Chapter 4

The fulfilment of history in Barth, Frei, Auerbach and Dante

Mike Higton

On the 28th January 1969 a memorial colloquium was held in honour of Karl Barth at Yale Divinity School, forty days after his death. James Gustafson spoke on Barth's ethics, Brevard Childs on his reading of Scripture, and Juliann Hartt on the scale of Barth's achievement; Hans Frei presented a piece simply called 'Karl Barth: Theologian',¹ in which he spoke of Barth's 'energetic and logically consistent Christ-centredness', and of his theology's ability to 'haunt and comfort the rest of us with its iron and yet gay consistency, when we are less daring in our ways of doing theology' (Frei, 1993, pp. 174–5). Barth's Christ-centredness was shown, Frei said, in his

conceptual unfolding of a rich variety of beings and relations, all of them good and right, and all of them real in their own right, and all of them referring figurally to the incarnate, raised and ascended Lord who has promised to be with us to the end, and at the end. (Frei, 1993, p. 175)

'In casting about for a comparison' to Barth's achievement in the *Dogmatics*, Frei said, he found himself 'invariably drawn to some things Erich Auerbach has said about Dante': there is a 'Dantesque element in Barth' (Frei, 1993, p. 168).²

For Barth, the Bible was, in a manner, Virgil and Beatrice in one. The Guide who took him only to the threshold of Paradise, it was at the same time the *figura* in writing of that greatest wonder which is the fulfillment of all natural, historical being without detracting from it: the incarnate reconciliation between God and man that is Jesus Christ. (Frei, 1993, p. 169)

To put this in my own terms, Frei was suggesting that Barth's 'energetic and logically consistent Christ-centredness', a Christ-centredness which 'reached a well-nigh incredible consistency' (Frei, 1993, p. 175), can best be understood as a *figural economy*. He suggests that if we understand the *Church Dogmatics* as the exploration of such a figural economy, it becomes clear that Barth's theology is one which fosters, rather than inhibits, attention to the particular, the contingent, the surprising, the different. It becomes clear that Barth's vision of the fulfilment of history is profoundly open to history, that it is profoundly historical.

Hans Frei on Karl Barth

A 'Dantesque' Barth

Frei, then, begins his interpretation of the *Church Dogmatics* by drawing a comparison with Auerbach's Dante.³ I am not here going to provide an exposition of Auerbach's work – that can be found easily enough elsewhere – but the essentials are clear enough.⁴ Dante, in Auerbach's description, portrays a vast array of characters who have found (in their respective positions in the inferno, purgatory, and paradise) their fulfilment. That is, in her position in the comedy each has become most fully him- or herself precisely as he or she takes her place in a vast choreography which as a whole demonstrates divine judgement, and which as a whole circles around the centre, Christ. In Dante, we might say, the 'fulfilment of history' is *displayed* in the arrangement of all natural, historical being according to the scheme of God's judgement, and the valuing or preservation of history is displayed in the richness and density of the portrayals that make up this history. That is, God's judgement, in its basic threefold division, and in the finer grades that structure the inferno, purgatory and paradise, is seen precisely in and through the

diverse concrete lives of multiple distinct creatures; and the reality and individuality of each of those creatures is preserved and even accentuated in this portrayal.

For instance, Virgil in the *Comedy* is not, according to Auerbach, an allegorical figure; he is neither ‘reason nor poetry nor the Empire. He is Virgil himself’ (Auerbach, 1984, p. 70); better: he is the concrete, fulfilled reality of which the historical Virgil was the figure. The Virgil of the *Comedy* is *more* real, and more really Virgil, than the Virgil of history, because he is a Virgil whose position in God’s plans is now made fully clear, and who is now most fully able to play his allotted role in demonstrating God’s justice. The historical Virgil known of by Dante had prophesied the *pax romana*, had inspired future poets, had prophesied Christ in the Fourth Eclogue, had described the pathway to the dead, and was a man of justice and piety; living before Christ he nevertheless stood on the threshold of Christianity, pointing towards it; living as a pagan, he could approach but not cross that threshold. It is precisely as the fulfilment of this historical figure that the Virgil of the *Comedy* is elected as Dante’s guide, but ‘can lead him only to the threshold of the kingdom, only as far as the limit which his noble and righteous poetry was able to discern.’ Virgil is now what Virgil was then; only now the full meaning – the full grandeur and limitation – of Virgil’s existence is made clear. The *Comedy*’s Virgil is a concrete, living figure who interprets for us the concrete, living Virgil of history. Virgil in the *Comedy* is more Virgil than Virgil (Auerbach, 1984, pp. 68–70).

With Beatrice, the situation is more complex. Beatrice was in Dante’s own life always understood as ‘a miracle sent from Heaven, an incarnation of divine truth’ (Auerbach, 1984, p. 74). We need not bury ourselves in discussion of how the Beatrice constructed in Dante’s poetry and imagination, the Beatrice of the *Vita Nuova*, relates to

the particular Florentine girl who later married Simone de' Bardi (Auerbach, 1969, p. 60); her fulfilment in the *Comedy* is the fulfilment of the figure of Beatrice experienced by Dante in his own life and depicted in his poetry. Beatrice in the comedy is the fulfilment of this genuinely, if not straightforwardly, historical reality.⁵ The Beatrice of the *Comedy* is therefore an incarnation of (not an allegory of) revelation: an incarnation of 'that part of the divine plan of salvation which precisely is the miracle whereby men are raised above other earthly creatures. Beatrice is incarnation, she is *figura* or *idolo Christi*' (Auerbach, 1984, p. 75). This is what the experience of Beatrice had been to Dante in life; this is now what the *Comedy*'s Beatrice is more fully and clearly. Once again, the Beatrice of the *Comedy* is more Beatrice than Beatrice, precisely because her position in God's plans is made fully clear, and because she is enabled to play fully the role in displaying God's justice which the Beatrice of Dante's earlier life had filled only in part.

Virgil, one concrete historical figure amongst all others, nevertheless acts as a guide to this display; he leads Dante through it to the threshold of that region in which the lives of men and women are made to display the reconciliation of God and creation; as a John the Baptist figure he *points towards* this reconciliation only from a distance. Beatrice, on the other hand – again as one concrete figure amongst others – is in her very particularity an *embodiment* of the reconciliation to which Virgil can only point: she displays the nature and glory and beauty of it.

When Frei explains his comparison between Barth and Auerbach's Dante, he says that the Bible in Barth can be compared both to Auerbach's Beatrice and to his Virgil.⁶ Barth, that is, saw in the Bible a portrayal of creatures who have their own concrete particularity, but who are portrayed in the context of divine providence, and in

that fuller context are shown to be both *witnesses* to the reconciliation of God and humanity (the Virgil aspect) and the *embodiment* of that reconciliation (the Beatrice aspect).⁷ This witnessing and this embodiment are not functions which diminish, annul or override the concrete particularity of the creatures portrayed, and neither are they roles which are external or accidental to the creatures' concrete particularity: rather they are the confirmation and fulfilment, the establishment and preservation of that particularity. As such it is misleading to use, as I have done for the sake of convenience, terms such as 'function' or 'role': the witness or embodiment which the Bible displays to us in its characters is a matter of their identity, their being, rather than of something ultimately distinguishable from them. They *are* witnesses and embodiments, precisely as the unsubstitutably particular individuals they are.

One way of interpreting further Frei's sketch would be to suggest that the Bible portrays many diverse witnesses to reconciliation, but only one embodiment: that is, that the role of Virgil is played by a cast of thousands (patriarchs, judges, kings, prophets, apostles; saints and sinners) but that the role of Beatrice is played only by Christ. Christ is portrayed as an unsubstitutable individual, but in such a way that in his very unsubstitutable individuality he is shown to be the embodiment of divine-human reconciliation; other creaturely actors in the Biblical drama are portrayed in all their concrete particularity, but in such a way that their concrete particularity is shown to witness to Jesus Christ.

This is, I think, part of Frei's meaning. However, he ultimately makes it clear that he has a more complex view of the figural economy of Scripture. Frei insists that Jesus, as portrayed in the Bible, is both fulfilment *and figure*. As figured, the reconciliation of God and humanity in Jesus of Nazareth is and will be the fulfilment of

‘all created reality’: all the creaturely reality depicted in the Bible (and, indeed all other creaturely reality, when seen in the light of God’s Word) finds its true meaning when it is shown in all its particularity as a witness, as a reality which points away from itself and towards Christ. As *figure*, however, what we see displayed concretely in Jesus is also found repeated in every other concrete form of the divine human relationship: in each of those concrete forms the incarnation is as it were republished and filled out, split in the prism of diverse creaturely reality into a rainbow of incarnate reconciliation.⁸

Figural imagination and secular sensibility

This figural economy was, Frei says, a ‘given’ for Barth’s imagination. This imagination is, of course, a *biblical* imagination: an imagination which feeds upon the many concrete portrayals in the Bible and which passionately believes that these portrayals form a unity, with Christ at their centre (and although the Bible may not form the same kind of structural unity as the *Comedy*, for the figural imagination it is nonetheless single: it is not simply ‘the Scriptures’, it is one Bible). Barth’s imagination is also both a *Christological* and an *eschatological* imagination, and the two are inseparable: it is an imagination which looks for the fulfilment of all creaturely reality in Christ’s first and second advents; and it is an imagination for which there is therefore a concrete horizon set to creaturely reality, a horizon which both appears in the midst of history and is still to come.

More importantly for our purposes, however, the comparison with Dante allows Frei to specify the ways in which Barth’s figural imagination was at the same time an *historical* imagination. On the one hand, recognition of Barth’s Christocentric vision as a figural vision allows Frei to describe Barth’s imagination of fulfilment in Christ as anything but ‘Christomonist’: it suggests a vision of the fulfilment of history according

to which each particular is seen in relationship to Christ, and has its very particularity established and accentuated in that relationship. This is a fulfilment which does not involve the annulment or loss of any figure's concrete particularity; it does not involve the abolition of any figure's creatureliness; it does not involve the erasure of any figure's difference from Jesus of Nazareth. In this fulfilment all figures find their full reality as the individual creatures they are, in unity with Christ, and only in Christ.⁹

On the other hand, however, the comparison with Auerbach's Dante allows Frei to highlight another way in which Barth's figural imagination is an historical imagination, by pointing to a kind of shadow that his figural imagination casts, which Frei refers to as Barth's 'sceptical and secular' sensibility. In order to understand this claim, though, we need to be a little more precise about the nature of the figural imagination. That imagination sees every instance or form of a relationship between God and creation as a figure of the incarnate reconciliation between God and humanity that is Jesus of Nazareth. A figural relationship is not a relationship based on straightforward causal links between the poles of the relationship, nor a relationship based on a process of evolution that includes both poles; rather, it is a relationship grounded solely in God's providential plan. This means, however, that when a figural relationship is displayed like this, there is no further evidence which can be presented to explain *how* this relationship works: the only things that one can do by way of explanation are first to refer to the mysterious of freedom of God for creation which allows him to call and form witnesses in the midst of creation, and second to portray both figure and fulfilment in such a way as to highlight the resemblance or contrast between them. A figural relationship cannot be explained; it can only be displayed (Frei, 1993, pp. 170–2).¹⁰

In other words, the figural relationship is not an expression of some deeper worldly relation between the events, which could be exposed with the right analytic techniques; there is no hidden variable to which the displayed figural relationship is epiphenomenal. What God does in Christ is not the activation or fulfilment of some prior potential within history which also lies behind the apparently diverse figures of Christ in history. If that were the case, then to establish the existence of the prior potential would be to find the *real* relationship between figure and figured, a real relationship of which the figural relationship was a secondary form. If, for instance, we were to hold that Abraham was a figure of Christ because he partially fulfilled the human possibility of God-consciousness which we see perfected in Christ, then that human possibility would provide the secret, subterranean connection between Abraham and Christ at which the figural relationship merely hinted.

Barth, says Frei, resisted any move which would make the actual, concrete, historical appearance of Christ secondary to some deeper, more pervasive worldly possibility (Frei, 1993, pp. 170–1). Such a move would inevitably imply that there was a point at which we could substitute the general name of that possibility for the particular name of Jesus of Nazareth. The ‘possibility’ of Christ’s appearance as the fulfilment of all history is to be found purely on God’s side, not on the world’s side. There is no site within ourselves, no aspect of the ‘human situation’, no portion of history, no worldly reality which serves to explain the incarnation’s possibility. Christology cannot begin with anthropology, or with any such generalising discipline.

Put another way, we may say that if history is regarded *remoto Christo* we cannot expect to find any *praeparatio evangelica*, any capacity or potential for relationship with the divine which could in any way dictate the forms in which God

could bring that relationship about. Speaking of Barth's 'slightly bemused and slightly amused but appreciative and even delighted' appreciation of America, described in the introduction to the American edition of *Evangelical Theology*, Frei says:

It is not only the case, I believe, that Barth took pleasure in the vast variety of this indefinitely expansive human experience in this vast natural context – not only that he affirmed every part of it, at once in and for itself and for its potentiality as a *figura* of God's fulfilling work. Additionally, I believe he looked with a long, cool scepticism at that scene and every part of it because he believed that none of it shows that figural potential by any inherent qualities or signs of its own – either positive or negative. (Frei, 1993, p. 172)

This negative constraint, however, is the source of a far more positive vision. If this constraint is taken absolutely seriously (and Frei suggests that Barth did take it seriously), history is freed from an unbearable burden; it is freed from having to be the ground of the ways of God, it is freed to be itself, freed to be properly creaturely. If Barth's figural imagination is an imagination which sees the particularity and individuality of history upheld when that history is fulfilled in Christ, its shadow-side is a paradoxically 'secular' vision which sees, *remoto Christo*, only the particularity and diversity, the complexity and contingency of history. This is what Frei means when he says that 'there was in Barth a self-conscious secularity of sensibility far, far beyond' that shown by any apologetic theologian who seeks to find in this world the possibility which God's work fulfills. 'Barth', he says,

may have explored at once calmly and passionately, at once positively and negatively, that secularity which from a theological stance he would have thought an 'impossible possibility'. He may have explored it far more searchingly than

any of his opponents, as well as any of his own modifiers with their little apologetical nostrums, either in favor of or against the ‘secular situation’. (Frei, 1993, p. 173)

Figural imagination and secular sensibility go hand in hand.¹¹

Any suggestion that Barth was, in his own way, a ‘secular’ theologian needs, of course, very careful handling if it is not to be patently false. We must, for instance, note that Frei in no way suggests that Barth was in possession of some total secular account of the world, an account which excluded God, or graciously allowed God in at its gaps, or which could be set in paradoxical relationship with a positive theological account. The secular, sceptical vision of which Frei speaks is something rather more like an *absence* of such accounts, a willingness to pay attention to the always disruptive, never containable suddenness of things, a willingness to wait upon the particularity of the world rather than pre-emptively positioning and explaining it. The secular, sceptical sensibility of which Frei speaks is, we might say, a commitment to an unending *learning* of the world which does not know in advance what it will find, and which is not simply recalling or confirming general truths already known.

We should not think, either, that the secular, sceptical sensibility is some universally available default position to which all right-thinking observers would revert if only they would dare to think, dare to rid themselves of religious obfuscation. I have called it the shadow-side of Barth’s figural imagination deliberately: it is itself produced by the same light of revelation that makes the figural economy visible. Barth is, in Frei’s terms, able to take secularity seriously precisely because, for him, it has been made visible by Christ; in Christ Barth finds a judgement upon all religious accounts of

the world, and it is only in Christ that he finds the possibility of a non-religious account of the world.¹²

The secular, sceptical sensibility that Frei identifies is, then, a view of the world *remoto Christo*, only visible in the light of Christ. Is this not simply a contradiction? Is attention to the world *remoto Christo* truly a possibility for Barth? After all, the whole of history is, for him, to be interpreted in the light of Jesus Christ, and that light reveals the truth about all history; it is not some colouring lent only accidentally by Christ to a history that makes sense on its own. Nevertheless, that light is cast by Jesus and only by Jesus: and that means that it is cast by one concrete occurrence within history. We are, therefore, better able to imagine the world without Christ than would be the case if Christ's reality or possibility were somehow a deduction from the world; there is no necessity for Christ on the world's side, and therefore the world may be imagined (temporarily, with fear and trembling) without Christ.

To summarise: Frei uses a comparison with Auerbach's Dante to introduce his account of Barth's figural imagination and secular sensibility. On the one hand, he finds in Barth a ringing affirmation that history is fulfilled in Christ – that in Christ it is made most fully real, that in Christ it attains the full being which it has hitherto lacked; on the other, he finds that this fulfilment in no way abolishes the concrete particularity of history, but rather that the figural vision allows that particularity to be taken with utmost seriousness. In Barth, in other words, Frei finds a depiction of the fulfilment of history precisely as history.

Barth's figural reading

It is impossible in a paper of this scope to give Frei's proposed reading of Barth anything like a comprehensive testing. In particular, to ask to what extent the Christocentric organization of Barth's work has the character of a figural economy would involve working through much of the *Church Dogmatics*. In this paper, I have set myself the more manageable task of looking at some of Barth's explicit use of figural interpretation, to see whether it can inform and deepen the sketch of figural economy provided by Frei.

Election and rejection

In the Preface to *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, Frei suggests reading *Church Dogmatics* II.2, pp.340–409 as one example from amongst a 'vast number' of 'Barth's remarkable use of figural interpretation of the Old Testament'. This passage is part of Barth's presentation of the doctrine of election, specifically the election of the individual; it is the second part of that presentation where, after having treated 'Jesus Christ, the promise and its recipient' Barth turns to 'The elect and the rejected' with the question, 'What is it that makes individuals elect?' (*CD* II/2, p. 340)

The answer which Barth gives is, of course, that it is God who makes individuals elect: the election of an individual is first and foremost a distinction in the way God stands towards that person; it is not based on any 'attribute or achievement' of that person. However, this election is inevitably displayed; the fact that God stands towards a specific person in this particular way finds its expression or correlate in the calling, guidance, conduct, and role of that person in his or her specific history. Indeed, this is part of what election means: election to be a witness to, or a displayer of, the God who elects, and the election by which God elects.

A specific human life does not display this election by becoming subject to an external constraint (such that election would compete with freedom), nor does he or she display election by meeting some formula or following some recipe for what can count as an elect life. Each elect person displays election in his or her own way, by being entirely his- or herself. To use an inadequate analogy: it is as if God were to chose to witness to Godself by telling a story about an individual person, but could only make the story a good witness by making it the story of a full-blooded, consistent, contingent, and free individual – that is, by telling the story of a being who reflected in a creaturely way God’s own nature as free, as one who is what he is. It is as if God could only witness to Godself by telling a story of an individual who was not simply exhausted by some abstract definition of witness, who was not simply illustrative of some general theological theme, but who was a free person able to respond in love to the three-personned God who loves in freedom.

To put the same point more precisely: God determines individuals to display their election in irreducibly diverse ways, in ways that are coextensive with their unsubstitutable individuality. The calling, guidance, conduct and role of the elect individual are historical occurrences that take time to unfold; they are inherently temporal. We may recall Frei’s insistence that a person’s identity as witness or embodiment is not a constraint upon or accidental to his or her particularity; it *is* his or her particular, temporal identity.

Although election is not *grounded* in any difference of the elect from other human beings, it is *displayed* in such a difference: it is marked by individuals having proclaimed to them, and responding in faith to, their election in and with Christ. All elect people are, in their own ways, marked out like this from those who are not elect.

‘In different ways they repeat and reproduce the solitude of Christ. They are lights in the world because he is the Light of the world’ (*CD II/2*, p. 345).

It is not, of course, only the elect for whom ‘[t]he original and proper distinction of Jesus Christ...is the truth which...transcends, comprehends and illumines their existence’ (*CD II/2*, p. 349). There are also those, the ‘rejected’, who attempt to live in denial of this election, who attempt to live as ones rejected by God, yet who can only lie by so doing because God has allowed that role to be filled and exhausted by Jesus Christ (*CD II/2*, p.346). In other words, the witness to God’s election in Jesus Christ which God calls into being in history, which God *determines*, is a witness which takes two basic forms: the form of acceptance and the form of rejection. Yet each individual makes this witness in his or her own way, displaying this election and this rejection in and through his or her own irreducibly complex and contingent path. The basic distinction of acceptance and rejection, each a form of witness to God’s election in Jesus Christ, is worked out and displayed in forms which are coterminous with the peculiar concrete destiny of innumerable individuals.

Barth’s whole discussion of the nature of election is in fact a re-description of the results of his exegesis, in particular his exegesis of the Old Testament, where the electing and rejecting will of God is displayed precisely in and through the portrayal of elect and apparently rejected individuals and groups caught up for a time in the activity of God, without any diminution or overriding of their particular individuality, without any dissolution of the ‘freedom in which they are what they are’ (*CD II/2*, p. 343).¹³ Barth stresses that each individual person who becomes, for a time, the secondary subject of the biblical witness becomes a witness in his or her own peculiar way, but becomes a witness to the same Lord. The final word in exegesis of all these diverse

figures is the same: 'Jesus Christ'. Barth does not, however, mean to take away what he has just given, and suggest that the rich contingency of the Old Testament stories ultimately reduces to sameness; the relationship of all these figures to Jesus does not work like that.

[W]e do not recognise him in any of these types in exactly the same way as in the others, but ... in all of them we have to recognise him as he is. None of the types gives quite the same witness as the others. None simply repeats the witness of the others. The historical multiformity of individual elect and non-elect, of those placed on the right and those on the left, cannot be ignored, and no sound exegesis can afford to ignore it. It cannot be glossed over. It cannot be reduced to a formula. It cannot be simplified. But this multiformity of historical appearances is *best observed and maintained* if here too the final word in exegesis is actually the name of Jesus Christ, if he is understood as the individual in whom we recover both the unity of that which they all commonly attest, and that which is the peculiar individuality of each (*CD II/2*, p. 366, my emphasis).

If, then, we ask what Barth means, and how he can justify his talk of election, calling and determination – how he can say that individuals display their election precisely in and through their freedom; how he can say that finding the name of Jesus Christ to the final word in exegesis, far from undercutting the history-like nature of the biblical stories, is the *best* way to observe and maintain their historical multiformity – if we ask all this, the only kind of answer that Barth ultimately gives is exegesis.¹⁴ Rather than directing us to some metaphysic that could ground the possibility of such a claim, he points to the actuality, to the ranks of the elect and the rejected who parade through Scripture.

Selected figures

After fourteen pages in which Barth gives his dogmatic presentation of these ideas, with a few exegetical comments thrown in, this section of the Dogmatics continues with an immense block of exegesis, covering fifty-five pages of small print. He begins with a brief survey, mentioning Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah, Ephraim and Manasseh, Perez and Serah, Israel and Moab, and Midian, and Canaan (*CD II/2*, pp. 354–7), before turning to three longer exegeses.

He first concentrates on two rituals in which election and rejection are enacted: the ritual of the two birds in Leviticus 14:4–7 (for the cleansing of a leper) and the ritual of the two goats in Leviticus 16:5–22 (on the Day of Atonement). He suggests that in each ritual the Israelite spectator sees ‘in a picture’ his own relationship to God’s election and rejection, which are enacted upon the two goats or the two birds. Barth insists, however, that we look more closely at the detail of the passages, and see the differences between them. If we do so, we see that they run in opposite directions. In the ritual for the Day of Atonement, the ‘elect’ goat is sacrificed, and the Israelite sees in this both that his life is required of him, and that God will graciously take his life as an acceptable sacrifice. The other goat, however, the ‘unusable’ goat, shows in its ‘surrender to an utterly distressful non-existence’ (*CD II/2*, p. 359) the fate from which the elect are saved. In the ritual of the two birds, however, the bird that is sacrificed is killed for the sake of the bird that is released. In the sacrificed bird, the leper sees that his accession to purity occurs only with the death of his impure life; in the freed bird, which is first dipped in the blood of the dead bird, he sees that he is removed from the realm of God’s wrath and ‘once more a free member of the congregation’ (*CD II/2*, p. 360).

If, according to Leviticus 16, the non-elect, those who are separated and rejected, stand in the shadows in order that the grace of God may illumine and continue to illumine the elect, we are taught also by Leviticus 14 that it is to the realm of Azazel that the light of God's grace is poured and streams abroad. Let us gratefully know ourselves to be elect in the picture of the first goat of Leviticus 16 – grateful that we are accepted to sacrifice ourselves, grateful that we may suffer the saving judgment of the wrath of God, which is the wrath of his love, as only the elect can and may do! But let us with equal gratitude recognise ourselves as the non-elect in the picture of the second bird of Leviticus 14 – grateful because there is ordained for us the life for whose painful birth the other is elected, the resurrection for whose sake the elect must go to his death! (*CD II/2*, p. 361)

Having established this interpretation, Barth raises two questions. First, he asks whether the individual Israelite can truly see himself in either the dead or the living animal. Does he really see that his life is handed over to God and found to be an acceptable sacrifice? Does he really see that he has finally been transferred to freedom? Barth suggests that life as we know it is more limited than this, both negatively and positively, and that we do not see in the biblical stories of the elect and the rejected this kind of purity, completeness, or finality in their election or rejection. The rituals represent election and rejection in a heightened, extreme, 'superhuman' form which 'transcends the human reality known to us' (*CD II/2*, p. 362). Second, Barth asks how it is that the individual Israelite can see himself both as simultaneously dying a pure death by the grace of God, and being freed for true life by the same divine grace? How can the unity of the twofold picture portrayed in these rituals be achieved? More generally, looking at the Old Testament narratives of election and rejection, Barth notes that,

despite all the fluidity according to which the rejected can appear suddenly as the recipients of God's favour, the elected as the recipients of his wrath, nevertheless election and rejection are finally represented always by two separate individuals or groups, and the full unity of election and rejection in one individual is not and cannot be portrayed, even though it is suggested by the interrelation between the two doves or the two goats, and hinted at in the fluidity just mentioned.

In the face of this 'twofold enigma', Barth suggests that there is a provisionality about the Old Testament witness to election and rejection. The two rituals together suggest a form of election and rejection the full actuality of which we cannot find in the Old Testament.

These data confront us with the following choice. On the one hand, this subject of the Old Testament witness may be regarded as an unknown quantity. This might mean that for some reason it is not yet known to us, whether because it has not yet made itself known, or has in fact taken place but has somehow escaped us. But it might also mean that the Old Testament has no subject at all, that its testimony points into the void, and that in the place to which its stories and sacrificial pictures ... all point, there is, in fact, nothing, so that there is nothing to see, and never will be anything to see. On the other hand, the subject of the Old Testament witness may be accepted as identical with the person of Jesus Christ as he is seen and interpreted and proclaimed by the apostles because he had himself revealed and represented himself to them in this way (*CD II/2*, p. 363).

Barth is deadly serious here. This is no hermeneutical conjuring trick whereby he, with a twinkle in his eye, will pull a Christological rabbit from a Levitical hat. He believes that his exegesis shows that these Old Testament texts points to an election and rejection

greater and more final than any they portray, that there is an eschatological provisionality even about these supposedly static Levitical texts. He believes that a recognition of this eschatological dynamism requires us to ask the further question about what kind of fulfilment will come. And he believes that his exegesis does not force the question, but allows that there could be no fulfilment, or another fulfilment, instead of fulfilment in Christ.¹⁵ Nevertheless, he believes that the eschatological provisionality he has identified is part of the context in which Christ emerges, and by which Christ interprets himself and is rightly interpreted by the apostles. The incompleteness and provisionality of the election and rejection actually found in Israel's past, and the promise of the completion and unity of election and rejection found at least in Israel's rituals, create a space which Christ occupies and transforms. For those who believe in Christ, 'How can we believe in Jesus Christ and not of necessity recognise Him in these passages?' (CD II/2, p. 364) Barth goes on therefore, to declare the figural exegesis that Calvin gave to the Leviticus 16 passage 'correct' (CD II/2, p. 365).

In his second example, Barth retells the whole drama of Israel's first two kings, Saul and David, turning from a passage in which election and rejection are portrayed in their purity by means of a ritual, to one in which they are displayed in the thick of human lives. Barth provides first a reading of 1 Samuel 8, in which the 'folly of the nation' demands a '*melek* of the same kind as all other nations' and God judges the nation by giving them what they have asked for, and yet saves them by revealing that his will for them (concealed until now) is a will for a different kind of king, his anointed one. Saul is both this anointed king chosen by God according to God's good purposes, and a king like the kings of the Gentiles who is given by God as a judgement; he is, according to

Barth, the former concealed under the latter. This reading enables Barth to give a powerful interpretation of Saul's sin, acknowledging that '[t]o this very day we find it difficult to stifle the sympathy and approval which are more readily felt than their opposite' in relation to his 'microscopic sins' (*CD II/2*, p. 369–70). Saul's sins are precisely moments in which it is clear that he fulfils the nation's desire for the wrong kind of king, and hence shows himself to be God's judgement against Israel and to be the one whom God has rejected, and hides his character as God's salvation for Israel and the one whom God has chosen.

From Saul, Barth turns to the 'remarkable figure of David' (*CD II/2*, p.372). David has the same dual character as Saul, but in his case divine election rather than rejection is uppermost. Nevertheless, both sides are still emphatically there; indeed, Saul's sins barely register when measured against David's. Barth does not make any simplistic or easy generalisations at this point.

Why, if [David] is God's elect, is he not unmistakably differentiated from Saul?
For all the beauty of the story, it is confusing and disturbing that Saul's son has the leading role in their covenant before God. And it is still more confusing that the position of the king who is also the son of God is not awarded to David but to his son. It is again confusing that for no very clear reason David is debarred from building the temple. Above all, how confusing it is that in his sin he actually realises in a much harsher fashion than Saul in his sins the picture of the heathen king rejected by God (*CD II/2*, p. 387).

The difference between Saul and David is not based upon any comparative estimate of the weight of each man's sins. The difference between them is purely and simply that in David we see election uppermost, and in Saul rejection uppermost; God has determined

his relation to each differently, and that determination is seen in the whole course of each man's life as it is displayed in the texts of 1 Samuel. Nevertheless, David only appears as the elect in such a way that the shadow of the rejected *melek* of the Gentiles looms large behind him; Saul only appears as the rejected in such a way that the light of God's anointed ruler plays constantly across his features. This ambiguity, Barth suggests, is never absent from the subsequent sorry history of the kings of Israel and Judah. Once again, Barth finds that there is a riddle here, an eschatological provisionality.

It is the riddle of the fact of a religious community which is gathered and remains gathered for centuries about a text whose content is necessarily a riddle for them, in itself as well as in its relation to their contemporary situation. For in it they can find only the story of a mistake – and of a mistake which in the text itself is actually, though not explicitly, admitted. They can find only the story of a beginning ... without the corresponding development, a broken column pointing senselessly upwards, or, at any rate, a prophecy so far unfulfilled It is only eschatologically and therefore only as prophecy that they can read and understand these texts, if at all, as the texts of revelation (*CD II/2*, p. 386)

And once again, and with the same reserve, Barth finally turns to the question of figural exegesis:

[W]e can only again say that the ultimate exegetical question in relation to these passages – the question of their subject – is identical with the question of faith: whether with the apostles we recognise this subject in the person of Jesus Christ, or whether with the Synagogue both then and now we do not recognise Christ. The question obviously cannot be settled by the Old Testament passages as such.

The final result of the passages as such is the difficulty. Again, it is naturally impermissible to accept the reply of the apostles solely because we cannot solve these difficulties in the exegesis of the text itself, or because, on the other hand, we share with them an idea that Jesus Christ is supremely fitted to occupy the place where we are pulled up short. The apostles themselves did not reach their answer as a possibility discovered or selected by themselves, or as a final triumph of Jewish biblical scholarship. They did so because the Old Testament was opened up to them by its fulfilment in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and because in the light of this fulfilment Old Testament prophecy could no longer be read by them in any other way than as an account of this subject (*CD II/2*, pp. 388–9)

There is no need to describe Barth's third example in the same detail. He examines the strange self-contained tale of the man of God from Judah and the old prophet of Bethel found in 1 Kings 13, and finds that similar questions to those which he has raised in the priestly context of the Levitical rituals, and the kingly context of Saul and David, are raised in a story of prophets and men of God; once again he finds that the story points to a resolution which is not contained in the Old Testament itself, and once again he argues that a Christian can find that resolution nowhere else than in Jesus Christ.

In all three examples we see the same movement. Barth begins by practising an exegetical ascesis: he refuses to begin by finding Christ in these Old Testament stories. Instead, he begins by paying careful attention to the texts as they stand, to their details and their dynamics. He is even perfectly willing to pay attention to the textual history and the subsequent use of these passages.¹⁶ He deliberately and explicitly brackets out his Christology, and approaches the texts in the first instance *remoto Christo*; he

deliberately and repeatedly reminds us of this ascesis even whilst he is reintroducing the Christocentric frame at the end of his exegeses.¹⁷ Only once the passage has been carefully interpreted *remoto Christo* is the hermeneutical restriction lifted, and only then does Barth's interpretation become thoroughly figural. He finds that the Old Testament portrayals, in all their rich detail, both illumine and are illumined by Jesus Christ, not because there is some process of development linking the two, but simply because God has provided in Christ the answer and fulfilment to the reality that he established in the Levitical rituals, or in the rise of Saul and David. 'Fulfilment' is seen in the specific ways in which it turns out that these passages point beyond themselves, and Jesus Christ is seen to occupy the space at which they point; it is seen in the always particular ways in which each Old Testament character is made a witness (whether positive or negative) to Jesus Christ.

Note: from the Old Testament to the world

In the discussion above, I have silently made a transition from Frei's suggestion that Barth's figural imagination encompassed the *whole of creaturely reality* to examination of Barth's practice of figural interpretation of the *Old Testament*. This distinction cannot be ignored, however; it is the reason why we cannot directly equate Barth's hermeneutical ascesis in his approach to Old Testament texts with the 'secular, sceptical sensibility' that Frei described, even though they are related. The Old Testament is not simply history; it is a witness to the activity of God in history, and it is a witness that, for Barth, holds a privileged position within the purposes of God. It is also a text that has an ambiguous, questionable relationship to any historical-critical reconstruction of 'what really happened'. For the 'secular, sceptical sensibility' described by Frei, not even a negative preparation for the Gospel can be found by examining history *remoto*

Christo; for the ‘hermeneutical ascesis’ an eschatological provisionality can be discovered in the Old Testament narratives even when they are considered on their own terms: they are found to pose a question which need not be but can be answered by Christ. If Frei is right, then not even a question to which Christ is the answer can be discovered when history is considered ‘on its own terms’.

Nevertheless, this difference does not mean that what we have said about the Old Testament can have no wider applicability, for the God to whom the Old Testament texts witness, the electing and rejecting, calling and judging God, is witnessed to precisely as the God of the whole world. The God who is what God is here is identical with the God of all; God everywhere is therefore what God is here. The same electing and rejecting will which Barth found displayed clearly in the Old Testament texts is displayed everywhere, if only we have eyes to see. The difference between interpretation of the Old Testament and interpretation of the world more generally is that in the latter case we have further to travel before we can gain those eyes. Frei’s point in describing Barth’s secular sensibility is precisely that we can find even such negative preparations for the Gospel as Barth finds in the Old Testament only once we have been given eyes, once we have been schooled in new ways of seeing. We are faced with having to learn from the Biblical witness how to provide even the initial interpretation of history which is already present in the Old Testament, and that is very likely also to involve an unlearning of improper interpretations. There is no recipe for success in these matters, and any interpretation we are able to offer is bound to be partial and provisional; nevertheless, Frei wants to claim that, with this extra work and extra fragility assumed, a similar kind of figural interpretation can be practised on the newspaper as can be practised on the Old Testament.

The figural economy

Hans Frei understood Barth's *Church Dogmatics* as a figural economy. That is, he understood the *Dogmatics* as a portrayal of the 'fulfilment of all natural, historical being' in Jesus Christ, in such a way that the full concrete particularity and contingency of historical being is not undercut or ignored but preserved and proclaimed in this fulfilment. He understood that this kind of fulfilment was not simply asserted or theoretically described in Barth, but that Barth had found a fitting means for portraying it, for showing it. Explicit figural interpretation is, for Frei, the most revealing way in which Barth does this. If we ask what it can possibly mean for history to be fulfilled without diminution of its particularity, Frei will point us to Barth's exegesis. Look, he will say, how Barth finds Christ to be the subject matter of these history-like stories without turning away from their history-likeness; look how he does justice to their contingency, their roughness, their intractability, and finds that they speak of Christ in and through that. That is both a depiction of, and a promise of, the fulfilment of historical being in Christ.

Is Frei right, however? Does Barth's practice display the kind of fulfilment Frei describes? It certainly does look like Barth's figural exegesis is meant to inspire a closer attention to the rich detail of each pole of the figural relationship, and a revelation of the truth about each pole's particularity, rather than a turn away from either pole towards some abstraction.¹⁸ And the connections that he eventually proclaims are indeed not based on any worldly continuity or causality, but solely on the freedom of God – and Barth's employment of this kind of interpretation coheres thoroughly with his constant refusal to dig beneath the actuality of what God has done in history to find some worldly possibility which would ground or explain it.

However, when we examine his figural interpretation closely, and ask ourselves what precisely the ‘fulfilment’ of a figure consists in, we see him proceeding by locating in both the Old Testament figure and the Gospel fulfilment a common *pattern* of election and rejection. Each pole of the figural relationship can be re-described in terms of this pattern, in such a way that the election-rejection pattern in Jesus Christ appears as the completion of an otherwise truncated pattern in the Old Testament stories. The election-rejection pattern provides, in this case, the *content* of the claim that there is a figural relationship between these poles; the pattern, as it were, *mediates* the figural relationship.

This specification of the meaning of ‘figural relationship’ raises a question. Is Barth finally substituting a pattern, a diagram, a conceptual scheme, for the history-like narrative? Does his figural practice involve turning away from the unsubstitutable particularity of both figure and fulfilment at the last moment? Our suspicions might be sharpened by noting how readily two of the passages chosen by Barth lend themselves to a quasi-structuralist reduction to diagrams. The rituals in Leviticus 14 and 16, and the folk-tale-like quality of the story in 1 Kings 13 are, in Frei’s terms, less ‘history-like’ than many Old Testament narratives. They are, to some extent, constructed out of a series of categorial oppositions built into Israelite culture, and it is no surprise to find that Barth’s pattern-seeking exegesis provides powerful and largely convincing accounts of these passages. What, though, of the far more unruly story of Saul and David? There is no doubt, of course, that Barth’s exegesis is a *tour de force*, nor any doubt that he pays sustained attention to a whole range of details and disruptive elements in the stories; nevertheless, despite its enduring brilliance, it is possible to be left with an irritating worry that Barth succeeded, despite himself, in replacing a messy

and uncontrollable history with a calculus, and that his confidence in proclaiming the nature of this story's patterned provisionality and hence his proclamation of the kind of resolution it demands is just a little brash, just a little reductive. We can be left with a suspicion that this story's rich complexity is more than Barth can capture in his ultimately diagrammatic exegesis, that it exceeds his conceptual schema, and that Barth's exegesis does therefore involve a turning away from history at the last moment. This worry might give us pause for thought – suggesting that Frei's interpretation of Barth's intentions is misguided, or that Barth does not finally measure up to his intentions.

However, the exegesis we have examined is part of the supporting material for Barth's dogmatic exposition of just one doctrinal locus: that of election and rejection. Barth returns to this material in his discussion of other loci; for instance, he treats much of the same material in *CD IV/1*, pp. 437ff in his discussion of pride, and discusses an element ignored in the present exegesis in *CD IV/2*, pp. 427ff in his discussion of sloth. The material we have discussed is not Barth's sole or final interpretation of this passage: it is one reading, for one purpose. Yes, his figural exegesis goes by way of the identification of a pattern, a pattern inevitably less rich than the story it describes; but that pattern is not a *replacement* for the story, it is (in the wider context of the complete *Dogmatics*) *subordinate* to the story.

All figural exegesis, insofar as it finds a relationship between two unsubstitutably particular poles, is bound to involve a moment of abstraction: after all, the particularity of the poles means that they are not identical, that they are first of all themselves, and to find a similarity between them is, therefore, necessarily to find a relationship between them *in some respect*: it is inevitably to bracket at least some of

the complexity that makes each pole particular. This need not mean, however, that figural exegesis cannot ultimately do justice to the unsubstitutable particularity, the history-likeness, of the poles; it simply means that we cannot think of any single performance of figural exegesis exhausting the poles, and must always accept the possibility of returning and re-reading these poles.¹⁹

If we restrict our attention for the moment to the relationship between Old Testament figures and their New Testament fulfilment, we can take Frei's interpretation of Barth to mean simply that the fulfilment of the Old Testament in the New is not its abolition, but rather a fulfilment that frees us *for* the Old Testament. That is, it is a fulfilment that sends us back again and again to read the Old Testament 'in its own terms', paying attention to its complex, contingent, disruptive nature. Time and time again we will find that we find patterns which allow us (but do not force us, unless we have faith in Christ) to link Old Testament and New; we will find, for instance, that we can see patterns of election and rejection running through Old Testament narratives and reaching some kind of culmination in the Gospel depiction of Christ. On that kind of basis, we will be able to erect some more abstract scaffolding – in this case a doctrine of election – but we will have to make sure both that the doctrine is framed in such a way as not to suggest that the pattern we have seen is somehow a replacement for the story in which we found it (hence Barth's careful specification of the relationship between God's election and its always different display in the particular course of individuals' lives) and that we do not suggest that this pattern is the only one that can be found (hence Barth's return to the same stories in other contexts). To claim that Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of an Old Testament narrative is to commit to this endless paying of

attention, this endless finding of patterns which partially confirm our commitment, this endless reading of the Old Testament narrative alongside the Gospels.

Frei's claim about Barth's figural economy was not simply about relationships between Old and New Testaments, however. He claimed that 'figura' provided a way of talking about the relationship between all creaturely reality and Christ. This suggests an extension of what we have just said, and an interpretation of Frei's suggestions about the 'secular sensibility'. To claim that all creaturely reality is fulfilled in Christ is to commit to an endless attention to the particularities of the world, an attention educated by our reading of the Bible. It is to commit to an endless learning of a world which is always surprising, always disturbing, always disruptive of any premature generalisation, any too-easy closure. It means committing to reading the world and the Gospel side by side – the newspaper in one hand, the Bible in the other – expecting to find patterns linking the two, and expecting never to stop finding such patterns.

Lastly, Frei's suggestions provide us with a way of talking about eschatological fulfilment. If creaturely reality as it now is looks forward to eschatological fulfilment in Christ, then it is not looking for its reduction to Christ, or its sublation by Christ, or its abolition in favour of Christ. Rather, it is looking for a future in which it, in ever new ways, explores and interprets the inexhaustible riches of Christ, refracting and reflecting Christ in ways which are endlessly particular. Precisely by being our fulfilled selves, we will be constantly renewed fulfilments of Christ. An individual instance of figural interpretation is a hint, a gesture in the direction of this fulfilment; the ongoing practice of returning to figural exegesis again and again provides a better picture of the fulfilment for which we hope.

Counsels for reading the *Dogmatics*

My suggestions lead to some counsels for reading the *Church Dogmatics*. Firstly I suggest that the *Church Dogmatics* be seen as a school of figural interpretation. With its enormous length, its curiously repetitive structure, its constant return to exegesis, the *Church Dogmatics* is not simply a static description of a theological system; it is a dynamic attempt to teach its readers to read differently – to become, for example, readers of the Old Testament who have learnt to keep the potential distractions of historical criticism and source analysis in their proper place, and who have learnt a second naïveté in which the texts can be read ‘in their own terms’ once more, and who have begun learning that Christian vision by which the figural possibilities of the text become once more visible.²⁰ In this school, the reader is also learning to read the world: learning, that is, to unlearn some of the ways we have had of confining the world in ultimately implausible apologetic structures, learning more positively to see the world with a second naïveté which allows it to be itself (that is, to see it with what Frei called a secular sensibility), and learning to see the world’s figural potential, visible in the light of Christ. These things can only be learnt by example and practice, precisely because they are endlessly and always particular, beyond any recipe or diagram. Only by seeing figural reading done well, and done repeatedly, and done in a nearly endless variety of ways, can we serve the kind of apprenticeship which will allow us to go on producing our own figural readings.

Secondly, however, my suggestions involve reading the *Dogmatics* in such a way that the priority of the Biblical narratives over any single performance of exegesis or commentary is preserved. To put this more pithily, this counsel could be rephrased: the *Church Dogmatics* is best read inside out. Frei apparently counselled some of his

students to begin the *Dogmatics* with volume IV, because there the dependence of Barth's dogmatic exposition on repeated close reading of the Gospel narratives is most evident; to begin reading there is to see that the whole *Dogmatics* rests upon such reading and re-reading (a point that is less evident if one begins with volume I). Or we might suggest regarding the small-print sections as having priority over the large-print sections, because the large print sections contain the refined results of the exegesis performed in the small-print sections, and properly point back to them. A *Dogmatics* without the large-print sections would still have integrity (even if it lacked apparent organisation); a *Dogmatics* without the small-print sections is inconceivable. Lastly, we could even suggest that the proper doorway into the *Church Dogmatics* is the Index volume – not the contents section, in which the dogmatic theses are set out in logical order, but the Scripture References index and, above all, the 'Aids to the Preacher' section, in which we see most clearly the nature of the *Dogmatics* as exegesis, repeated exegesis, in which pattern after pattern is unearthed in the same text, and those patterns slowly built into an overall dogmatic structure (*not* a systematic structure) which is in one sense nothing more than a guide to ways of reading and re-reading these Biblical texts. Only if the *Dogmatics* is read 'inside-out' in these sorts of ways can we preserve the truly figural nature of Barth's achievement as a depiction of the fulfilment rather than the abolition of history.

The third counsel may again be put pithily: we should carefully consider whether we should be reading the *Dogmatics* at all. My message, and Frei's, and (if we are right) Barth's as well, is that we must pick up the Bible in one hand, and the newspaper in the other; and never put them down – and that no book of theology (even the *Church Dogmatics*) can substitute for either. We must go on reading Bible and

newspaper in the light of each other, looking for particular ways in which, by the grace of God, we can find patterns linking the two, hints of the fulfilment of history in Jesus of Nazareth. We can't expect to produce any final reading of either, both because the fullness of the fulfilment for which we hope is an eschatological reality towards which the Bible only points (it is Virgil as well as Beatrice), and also because the fulfilment we see embodied in it (it is Beatrice as well as Virgil) is an unsubstitutably particular human being. We can only expect to glimpse the fulfilment of history in an endless multiplicity of figural exegeses, which mine but never exhaust the texts they interpret. Of course, the Christian interpreter with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other may well have the *Church Dogmatics* on a table beside her, and may properly use it as one school in which she can learn to read the materials in her hands. But it is no replacement. The abstractions of doctrine are tools in the art of Christian interpretation, but they do not provide a separate object of consideration in their own right, one to which we could turn when we have penetrated beneath the messy particulars of the Bible or the newspaper. However powerful these tools, the more abstract disciplines of theology are, in the figural vision, subordinate to the practice of exegesis, subordinate to the hunt for the always particular ways in which Jesus of Nazareth both is and witnesses to the fulfilment of history. We may well ask, with Frei, 'Has Christian theology succeeded in setting us another task instead of this?' (Frei, 1993, p.175).

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Notes

¹ The papers were collected in a special edition of the journal of the Yale Divinity School Association, *Reflection* 66:4 (Frei, 1969). Frei also participated in discussion transcribed later in the volumes. His paper was later republished in Frei, 1993.

² Cf. ‘Scripture as Realistic Narrative: Karl Barth as Critic of Historical Criticism’, a paper that Frei presented to the Barth Colloquium in Toronto in Spring 1974. A transcript of an audio recording of this session has been edited by Mark Alan Bowald, and appears on the Yale Divinity School web site at <http://ref.ref.ref/ref>.

³ The bibliography lists the main relevant sources under ‘Auerbach’. It is unclear whether Frei read the *Dante* book (Auerbach, 1961); he was fascinated by Auerbach and in particular Auerbach’s description of Dante’s vision of historical reality in the early 60s and the English translation was published by the University of Chicago Press in 1961, but I have found no explicit reference to it in Frei’s works or papers.

⁴ The first commentator on Frei’s comparison of Barth and Dante was a respondent to Frei’s paper at the colloquium who said ‘the comparison with Dante ... I think was wild – nothing short of that; and it’s a way into Barth, I think’ (Orff, 1969, p. 13). The best exposition of Auerbach’s figural reading is that of John David Dawson (Dawson, 1998).

⁵ In the *Dante* book (Auerbach, 1969), Auerbach suggests that the encounter with Beatrice was to some extent the source of Dante’s profound feeling for the figural vision: ‘In many men of his time, that yearning [for transcendence and transfiguration] was so overpowering as to destroy their perception of the world; the spirit became utterly absorbed in mystical devotion to the transcendent figuration of its hope. Dante’s

intense feeling for earthly existence, his consciousness of power made that evasion impossible for him. He had seen the figure of perfection on earth; she had blessed him and filled him and enchanted him with her super-abundant grace: in that decisive case he had beheld a vision of the unity of earthly manifestation and eternal archetype; from that time on he could never contemplate an historical reality without an intimation of perfection and of how far the reality was removed from it; nor, conversely, could he conceive of a divine world order without embracing in the eternal system all manner of phenomenal realities, however diverse and changing.’ (p.67)

⁶ By rendering in its own concrete particularity these various creaturely witnesses and embodiments of reconciliation, the Bible can itself be said to be both a pointer to the reconciliation of God and humanity and, in a sense, an embodiment in writing of that reconciliation. For Barth, the Bible is not simply a pointer to the Word, it is a secondary form of the Word; as Virgil it leads us to the threshold, but as Beatrice it renders to us what lies beyond that threshold. It is no contradiction, then, that Frei begins by saying that it is the Bible itself which is for Barth both Virgil and Beatrice in one, even though the rest of his discussion focuses on the figuring or fulfilling roles played by that which the Bible portrays.

⁷ It may be pushing the comparison too far, but it is worth noting that the Virgil and Beatrice of the *Comedy* are already the *fulfilment* of the historical Virgil and Beatrice. So, we might say, the characters, events and settings of the Bible are not, for Frei or for Barth, a straightforward repetition in writing of characters, events and settings which took place in history, but are portrayals of the *fulfilment* of those things: the setting of those things in the context of God’s providence in such a way as to reveal them as

witnesses to and embodiments of God's will. These portrayed fulfilments are no less concrete, no less particular and historical; indeed, the concrete particularity of the reality portrayed can be taken with *more* seriousness than is possible in other forms of ancient literature, precisely because of the horizon of divine judgement. All this is a fairly straightforward application of Auerbach's interpretation of the *Comedy* to the Bible; Frei, however, appears to be more concerned with the roles that these fulfilled portrayals of historical characters, events and settings can themselves play as figures of one another: i.e., he is concerned with a second level of figural relationships, supervening on that just described. I am not sure that any clear distinction between these two levels of figural relationships can be found in Frei's sketch; it might, however, be an illuminating way of redescribing aspects of Frei's (and Barth's) hermeneutics.

⁸ There is one more aspect of this complexity, hinted at in Frei's account: the Jesus to whom the Bible witnesses, the Jesus who is the reconciliation between God and creaturely reality, is, for Frei, the Jesus of both advents: he is the Jesus who lived, died, and rose, and he is the Jesus who is to come. There is an extent to which the Jesus of the first advent is a figure of the Jesus of the second advent: the second advent will complete, confirm and reveal the first advent rather than simply being a linear extension of it. This makes the figural economy which Frei sketches even more complex.

⁹ I should mention, at this point, that nothing I have said so far is intended to make that all-too-familiar mistake of assuming that Barth is a universalist: just as in Dante the fulfillment of history is also seen in the inferno, so with Barth the promise of the fulfillment of creaturely being in Christ includes the possibility that that fulfillment will

take place in such a way that the 'No' which is enfolded in God's 'Yes' will also displayed.

¹⁰ Similarly, if we are asked how it was *possible* for Dante to combine his vision of the ordered judgement of God on all history with a true flourishing of attention to historical particularity and difference, the answer can only be, 'He did so: read the *Comedy*!' So with Barth: the answer to the 'Christomonism' accusation, the accusation that Barth's attention to Jesus of Nazareth does not allow any other creaturely reality space to be itself, is simply, 'He *does* allow this space: read his figural exegesis in the *Church Dogmatics*!'

¹¹ Frei places the figural vision and the secular sensibility in paradoxical relationship, referring to Barth exploring 'that secularity which from a theological stance he would have considered an "impossible possibility"' and I can't help wondering whether Frei, despite himself, overdoes the opposition between the two. Are there, in this, hints of too much of a reliance on Auerbach's Hegelianism (for which, see the following note)? In Barth, it seems to me, such an antagonism is rightly excluded.

¹² Although Frei does not make the links explicit, there is an interesting link between his description of Barth's secular and sceptical sensibility, and Auerbach's portrait of Dante as 'Poet of the Secular World' (Auerbach, 1969). Dante, for Auerbach, stood at the cusp of the figural tradition: he was both the author of its final triumph and the unwitting perpetrator of its undoing. He was midwife to a new tradition of secular, sceptical realism which would eventually turn and kill the very figural vision from which it had been born. Auerbach took the inspiration for his analysis of Dante from Schelling and, especially, from Hegel, and it is no surprise to find that his Dante is an episode in

Western culture's long coming to its humanist senses, and that the figural vision, though an essential precondition for the emergence of secular realism, is in the event overcome and replaced by the new synthesis. For Barth, on the other hand, the relationship between the figural and the secular is different: a commitment to the figural account involves the defeat of those religious pretensions or anxieties which would keep us safe from a secular, sceptical vision; Barth's figural vision therefore includes this negative secular vision as a constant minor partner, rather than giving birth to it as an antagonist. A view of the world as having no inherent possibility of communion with God visible apart from the particular divine act of communion in Christ is a view which lets the world simply be worldly, earthly, *irdischen*, secular.

¹³ 'The Bible is, in fact, everywhere concerned with the election of individual men. A human name mysteriously appears and occupies the stage for a time, whose peculiar human life, doing and sufferings in relationship with those of others form for a time the secondary subject and content of the biblical witness, and therefore themselves become a witness to that which is the primary subject and content of this witness.' (CD II/2, p. 341)

¹⁴ Cf n.10.

¹⁵ 'The choice between these ... possibilities is not an exegetical question; it is a question of faith. It is, therefore, to be distinguished from exegesis. But it is inescapably posed by it; and in the answer to this question, whatever it may be, exegesis is forced (even in the form of a *non liquet*) to speak its final word' (CD II/2, pp. 363–4).

¹⁶ For instance, he discusses the sources of the 1 Kings 13 story on p.393, and he discusses the 'sacral interest with which these texts were read' on p.386.

¹⁷ The phrase '*remoto Christi*' needs clarification. Barth was, of course, a Christian interpreter first, foremost and always, and we cannot sensibly hope to ask whether he would have been able to arrive at his exegeses, his identification of the patterns and the provisionality in these Old Testament stories, had he not been a Christian interpreter. Whoever the 'he' is in that final clause, it is not Barth. Perhaps we might say that the deliberate ascesis, the *remoto Christi* procedure we are describing, is rather an attempt to produce (as a Christian interpreter, schooled and enabled by Christian interpretation) readings of the text which will be intelligible and perhaps convincing to those who do not share this Christian inheritance. It makes sense to imagine Barth in conversation with a Jewish Rabbi about Leviticus 14, for instance, and to imagine them having enough to say to one another to allow the conversation to continue rather than falter; it is possible to imagine each holding the other to account for his exegesis of the passage, by constant reference back to the text.

¹⁸ I realise I have not demonstrated Barth's attention to the particularity of Jesus of Nazareth, witnessed to in the Gospel narratives. We could have looked at Barth's exegesis of the Gospel narratives in such passages as *CD* IV/1, pp. 259–273 on Gethsemane.

¹⁹ For Frei's explicit comments on the use of multiple descriptions in preserving the history-like qualities of a narrative, see *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Frei, 1975), ch.10.

²⁰ Compare this counsel with Frei's description of the *Dogmatics* in Frei, 1978.