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'Realities side by side': God's patience and Abraham's humanity in Genesis 18:16–33

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Abstract

This paper argues that in Jesus Christ 'real humanity' is revealed as a gift of the *patient* God, who gives time and space to creatures. While Karl Barth's work in *Church Dogmatics* §30.3 focuses on God's patience as a mode of his *redeeming* presence, §44.3 opens up towards, but leaves undeveloped, a *providential* mode of patience, in which God constitutes his people by choosing them and giving them all they require to hear his Word and respond in obedience. Recognising God's patience in these distinct modes allows biblical instances of divine–human dialogue to be heard in new and compelling ways. For example, it allows Genesis 18:16–33 to be understood as foregrounding Abraham's *joyful responsibility* to engage with God, making that event, in all its contingency, *the* description of who Abraham is as real man. In this way, a complete theological anthropology has at its heart God's own perfection of patience.

Keywords: Genesis 18, Karl Barth, patience of God, theological anthropology

As an attribute of God's life, patience has been conceived strictly in negative terms as the goodness in which God 'spares those who are deserving punishment'.[1] The purpose of this paper is to move constructively beyond such narrow definitions. I argue that God's gift of time and space – flowing from the *patientia Dei* – is not merely the ground of our salvation but also the basis and reality of our flourishing *as creatures*. I begin by developing one of Karl Barth's insights, namely that the patience of God has as its content the 'real humanity' of Jesus Christ. He alone is the measure of what it means to be human, in the twofold sense that, *as man*, he is elected by God and responds to God's Word. Second, I explore the implications of this ordered relationship for all divine–human encounter. I have chosen the dialogue between the Lord and Abraham in Genesis 18:16–33 as a test case. Whereas commentators have tended to focus upon the nature of God's righteousness

[1] Herman Bavinck, *God and Creation*, vol. 2 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. J. Vriend, ed. J. Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), pp. 213–14.

(the material content of the passage), it is God's determination to be present to Abraham, to speak his purposes and to give time and space to Abraham's voice (the formal content) that actually establishes the reality of the covenant partner. By way of conclusion, I suggest how this aspect of the scriptural witness should reshape a traditional concept of God's patience.

A marvellous consistency

In the last few years of his career, Karl Barth returned to the fundamental question of the relationship between God and humanity in order to correct any overstatement that might have been present in his earlier writings. Barth's central insight was that, as we are confronted by the person of Jesus Christ, 'we encounter the history, the dialogue, in which God and man meet together and are together, the reality of the covenant mutually contracted, preserved, and fulfilled by them'.[2] With the incarnation, in other words, the startling fact that 'God is human' comes to occupy a legitimate place within Christian theology, because the truth of each party, in its respective life, character, and position, is bound inseparably to the other.

In *Church Dogmatics*, §44.3, Barth had already thought through the concept of 'real man'[3] as the one who is 'absolutely grounded' (*schlechthin begründetes*) in his derivation *from God* (III/2, p. 140).[4] Such is the nature of human dependence. It is not that God withholds from his people any measure of goodness or begrudges them a reality or even an independence of their own. Rather human life is a gift. As such, it is traceable to two basic realities: God's gracious election and the hearing of his Word. Apart from these, it is unthinkable. For Barth, they encompass our whence and whither, and together comprise a properly *theological* anthropology.

What is most distinctive in Barth's work is the manner in which this particular dependence must be grasped: not as a postulate of idealized human being, but only as it is secured *extra nos*, that is, above and prior to us in the person of Jesus Christ. 'What a man is in this counterpart is obviously the basic and comprehensive determination of his true being. Whatever else he is, he is on the basis of the fact that he is with Jesus and therefore with God' (III/2, p. 135). Human nature is not a substance one bears in advance of

[2] Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1960), p. 46.

[3] Claims to 'real' or 'true' humanity should be understood *normatively*, as referring to how a person has actualized the humanity to which she is summoned, a use which admits of degrees; cf. David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 205.

[4] All parenthetical citations are to Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 13 vols, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75).

God's election or the hearing of his Word. It is a sharing in a *history* already undertaken and completed in the person of the incarnate Son. The result is that Jesus Christ is 'not merely *a posteriori* but *a priori*, from the very outset . . . the Neighbor, Companion and Brother of every man' (III/2, p. 134). As we will see, the implications for how one reads biblical instances of divine–human encounter are far-reaching.

As influential as Barth's understanding of the human creature has been, far less attention has been paid to the manner in which these judgements are anticipated in his discussion of the patience of God in *Church Dogmatics*, §30.3. There is a marvellous consistency between these two sections. Here too Barth moves the discussion deliberately and carefully beyond speculation (this time concerning *what a god must be* in contrast to the finite world) towards an account of God's life that is properly chastised by Christian scripture. Thus he seeks to operate assiduously within 'the sphere of God's action and working as it is revealed to us in His Word' (II/1, p. 260).

As before, it is the idea of humanity-in-general that Barth finds inadequate to grasping the purpose for which God gives to creatures time and space. History is not an open stage onto which Jesus Christ enters as one cast member alongside all others. Much the contrary, it is Jesus Christ alone in all his particularity who is 'the meaning of God's patience' (II/1, p. 432). Around him the action has been gathered. Primarily and properly, then, Barth's definition of God's patience has as its content this one man:

> We define God's patience as His will, deep-rooted in His essence and constituting His divine being and action, to allow to another . . . space and time for the development of its own existence, thus conceding to this existence a reality side by side with His own, and fulfilling His will towards this other in such a way that He does not suspend and destroy it as this other but accompanies and sustains it and allows it to develop in freedom. (II/1, pp. 409–10)

Outward from Jesus Christ to all others – that is the direction of Barth's thinking. The result is an account of the divine patience which unswervingly reflects the love of God, yet also honours the characteristic depth, or freedom, of all God's acting. Human beings *are* precisely and only as God gives them time and space *to be*.

I am interested in these sections of *Church Dogmatics* because, read together, they provide a unique starting point from which to grasp the profound implications for creatures of a creator whose electing love is always self-giving love. If this relationship between theology and anthropology is to be

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of any assistance in thinking after other instances of divine–human encounter, however, it is worth dwelling at greater length on two particular features.

First of all, the thoroughgoing realism of the theology sketched above should give us pause. For Barth, beginning anywhere but Jesus Christ would not treat 'real man' at all, but only approximate a phenomenon of humanity, and so a human capacity to thrive in general time and space, or transcend chemico-biological process, or live out an openness towards an absolute other. When Edward Farley sets out to describe the human experience of 'being-founded', to cite one example, he unfolds his argument *remoto Christo*, refusing to 'explicate or even presuppose the cosmic narrative' of the active presence of God in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. A significant set of topics is thereby placed beyond the reach of theology. Among these are divine election, God's action in and through history, and even the question of whether the God who originates the experience of 'being-founded' can be thought of in personalist terms.[5]

Rather than pursue such local or regional descriptions of human life, however, 'Christian theology seeks a "global knowledge". Its realism must encounter, acknowledge and bow down before the God who is the creator of all reality, who is not an after-thought, observer, or unintegrated part, but rather the author and judge of the world he has made.'[6] It is an implication of such realism that one must begin from God's action in Christ in order to articulate the particularity of human being in the strongest possible terms. Only 'in the presence of this holy and righteous One', Barth writes, can we learn how to live, because his is 'the only possible life' (II/1, p. 430).[7] As God's 'chosen One' (Luke 9:35), Jesus' humanity offers an event in the midst of history that is definitive of all real human being, precisely because it is chosen by God 'from before the foundations of the world' (Eph 1:4). *Quod ultimum est in executione, primum est in intentione*. In the context of God's 'plan for the fullness of time', he alone is *the* object of God's gracious election, and only in him does God gather up all others (Eph 1:10).

One implication of this is that God's patience is strong. It is the Son's obedience, in the flesh of Jesus Christ, which God awaits.

[5] Edward Farley, *Good and Evil: Interpreting a Human Condition* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 140.

[6] Katherine Sonderegger, 'The Character of Christian Realism', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57/4 (2004), p. 453.

[7] In §30.3, Barth is actually developing the biblical concept of God's patience alongside and through that of wisdom. The latter is a distinct topic for theology because 'God not only wills but knows what He wills. And He knows not only what He wills, but why and wherefore He wills it ... [namely] His own meaning, plan and intention' (II/1, p. 423).

> The existence of the man Jesus is the true and original object of the divine election of grace. Apart from God himself there was nothing that was before it. In the decree of God, it is the first thing to which everything else is related and which everything else can only follow. (III/2, p. 145)

The turn here is away from locating the fundamental reality of the covenant in any other conversion, repentance or obedience. Were these the criteria, the history of God's people is sufficient proof of how quickly our destruction would come.[8] Rather, from first to last the covenant is God's own work, and on that account his patience bears an 'invincible, victorious power' to accomplish his ends (II/1, pp. 416–17). Of course, the work itself may still be mysterious. Jesus' own life has at its heart an 'hour' which none of his disciples can comprehend but nevertheless rushes inexorably towards them, passing even through death and darkness (John 12:27; cf. Isa 55:10–11). But that only underscores the point. It is not a route taken for its self-evident promise of victory but for the sole purpose of glorifying God (1 Cor. 1:27–8). There is therefore no risk when God is patient with his creatures, no teetering upon the precipice. Counter-intuitive as it is for reason yoked to idealist concepts, nothing of the weakness, short-sightedness or indeterminacy of creaturely patience applies here. However human beings might fail and forfeit their existence as creatures – and Abraham must of course be included here – even so, God is justified in the time and space he gives them, because in the person of Jesus Christ 'that which He awaits has taken place and is fulfilled, the obedience which He demands from His creature has been rendered' (II/1, p. 420).

Alongside this, Jesus' life as 'real man' includes another feature: to the election which characterizes the incarnate Son's going out from God, there perfectly corresponds his return, a concrete history of gratitude and obedience. As with his election, here too Christian theology makes plain its thoroughly realistic character. The incarnation of God's Word is indeed an event, but, as Kathryn Tanner has argued, not in the sense of being a single moment. Even for the Son of God, perfect humanity is not realized in a timeless, immediate manner but must be learned through suffering (Heb 5:8). 'It is not the case, for example, that Jesus overcomes mortality ... before he is crucified' or 'temptation until he is tempted' or 'fear of death until he feels it'.[9] If that were the case, the very living out of his life would

[8] One thinks here of the remarkable case of the deluge, in which God's reason for destroying the world – namely the evil inclination of the human heart – is also the reason he will never do it again (cf. Gen 6:5; 8:21).

[9] Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 28.

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be merely a concession – an accommodation – rather than the irreplaceable fulfilment of God's will for a particular kind of creature.

Within the Gospels, it is perhaps Jesus' wrestling in Gethsemane that provides the most poignant example of the response to which human beings are summoned. In that moment of prayer, the silence that Jesus faces anticipates the Father's complete hiddenness in the event of the cross. And yet, what is won is the Son's unshakeable resolve to do God's will, even if that means drinking 'the cup' of divine judgment (Mark 14:36; cf. Jer 49:12). As Paul Dafydd Jones writes, in the garden, 'Jesus does not disappoint; he does not try God's patience . . . [but offers obedience] in ways that perfectly fulfill God's desire to live in true fellowship'.[10] The implication is *not* that Jesus comes to participate in a humanity already developed in advance of and outside his own life. Rather his endurance of such distress, agitation and deep grief 'shows these traits being *forged*'.[11] In this way, the event in time and space of Jesus' life is 'the penetrating spearhead of the will of God' (III/2, p. 143). It is the revelation both that in Christ, as the only One who is turned wholly to God, humanity has reached its goal, and also that, in him, a wider fulfilment is yet to come.

Alongside its realism, a second aspect of this theology deserves close attention. A theology of God's patience needs to make equally clear that God's *gift* of time and space does not in any measure constitute a *giving away* of his lordship and care. In the context of God's creating and redeeming, there is no neutral field that human beings can occupy. There is only 'life and prosperity' within covenant or 'death and adversity' without (Deut 30:15). Far more congenial to the modern mind, however, is the assumption that to be human is to be wholly independent. Crucial to John Locke's philosophy, for example, is the claim that whatever time and space is given to creatures is emphatically *not* determined within the context of a dynamic relationship of divine address and human response. Rather, as human beings, we are defined by our own reflexive capacities. We are rational, disengaged selves, able both to determine the good and to will it, and, as such, we become for ourselves 'objects of far-reaching [self-] reformation'.[12] Pressed to its end, what is asserted is an inherently secular sphere of life, in which human society and culture flourish to the extent that they 'are delivered from tutelage to religious

[10] Paul Dafydd Jones, *The Humanity of Christ: Christology in Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), p. 169.

[11] Ibid., p. 234.

[12] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 171.

control and closed metaphysical world-views'.[13] Of course, when claims like this fly untethered from the particularities of the biblical witness, the results for theology are disastrous. They tend eventually to drive a wedge between one's hunger for God and one's responsibility for fellow humanity; they too closely identify God with history; and they construe the creature's attempt to cling to God's name as a virtueless act, precisely because it undercuts one's perceived independence. The terminus is not merely atheism but, as Wolf Krötke has argued, a state of God-forgetfulness (*Gottesvergessenheit*), in which 'God plays no role as a determinate aspect and guide for the way a human being lives out his or her life. God is not asked about, nor is he listened for. As far as that person is concerned, *God is not there*'.[14]

In reply, the first thing that must be said is that such a position trades upon a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the God whom Christians worship. Within the context of the *locus de Deo*, the attributes of God 'must be defined from and through one another'.[15] As a result, the patience of God bears a characteristic depth most clearly grasped in relation to other divine perfections, such as eternity and immensity. A right-headed account of God's eternity, then, should underscore that his difference from the world does not entail the destruction of a genuine history in time, but instead furnishes the basis for one's trust. So the psalmist proclaims that because you, God, have your life 'from everlasting to everlasting' (Ps 90:1), our times are secure 'in your hands' (Ps 31:15). In a similar manner, acknowledging the immensity of God underscores that the Lord of Israel lives among and within creatures, but never under the limitations of spatial distance. 'Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? says the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth?' (Jer. 23:24). From start to finish, because God is in himself eternal and immense, he indivisibly 'embraces' (*complectitur*) creatures in genuine relationship.[16]

Not only is such secularism ontologically confused, but its bid for human independence is essentially dehumanizing. The divine embrace neither robs creatures of their autonomy nor binds them to oppressive authorities. It is precisely in this lordly act, rather, that the Son and the Spirit make human beings free to return to their creator. Colin Gunton states the paradox clearly:

[13] Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 20.

[14] Quotation is taken from Philip G. Ziegler, *Doing Theology When God is Forgotten: The Theological Achievement of Wolf Krötke* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 25.

[15] Colin E. Gunton, *Act and Being: Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), p. 123.

[16] Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols, trans. G. M. Giger, ed. J. T. Dennison (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1992), III.x.11.

> Incarnationally conceived action – action understood through the focus provided by the true humanity and self-giving to death of Jesus – indicates contingency but not 'pure' chance as the heart of the matter. There is nothing outside God's ordering activity. But that divine determining is not deterministic, because the action of the Spirit defines the kind of order that there is, or can be. The Spirit's action is eschatological action, enabling things to be themselves.[17]

Creaturely freedom cannot be cordoned off from love, in other words, as though it were purest when disentangled from the need and worth of others. Rather Christian freedom reflects God's own costly self-giving, and the Gospel therefore sets us *as servants* before our neighbours, able and willing to respond (Gal 5:13; cf. II/1, p. 418). It is this freedom, properly in Jesus Christ and derivatively in all his people, which the Lord has as his 'definite intention' (II/1, p. 408). Precisely because God has chosen to create, sustain and redeem a world of time and space, a concept of secularization in biblical light can only refer to the *human* denial of their Lord – whether, as Barth writes, this takes the form of militant rejection or superficial acquaintance (IV/3, pp. 118–22). In no respect can it describe *God's* denial of his world.[18]

This brings us full circle. Having begun from Karl Barth's proposal for a material relationship between divine perfection and human being, I sketched two aspects of this theology in order to focus theological attention more sharply upon the significance of biblical encounters between God and his people. It is into this relationship, and therefore into this particular time and space, that Abraham enters.

Abraham's humanity: same text, new song

If the 'real man' can neither be thought nor realized apart from the person of Jesus Christ, how does this turn theological attention back to human being and action within the canon as a whole? Note the impetus behind this move: it is not by 'a flight of creative exploration' that Jesus' life comes to illumine Abraham's dialogue with God. Rather, to adapt the work of Brevard Childs,

> [T]he biblical text itself exerts theological pressure on the reader . . . [so that] when the interpreter moves from the reality of God manifest in action back to the Scriptures themselves for further illumination of the

[17] Colin E. Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 192.

[18] The most forceful modern proponent of this position is arguably Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. G. Eliot (New York: Harper, 1957), esp. pp. 1–58.

> divine economy, he or she is constrained to listen for a new song which breaks forth from the same ancient, sacred texts.[19]

A demand like this for reinterpretation certainly does not free one from the work of disciplined exegesis. The text's socio-cultural inheritance, the fingerprints of its redactors and the nuances of language remain irreducible features of its creatureliness. Where these words are recognized as an object of God's sanctifying work, however, or better, where it is recognized that '[t]here is an election and overseeing of the entire historical course of the creaturely reality so that it becomes a creature which may serve the purposes of God',[20] the meaning of God's presence to Abraham will exceed its own isolated and fragmented witness. In the light of Jesus Christ, Abraham's dialogue with God is more than an eclectic or occasional event. It belongs to the enactment of his being as human, and is thus a living into his true humanity.[21]

A word about the setting is appropriate. The passage at hand serves as centrepiece to a larger pericope stretching from Genesis 18:1 to 19:29. Each of the three episodes comprised therein – the visitation to Abraham, his dialogue with the Lord and the destruction of the cities – bears witness to covenant life as hospitality, whether by faithfulness or by failure.[22] Within the canon, of course, the goal of hospitality is not merely comfort, and certainly not luxury or entertainment. A more sensitive theological eye detects as its end participation in the very *purpose* for which God has given time and space. Taken up into God's economy, in other words, biblical acts of hospitality unfold as 'pregnant occasions for God's reciprocity, quantum leaps in the progress of the gospel through gift exchanges among humans'.[23] Thus the human practice – so characteristic of Ancient Near Eastern life, and focused narrowly on discrete acts of welcome in which the distance between host and stranger is overcome – is drawn up into God's larger purposes.

1. Elected by God – 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?' (Gen 18:17)

No less than in the chapters which precede it, Abraham is identified here primarily as one elected by God. God's determination to disclose his plans

[19] Brevard S. Childs, 'Toward Recovering Theological Exegesis', *Ex Auditu* 16 (2000), p. 127.

[20] John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), p. 26.

[21] The slow process of Peter's conversion to global Christian mission offers another compelling example of this (see Acts 10).

[22] Cf. James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as it Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 328–50.

[23] John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 105.

to the man of Ur is predicated upon nothing other than God's decision to have for himself a people. Thus the verb (ידע, Gen 18:19) is deployed in its rare and significant sense, not simply to mean that God has *known* Abraham but that he has *chosen* him for 'a permanent relationship of the closest mutual belonging'.[24] This relationship between election and disclosure is similarly present in the prophet Amos. There, Israel's standing before God means wholehearted accountability to righteousness and justice, but also carries with it the corresponding promise that God will not act so as to leave his prophets in the dark (Amos 3:2, 7). It is a reality that fractures simplistic understandings of life with this Lord. In the present intra-divine monologue, God's self-reflection reiterates his original promise. 'In due season' (18:10), Abraham will receive his heir, through whom he will become 'a great and mighty nation', overflowing as a blessing to all peoples (Gen 12:2–3; 15:4; 17:2, 7–8). This need not suggest that Abraham's greatness in some way precedes God's call. His life as worthy covenant partner is not complete in and of itself; it is not a given quantity with which God has to work, as marble is to the sculptor. Rather, the unfolding of Abraham's life is at every point embraced by God's prevenient grace. Precisely as he is chosen by God, *on that basis*, he and his kin will be great.

There enters at precisely this point in Genesis, however, a new and challenging element to its witness. It is ingredient to Abraham's election in Genesis 18:19 that he and his household will keep 'the way of the Lord' (דרך יהוה; cf. Ps 119) by doing 'righteousness and justice' (צדקה ומשפת; cf. Ps 89:14). This is a strikingly new dimension within the broader narrative. In the preceding chapters, righteousness is mentioned only as it is 'reckoned' to Abraham on the basis of faith (15:6; חשב; LXX, λογίζομαι; cf. Rom 4:1–12; Gal 3:6–14). In the unfolding of the canon, scholars have seen this particular passage as a bridge from patriarchal religion to the religion of Israel, from the favour God shows Abraham to the Mosaic covenant.[25] Whereas the law is only given to Moses at Mount Sinai, Abraham is understood even prior to this as embodying the righteousness God requires. It is worth pointing out that this affirmation seems to exceed the evidence of Abraham's own life, since Genesis presents a decidedly mixed record of his meeting the demands of the law. On the one hand, for example, he both shrinks back from Pharaoh in surrendering Sarai (Gen 12:10–20; cf. 20:1–18) and seeks an heir by

[24] Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1961), p. 292. Contrast the diabolical usage in Gen 19:5.

[25] Walter Moberly likens the key interpretive move to the typological reading, which, for Christians, bridges Old and New Testaments – *The Theology of the Book of Genesis* (Cambridge: CUP, 2009), pp. 139–40.

his own misguided means (Gen 16:1–6). On the other hand, however, he remains set apart as the one who not only 'believed God' (Gen 15:6) but, in terms most recognisable within the context of the conditional covenant, will 'keep' (שמר) the way of the LORD (Gen 18:19). What is remains clear is that Abraham's election is not established on the basis of who he is *in himself*; rather the electing God establishes who Abraham will be in their history together.

For our purposes, the central point is that God's refusal to conceal his plans from Abraham is most intelligible on the basis of his decision *for* Abraham and all his household. Source-critical work has been suspicious of late interpolations because of the way they are assumed to bend the sense of an ostensibly more basic or original text. Such work often culminates in the subordination of passages of so-called 'secondary character' – in this case, vv. 17–19 and vv. 22b–33a – to an 'original legend'.[26] While feats of a certain kind of linguistic and historical skill, such insights are nevertheless little help in hearing how the text speaks in its final form. In Genesis itself, we are offered this passage as a unit. If the dialogue which follows is to be understood, it should be understood on the basis of God's life and his decision to give time and space to his people.

2. *Hearing and Responding to God – 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?' (Gen 18:25)*

The subsequent back-and-forth unfolds at the Lord's gracious invitation. Not in addition to but rather in realisation of his elect status, Abraham is drawn into this encounter. The action narrows, and as Abraham remains 'standing before the Lord', there is suggested something of a servant before his master (v. 22; cf. 19:27). This, it has been proposed, is not the earliest form of the text. The tradition of scribal emendations (*Tikkune Soferim*) has carefully documented here a reversal of a previous form, which read, 'the Lord remained standing before Abraham'. Thus far, attempts to excavate the motivations driving the reversal have been pure conjecture. A leading theory is that the original form was unworthy of God, for it appeared to reverse the proper relationship of authority between the two parties. That conclusion, however, may be more than merely short-sighted. Gerhard von Rad pinpoints the cost. When 'the post-exilic Jewish men of learning' made the change, they 'sacrificed . . . Yahweh's gesture of lingering, which contained a silent demand to express itself, to their religious timidity'.[27]

[26] E.g. Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. M. Biddle (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), pp. 200–5.

[27] Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, trans. J. H. Marks (London: SCM Press, 1961), p. 206.

In light of my argument, I hope it is clear how such an act of God is perfectly conceivable for an orthodox theology. In neither case is the Lord's posture a sign of weakness or subservience or passivity; it is an act of accommodation to the finite creatures he has created. In an important book, Kevin Vanhoozer argues that *communicative* action is the 'prime mode of personal existence', which unlike *instrumental* action, 'brings about its effect irresistibly yet non-coercively'.[28] As a realistic narrative, in other words, the passage moves dynamically. God speaks with neither a mechanical necessity nor predictability; but God does speak with his singular Word. The result is that, to the one Word who calls upon Abraham, there already belongs properly and primarily the truth of human being.[29] In the dialogue, then, a history is invited, with variations in its unfolding but constancy in its aim. First is struck the note of love in God's will for dialogue; it is followed by God's free act of giving time and space for Abraham to receive the Lord and respond; it concludes by placing the emphasis upon God's own freedom: 'the Lord went his way, when he had finished speaking with Abraham' (v. 33). God desires such a response from Abraham and is thus present to him accordingly.

Admittedly, this conclusion is somewhat strained by the fact that the disclosure upon which the whole passage pivots – namely, the Lord's intention to destroy Sodom – is only implied. Here too, one way to understand the omission is to focus on what God's creatures require, and what God commits to providing as part of his will to create. Where his sovereign decree (as it corresponds to an eternal encompassing of real history, rather than a bland nullification of free will) is withheld for a short time, it leaves room for divine–human dialogue to take place. Abraham questions whether the Judge will do what is just, as if the cry of injustice (Gen 18:21; 19:13; cf. Isa 5:7; Jer. 20:8) has already condemned the cities of the plain. He thus wrestles understandably with the question, stated positively, 'Should not a smaller number of guiltless men be so important before God that this minority could cause a reprieve for the whole community?'[30] He may do this precisely because God's presence to creatures *befits the ones he has both chosen*

[28] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion and Authorship* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), pp. 148, 383–4.

[29] If, as Robert Jenson has argued in *Canon and Creed* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), the second article of the Apostles' Creed comprises 'recitative appropriation of acts of God by which his Son Jesus is indeed our Lord' (p. 49), then one may envision a second article which not only begins, 'and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who as the Word given to Moses led Israel out of Egypt' (pp. 30–1), but also, as a matter of canon, includes God's disclosure to Abraham (Gen 18:19).

[30] Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 208.

and created for himself. Paul Helm lays out the logic: '[I]f men and women who are themselves in time are to respond to God, then he must represent himself to them as one to whom response is possible, as one who acts and reacts in time'.[31] Deliberation, investigation and attention paid are thus first and foremost an act of God's faithfulness to himself.

By contrast, certain other interpretations of this event thrust attention radically upon Abraham's supposed autonomy. Walter Brueggemann, for example, presents Abraham as a man of 'powerful credentials', licensed to challenge Yahweh's rather simplistic willingness to enact retribution in a manner far too similar to that of the world at large. This is the Lord's course, writes Brueggemann, until Abraham intervenes:

> It is as though Abraham is Yahweh's theological teacher and raises a question that is quite new for him. The question concerns Yahweh's willingness to set aside the closed system and approach the world in another way. Abraham is the bearer of a new theological possibility.[32]

What is striking about this interpretation is not the attention given to Abraham's constitutive place in the Lord's greater plans. It is the unqualified *autonomy* attributed to the man. His voice is neither an echo of nor a response to God's prevenient righteousness, but constitutes an authority all its own, which, in Jon Levenson's words, 'doubts, questions, argues, and even convinces God to back down from an extreme opinion'.[33] Abraham is presented, in short, as God's worthy opponent. He is not given time and space to learn and live as a creature, but to teach and, by implication, to prescribe life in a new form. Whereas classical interpretations have perceived in this exchange the training up of God's people,[34] this alternative proposal shockingly reverses the relationship, such that it is the people who now train up their God.

At least two additional responses are appropriate. First, when attention is fixed on both sides of the dialogue, the Lord's response to Abraham is more nearly a refusal to enter into any such contest. Nathan MacDonald's

[31] Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), p. 194.

[32] Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation Series (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), pp. 168–9.

[33] Jon Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), p. 152.

[34] E.g. Ephrem the Syrian (*Comm. Gen.* 16:1), Chrysostom (*Hom. Gen.* 42:12, 19, 23–4), and Calvin (*Comm. Gen.* 18:17–18). The possibility that a text's meaning may depart in this way from the most direct sense of the words rests on the distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts; see Nicolas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), p. 191.

work on this is extremely illuminating. Everything the Lord does – e.g. in allowing Abraham to dictate the parameters and terms of the exchange; in refusing to counter-bid; and in bridging the disparity in knowledge between the two parties rather than exploit it for his own gain – together constitutes a 'subversion of the pattern of haggling' one might find in a Near East bazaar.[35] Second, to suggest that Abraham's actions *taken in isolation* are noble and warranted is to baptise the catastrophic. Even within the limited scope of Genesis – let alone the canon as a whole – every foray into such territory belongs to the horrendous attempt to grasp after equality with God (e.g. Gen 3:6), rather than faithfully refuse such wickedness (e.g. Gen. 39:9).

For human beings whose *whence* is an election to covenant life, their *whither* can only be a return to the Father. For Abraham, this return is the humble but persistent pursuit of God's justice, a searching, in which his own word more and more nearly corresponds to God's own. Moreover, there is in Abraham's posture a fitting receptivity, an acknowledgement of the unworthiness of a man who in and of himself is 'dust and ashes' (Gen 18:27), but, by the goodness of God, is made 'a friend' (Jas 2:23; 2 Chron 20:7; Isa 41:8). David Kelsey offers a penetrating analysis of this relationship between divine presence and creation. The *ultimate* context of human existence, he writes, cannot be accounted for in terms of a God-given capacity – such as with cognitive or affective faculties – but only in terms of God's presence to creatures in hospitable generosity.

> [I]t is precisely the actuality of God's relating to them in address that creates them, not just as actual living bodies ... but more particularly as personal bodies having just such capacities for relating to one another through the use of a language ... God, as it were, talks living human bodies into being personal.[36]

God's vocal and self-giving presence elicits spiritual freedom. This freedom is neither an indeterminate striving nor an unfettered compulsion, but a life that by the power of God's own Spirit may be lived with and for one's neighbour. Tying this back to our focus upon the time and space which constitutes God's basic gift to humankind, Douglas Knight has argued that this God-given freedom 'to make decisions and exercise judgment in favor of

[35] Nathan MacDonald, 'Listening to Abraham – Listening to Yahweh: Divine Justice and Mercy in Genesis 18:16–33', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66 (2004), p. 35.

[36] Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, vol. 1, p. 293. Less persuasive is Kelsey's assertion that 'in creating, God precisely does not give Godself. To the contrary, what God gives in creating is thoroughly other-than-God' (p. 214). This is based on Claus Westermann's dubious distinction between *blessing as a state* and *deliverance as an event* (p. 166). For the passage at hand, God's abiding presence includes his concrete address of the creature.

others' is not only an act of love but the very 'purpose of this serial mode of being', the way in which we as human beings learn to be with one another.[37]

A more adequate hearing of this passage, therefore, does not begin or end with Abraham's supposed independence, but with the God who is perfectly patient, willing time and space for Abraham to be a covenant partner. God's patience means not merely an opportunity, and certainly not an unwelcome presumption, but rather Abraham's *joyful responsibility* to engage with God on the quality and form of this life. 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?' (Gen 18:25). As a good deal of commentary work has shown, the question is significant as an inquiry into God's righteousness. More basically, however, as God hears and responds, it is significant as the act in which the patient Lord makes human beings most truly themselves.

A concept of God's patience bent to divine action

What I have developed above concerning God's patience is not in the foreground of Karl Barth's own writing, nor is it typical of the larger Reformed tradition. Even among the more important treatments of the topic, most of the theological attention given to it has been both cursory and too narrowly focused upon the fallen creature as she stands before God. In his *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, one of the best known and most expansive works of its kind, Stephen Charnock locates the key to understanding God's patience in 'formal consideration of the object', specifically the human being who has made herself a criminal through sin.[38] From one perspective, this emphasis is undeniably right-headed. In most instances, the biblical lexicon itself moves in precisely this direction. While God's patience (μακροθυμία) does not dissolve the palpable tension human beings *experience* between his wrath and mercy, in the canon, such patience does belong to the unity of God's life and work. It is an affirmation that God is not controlled by his wrath but executes it in the time and manner that he chooses (cf. Rom 2:4; 3:25–6).[39] Similarly, God's forbearance (ἀνοχή) clearly indicates an act of self-restraint, whether this leads to the salvation of creatures (e.g. LXX, Isa 42:14; Rom 2:4) or, less frequently, to their destruction (e.g. LXX, Isa 64:12). The clearest instance in which biblical

[37] Douglas Knight, 'Time and Persons in the Economy of God', in *The Providence of God: Deus Habet Consilium* ed. F. A. Murphy and P. G. Ziegler, (London: T&T Clark, 2009), pp. 136, 141.

[38] Stephen Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, vol. 2 (New York: Robert Carter, 1853), p. 479.

[39] For the community of faith, the negative side of divine patience is the 'apparent delay of God's promises' in which injustice and evil are given scope. Hermann Cremer, *Die christliche Lehre von den Eigenschaften Gottes* (Gließ: Brunnen-Verlag, 2005), p. 84.

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terminology for God's patience presupposes sin, however, is found in the Hebrew idiom, ארך פים. It is a picturesque phrase, which speaks literally of 'length of nose' but is usually rendered 'slow to anger' in modern English translations. It may depict the space one gives to another, and so a refusal to close the distance in a moment of confrontation (cf. Prov 25:15), or the ample time given for hot air to cool as it travels down one's nostrils.[40] Altogether, these word groups articulate a mode of God's real presence in virtue of the sin which God rejects, and which threatens both creature and covenant. This is the solid ground upon which Charnock's exposition, as one representative example, is built. The concept he deploys is familiar and intuitive. Its sense flows directly from the bulk of the scriptural testimony, and it fits neatly with, though it is not encompassed by, the general use of the term.

Yet in Charnock's handling, as in most others, the *patientia Dei* is thereby reduced to only one of its biblical modes. It remains a power that God exercises in history in order to redeem, but it is not understood in the most basic sense to constitute history itself. With specific reference to Genesis 18:16–33, Charnock writes that patience is *what Abraham requests* on behalf of Sodom, not *the basis on which Abraham makes his request and is heard* by God as covenant partner.[41] The weakness of such an approach lies in the willingness to reduce conceptual work to individual points of vocabulary. In all reflection upon the life and character of God, my own assumption is that the criteria for success include the capacity of such work to accurately reflect (and promote reflection upon) divine action as it is witnessed to in scripture. The success of my own argument, then, should be measured by the dictum laid down by James Barr, namely that the meaning and distinctiveness of biblical thinking *will not and cannot* be settled by isolating the vocabulary deployed therein.

> It is the sentence (and of course the still larger literary complex such as the complete speech or poem) which is the linguistic bearer of the usual theological statement, and not the word (the lexical unit) or the morphological and syntactical connection.[42]

A concept of divine patience tied exclusively to the reality of sin rather than, say, the finitude of creatures, who are dependent upon God's gracious

[40] The phrase is closely related to 'length of spirit' (ארך–רוח), which suggests calmness in the face of disorder or calamity (e.g. Eccl 7:8). I am grateful to Jim Bruckner, who has pointed out in private correspondence that, in other places in scripture, ארוכה functions as a word of healing and restoration (e.g. Isa 58:6–9), an image of flesh as it grows or lengthens over a wound (e.g. Jer 33:6).

[41] Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, vol. 2, p. 494.

[42] James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: OUP, 1962), p. 263.

will for their existence as not-God, is simply not elastic enough to account for various encounters in scripture between the Lord and his people. The dialogue of Genesis 18:16–33 is one case in point, the larger literary complex demanding far more nuanced comment.

My proposal is that holy scripture presses us to account for patience as *a providential mode* of God's goodness, a character description of the God who wills to give finite creatures life, existence and purpose, but only with and before himself.[43] In the terminology of classical Reformed dogma, one might restate the need for this distinction in the following way. On the one hand, God is clearly patient towards creatures who are enveloped in a *status corruptionis*, a people left limping and gasping by a deadly lawlessness and so decisively lost unless God gives us time and opportunity to repent (2 Pet 3:9, 15). In and with this, on the other hand, God is also patient with creatures as he first gives us life and sustains us for a special purpose and blessing (Gen 1:28; Acts 14:17), for a life consummated in a kingdom that glorifies the Lord who is all in all (Rev 21:24; 1 Cor 15:28). This too is the work of the triune God, rooted in his life. Time and space are no neutral field, but the stage on which God moves his people from a *status integritatis* to a *status gloriosus*. In the particular case of Abraham, we have seen that the tensed and extended world that God wills for him is given precisely for the purpose of engaging his Lord.

Insofar as such distinctions in protology and eschatology are thought through on the basis of the life of God's incarnate Son, even Barth, who was deeply aware of the disastrous consequences that speculation poses for theology, stressed that such matters 'are not absolutely closed to us' (III/2, p. 39). Once the life of Jesus Christ is set before us, in fact, we not only *can* ask, but *must* ask how all other human life is fulfilled from this centre outwards. A theology of 'real humanity' should neither begin from nor end with our separation from God, for that is not our nature. Rather, '[w]hat God knows of man beyond his sin, relativizing even the sin of man in the freedom of His grace, looking above it and through it, is the real creaturely nature of man' (III/2, p. 38). It is *this* humanity that God awaits, and for which he works. As our concepts of patience are continually submitted to the Spirit of God, and so bent to the witness of holy scripture, we should not be surprised to find our work 'far more open and eclectic than has been the tradition'.[44] In the encounter between God and human beings, it is not merely the topic

[43] On the distinction between providential and redemptive modes of divine perfection, see my book, *Wrath among the Perfections of God's Life* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), pp. 109–14.

[44] Gunton, *Act and Being*, p. 74.

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discussed, but the fact that God invites finite creatures into his counsel at all, which is cause for amazement and awestruck praise: 'When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?' (Ps 8:3–4).

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