

'An Extraordinarily Acute Embarrassment': The Doctrine of Angels in Barth's Göttingen Dogmatics

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Abstract

Study of Barth's doctrine of angels has languished, and the time is ripe for a thorough reassessment. While any full account will centre on the magisterial theology of angels in the *Church Dogmatics*, much can be gained from a close, contextually informed reading of the earlier treatment of angels in the Göttingen dogmatics lectures. These lectures are shaped by a twofold procedural commitment: Barth's presentation is ordered, on one hand, to a recognisably modern conception of the logical content of Christian preaching; and it conforms, on the other hand, to a doctrinal sequence recommended by the dogmatic textbooks of the classical Reformed tradition. A tension between these two aspects becomes visible in Barth's handling of the doctrine of angels – a tract of teaching by which he is visibly unsettled. Barth accordingly attends with particular care to two fundamental modern objections to the doctrine – namely that it involves a superfluous reduplication of anthropological themes and that it has no independent doctrinal standing. The first objection exploits the observation that the doctrine of angels traditionally stands in close proximity to the doctrine of the human creature; the second follows from the claim that Christian preaching, and the dogmatic theology which serves it, attends strictly to the relationship between God and humanity, realised and revealed in the gospel. Barth's attempts to respond to these criticisms, and so to draw out the necessity and the proper dogmatic status of the doctrine of angels, are traced in detail. Angels and demons, conceived as real spiritual forces, are ineluctable features of the situation within which human moral agency is exercised. And angels are ingredients in, though not central to, the scriptural depiction of the relationship between God and humanity. Barth's elaboration of the positive features of Protestant scholastic angelology is summarised, and the motivating impulses and constructive potential of his theology of angels are briefly noted: Barth's exposition may be read as a complex exercise in theological self-differentiation; a recommendation of a distinctive style of biblical reasoning; and a creative contribution to the revitalisation of a culture of Christian witness.

Keywords: angels, Barth, Church Dogmatics, demons, Göttingen dogmatics.

In 1951, W. A. Whitehouse published two reports in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* on *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III/3.¹ The first offered a high-level overview of Barth's doctrine of providence as a whole, along with some fairly guarded analysis – 'what [Barth] has to say', Whitehouse told his readers, 'is not excitingly novel'.² The second focused on Barth's treatment of angels, and here Whitehouse drew a bolder line: 'Schleiermacher dismissed the topic from Protestant theology for 150 years, but now it has come back in a treatise that will surely rank with the other two great monuments of angelology, the *Celestial Hierarchy* of Pseudo-Dionysius, and the *Summa Theologica* of Aquinas.'³ This gives Schleiermacher rather too much credit – his doctrinal diffidence towards angels was neither unprecedented nor uniformly influential in Protestant dogmatics⁴; and it presents a drastically simplified picture of a massively complex patristic and medieval tradition of reflection on the angels.⁵ But precisely in its descriptive economy it captures something of

¹ W. A. Whitehouse, 'Providence. An Account of Karl Barth's Doctrine', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 4 (1951), pp. 241–56; Whitehouse, 'God's Heavenly Kingdom and His Servants the Angels. An Account of Kirchliche Dogmatik §51 by Karl Barth', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 4 (1951), pp. 376–82.

² Whitehouse, 'Providence', p. 241.

³ Whitehouse, 'God's Heavenly Kingdom', p. 376.

⁴ For Schleiermacher (see *Der christliche Glaube 1830/31*, ed. M. Redeker (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999), pp. 204–11 (§§42–3)), because the biblical portrayal of angels as pure spiritual creatures, active in the worship of God and the service of his people, contains nothing inherently impossible and does not conflict with the feeling of absolute dependence, it may continue to play a role in the liturgy and in expressions of personal piety. But, while the Bible everywhere assumes the existence and activity of angels, it nowhere intends to set forth a definite teaching about them. Dogmatics thus need not ask after the creation and nature and activity of angels but discharges its obligations with the warning that belief in angels must not be allowed to shape our public understanding of or conduct within the world. In all this, Schleiermacher sought to exercise a moderating influence in a long-standing debate within the Protestant church over the nature and activity of created spirits. For the eighteenth-century background, see esp. J. F. Buddeus, *Theses theologicae de atheismo et superstitione variis observationibus* (Jena: Ioannem Felicem Bielckium, 1717), pp. 579–82; Joachim Oporin, *Die erläuterte Lehre der Hebräer und Christen von Guten und bösen Engeln* (Hamburg: Felginer, 1735); D. Balthasar Bekkers *bezauberte Welt*, trans. J. M. Schwager, ed. J. S. Semler (Leipzig: Weygandschen Buchhandlung, 1781); D. Franz Völkmar Reinhardt's *Vorlesungen über die Dogmatik*, ed. J. G. I. Berger, 5th edn (Sulzbach: Seidel, 1824), pp. 184–92.

⁵ On which see e.g. Georges Tavard, *Die Engel* (Freiburg: Herder, 1968); Henry Mayr-Harting, *Perceptions of Angels in History* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998); Ellen Muehlberger, *Angels in Late Ancient Christianity* (Oxford: OUP, 2013); David Keck, *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages* (New York and Oxford: OUP, 1998); I. Iribarren and M. Lenz (eds), *Angels in Medieval Philosophical Inquiry: Their Function and Significance* (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2008).

the sheer significance of Barth's achievement. 'Barth's doctrine of angels', Pannenberg says, 'is the most important discussion of the theme in modern theology' – and his judgement is widely shared.⁶

It is a matter of some interest, then, that despite the widely acknowledged interest in angels in contemporary Western culture⁷ and the extraordinary rate of production of specialist studies within Barth scholarship, there remains to date no comprehensive study of Barth's angelology in any language.⁸ A number of factors may be named to explain this hiatus in the literature: angels remain marginal figures in much constructive Protestant doctrinal theology;⁹ specialist Barth studies have been widely preoccupied by contextual matters and with what have been perceived to be more dogmatically central themes; and the motivating interest of much interdisciplinary enquiry into angels remains remote from Barth's own theological concerns. Whatever the reasons, it remains the fact that Barth's teaching on angels still awaits the full-scale treatment for which Whitehouse called.¹⁰ Such an account would have to range widely across Barth's work, treating the angelology of *Church Dogmatics*, §51, in light of the many less developed statements in the sermons, commentaries, catechetical and exegetical lectures, and correspondence.¹¹ The analysis offered here

⁶ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 103. Cf. Tavad, *Die Engel*, p. 93: Barth undertakes 'the most significant theological attempt to renew angelology in Protestantism', and along the way offers 'the most consistent and thorough overview of an angelology in modern theology'.

⁷ See e.g. Uwe Wolff, *Die Wiederkehr der Engel: Boten zwischen New Age, Dichtung und Theologie* (Stuttgart: EZW, 1991); Wolff, 'The Angels' Comeback: A Retrospect at the Turn of the Millennium', in F. V. Reiterer, N. Tobias, and K. Schöpflin, eds, *Angels: The Concept of Celestial Beings: Origins, Development and Reception* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2007), pp. 695–714.

⁸ The proceedings of a 1996 symposium on Barth's angelology were published in part in *Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie* 12/1 (1996). Other notable recent treatments include H. Achten, *Das Engelmotiv in der Theologie von Karl Barth und Paul Tillich* (Marburg: Tectum, 1998) and Dieter Heidtmann, *Die Engel: Grenzgestalten Gottes. Über die Notwendigkeit und Möglichkeit der christlichen Rede von den Engeln* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag 1999), pp. 71–115.

⁹ For a recent review of major twentieth-century contributions and a constructive doctrinal proposal, see Oliver Dürr, *Der Engel Mächte: Systematisch-theologische Untersuchung: Angelologie* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2009).

¹⁰ Whitehouse, 'God's Heavenly Kingdom', p. 381: 'We must have a book by an English theologian on the subject'.

¹¹ It is not clear that Barth included a discussion of angels in his Münster dogmatics lectures. The typescript of the lectures held at the Barth-Archiv in Basel, in any case, does not include an independent section on angels, and it offers no indication that

necessarily is more restricted, intending a focused contribution to that larger investigation in the form of an exposition of Barth's first extended statement on the doctrine of angels – the section *de angelis bonis et malis* in the 1924/5 Göttingen lectures on dogmatics.

What follows thus may be understood less as a direct response to Whitehouse's call than its reiteration and amplification: an attempt to suggest once again that close study of Barth's doctrine of angels remains important both for a fuller understanding of his own theology, and for any future constructive theological work on the identity and function of those realities that scripture calls angels. In drawing attention to Barth's Göttingen angelology, I wish to open up some preliminary lines of enquiry which seem to me of particular significance for a fuller critical and constructive engagement with Barth's angelology. Phrased in the idiom of explanatory pragmatism,¹² the exposition offered here seeks to draw out three fundamental communicative strategies in Barth's doctrine of angels, highlighting the ways in which his early exploration of this doctrine appears as a complex exercise in theological self-differentiation; a recommendation of a distinctive style of biblical reasoning; and a creative contribution to the revitalisation of a culture of Christian witness. I will return to each of these themes in a conclusion which draws together the main threads of the exposition and tenders some judgements about the relation between the Göttingen angelology and the account of angels set forth in the *Church Dogmatics*.

De angelis bonis et malis

Barth's first lecture cycle in dogmatics, advertised under a title – 'Unterricht in der christlichen Religion' – which evoked both Calvin and Ritschl, extended over four consecutive semesters, beginning in the summer of 1924.¹³ Barth devoted the entire summer semester to a long prolegomenal

Barth recycled his Göttingen lectures *de angelis* in Münster (I am grateful to Hans-Anton Drewes and Peter Zocher for advice on this point). More generally on the Münster dogmatics, see Amy Marga, 'Karl Barth's Second Dogmatic Cycle, Münster 1926–1928: A Progress Report', *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 21/1 (2005), pp. 126–37; Marga, *Karl Barth's Dialogue with Catholicism in Göttingen and Münster: Its Significance for his Doctrine of God* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

¹² Cf. Robert Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 2–4.

¹³ Barth advertised the resonance with Calvin to his students: 'Wenn Sie den Titel ins Lateinische zurückübersetzen: *Institutio religionis christianae*, so ist er gleichlautend mit dem Titel des bekannten Hauptwerkes von Calvin'. *Unterricht in der Christlichen Religion*, vol. 1. *Prolegomena* 1924 [henceforth UCR 1], ed. H. Reiffen (Zürich: TVZ, 1985),

exercise, leading his students through a complex exploration of the defining conditions and tasks of Christian dogmatics. When the class reconvened in early November for the start of the winter semester, Barth opened his lecture series with a brief rehearsal of the previous semester's work and some words of orientation for the weeks ahead.¹⁴ 'Dogmatics', Barth reminded his students, 'is the science of the principles of Christian proclamation', an enquiry into 'the transcendental basis of Christian preaching'.¹⁵ Accordingly, dogmatic theology proceeds in a critical rather than a merely explicative or pragmatic mode, not simply tracing communally privileged patterns of speech nor principally asking after their rhetorical efficacy, but investigating the coincidence of the church's proclamation with divine revelation. 'The problem of Christian preaching, its judgment and its only possible justification, is this: How can it, as a human word, be God's Word?'¹⁶ Under what conditions may the teaching of the church be regarded as 'pure doctrine', a human word which is 'a true forerunner, herald, and bearer' of the divine Word which was spoken in Christ, which still is spoken through the prophets and apostles, and which continually wills to speak again?¹⁷

Christian dogmatics, then, investigates the 'fundamental structure' of church proclamation, critically enquiring into the relation of the church's human words to the divine Word. Accordingly, theological interest in the systematic coherence of Christian speech is subordinated to, and disciplined by, a prevailing regard for the immediate exposure of every theological statement to the divine revelation whence it arises and which it intends. In practice, this means that preaching and the dogmatics which serves it should proceed in the closest proximity to the scriptural text, the grand architectonics of an idealist system making way for a more unassuming

p. viii; Eng. trans. *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. x. He privately acknowledged a (waggish) reference to Ritschl in a letter to Thurneysen on 5 Feb. 1924: *Karl Barth–Eduard Thurneysen Briefwechsel*, vol. 2, 1921–1930 [B–Th 2], ed. Eduard Thurneysen (Zürich: TVZ, 1974), 221; cf. Albrecht Ritschl, *Unterricht in der christlichen Religion: Studienausgabe nach der 1. Auflage von 1875 nebst den Abweichungen der 2. und 3. Auflage*, ed. C. Axt-Piscalar (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002).

¹⁴ See Karl Barth, *Unterricht in der Christlichen Religion*, vol. 2, *Die Lehre von Gott, die Lehre vom Menschen 1924/1925* [UCR 2], ed. H. Stoevesandt (Zürich: TVZ, 1990), pp. 1–10; Eng. trans., pp. 317–24.

¹⁵ UCR 2, pp. 1, 3 (Eng. trans., pp. 317, 319); see the fuller development at UCR 1, pp. 3–51 (Eng. trans., pp. 3–41), and the neat distillation at UCR 2, p. 51 (Eng. trans., p. 354).

¹⁶ UCR 2, p. 3; Eng. trans., p. 319.

¹⁷ Cf. UCR 2, p. 6; Eng. trans., p. 322.

movement from one doctrinal locus to the next, in a sequence ordered to what Barth calls ‘the logical content of Christian preaching’:¹⁸

We can agree that Christian preaching, described in the crassest of religious generalizations, deals with God, with human beings in their relation to God – or more specifically: with what God is to and for human beings, and what they for their part have in God . . . If we direct our own course accordingly, we are simply following the classical line that dogmatics has taken from Origen to Wegschneider, with Schleiermacher as the first exception: (a) God, (b), anthropology, (c) reconciliation, and (d) salvation.¹⁹

Dogmatics, then, asks strictly after ‘God’s address and our encounter with God, as this is made in Christian preaching or posited in the Bible as holy scripture’.²⁰ In doing so, it speaks first of this address as God’s – as the utterly gratuitous communicative act of the self-existent divine subject – and so of God as the one who has himself spoken in Jesus Christ, revealing himself to faith.²¹ And so, following his one-hour introduction to the term’s teaching,

¹⁸ Cf. e.g. UCR 2, pp. 6–7 (Eng. trans., p. 322). Barth’s instincts here differed sharply from those of his brother Heinrich, who regularly lamented Barth’s relentlessly and vividly biblical idiom. See Barth to Thurneysen, 27 July 1917 (*Karl Barth–Eduard Thurneysen Briefwechsel*, vol. 1, 1913–1921 [B–Th 1], ed. E. Thurneysen (Zürich: TVZ, 1973), pp. 219–20): ‘unsre allzu biblische Art des Denkens’; 23 July 1918 (B–Th 1, pp. 266–8): ‘unserer beweglichen bildhaften Ausdrucksweise’.

¹⁹ UCR 2, p. 8; Eng. trans., p. 323.

²⁰ UCR 2, p. 167; Eng. trans., p. 440.

²¹ In his own way, Barth thus fully endorses ‘the correlation of God and faith that rightly is so important to modern theology’ (UCR 1, p. 13; Eng. trans., p. 11); cf. e.g. Julius Kaftan, *Dogmatik* (Freiburg: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1897), p. 107: ‘the knowledge of God must be and remain the knowledge of faith’. To the danger, which Feuerbach so acutely diagnosed, of an inversion of the relation between believing faith and its object see already the critique of Kaftan’s motivational analysis of religion in Wilhelm Herrmann, *Dogmatik* (Gotha-Stuttgart: Verlag Friedrich Andreas Perthes, 1925), 9. For Barth, the problem is avoided not by self-extraction from a situation of immediate and utter trust in the God of Christian confession nor by the addition of metaphysical ballast to the gospel but by a scripturally deferential characterisation of God as the infrangibly free subject in his self-disclosure and of faith as the human response or ‘answer’ to the divine address. Already clearly articulated in the Göttingen lectures, the point is restated with greater precision in Münster (see *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, vol. 1, *Die Lehre vom Worte Gottes. Prolegomena 1927*, ed. G. Sauter (Zürich: TVZ, 1982), pp. 117–18): ‘the object of dogmatics is not the Christian faith but the word of God. . . . The intention [of this thesis] is not to sever the correlation between the word of God and faith but rather to render it comprehensible in its particular structure, which is utterly asymmetrical and irreversible. The rejection of the concept of the “doctrine of faith” in no way involves the establishment of a *scientia de Deo* prescinding from faith’.

Barth devotes the first five weeks of the winter term to an investigation of the knowability (§15), nature (§16) and attributes (§17) of God, one which he intends to take place strictly on the basis of God's self-revelation. But precisely because God addresses himself to humanity, Christian dogmatics must also enquire into the anthropological pole of the divine–human relation. Again, the particularism of the exposition is crucial: consideration of the human being as the object of the divine address and of the church's proclamation is not a matter of considering what Barth would later call the 'phenomena' of the human – those features of human life (the physical and psychic constitution of human being, the political-social structures and cultural histories of human communities, and so on) which are in view in the natural and social sciences; it is, rather, a question of human being in relation to God. 'Who or what is man that God is mindful of him, that God considers him worthy of but also in need of his address? In what situation does man find himself . . . as he walks in the light of God's revelation?'²² In taking up this question, dogmatics develops an account of the human creature, positively as one ordained for covenant fellowship with God and negatively as one who breaks this covenant and so lives under the conditions of sin. And so Barth advertises his intention to conclude his lectures in the winter semester of 1925 by treating the human being as the creature of God (§22); the covenant of God with humanity established in creation (§23); the fall as the transgression of this covenant (§24); and sin as the fundamental determinant of historical human existence (§25).²³

On the way from the doctrine of God to anthropology, Barth traverses doctrinal terrain in which he seems to have felt his footing unsure; certainly he works his way through it with a certain disquiet, if also with a sense of its importance and a growing confidence.²⁴ He begins by taking up the doctrine of election (§18), following here a convention of the older Reformed dogmatics, for whom predestination couples the doctrine of God and the doctrine of creation (in contrast to a Lutheran tendency to treat election in conjunction with the doctrine of justification). And he notes that this procedural commitment – the conviction that election should appear before the doctrine of creation as a continuation of the doctrine of God – has clear material consequences.²⁵

²² UCR 2, p. 309; cf. UCR 1, pp. 86, 215; Eng. trans., pp. 72, 174; UCR 2, p. 344.

²³ See UCR 2, p. 310.

²⁴ See Barth's circular letters of 26 Nov. 1924 and 15 Feb. 1925: Barth–Thurneysen Briefwechsel 1921–1930, ed. Eduard Thurneysen (Zürich: TVZ, 1974), pp. 285–94 (esp. p. 293) and 301–9 (esp. p. 302).

²⁵ UCR 2, p. 172; Eng. trans., pp. 444–5.

One benefit of this doctrinal sequence, in Barth's view, is that it helps to maintain a proper anthropological concentration in the treatments of creation (§19) and divine providence (§20) which follow. 'God and the world! It is the world of humanity – the humanity of whom the doctrine of predestination speaks, the same humanity of whom we are to speak in its own right. That is the connection.'²⁶ And on this view there would seem to be no material reason why, having concluded the exposition of the doctrine of providence, one should not immediately proceed to a treatment of the human creature.

But before we are able to embark on this next task – at least if we follow the guidelines of the old dogmatics as has been our wont to this point – we find rolled in our path a heavy beam in the form of the doctrine of angels and demons, and we will not be able to avoid taking up some kind of position towards it, although the old Adam certainly would wish us to do so. Angels and demons! An acute, an extraordinarily acute embarrassment, is it not?²⁷

In setting before his students the problem posed by the angelology of the 'old dogmatics', Barth draws attention to the seventeenth-century Reformed dogmatician Francis Burmann, whom Barth calls 'my special informant'.²⁸ Burmann, Barth observes, negotiates the passage from the doctrine of providence to anthropology via the doctrine of angels with ease. Having considered the *absolutis operibus Dei*, he simply presumes that a discussion *de operibus externis* should begin with consideration of rational creatures; that created intelligences are a class comprising two genera – the angelic and the human; and that angels are to be regarded first generically and then according

²⁶ Cf. UCR 2, pp. 214–15.

²⁷ UCR 2, p. 310.

²⁸ UCR 2, p. 310. As is well-known, in his early engagements with Protestant scholastic theology, Barth regularly drew upon and referred his students to the sourcebooks of Heinrich Heppé (*Die Dogmatik der evangelisch-reformierten Kirche dargestellt und aus den Quellen belegt* (Elberfeld: R. L. Friderichs, 1861)) and Heinrich Schmid (*Die Dogmatik der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche dargestellt und aus den Quellen belegt* (Erlangen: Carl Heyder, 1843); cf. e.g. UCR 2, p. 10 (Eng. trans., p. 324)). But Barth secured a copy of Burmann's *Synopsis theologiae et speciatim oeconomiae foederum Dei* in late 1924, and here he cites Burmann directly from the original (see H. Stoevesandt's editorial remarks at UCR 2, p. 11). One should treat with caution claims that 'Barth's recovery of Reformed theology in Göttingen was synonymous with his discovery of Heppé and a coterie of nineteenth-century historiographers of the tradition' or that 'his understanding of the Protestant orthodox tradition at this point was entirely dependent on later historiography' (Ryan Glomsrud, 'Karl Barth as Historical Theologian: The Recovery of Reformed Theology in Barth's Early Dogmatics', in David Gibson and Daniel Strange, *Engaging with Barth: Contemporary Evangelical Critiques* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), pp. 89, 111).

to species. The arrangement has deep roots in the tradition, and on Barth's reading Burmann takes it as self-evident: 'A doubt about the *importance* and the *propriety* of the claims made here does not come into view at all'.²⁹ Here Barth finds himself doubly unsettled: by the traditional convictions that Burmann inhabits, and also by the fact that Burmann appropriates this traditional teaching so effortlessly and confidently. This corresponds in part to Barth's historiographical sensibilities – he understands himself and his students to be separated from Burmann by two centuries of dramatic (even catastrophic) developments in Christian dogmatics.³⁰ But it also bespeaks Barth's highly charged theological conception of the situation and obligation of Christian preaching and so of the dogmatics which serves Christian preaching. Both in the pulpit and in the classroom, Barth insists, precisely as we draw upon the deliverances of the doctrinal and exegetical traditions of the church, we have centrally to ask not simply what was said *then* but what we must say *now*. The responsibility of the Christian witness is discharged only in the first person and in the present tense.

[T]here comes a point – and no theologian can wholly evade it – at which theology does become dangerous and suspect. This is the point where the twofold question arises: What are you going to say? Not as one who knows the Bible or Thomas or the Reformers or the older Blumhardt, but responsibly and seriously as one who stands by the words that are said. . . . And what are you going to say? Not how impressively or clearly or how well adapted to your hearers and the present age – all that is a *cura posterior* – but what? You? What? These are the questions of dogmatics. We have to consider the fact that 'somehow' we have to speak about God. The questions put a pistol at the breast of theologians and through them at that of the public.³¹

So there can be no question of simply rehearsing received teaching about angels. Not in the first instance because that teaching is presumed to be outmoded or materially deficient. It is simply that the question of truth

²⁹ UCR 2, pp. 310–11.

³⁰ See, most pointedly, UCR 2, p. 56; Eng. trans., p. 358.

³¹ UCR 1, pp. 6–7 (Eng. trans., pp. 5–6). On the sense of the *Lebensgefährlichkeit* of preaching and dogmatics in Barth, see H. Stoevesandt, 'Die Göttinger Dogmatikvorlesung. Grundriß der Theologie Barths', in M. Beintker, C. Link, and M. Trowitzsch (eds), *Karl Barth in Deutschland (1921–1935): Aufbruch – Klarung – Widerstand* (Zürich: TVZ, 2005), pp. 77–98. See here also Thurneysen's remarks on the character of Barth's dogmatics lectures in his letter to Hermann Kutter of 11 Feb. 1925 (B–Th 1, pp. 315–18).

needs continually to be raised. And this reading of Burmann, for Barth, serves as an occasion once again to raise it.³²

‘But what should we say about it?’³³ Barth approaches the question by way of a review of representative modern objections to the traditional scheme. Some of these are quickly dismissed: Strauss’s claim that Copernican celestial mechanics rendered obsolete Ptolemaic cosmology and thereby decisively undermined the traditional Christian doctrine of heaven is judged to be ‘banal’ and ‘myopic’; dark references to the historical sources of scripture’s angel-talk in Persian religious imagery are deemed intellectually lazy and in any case irrelevant.³⁴ That said, Barth thinks modern theology does pose questions which demand more serious attention, and he takes up two of them at length.

The first, which Barth finds in Strauss, is that the doctrine of angels and demons is a needless reduplication of statements properly made in a theological anthropology. Good angels are idealised projections of morally unsullied human creatures, while fallen angels portray the tragic end of misused human freedom. To this extent the doctrine is merely superfluous, and unhelpfully so insofar as it diverts interest from the concrete situation in which human moral agency is exercised. So Strauss would have done with it: ‘Away with these shadows! Let us hold fast to the full, concrete life,

³² This and several other aspects of Barth’s presentation may also profitably be read in view of Erik Peterson’s lectures on Aquinas, which Barth and a number of his students had audited in the winter semester of 1923/24 (see Peterson, ‘Thomas von Aquin: Vorlesung Göttingen Wintersemester 1923/24’, Peterson, *Theologie und Theologen*, 9/1, Texte, ed. Barbara Nichtweiß (Würzburg: Echter, 2009), pp. 67–190). In his own reflections on ‘the real difficulties for our modern dogmatics in understanding the doctrine of created spirits’ (144), Peterson sharply criticises what he perceives to be a prevailing subjectivism in the theological faculties: ‘In dogmatics what matters is not the personal conviction of the individual but what the church believes and confesses in its dogmas. . . . If we do not know from our own experience what angels and demons are, why should we not be enlightened about what the church knows to say in its teaching about angels and demons?’ (145). Barth never accepted that the dogmatic task was fully discharged in such a restatement of church dogma, and he saw the question of truthfulness as lying beyond the alternatives of ecclesial authorisation and theological subjectivism. Whether he accorded the pneumatological issues implicit in his exchanges with Peterson sufficient attention remains widely controverted.

³³ UCR 2, p. 311.

³⁴ UCR 2, pp. 312–13; cf. David Friedrich Strauss, *Die christliche Glaubenslehre in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung und im Kampfe mit der modernen Wissenschaft dargestellt*, vol. 1 (Tübingen: Osiander, 1840), p. 671; Theodore Haering, *The Christian Faith. A System of Dogmatics*, vol. 1, trans. J. Dickie and G. Ferries (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1913), p. 411. The first critique conflates the form and content of traditional teaching; the latter commits the genetic fallacy.

to complete beings, complete personalities, and not to complete angels or devils, which are only half a personality and so no personality at all.³⁵ The second, typically Ritschlian, objection is that the doctrine of angels has no obvious place in a systematic presentation of Christian dogmatics. Dogmatics has to do with the relation of God and humanity; but in the doctrine of angels, it is a question of a third quantity – ‘a great unknown factor in the world’ – neither divine nor human.³⁶ Put otherwise: a developed doctrine of angels presumes that we can take independent interest in ‘angels’ and ‘demons’ as a factor in a ‘scriptural worldview’. But dogmatics has no investment in a putative biblical view of the world; it is concerned strictly with the witness of scripture to God’s creative and saving address to humanity. In short: the doctrine of angels either is superfluous or speculative, and in either case is dogmatically impertinent. How does Barth respond?

On the necessity of the doctrine of angels

Barth takes up Strauss’s critique with a note of general concurrence: in the tradition, the doctrine of angels does in fact stand in the closest possible connection to teaching about the human creature. The connection is formally evident in the contiguity of the doctrines in (most) Reformed manuals, and Barth himself characterises the doctrine of angels as a ‘great metaphysical overture’ to a theological anthropology,³⁷ ‘a gigantic parallel or a projection of the doctrine of the human creature into a second, higher world – or, more precisely, a projection of the one, visible, natural side of the world onto its other, invisible, spiritual side’.³⁸ Barth focuses this observation by reflecting on the ways in which both the doctrine of angels and demons and the anthropology relate to the doctrine of election. In well-rehearsed contrast to the remarkable reworking of this doctrine in the *Church Dogmatics*, in the Göttingen lectures Barth depicts divine election as the transcendental possibility of human freedom in vividly actualistic terms. God’s decision continually is realised at every moment in the life of the human moral agent acting towards good or evil. The ‘concrete life’ of the human being, on Barth’s account, thus is lived out in the divine decision; the human creature, we might say, always ‘performs the act of his freedom’ in the space of the divine deciding. Angels and demons, as significantly volitional

³⁵ See Strauss, *Die christliche Glaubenslehre in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung und im Kampfe mit der modernen Wissenschaft dargestellt*, vol. 2 (Tübingen: Osiander, 1841), p. 18.

³⁶ UCR 2, p. 324.

³⁷ UCR 2, p. 344; cf. UCR 2, p. 314: a ‘prologue in heaven’ to the mundane history of humanity (the reference is, of course, to Goethe’s *Faust*); UCR 2, p. 328: ‘a prelude to the doctrine of humanity’.

³⁸ UCR 2, p. 315.

creatures, likewise live from the divine decision. But they represent creaturely existence not in its *concrete* determination by God but in the abstract. Angels and demons foreshadow the dramatics of human life as a kingdom of personal moral agents which 'already have realized in abstract decisiveness the two possibilities lying in the counsel of God and in human freedom'.³⁹

The doctrine of angels thus indeed revisits a dynamic which receives dogmatically central treatment in the doctrine of the human creature. But it is not therefore superfluous. Rather, the doctrine of angels and demons is occasion to acknowledge the reality of the *heavenly* and so of the irreducibly spiritual texture of world-reality.⁴⁰ Creation is not exhausted in its empirical availability; all that is stands at the intersection of the visible and invisible. And a moment's reflection on our ordinary habits of language is sufficient to show that we do in fact reckon with the 'invisible reality of the world' that emerges in, with, and under all visible appearances:

Who would admit the accusation of superstition and fantasy because he talks of the true, the good, and the beautiful (or of error, evil, and ugliness) in the same grave, earnest tones in which a dogmatician speaks of the angel Michael and of Satan? Would we accept that concepts such as 'art', 'science', 'education', 'the fatherland', 'history', 'national character', 'state', 'law', 'humanity', 'proletariat', 'progress', 'the idea of leadership', 'the revolutionary principle', 'the youth movement' are empty constructions, castles in the clouds, in face of which we might well raise the call: back to concrete life! Would it be proper to draw the attention of the sober Americans to the fact that they were wrong to erect that famous statue in New York harbor to *freedom* rather than to the 'complete personality' of some one of their happy fellow citizens? . . . Mark it well: It will not do to protest against speaking in abstractions. Not only because one should avoid pedantry and should have a little fun and some taste for poetry and symbolism, but because we find it impossible

³⁹ UCR 2, p. 309; cf. p. 337: to the human decision (*Entscheidung*) corresponds the angelic or demonic being-decided (*Entschiedensein*) or decidedness (*Entschiedenheit*); this is why the fall of the angels is irrevocable: 'The die is cast and lies, once for all, in freedom; but in the freedom that no longer wants to choose otherwise than it has chosen.'

⁴⁰ See UCR 2, p. 313; cf. pp. 224–6. Barth's argument here involves a translation of scriptural and traditional doctrinal language into the idiom of critical idealism. Angels are 'heavenly' beings; and 'heaven' stands in relation to 'earth' as the abstract to the concrete, the transcendental to the empirical, the spiritual to the natural. The legitimacy of this hermeneutical tactic, Barth stresses, turns on a strong account of creation *ex nihilo* and a corresponding doctrine of the *relative* transcendence of the heavenly creation over the earthly.

to conceal the fact that symbols correspond all the way down the line with realities.⁴¹

In short, in the doctrine of created spirits we directly reflect upon the reality of that aspect or side of creation which is not directly amenable to our perception and control but that nevertheless genuinely impacts upon our lives; and we thereby come to understand something of the character of these non-quantifiable influences. Thus Barth claims that we do not 'postulate this alleged shadow-world' only as a rhetorical embellishment of a self-sufficient naturalistic account of the world, but 'we reckon intellectually and aesthetically' with the 'elemental principles of the world' (cf. Col 2:8) 'because we reckon with them *ethically* and *religiously*; that is, because we *respond* to them – always voluntarily – and because we “fear, love, and trust” them – though one hopes not “above all things”’.⁴² The principalities and powers are not, in other words, merely projections upon an ethically vacuous network of cosmic relations but 'spiritual movements and dependencies that follow their own laws' even if they never exist in total isolation from the natural-mechanical laws of the universe.

Granted the reality of these spiritual dynamics in creation, two further questions confront us. Are angels – are these 'elemental principles' – *personal* realities? And is the kingdom of spirits *divided* between 'good' angels and demons (spirits turned towards or away from God)? Barth is content to leave the first question open: it is, he suggests 'a matter of the greater or lesser vitality and receptivity with which the individual person and entire centuries and generations confront the spiritual side of world-reality'.⁴³ And even if we cannot definitively answer the question for ourselves, he suggests, we should at least be clear that 'it is a symptom of enviable intensity, liveliness, and urgency in the spiritual life' if with a Luther or Blumhardt we perceive and depict 'the mysterious to and fro between spirit and nature, heaven and earth' in vibrantly personal terms.⁴⁴ The second question invites a more definite response: Insofar as we recognise the spiritual urgency of our situation, knowing ourselves to be living 'in the decision' – in the place where divine election meets and sets in motion human freedom – we necessarily will conceive of the invisible side of the world not as a neutral sphere but as an interplay of light and darkness.

In all this, Barth suggests, earlier generations were our superiors, recognising more clearly than many moderns the poverty of a purely

⁴¹ UCR 2, pp. 319–20.

⁴² UCR 2, p. 320.

⁴³ UCR 2, p. 322.

⁴⁴ UCR 2, p. 322.

naturalistic conception of the world and rightly perceiving that historical events cannot be exhaustively understood in terms of human intentions and actions.⁴⁵ And if we follow them in acknowledging that our lives unfold in a determinate and ethically contoured spiritual setting, the necessity of the doctrine of angels and demons establishes itself.

On the dogmatic status of the doctrine of angels

What role should the doctrine of angels play in dogmatics? The question is acute:

The word of God as revelation and as preaching is the address of God to humanity. The angels and the devils do not contribute to it, nor do they listen in to it – at least not as those addressed in it. The conversation between God and humanity passes clean by them. . . . When God is speaking, the discourse of the ‘elemental principles of the world’ – of ideas, principles, and abstractions – is precisely the danger that the church must flee as the plague. One cannot serve God and the principalities and powers, the -isms and -alities of the world. God speaks alone. And when he speaks, then even the highest angels – to say nothing of the devil – must keep silent.⁴⁶

Of course Barth knows well that angels and demons appear prominently in some scriptural passages. Take for example the gospel narratives of Christ’s birth and temptation in the wilderness. It is impossible, Barth says, ‘to hear the witness of scripture’ in such passages if one does not take seriously the presupposition of these texts that there is a ‘world above’ which acts beyond human initiative, as if the glory of the angelic host could be reconceived without loss as the effulgence of the religious imagination or the voice of the tempter equated with an oscillation within the finely tuned religious conscience. On the other hand, one may not say that the Bible testifies to angels and demons as it witnesses to Christ:

It presupposes them, it reckons with them, they belong, so to say, to its necessary conceptual apparatus; but it does not lie in the intention of the Bible – not even as its co-intention – to proclaim that angels and demons exist. It reckons with these concepts somewhat as . . . it reckons with the fact that there are prophets and apostles, a category without the understanding of which one cannot hear its testimony, but which does not belong to the content of the biblical witness, is not itself the Word of

⁴⁵ Cf. UCR 2, p. 324.

⁴⁶ UCR 2, p. 326.

God. God's Word even in the Bible, precisely in the Bible, is exclusively the happening between God and humanity.⁴⁷

Angels appear in scripture, in other words, only as 'escorts' and 'assistants'; they accompany the ways of God with humanity, not taking centre stage but appearing in occasional attendance of the main figures and lines of the drama. The task scripture presents here, for Christian preaching and dogmatics, is to acknowledge the presence of angels in the apostolic-prophetic attestation of God's address to humanity as an open problem – and to 'respect and assert the problem (whose answer is not its responsibility) as a necessary problem'.⁴⁸ Not, again, as a central concern, but as a 'necessary marginal gloss to the real dogmatic theme'.⁴⁹

Having negotiated these fundamental objections to the doctrine, Barth proceeds to offer a brief positive development of its main features, staying close to his preferred sourcebooks of Protestant scholastic theology while drawing freely on a limited range of medieval and contemporary texts. The material is organised in four overlapping sections.⁵⁰ In the first, Barth gathers together a range of general observations, including the significance of the name 'angel'; the nature of angels as created spirits; their relation to space and time; and the character of angelic cognition. The second section considers the fall of Satan, and Barth marvels that it is handled with surprising sobriety by the medievals, for whom Satan was the epitome of culpable creaturely self-satisfaction and not – as he appears in much Protestant theology – a heroic, tragic pretender to the divine throne. This section also includes reflection on the divergence between good angels and demons which issues

⁴⁷ UCR 2, p. 327; cf. Kaftan, *Dogmatik*, 262–3: '[a]ngels are not the object of faith – that is solely God in his revelation – and consequently they are not an object of the knowledge of faith and of the doctrine of faith in the narrower sense'. The distinction between what scripture says and what it teaches goes farther back, and is central to Balthasar Bekker's *De betooverde Wereld* (1691–93) – a text which is decisive for the career of the doctrine of angels and demons in modern Protestant theology: 'One must take to heart the fact that when the Bible refers to the angels or spirits it never says what they are according to their essence and their attributes. And why should it? It is not written for angels but for human beings, who are to learn from it the way to blessedness. Thus it teaches us to seek Christ alone, who for our sake has become neither angel nor spirit but a human being' (*Bezauberte Welt*, p. 334). Generally on Bekker, see Andrew Fix, *Fallen Angels: Balthasar Bekker, Spirit Belief, and Confessionalism in the Seventeenth Century Dutch Republic* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1999); on his hermeneutics, see Fix, 'Bekker and Spinoza', in Wiep van Bunge and Wim Klever (eds), *Disguised and Overt Spinozism around 1700* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), pp. 23–40.

⁴⁸ UCR 2, p. 309.

⁴⁹ UCR 2, p. 328.

⁵⁰ UCR 2, pp. 329–33, 333–7, 337–42, 342–3.

from the fall of Satan; this divergence is grounded, Barth stresses, not in the nature of angels but in the divine election and reprobation (that is, the possibility of a fall from, or continuation in, original goodness and glory rests in the divine determination, though the reality of the fall of some and the steadfastness of others – the reality of the obedience of the angels and of demonic disobedience – rests in a free, irrevocable decision of the created will). The third and fourth sections treat, respectively, wicked and good angels according to their nature, situation and activity. Remaining creatures, the demons are exiled from their original heavenly home without hope of restoration; they now influence human life within the limits set by divine providence, acting solely upon the imagination (though they are not merely imaginative figures) to tempt, threaten and trouble individuals, families, states and churches. For their part, good angels act from heaven on the same formal terms as the demons, though of course with a different intention and to a different end.

Much of this is reportage, delivered in a characteristically lively voice and displaying Barth's remarkable powers of assimilation and penetration. Barth travels lightly over the historical terrain, preferring the bold sketch to nuanced exposition. Working at speed, he remains content to trace the broad lines of Protestant scholastic angelology in brisk strokes, drawing attention to points of major variation between the medieval and post-Reformation Protestant scholastic angelologies or to pronounced differences between modern and classical sensibilities over particular points of doctrine.⁵¹ When he does pause to register a significant constructive point, the effect is to reinforce the claims made in the first part of the lecture rather than to introduce a major new consideration. The whole discussion is loosely structured, and it lacks a summative conclusion. In a final flourish, he charts confessional differences over the theological cogency of the Dionysian celestial hierarchy, the doctrine of guardian angels, and the veneration of angels. And, highlighting the characteristic Reformed trenchancy in each area, Barth brings his treatment of angels and demons to an end.

Strategies and trajectories

Nearly 25 years after this week-long exploration of problems and themes in the doctrine of angels and demons, Barth returned to the theme, devoting an entire semester to an exposition of the doctrine of angels. The result – the famous angelology of *Church Dogmatics*, §51 – remains an enormously compelling piece of theological writing, a work of quite considerably greater

⁵¹ As e.g. the displacement of theological interest in witchcraft by a commitment to the explanatory power of the natural sciences (see UCR 2, p. 339).

formal discipline, exegetical and historical density, and rhetorical power than the lectures we have reviewed here. But for all the material and stylistic advances of the later presentation, many of its fundamental features are already clearly adumbrated in the Göttingen lectures. The continuities and transformations between the two treatments cannot be traced in detail here. But we may draw up the threads of our exposition and indicate some ways in which the Göttingen angelology points ahead to the *Church Dogmatics* by drawing attention to three fundamental communicative strategies at play in Barth's theology of angels. Briefly, we may read both the lectures *de angelis bonis et malis* and the mature angelology as:

- 1) *A complex exercise in theological self-differentiation.* Reading Barth's treatment of angels alongside some other essays from the middle decades of the twentieth century (one thinks, of the serenely self-effacing restatement of the angelology of the church fathers in Jean Daniélou's lovely essay *The Angels and their Mission*),⁵² one cannot help being struck by the sheer weight of Barth's authorial presence. His doctrine of angels reads as an *achievement* – or at least a highly self-conscious attempt to break new ground. This is evident in a recurrent pattern of argumentation – a kind of discursive triangulation – in which Barth situates his own constructive proposal as an advance beyond two opposing, commonly deficient alternatives. The pattern is familiar to any reader of Barth; in his treatment of the doctrine of angels, it takes form as a reasoned impatience both with what Barth perceives as the metaphysical indulgences of the patristic-medieval tradition and with various forms of modern hostility or indifference to angels.
- 2) *A recommendation of a distinctive style of biblical reasoning:* Already in Göttingen, but at far greater length in the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth presents his doctrine of angels as an extended exercise of a proper intellectual liberty which exactly coincides with a strict scriptural attentiveness. Against what he perceives as a widespread marginalisation of angels in modern Protestant dogmatics, Barth insists that we need actively to exercise the freedom to speak forthrightly of angels *precisely because* canonical scripture does. Angels are a topic for serious doctrinal consideration because they occupy a significant place in the scriptural attestation of God's self-communication to humanity. Again, Barth insists on the freedom and the need to deal with angels *precisely in the way that* scripture does. But, as we have begun to see, Barth struggles to give a satisfying account of what exactly this

⁵² Jean Daniélou, *Les anges et leur mission* (Chevetogne: Éditions de Chevetogne, 1953); Eng. trans., *The Angels and their Mission* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2009).

looks like. Barth's invocation of the distinction between what the Bible says about heaven and the angels and what it teaches about them is a symptom of an underlying disturbance, as is the rather spare (in Göttingen) and uneven (in the *Church Dogmatics*) handling of the relevant scriptural texts. His inhibitions derive in part from an inherited nervousness about those trajectories within the exegetical tradition which seek from scripture a broad and richly textured view of God's relating to creation according to its several kinds and ends. Positively stated, Barth was utterly captivated by the prophetic-apostolic announcement that the human creature is arrested, condemned, justified and set at liberty by God; and he never tired of drawing attention to this central feature of the gospel. In doing so, he sometimes betrayed his impatience with styles of contemplative exegesis and doxological theology which allow other features of scriptural teaching – perhaps most importantly for our purposes the heavenly worship of angels and in the doxological communion of angels and human beings in the liturgy – to come centrally into view.⁵³

- 3) *A contribution to a revitalization of a culture of Christian witness.* In our reading of Barth's earlier theology of angels, we have seen that his treatment is motivated not principally by an interest in the nature of angels, their heavenly worship, or their involvement in the ordering of the natural world – i.e. his angelology is not specially attuned to the metaphysical, liturgical or cosmological entailments of the doctrine of angels. Rather, his concentrated efforts to identify the proper dogmatic location and functions of angels are directed towards drawing out the necessity and significance of the biblical assumption that the angels accompany and attest the divine address to human beings. And one of Barth's most suggestive insights is that the doctrine of angels is an occasion at once to draw upon and to deepen a theology of witness. We have seen how Barth draws a parallel between the angels and the apostolate, each a formal feature but not a material ingredient of biblical teaching. And we have observed him beginning to investigate ways in which to recast traditional teaching regarding the presence and activity of angels in terms of a christologically focused service of attestation. Angels do not bear witness from a distance but are present to the encounter of God and

⁵³ See here, in addition to Erik Peterson, *Das Buch von den Engeln: Stellung und Bedeutung der heiligen Engel im Kultus* (Leipzig: J. Hegner, 1935), the important essay of Otfried Hofius, 'Gemeinschaft mit dem Engeln im Gottesdienst der Kirche. Eine traditions-geschichtliche Skizze', *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 89 (1992), pp. 172–96. Further afield, Robert L. Wilken, 'Angels and Archangels: The Worship of Heaven and Earth', *Antiphon* 6/1 (2001), pp. 10–18.

humanity they attest and serve; and angels are obediently present to God and to human creatures only as witnesses – they are not intermediary figures, representing a God who keeps his distance, and in that distance finding a space for their own self-expression and self-expansion. The content and tenor of the exposition of the angelic attestation of God's self-communicating does undergo significant transformation in the *Church Dogmatics*. But the seeds of that later treatment are sown here, in a tentative, explorative proposal which deserves to be more widely known and that certainly will repay further investigation.