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For Dick & Marcia  
on the eve of Linda's

Bar mitzvah -

with warmest  
wishes

Harold

## KARL BARTH'S JOB

### *Morality and Theodicy*

By HAROLD M. SCHULWEIS

BARTH'S THEOLOGICAL EXEGESIS of the Book of Job demonstrates the extra-ordinary role which the idea of divine personality plays in his theodicy.<sup>1</sup> For Barth, the moral of the Book of Job is the discovery that in dealing with God we have to do with a totally unique Personality, with a Subject which alone offers content to the predicates ascribed to Him.

At the outset of the Jobian drama Job knows only Elohim, the Deus revelatus, God as partner and friend. His idea of God has been formed and confirmed by benevolent experiences in life. Now he suffers terrifying afflictions. He is bewildered because as a believer in one God he knows that whatever sorrow befalls him comes from God. As a monotheist he knows that suffering comes from no secondary god. Job's faith and honesty force upon him the recognition of a relentless, cruel, hostile force. At the same time the memory of Elohim, and the covenantal compact support his protestation against this alienating power. He appeals to the co-signatory of that "record on high" for witness and vindication.<sup>2</sup> Only at the conclusion of the dialogues with man and the voices out of the whirlwind does Job come to know the identity of this alien and unpredictable form. Yahweh, the concealed personality of the divine, is the same as Elohim. In Job's moment of truth, the "two gods" are known as one. Adversary and advocate inhere within the same Personality. Through this shock of recognition Job finds his reconciliation with God. He has

<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV, Part 3, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961). Section 70.

<sup>2</sup> *Job*, 16:19-21.

come to believe in Elohim despite his belief in Yahweh, and in Yahweh despite his belief in Elohim.

To become aware of the oneness of Yahweh-Elohim is to overcome the inner conflict which tears apart Job's fidelity. "Far from the Word uttered by Yahweh provoking or even fostering division in Job's thought of God, it restores and re-establishes the Unity which is so severely threatened".<sup>3</sup> This inner unity has been achieved through Job's heroic surrender to Yahweh as "the ruling Subject in the history of Job."<sup>4</sup> Such willing and unconditional subordination to the divine Subject is the triumph of faith. In obedience to the self-revelations of Yahweh, in the acceptance of His ways without attempting to judge them, Job finds his true freedom. He is free from the futile efforts to understand, justify or contend with the ultimately inscrutable manifestations of the distinctive personality.

For Barth, the need for theodicy is itself a symptom of man's enslavement to moral and logical criteria and norms irrelevant to the conduct of the divinely unique One. Yahweh neither requires nor asks for Job's "understanding, agreement or applause."<sup>5</sup> The very question which underlies the alleged need for theodicy is presumptuous. The "message of the cosmos" whispering through the whirlwind informs Job that he is not the center of the universe, that he has nothing to do with its direction, that he is incompetent and irreverent in thinking he can judge its teleology.

What then of the old covenant which promised men security and moral intelligibility of the world? That solidity Barth judges to be "static." Its monodimensional character is superseded by a dynamic, changing relationship.<sup>6</sup> True relationship is alive with unpredictability. The divine Other is Subject personality, not impersonal moral or metaphysical

<sup>3</sup> *Church Dogmatics*, op. cit. p. 428.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 431.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 405

ideals. The divine Person cannot be made perceptible to man, reasonable and amenable to human standards, without reducing His dignity. The true Subject of faith is Yahweh, the unique Personality who will not be confined to any limits outside Himself. Man's expectation level must accordingly be opened beyond the limitations of his objectified ideals. With Yahweh, one must be prepared to live in surprise. For man knows nothing of the immanent autonomy of God's purpose.

In the beginning Job had only half a god and his fidelity to such a partial deity led to his alienation. Loyalty to Elohim is idolatrous and ultimately self-idolatrous. And Barth, while understanding Job's honorable defiance against Yahweh, will not justify it. "Ungodliness does not cease to be such because it is ungodliness in what is good."<sup>7</sup> Nor is Barth easier on Job's comforters. Their apologetic is filled with sacred cliches dependent upon their acquaintance with Elohim alone. For all their obduracy in clinging to the good and just even in the fire of affliction, they have strait-jacketed the Divine personality. They have frozen the fluidity of God's will and acts into abstract, general, universal attributes—all "unhistorical terms."<sup>8</sup> In moralizing God's ways they have programmed Him into a safe and predictable moral machine. God's repudiation of their apologia Barth takes as a warning against institutional truth. In binding the unconditional freedom of the Divine Subject to the moral predicates they have made sport of His sovereignty.

It would appear that the logic of Barth's harmonization of the two gods results in a subordination of Elohim to Yahweh. One cannot come to Yahweh through Elohim because the latter refers to the generic name of His righteousness, wisdom and goodness. Through the generality of Elohim attributes we remain with dead, changeless essences, knowing nothing of His initiating revelations in the dynamics of historic events. Elohim-centered, we know nothing of the Lord who stands

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 407.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 457.

over against us, conformable to no antecedent behavior, the absolute source and norm of all the good. For the friends of Job, "He is not Yahweh and as such Elohim-Shaddai, as such righteous, wise and powerful in what is always a definite and limited sphere, as such operative and manifest in these His attributes."<sup>9</sup> For Job's friends, the predicates decide the Subject. Therein lies concealed the deepest heresy of religion, according to Karl Barth.

### *Personality as Subject*

Barth's account of the Job story and the relationship between Elohim and Yahweh exemplifies his major concern for the proper relationship of predicates and Subject within theological propositions. Yahweh is the paradigm of the divine Subject which spawns a collection of divine predicates. For Barth, it is critical that the subject-predicate relationship remains uninvertible. The Subject and only the Subject determines the predicates. Without the Subject, the predicates are lifeless and their meaning undetermined. Barth is ever concerned lest the predicates of divinity, once assigned meaning independent of the Subject, become the measuring rod of God. Once they are given separate status, characterized unequivocally, the Subject is open to judgement according to the sense of predicates. For Barth opposition to the Biblical God whose being, acts, and love forever are "His own," may be traced to the false autonomy claimed by the predicates of divinity. Naturalism, idealism, romanticism, humanism err in common by allowing the priority and primacy of the predicates of divinity over that of the divine Subject. In opposition to such subordination of the subject, Barth announces that: "Strictly speaking there is no divine predicate, no idea of God which can have as its special content what God is. There is strictly speaking *only* the Divine Subject as such and in Him the fitness of His divine predicates."<sup>10</sup> The truth and meaning

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 460.

<sup>10</sup> *Church Dogmatics* II, Part 1, p. 300.

of all predicates remain the prerogative of God as the one Subject. Only the Subject gives meaning to the what.

The subject is the "Who," best characterized as personality. But "personality," we are cautioned, is an attribute borrowed from our experiences with human persons. The meaning of personality as applied to the divine subject cannot be gained by analogy from below upwards, but is acquired derivatively from His self-disclosure. Only God is Subject, only God is personality. "Not we but God is I."<sup>11</sup> We can therefore learn nothing from the claim that God is or has personality if we think we understand what personality means of itself.<sup>12</sup> God as personality prevents man's predicate worship. Despite its pious sounds, fidelity to universal and comprehensible predicates is but a circuitous adoration of our objectified projected values.

In examining the attempts of those philosophers and theologians who would deny attribution of personality to God, Barth detects a secret rebellion against the autonomy of the predicating Subject. Behind the efforts of Hegelian theologians to defend the Absoluteness of the Infinite Spirit from the compromising personality, he sees a subtle pre-emption of God's exclusive controlling function by the human personality. For them, human personality, despite its finitude, becomes the true I who wills and knows and names the acts of God. The divine Subject is domesticated by the predicates known by man and used to determine the shape of God. Even those who ascribe personality to God but simply as an appended predicate torn from man's noblest part (H. Siebeck, R. Rothe, Lotze and Ritschl), are exposed by Barth as robbing God of His exclusive autonomy. The origin and selection of the predicate is still man's. In genuine faith, as Barth conceives it, the predicates of God are revealed in concrete, particular relations; but all the predicates are entailed in the Subject and are not refutable by any conceivable experience. In this

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 284.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 296.

sense, Barth's Subject-theology appears analytic; that is, the predicates are entailed in the Subject. The Subject is unconditionally true and beyond definition. To properly ascribe personality to God is to recognize something which precedes all human predications.

The limitations of Job and his comforters are revealed in their appeal to the predicates of an accessible Elohim. Yahweh is, however, from the point of human cognition, a veritably predicateless Subject. Job would not have complained nor would his friends have offered defense of God had they not relied on the independent meaning of the predicates. Only the Subject may judge. Man, as the object of that judgement, can properly only receive and accept. The ground of critique of God is removed at its foundation.

We are presented with a Euthyphro-like disjunction: either theology judges the Subject according to the predicates, or the predicates according to the self-disclosure of the Subject. For Barth the choice is unambiguous. The Subject is the unquestionable norm and criterion of the goodness of its imperatives.

What then of God's self-disclosure? Have we no knowledge of God's attributes after the revelatory self-manifestation of the Subject? Is there no constancy in God's justice or mercy? Barth cannot endow even the revealed predicates with immutability lest they thereby serve as measures of God's future conduct. No external rules of logic or semantic order or moral standard can judge His self-endured constancy. However, God's actions may appear to contradict His earlier self-revelation, they are internally consistent in Him. "The fact that He is one and the same," Barth contends, "does not mean that He is bound to be and say and do only one and the same thing. . . ." <sup>13</sup> Who then possesses the true measure of sameness to judge the constancy of an absolutely free, living personality whose decisions are flexible? No epistemic

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 496.



guarantees are offered to man by the unique and dynamic personality. Metaphysical and moral predicates hold no fettered meaning over His actions. Accepting the mobility of His actions, the man of faith must surrender all claims to knowledge of His immutability. Anticipation of His future acts based upon past performances presupposes a uniformity of divine nature less justifiable than the scientist's dependence upon the uniformity of nature. Man must be prepared to encounter His will ad hoc. He cannot make any deductions from the singularity of His concrete self-revelations, neither as to His essential character nor as to His future conduct. It may well not happen the same way a second time; indeed, the second time may contradict what man has taken to be the meaning of the original self-manifestation. With no constant predicates ascribable to the Subject, man's false security is shattered. For they provided a stability surreptitiously based upon the human conceit in his cognitive grasp of the elusive Subject. However the man of faith trusts in the perfections of God, he can never be completely free from the suspicion that the divine Personality has chosen to reveal Himself "in this or that form" in a "kind of sport," without disclosing Himself in reality, without giving us any pledge that in Himself He is not perhaps quite other; and so radically different from the forms of glory in the game played with us that "it is not worth while perhaps to take part in this game or this economy."<sup>14</sup>

What does it amount to then that God has revealed Himself to be "right, friendly and wholesome"? How does faith in God's goodness or His love affect man's expectations? Again, we return to Barth's insistence that the theological propositions of faith are not to be inverted. "God is love" does not mean that "love is God." Love itself is undefinable. "God is love" means that our attention is to be directed towards the one who loves. The Who, not the what, must be our ultimate concern.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 324.

We know nothing about God's love. Consequently, we have no right to inform God that killing, rejecting and condemning man "from the very beginning, from all eternity" is contrary to the idea of love.<sup>15</sup> If anything, we must learn from God's unconditional love how we are to love the Subject without any regard to the predicates. For God's true love is not tied to the worthiness of the object loved. The "sovereign love" of the Subject is not dependent upon the lovability of the predicates of the other.

Helmut Gollwitzer elaborates upon this Barthian motif by distinguishing between erotic and genuine love. Erotic love is the love of the object's predicates, for it is directed towards the other only as "a bearer of the worth."<sup>16</sup> The other must be worthy of our love. Genuine love is interested in the other as Subject, irrespective of the predicates. Such unconditioned love is focused upon "the Ego" of the other without regard to its qualities. The subject or Personality of God cannot be translated into predicates.

Barth intends to preserve the freedom and uniqueness of God's sovereign "I" by negating the independent ontological and axiological value of the attributes. Otherwise, God is simply summed up as a collection of ultimate values and potencies. Such values apprehended, approved and worshipped by man mask the conceit of self-love and self-sufficient knowledge. There are no sources outside God's self-revelation that can help us understand the divine perfection.<sup>17</sup> The analogical nature of language must not be taken so seriously that it is confounded with the inner nature of God.

#### *Personality: Barthian Usage*

The Barthian solution to the problem of evil amounts to a dissolution of the problematic itself. The presuppositions

<sup>15</sup> *Church Dogmatics* II, Part 1, p. 171.

<sup>16</sup> Helmut Gollwitzer, *The Existence of God as Confessed by Faith*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), p. 103 f.

<sup>17</sup> *Church Dogmatics* II, Part 2, p. 334.

of the Jobian expostulation with the divine are attacked as presumptuous. As we have seen, Barth's conception of divine personality assumes the primacy of the Subject and an irreversible relationship between it and its predicates. His exegesis of the Book of Job is faithful to the absolute dominance of the divine personality. That which Barth describes as Job's final acknowledgement of the identity of the two Gods is in fact achieved by the absorption of Elohim by Yahweh, by the assimilation of the predicate by the determining Subject. Barth's analysis suggests the need for an anthropodicy, not a theodicy, for a justification of man's sinfulness, not God's justice. The proper relationship of nature to the radically transcendentalized totally other Subject is, in Peter Berger's sense of the word, "masochistic."<sup>18</sup>

For all its contrast with the alleged impersonalism of metaphysical God-ideas, the living personality of the Barthian God is no more compassionate towards man nor more supportive of the ideals of human personality. The common claim that the understanding of God as personality transfers to man greater dignity than does the metaphysical God-idea is not borne out in Barth's personalism. After Barth, we are not convinced by Herbert Richardson's claim that "The integrity of the individual person is protected by the affirmation that the principle of ultimate reality is a personal God."<sup>19</sup> Paradoxically, the personalism of Barth's sovereign God appears to depersonalize man.

"Personality" is a notoriously elastic term. No dictionary definition will help us determine how it is being used. A personal God is normally associated with a moral God, one disposed to act in accordance with commonly understood moral standards. But we would be well advised to follow the

<sup>18</sup> In his *The Sacred Canopy*, Peter Berger employs this term in a non-Freudian sense. It refers to the self-denying surrender of the individual to large nomoi. P. 55 f. (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1969).

<sup>19</sup> Herbert W. Richardson, *Toward an American Theology*, (New York, Harper & Row, 1967), p. 10.

counsel of contemporary linguistic analysts and ask what "job" the term "personality" is meant to perform in theology. In the case of Barth personality is a morally neutral concept. In his theological writings, divine Personality refers to a will which cannot be rationalized or moralized. To live over against a living personality means to subordinate our moral concepts to His inscrutable sovereign will. No system, no moral or rational standards are applicable to His will. Such a conception of divine personality recommends itself to personalistic theodicies. For with such a personality one can never be sure of the meaning of our moral predicates.

To acknowledge God as person means to accept Him as He is; however He appears, He is to be experienced, not defined. The experience, however, is unpredictable. Who then is right in ascribing personality to God? Does "personality" ascribed to God refer to a supreme self-subsistent, most perfectly intelligent being (Aquinas); or does it include a capacity to feel joy and suffering, an achievement born through conflict (Berdyayev)? Does it entail a willingness and capacity to relate to others (Brightman)? Does it imply God's moral responsibility or confer obligations upon Him?

"Personality" functions as an ascriptive term. When applied to a supersensible being not subject to empirical observation, the intent and extent of the ascription is undetermined. The issue is not resolvable by consulting lexicon or scriptures. Verses may be cited to support a humanly comprehensible moral understanding of personality and others to sustain a supramoral interpretation. And, in truth, the name person as applied to God is not found in the Bible. We gain familiarity with the notion of a personal God indirectly through biblical and liturgical idioms which refer to God as "shepherd," "father," "ruler," "king," "judge." But precisely what moral character these terms suggest is left unclear.

As Barth uses the term personality, it offers little positive information about the subject. Personality is not a predicate among predicates. It functions much like that logically odd

term "existence"; a term to which linguistic analysts deny the status of predicate. "Existence" is not a quality or property of a subject, but functions to inform us that whatever concept is under discussion applies to something.

Similarly, to speak of God's personality is to be advised that whatever attribute is under discussion refers to the Subject. It refers to a unique "I," to a something or someone I know not what. Personality in Barthian usage functions negatively. It tells us that the Subject is not an object, not an accessible essence, not approachable through an apprehension of general predicates.

Barth's use of personality is related to his idea of divine perfection. For Barth, the overriding consideration determining divine perfection is His sovereign freedom. He uses personality to defend that absolute independence of God. In his theodicy, its use effectively vitiates the very ground upon which the Jobian complaint is founded. In his hands, personality as a divine predicate is as morally neutral a term as is "holiness." Of interest here is Walther Eichrodt's discussion of the original biblical concept of holiness. He tells us that holiness "resides not in the elevated moral standards, but in *the personal quality* of the God to which it refers."<sup>20</sup> Noteworthy in Eichrodt's analysis is his use of God's "personal" quality to characterize the amorality of holiness. To inquire into the ethical content of holiness is therefore to "ask the wrong question." It is, however, equally clear to Eichrodt that the later biblical tradition, preeminently through the prophets, transformed the supra-moral meaning of holiness. The moral element, "permeated the language of holiness even more strongly when the perfect fulfillment of social obligations came to be understood as the conduct truly in keeping with the divine holiness; and to such conduct the actual term holy was now applied."<sup>21</sup> Ezekiel Kaufman, among other

<sup>20</sup> Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 6th edition, 1961). Volume I, p. 276.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p. 278.

scholars, senses the tension between "religious" and "moral" demands in characterizing the nature of God. Within the Bible, one may observe the moral ideal which sets limits upon the ways of God as opposed to the religious ideal which subjects all things and events to divine control without any restrictions. Kaufman speaks of a "primary non-moral or supra-moral element in monotheistic faith: the will and command of God is absolutely good."<sup>22</sup> The will of the sovereign Personality is good by virtue of the commander. The Barthian use of "personality" in his theodicy, we suggest, tends toward an earlier supra-moral, priestly understanding of holiness. In this reversion, he has managed to shake loose the later religious association of morality with divine personality.

<sup>22</sup> Ezekial Kaufman, *The Religion of Israel*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1960), p. 75.