt to come to terms with questions I have been wrestling with for more than a decade and a half.

I began reading Karl Barth at the beginning of my junior year in college. At the same time I was introduced to historical-criticism and became very enthusiastic about the fruit it could bear. When I came to seminary, I signed up for as many New Testament courses as I could fit in my schedule. I enjoyed and remained enthusiastic about studying the Bible “critically.” Yet somehow I was still not satisfied. Gradually, I realized there had to be more to biblical exegesis than reckoning with the various historical circumstances and sources behind the text. Fortunately, at the end my first year, I came upon a copy of Hans Frei’s *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*. It took me years to understand what is really at issue in this book. After seminary, I packed it in my suitcase and meditated on it while studying at the University of Tübingen. Later, as a pastor, I continued to reflect on Frei and Barth, and specifically the latter’s call to an approach to the task of exegesis which he claimed was ‘more critical.’ It was also as a pastor that I came face to face with the same sort of problem Barth alludes to somewhat bitterly in the preface to the second edition of his *Römerbrief*:

I know what it means to have to go into the pulpit year in and year out, obliged to understand and explain, and wanting to do so, yet being unable to do it because we were given almost nothing at the university except the famous “respect for history,” which despite the beautiful expression means simply the renunciation of every earnest, respectful understanding and explanation.

After a few years in the pastorate, I entered the S.T.M. program at Yale University Divinity School in order to sort out some of these issues and do further research on Frei. There I was introduced to the so-called ‘Yale School’ of theologians (notably Professors David Kelsey, George Lindbeck, and Brevard Childs), to Gadamer’s *Wahrheit und Methode* by Professor Cyril O’Regan, to deconstructionists, and to all sorts of post-modernists who talked alot about hermeneutics (even though most of them claimed they were not really interested in hermeneutics).

In 1993, I entered the Ph.D. program at Princeton Theological Seminary and came under the tutelage of Dr. Bruce McCormack, my *Doktorvater*, who challenged me to think more dogmatically about the topic of hermeneutics than I

had ever thought about it before. He also pointed me in the direction of the preface drafts to the first edition of Barth's *Römerbrief*. Professor McCormack's reputation as a Barth-scholar and as one of the leading theologians of our day is well-known both in the United States and abroad. What is perhaps not so well-known is his devotion to his students. His advice throughout the process of writing my dissertation and his guidance throughout the entire doctoral program was invaluable. His willingness to take time to read, to critique, and to discuss many things with me, was a labor of love and exemplified the kind of *Nachdenken* and *Mitdenken*, the kind of *Aufmerksamkeit* and *Liebe*, that is so important in Karl Barth's hermeneutics. For Professor McCormack's help, I will be forever grateful. I am also thankful for Professor Diogenes Allen, above all, for his kindness and Christian character which was a great source of encouragement to me throughout my years at Princeton but also for introducing me to Austin Farrer, "the one genius of the English church" (as C.S. Lewis referred to him), whose own approach to exegesis also shed important light on this project.

I am greatly indebted to Dr. Hans-Anton Drewes, editor of the Karl Barth *Gesamtausgabe* and director of the Karl Barth-Archiv in Basel, Switzerland, who read my manuscript in its entirety and offered me indispensable advice. His knowledge of Barth and his keen, editorial eyes saved me from many mistakes. I also thank my friend, D. Paul La Montagne, for his help in preparing this work for publication. His expertise in theology, computers, and editing proved to be very important for the final production of this volume. I, nevertheless, am responsible for all mistakes, as well as any undo repetition of Barth's statements from his *Römerbrief* prefaces (which, given the richness of some of them, often seemed unavoidable).

I must also thank my mother, Ruth, and my father, the late Reverend Robert E. Burnett, for their lives of humble Christian service and their effort to bring me up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. My indebtedness to them goes beyond words. I thank the congregations of The Second English Presbyterian Church of Amwell, New Jersey, and The First Presbyterian Church of Waynesville, North Carolina for their patience with me as I tried to be their pastor while writing my dissertation. I am also grateful to the Montreat Presbyterian Church and to Mrs. Kate Simpson for their support and a very special word of thanks goes to the Reverend Dr. Calvin Thielman who has been a mentor and father in the faith to me for many years. I am also very grateful to Professor Martin Hengel, my sponsor while studying at the University of Tübingen, who graciously recommended my dissertation for publication, and to Mr. Georg Siebeck. I am deeply honored to have this work published by J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck).

Finally, I wish to thank my wife, Martha, the mother of our four children, Robert Knox, Hanna Ruth, Carl Austin, and Collin Brock. She has taught me more about love than I deserve to know and I dedicate this dissertation to her.

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If Protestant theology is to recover once more from its emaciation, and it is by no means certain that it will, our Old and New Testament scholars will, without prejudice to what they do as historians (as an avocation!), be theological exegetes, and as such really also work in obedience to “the truth.”

Karl Barth, “Von der Paradoxie des ‘positiven Paradoxes’
Antworten und Fragen an Paul Tillich” (1923)

Chapter 1

Introduction

Karl Barth's break with liberalism in the summer of 1915 is the most important event that has occurred in theology in over two hundred years. It should come as no surprise therefore that the precise nature of Barth's break with liberalism continues to be analyzed. Many books have dealt with this topic but the most important to appear in recent years has been Bruce McCormack's *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936*.¹ This study has overturned Hans Urs von Balthasar's thesis, which prevailed for nearly half a century, that Barth's break actually consisted of two breaks, "two conversions," "two decisive turning-points," the first occurring sometime during the First World War which was a turn from liberal theology to dialectical theology culminating in the second edition of his *Römerbrief* (1922), the second occurring in the late 1920s which was a turn "from dialectic to analogy" culminating in his little book on Anselm which he wrote in 1931 entitled *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*. McCormack has shown that although there were various shifts in Barth's development there was actually only one break, that which occurred in the summer of 1915, and that analogy never simply replaced dialectic but co-existed with it in Barth's thought from at least 1920 on, and that Barth's theology was always inherently dialectical from the first edition of his *Römerbrief* (1919) throughout the *Church Dogmatics* in the sense that it presupposed a *Realdialektik* of the veiling and unveiling of God in revelation. The upshot of all this is that we now have a new paradigm, a new periodization of Barth's development, which has not only further dismantled the largely Anglo-American myth of a neo-orthodox Barth, but has shown, because of "a single material insight" which began to emerge in Barth's thought in the summer of 1915, "that Barth was from first to last a theologian (and not a philosopher turned theologian as von Balthasar and those who followed in his wake seemed to imply)."²

A new day has clearly dawned in Barth studies. But as pioneering as McCormack's work has been and as much insight as he has given us into the social, political, cultural, philosophical, and theological antecedents leading up

¹ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

² McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, p. 20.

to Barth's break with liberalism, many important questions remain. What was Barth's relationship to Kant prior to his break with liberalism and throughout his *Römerbrief* period? What was his relationship to the reformers, to Luther, to Calvin? And above all, what was Barth's relationship to Schleiermacher? The significance of this latter question can hardly be overestimated. Barth recognized the significance of Schleiermacher's legacy perhaps more so than anyone else of his generation. Prior to his break with liberalism he had been a deeply devoted disciple of Schleiermacher. At the end of his career he questioned whether Schleiermacher was not only *the* church father of the nineteenth century but of the twentieth century as well.³ Even after his break, in his introductory lecture to his course on Schleiermacher in Göttingen on Nov. 11, 1923, he said:

Schleiermacher merits detailed historical consideration and study even if only because he was the one in whom the great struggle of Christianity with the strivings and achievements of the German spirit in 1750-1830, in whose light or shadow we still stand today, took place in a way which would still be memorable even if he were dead and his theological work had been transcended. ... But Schleiermacher is not dead for us and his theological work has not been transcended. If anyone still speaks today in Protestant theology as though he were still among us, it is Schleiermacher. We study Paul and the reformers, but we see with the eyes of Schleiermacher and think along the same lines as he did. This is true even when we criticize or reject the most important of his theologoumena or even all of them. Wittingly or willingly or not, Schleiermacher's method and presuppositions are the typical ferment in almost all theological work.⁴

There has been a great deal of discussion about Karl Barth's relationship to Schleiermacher in the last several decades. Many have claimed that Barth's treatment of Schleiermacher was not always fair. Indeed some have argued, especially in the period immediately following his break, that his "critique was seriously mistaken at every juncture."⁵ Barth himself said of those early years:

It is certain that what I thought, said, and wrote from that year on [1916], I simply did without him, and that his spectacles were not sitting on my nose as I was expounding the Epistle to the Romans. He was no longer a 'church father' for me. It is further certain, however, that this 'without him' implied a rather sharp 'against him.' On occasion, I intentionally

³ Karl Barth, "Nachwort" in F.D.E. Schleiermacher, *Schleiermacher-Auswahl*, ed. Heinz Bolli (Munich: Siebenstern-Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1968), p. 290; ET "Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher," trans. George Hunsinger in *The Theology of Schleiermacher* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), p. 261. Hereafter cited "Nachwort."

⁴ Karl Barth, *Die Theologie Schleiermachers 1923/24*, ed. Dietrich Ritschl (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1978), p. 1; ET *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), xiii. Hereafter cited *Die Theologie Schleiermachers*.

⁵ Terrence Tice, "Interviews with Karl Barth and Reflections on his Interpretation of Schleiermacher," *Barth and Schleiermacher: Beyond the Impasse?*, ed. J. Duke & R. Streetman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 55.

tionally made that explicit. Yet I really did not do it — since ‘old love never fades’ — without a deep inner regret that it could not be otherwise.⁶

Suffice it to say, no account of Barth’s break with liberalism can be considered complete apart from a thorough examination of his relationship to Schleiermacher. The following study seeks, in part, to contribute to a further understanding of this very deep and complex relationship. Though it makes no pretense of being complete in any sense, it does focus on a theme that deeply concerned them both.

More has been written about Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics in the last hundred years than any other topic related to him. Yet very little has been written about Barth’s relationship to Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics. This is surprising not only because of the enormous influence of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics throughout the twentieth century, but because Barth himself recognized it from early on. In his 1923/24 Göttingen lectures on Schleiermacher, of the four theological works selected to represent his greatest achievement as a scholar, Barth chose Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics for the following reason: “I am choosing for this purpose his hermeneutics, partly because of the principal importance of the material, for if a theologian of this significance wants to explain to us from what standpoint he reads and understands other writings, and especially the Bible, will not this apparently specialized question be in a very special way the place where everything is decided?”⁷ Barth, of course, could have chosen from a number of other works but the primary reason he seems to have chosen Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics as among his “most *mature* and *decisive*” is because “here,” he said, “we shall have the chance to get to know Schleiermacher at his best and most brilliant, in his natural strength, on his home ground, for, to use his own expression, he was a virtuoso in the field whose method hermeneutics describes.”⁸ Barth’s analysis of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics in his Göttingen lectures is as sharply nuanced and erudite as one can find in the early 1920s. Yet it also reflects a level of understanding, a depth of engagement, on the part of one who knows exactly where he stands in relationship to it. The following study seeks to demonstrate that Barth *did* know where he stood in relationship to Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics and knew from a much earlier period than most have realized.

In 1965, in the second edition of his epoch-making work, *Wahrheit und Methode*, Hans-Georg Gadamer referred to the first edition of Karl Barth’s

⁶ Karl Barth, “Nachwort,” p. 296.

⁷ Barth, *Die Theologie Schleiermachers*, p. 318; ET p. 178.

⁸ Barth *Die Theologie Schleiermachers*, pp. 9, 318; ET pp. xviii, 178.

Römerbrief as “a virtual hermeneutical manifesto.”⁹ This is an intriguing claim because the word hermeneutics does not even appear in any of the editions of Barth’s *Römerbrief* and because the theme of hermeneutics, apart from a few remarks in the prefaces, is nowhere specifically addressed. Unfortunately Gadamer never elaborated on this claim nor has anyone else provided a substantive explanation of it. It is the purpose of this study, however, to demonstrate that Gadamer was basically correct to refer to the first edition of Barth’s *Römerbrief* as “a virtual hermeneutical manifesto” and the reason is because it challenged the hegemony of a reigning hermeneutical tradition, the hermeneutical tradition of Friedrich Schleiermacher. To state it precisely, this study seeks to advance the thesis that an important part of Karl Barth’s attempt to break with liberalism was his attempt to overcome the hermeneutical tradition of Friedrich Schleiermacher – a tradition which was emerging before him and extended well beyond him yet took definitive shape in him – and that Barth’s attempt to overcome this hermeneutical tradition is reflected throughout his *Römerbrief* period and particularly in his attempt to engage in what he referred to as “theological exegesis.” Before I suggest why this study is important, however, it is necessary to address one particular issue which no consideration of this topic can avoid.

McCormack has argued that Karl Barth’s break with liberalism and subsequent theological revolution came about as the result of “a single material insight” and not primarily as the result of a shift in theological method. This is an important claim because “[h]aving identified a shift in theological method as the most significant,” many interpreters, according to McCormack, have “had a tendency to give to methodological questions a prominence that they simply did not have in Barth’s development when that development is viewed genetically – that is, from a standpoint within the development itself.”¹⁰ The following study seeks not to challenge this claim regarding the priority of content over method but, on the contrary, to underscore and deepen it, even if in an effort to contribute to a fuller account of Barth’s break with liberalism it also seeks to take one step beyond it.

Barth could indeed say from the beginning of his theological revolution as he did throughout his career that “*methodus est arbitraria*.” Nowhere is this better illustrated than in his talk about method and hermeneutics in the first half-volume of his *Church Dogmatics* where we repeatedly come across statements such as: “When God’s Word is heard and proclaimed, something takes place that for all our hermeneutical skill cannot be brought about by herme-

⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1965), p. 481 (Hereafter cited “Wahrheit und Methode”); *ET Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 581.

¹⁰ McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, p. viii.

neutical skill,” or “The only proper thing to do here is to renounce altogether the search for a method of hearing God’s Word, for an unequivocally correct description of its entry into man, into the realm of his experiences, attitudes and thoughts.”¹¹ From such statements it might appear that Barth was simply indifferent to hermeneutics or the question of method. This is certainly how many interpreted him after the Second World War and throughout the 1960s. More recently however a younger generation of scholars has suggested that Barth’s emphasis on the priority of content over method, specifically his emphasis on the priority of actual exegesis over hermeneutical theory, makes him more an exemplar or precursor of ‘post-modern’ or ‘post-critical’ thought. One such scholar, Mary Kathleen Cunningham, has for such reasons said that Barth’s hermeneutic is basically “*ad hoc*,” that he offers only “*ad hoc* hermeneutical principles,”¹² Explaining the reason for her own procedure, she says:

... moving from an examination of Barth’s hermeneutical comments to a study of his exegesis does not honor the pattern of Barth’s thinking, neither the unsystematic nature of his thought, nor his commitment to proceed from the particular to the general. Constructing a systematic hermeneutics out of what are essentially *ad hoc* remarks and then drawing conclusions about Barth’s exegesis on the grounds of these generalizations can lead one to distort his scriptural interpretation.

There is much to affirm here for it is certainly true that Karl Barth insisted on moving from the particular to the general and that there are dangers in drawing conclusions about his understanding of the exegetical task on the basis of generalizations rather than on the basis of his actual exegesis (Barth was fond of saying “*Latet periculum in generalibus!*” “Danger lurks in generalities!” and this certainly applies to any discussion of his exegesis). It is also true that Barth’s thought is unsystematic in the sense that it is not governed by any system, and that he did not construct a systematic hermeneutics.¹³ But it is quite another matter, it seems to me, to characterize Barth’s hermeneutic as basically “*ad hoc*” or to claim that he offers only “*ad hoc* hermeneutical principles.” Barth’s hermeneutic, on the contrary, as this study seeks to demonstrate on the basis of an examination of the *Römerbrief* period, can hardly be described as *ad hoc*. Indeed quite apart from where they came from or how he got them (which is the main reason they cannot be referred to as *ad hoc*), there are hermeneutical principles manifest in Barth’s writings throughout this period, par-

¹¹ KD I/1:153, 192; CD I/1:148, 184.

¹² Mary Kathleen Cunningham, *What Is Theological Exegesis? Interpretation and Use of Scripture in Barth’s Doctrine of Election* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995), p. 14.

¹³ Barth’s theology is, on the other hand, I would argue, systematic in the sense that it reflects the fact that not everything can be said about God at once and that when talking about God some things ought to be said before others.

ticularly in the prefaces to the various editions of his *Römerbrief*, which Barth defended throughout his career.

Again, however, this is not to suggest that Barth had a systematic or what since Schleiermacher has been called a general hermeneutic. Nor is it to suggest that what sparked Barth's revolution was his discovery of a new method. To repeat, Karl Barth's theological revolution emerged in the summer of 1915 out of a single material insight which did not occur as a result of applying *a priori* hermeneutical principles. Yet what this study seeks to highlight is the fact that the immediate consequence of this single material insight was a new understanding of the exegetical task which is reflected in the first edition of his *Römerbrief*. The hermeneutical principles emerging out of Barth's new understanding of the exegetical task, in other words, cannot be understood apart from this single material insight, but they are sufficiently formal to warrant attention. It is important to emphasize that these principles are not hard and fast rules. They do not serve to predict the outcome of any piece of actual exegesis or even preclude the possibility of arriving at very different interpretations of the same text.¹⁴ But they do indicate how Barth approached the task of exegesis and it is in closely examining these principles that we see as clearly as anywhere that Barth was indeed, as McCormack has said, "from first to last a theologian."

There are at least three reasons why this study is important. The first is because an in-depth study of the hermeneutical principles of Barth's *Römerbrief* period has yet to appear. A number of articles, dissertations, and book-length studies on Barth's exegesis have appeared in the German and English-speaking worlds in the last few decades.¹⁵ In this country among the most notable are two recently published Yale dissertations, Paul McGlasson's *Jesus and Judas: Biblical Exegesis in Barth* and Mary Cunningham's book, which I alluded to earlier, *What Is Theological Exegesis? Interpretation and Use of Scripture in Barth's Doctrine of Election*. Both of these studies have the virtue of maintaining Barth's priority of actual exegesis over hermeneutical reflection, but neither, frankly, tell us very much about Barth's theological exegesis.¹⁶ In the

¹⁴ What George Hunsinger says about certain patterns of thought in Barth's theology applies also to his hermeneutical principles. It would be false to suppose "that, because one understands how a lens works, one also understands the nature of an object on which the lens is focused. Just as a lens is merely a device for seeing and not the object perceived, so the patterns are merely instruments of perception and not Barth's argument itself. The difference between a lens and these patterns, however, is that the patterns are embedded in the object of perception rather than external to it" George Hunsinger, *How To Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology*, (Oxford: University Press, 1991), pp. vii-viii.

¹⁵ Most of these are listed in the bibliography.

¹⁶ Paul McGlasson, *Jesus and Judas: Biblical Exegesis in Barth* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1991). Cunningham's book I have reviewed in *Pro Ecclesia*, 4:4, pp. 499-501. Another

German-speaking world, however, much more serious attention has been given to Barth's hermeneutic. Walter Lindemann's book, *Karl Barth und die Kritische Schriftauslegung*, and Nicolaas Bakker's *In der Krisis der Offenbarung: Karl Barths Hermeneutik, dargestellt an seiner Römerbrief-Auslegung* are two among several important works which carefully examine Barth's hermeneutic and, specifically, his hermeneutical principles.¹⁷ Thus far, however, no study has focused primarily on the hermeneutical principles of Barth's *Römerbrief* prefaces nor how such principles might be understood in light of the hermeneutical tradition of Schleiermacher.¹⁸

The second reason why this study is important is because, in addition to all the secondary literature, a considerable amount of primary literature shedding light on Barth's understanding of the exegetical task has surfaced in recent years. Barth's personal correspondence with Eduard Thurneysen, of course, has shed a great deal of light on Barth's thinking in his early years and particularly with respect to exegesis. But more recent volumes of the *Gesamtausgabe* have shed even more light. Until 1978, for example, with the publication of Barth's 1923/24 Göttingen lectures on Schleiermacher, few knew that Barth had dealt specifically with Schleiermacher's hermeneutics. Furthermore, with the publication of two volumes of his writings from 1905-1914 in the last decade and a volume of his confirmation instruction from 1909-1921 in 1987, we now have more insight than ever into Barth's thinking before his break with liberalism and not least of all with respect to his understanding of the Bible and the exegetical task.¹⁹ Likewise the publication of Barth's first cycle of lectures

Yale dissertation yielding a similar result is Kathryn Greene-McCreight's *Ad Litteram: Understandings of The Plain Sense of Scripture in the Exegesis of Augustine, Calvin and Barth of Genesis 1-3* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, 1994).

¹⁷ Walter Lindemann, *Karl Barth und die Kritische Schriftauslegung* (Hamburg-Bergstedt: Herbert Reich-Evangelischer Verlag, 1973). Nicolaas T. Bakker, *In der Krisis der Offenbarung: Karl Barths Hermeneutik, dargestellt an seiner Römerbrief-Auslegung* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1974).

¹⁸ Two studies, however, are worthy of mention. Helmut Kirschstein's *Der souveräne Gott und die heilige Schrift: Einführung in die Biblische Hermeneutik Karl Barths* (Aachen: Shaker Verlag, 1998) is the most comprehensive study of Barth's hermeneutic to date. It considers Barth's hermeneutic in relation to the hermeneutical tradition of Schleiermacher but it does not do so in significant detail or specifically with respect to the *Römerbrief* period. Frederick Herzog's unpublished Th.D. dissertation, "The Possibility of Theological Understanding: An Inquiry in the Presuppositions of Hermeneutics in Theology," which began under Barth whom Herzog credits with having "pointed out the direction in which I was to follow," deals broadly with Barth's hermeneutic in relationship to Schleiermacher's (again, however, not with respect to the *Römerbrief* period), but, owing to its conclusions, did not have the benefit of materials which would have given him deeper insight into it. It was completed at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1953 under Paul Lehmann.

¹⁹ See p. 171n.183 and p. 45n.137, respectively, below.

on dogmatics, the *Göttingen Dogmatics*, coming as they do on the heels of the *Römerbrief* period, yield considerable insight into these matters, even though a conscious effort has been made not to read later insights back into this earlier period.²⁰ But by far the most important source of information to appear in recent years are the preface drafts to the first edition of Barth's *Römerbrief* which were made available thanks to Herbert Anzinger's careful transcription of Barth's handwritten manuscripts and first published in 1985 in the *Gesamtausgabe* edition of *Der Römerbrief (Erste Fassung) 1919* edited by Hermann Schmidt.²¹

Barth wrote six different drafts for his preface to the first edition of his *Römerbrief* before he settled on the one which is in the published edition. These are available here for the first time in English in the Appendix to this volume and they are significant for several reasons. Beyond giving us the rare opportunity to see a work of Barth's in progress, placing us, as Herrmann Schmidt says, "in the fortunate position to be able to look at the author in his workshop,"²² these preface drafts yield many new insights into Barth's understanding of the exegetical task at one of the most decisive turning points in his career. Michael Beintker has said:

Barth had of course already separated himself by the time of the first edition of his *Römerbrief* from the liberalizing tendency of his earlier years. He now approaches the Bible in that manner which shall remain determinative and valid for the entirety of his work. In contrast to historical-critical biblical exegesis, whose right he did not deny, he wanted to press forward to the theological understanding of the biblical texts – a task which he saw had been brought to extinction by limiting exegesis to historical analysis. Barth's exegesis was led by a hermeneutic which is able to see our world within the world of Paul's *Romans*. ... In the drafts of the preface Barth reflected on his hermeneutic even more extensively than in the programmatic preface of the published edition. ... the fact is, the first *Römerbrief* edition with its program of a thoroughly theological understanding of the text is to be seen as a fundamental building block in the history of biblical hermeneutics in this century, or even as an exceptional, pioneering accomplishment in this field.²³

Moreover, contrary to those who might have thought that his hermeneutical remarks in his famous preface to the second edition were "essentially *ad hoc*"

²⁰ Though I have sought to avoid a backwards historical argument, I *do* make references to the *Göttingen and Church Dogmatics* and other later materials for two reasons: first, because Barth himself sometimes makes reference in his later writings to his own thought processes in the *Römerbrief* period, and secondly, because Barth continued to use concepts and vocabulary out of his *Römerbrief* period, it is important to follow the trajectory of some of these thoughts at various points (which I do occasionally, though largely in the footnotes).

²¹ Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Erste Fassung) 1919*, ed. Hermann Schmidt (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1985), pp. 581-602.

²² Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Erste Fassung) 1919*, editor's preface, xv.

²³ Michael Beintker, "Der Römerbrief von 1919," *Verkündigung und Forschung*, 30:2, 1985, p. 23.

responses to the charges of his critics,²⁴ the preface drafts to the first *Römerbrief* edition are also significant because they demonstrate not only that Barth had clear, self-conscious hermeneutical convictions from the very beginning, but that he clearly anticipated his contemporaries' objections to them. In any case, they shed considerable light on much that Barth says in his prefaces to the second and third editions of his *Römerbrief* and, contrary to those who have sought to drive a wedge between the first and second editions, show significant points of continuity.

Finally, a third reason why this study is important is because no theologian since John Calvin has been more committed to biblical exegesis than Karl Barth. There are over fifteen thousand biblical references throughout the *Church Dogmatics* and more than two thousand examples of detailed exegesis of specific biblical passages. In addition to his other books, commentaries, articles, sermons, and publications, there is still a great deal of unpublished materials that demonstrate the seriousness of Barth's commitment to biblical exegesis. Barth's contribution is clearly unprecedented in modern theology. No other modern theologian has even come close to producing the amount of exegesis he produced. Yet the significance of Barth's achievement as a biblical exegete continues to be assessed. Unlike his early contemporaries who tried to dismiss him as a proof-texting "concordance exegete," there has been a tendency in recent years – even among those largely sympathetic to Barth – to characterize his contribution as basically aberrant, anomalous, something which owes more to his "tremendous creativity" and "genius" than to anything else.²⁵ Even my teacher, Brevard Childs, a student and longtime admirer of Barth's theology, has recently stated:

Karl Barth's name emerges above all others in the 20th century as providing the most ambitious attempt to construct church dogmatics on the foundation of biblical exegesis. One only has to compare Barth's sustained use of detailed exegesis throughout his dogmatics with Brunner, Althaus, Niebuhr, Tillich, and Ebeling, to name only a few, to see what a remarkably different world he had entered from that of his contemporaries. Yet for various reasons Barth's exegesis, for all its brilliant insights and massive stimulus, remained a "virtuoso performance" (the term is Paul McGlasson's) which could not be duplicated and which left little lasting impact either on the biblical academy or on the church. Here the contrast with the enduring biblical contribution of the Reformers is painfully evident.²⁶

²⁴ A collection of all the published reviews of the first edition of Barth's *Römerbrief* can be found in the Center for Barth Studies in Luce Library at Princeton Theological Seminary.

²⁵ Cunningham, *What Is Theological Exegesis?*, p. 14.

²⁶ Brevard Childs, "Toward Recovering Theological Exegesis" in *Pro Ecclesia*, 6 (1997), p. 19. In 1969, Childs said: "When one reads Jülicher's brilliant and learned treatment of Romans, the book emerges from a few shattered walls and ruins. And yet when you read Barth on Romans, whether you agree with his interpretation or not, you know you have confronted someone who understands Paul. It reminds one, again, of Augustine or Chrysostom" ("Karl

This is a serious charge which I believe calls into question not only the significance of Karl Barth's contribution as a biblical exegete but the significance of his entire theology. If Barth's exegesis was essentially a "virtuoso performance," something having more to do with his own creativity and genius than with what Scripture actually says, then his theology – on the basis of its own presuppositions and standards – will not stand. Barth insisted throughout his career that his move had been first to the Bible then to dogma, but if this first move began with exegesis which was essentially ill-founded or merely the product of his own idiosyncratic insights, then his entire theology – again, by its own presuppositions and standards – can hardly be judged as anything else but a "false start." Anyone who has read Barth for very long knows that his entire theological enterprise stands or falls on the basis of exegesis. "Does it stand in Scripture?" This is the presupposition and test of all dogma. This is what really mattered most to Barth; and not just in his early years but in his later years as well.²⁷ Thus, given the significance of its role, at least in Barth's own mind, before pronouncing any final verdict over his exegesis on the basis of whether it has made any "lasting impact" on the church or academy (which is perhaps still too early to tell) or whether it is capable of being "duplicated" or was merely the product of a "virtuoso" (neither of which, for reasons I hope to make clear, he would have seen as good), perhaps it is worthwhile to take a

Barth as Interpreter of Scripture" in *Karl Barth and the Future of Theology*, ed. David L. Dickerman (New Haven: Yale Divinity School Association, 1969), p. 35). Among others who refer to Barth as an exegetical "virtuoso" is Mark I. Wallace, "Karl Barth's Hermeneutic: A Way Beyond the Impasse," *Journal of Religion*, 68 (July 1988), p. 408. See also Paul Avis, "Karl Barth: The Reluctant Virtuoso," *Theology*, 86 (May 1983), pp. 164-171.

²⁷ Robert C. Johnson recounts being in one of Barth's seminars in the late 1950's when "a spirited and somewhat convoluted debate" over Barth's method arose, "a debate that moved from one complex issue to two others, and from each of these to two others, and so on. ... The dispute continued in white heat for more than an hour, in the course of which – peering over his glasses on the end of his nose – Barth smoked his pipe, sipped his wine, and refrained from speaking even one word. Then when the debate was at the point of moving into the second hour, it suddenly occurred to one of the students that there was a potential consultant present, a resource person who might conceivably be able to shed some light on the problem or adjudicate the dispute. This student turned and ricocheted the original question that had begun the debate to Barth. Not to be dramatic, but simply to report: there literally was a full minute of heavy silence, in which everyone simply stared at the table. And then Barth said, looking across the morass of complex issues that had been spread on the table (and to all appearances he was entirely serious), 'If I understand what I'm trying to do in the *Church Dogmatics*, it is to listen to what Scripture is saying and tell you what I hear.'" To which Johnson adds: "There was another full minute of silence; and when it was broken, it was not broken verbally but by the noise of chairs in which there was squirming and shifting. And when someone finally did say something (and a great deal more was said), it was said in quite another vein." See "The Legacy of Karl Barth" in *Karl Barth and the Future of Theology*, ed. David L. Dickerman (New Haven: Yale Divinity School Association, 1969), pp. 3-4.

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