

RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘A field of divine activity’: Divine aseity and holy scripture in dialogue with John Webster and Karl Barth

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Abstract

In dialogue with John Webster and Karl Barth, this essay considers the intersection of divine aseity and holy scripture. I argue that the doctrine of holy scripture is constituted by a backward reference, namely, the plentiful life of the triune God. The doctrine of divine aseity denotes God’s self-existent triune life, which anchors God’s bestowal of life. Construed negatively, aseity establishes the incommensurability of God and creatures by distinguishing, without sundering, scripture and God’s self-communicative presence. Construed positively, aseity constitutes scripture as ‘a field of divine activity’, the sphere of the life-giving missions of the Word and Spirit. The triune God who lives *a se*, elects the texts of scripture to serve as intermediaries of God’s vivifying address.

Keywords: aseity; Karl Barth; holy scripture; Trinity; John Webster

‘Theological intelligence’, John Webster remarks, ‘traces the outer movement of God’s communicative goodness’ to the triune life *in se*.¹ Appropriating such a posture, this essay traces one particular creaturely reality – holy scripture – to its origin in the plentiful life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In dialogue with two Reformed theologians, Karl Barth and John Webster,² I argue that Christian teaching about holy scripture, along with its fitting ecclesial reception, is constituted by a backward reference, namely, the antecedent perfection and plentiful liveliness enjoyed by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.³ As the triune relations *ad intra* fund God’s gracious self-communicative

¹John Webster, ‘Christology, Theology, Economy: The Place of Christology in Systematic Theology’, in *God and the Works of God*, vol. 1 of *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), p. 52.

²My reading of Barth follows Webster’s reception of Barth as an exegetical, moral and Reformed theologian – a reading which likewise privileges Barth’s teaching on divine aseity. This rendering of Barth’s thought is prescriptive, forming a presupposition of the essay which, given its aim, is inconsequential. Accordingly, I do not interact with issues germane to the study of Karl Barth, including, for instance, the disputed genetic-historical development of Barth’s doctrines of the Trinity and election.

³The approach taken here closely follows that of Scott R. Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading* (London: T&T Clark International, 2011), p. 8: ‘The central thesis of this book is that we may best appreciate the theological significance of the Bible and biblical interpretation if we understand these two themes in a trinitarian, covenantal context’. Along similar lines, Stephen E. Fowl argues that ‘Scripture needs to be

presence in the Word and Spirit, so the economy of electing grace undergirds the ontology of holy scripture as ‘a field of divine activity’.⁴ Holy scripture is the sphere of Word of God who gives life by the Holy Spirit.

What follows, then, is a dogmatic account of holy scripture that takes seriously God’s divine life *a se* – a vitality or liveliness set forth in the economy of redemption, reconciliation and consummation. Construed negatively, divine aseity establishes the incommensurability of God and creaturely reality by distinguishing, without sundering, scripture and God’s self-communicative presence.⁵ God’s sovereign majesty and loving-kindness are preserved by situating God’s inscripturated word, the creaturely witness of God’s self-disclosure, within the economy of grace. The Bible is holy *scripture*. Construed positively, divine aseity indicates God’s life-giving *relationship* to the canonical texts, and, in turn, establishes scripture as ‘a field of divine activity’. The triune God who lives *per se* and *a se*, elects and sanctifies the texts of scripture to serve as intermediaries of God’s *enlivening* instruction. The Bible is *holy* scripture.

The argument develops in four stages. The first section offers a brief account of the doctrine of divine aseity, with particular reference to its deployment in Karl Barth and John Webster. The second section considers the doctrine of divine aseity as ‘pronobeity’, or God’s self-determined freedom *pro nobis*, with a view to the economy of electing grace.⁶ The triune God who has life from himself wills life for human creatures. God’s gracious turn towards creation in the missions of the Son and Spirit determines the ontology of scripture by further characterising God’s divine action in, with and under these textual servants. The third section articulates further the positive dogmatic function of divine aseity for bibliology. God the Trinity elects, sanctifies, and employs holy scripture to mediate the *viva vox Dei*. The fourth section unfolds the significance of divine aseity for reading scripture by focusing on one hermeneutical application. As an act caught up in the life-giving movement of the triune God, scriptural reading is characterised by prayerful anticipation of hearing God’s vivifying speech.

Divine aseity

The doctrine of divine aseity is an aspect of God’s perfection. Aseity denotes the manner or mode of God’s self-existent being in himself as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which anchors God’s free bestowal of life in the economic missions of the Word and Spirit.⁷ God lives *a se* and *in se*. God the Trinity is ungrounded, unconstrained and

understood in light of a doctrine of revelation that itself flows from Christian convictions about God’s triune life’. Stephen E. Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), p. 13.

⁴The locution, ‘a field of divine activity’, is Webster’s. See John Webster, ‘The Dogmatic Location of the Canon’, in *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics*, 2nd edn (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), p. 32; cf. John Webster, ‘Reading the Bible: The Example of Barth and Bonhoeffer’, in *Word and Church*, p. 56.

⁵See John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), pp. 31, 51.

⁶The term ‘pronobeity’, is from Brian D. Asbill, *The Freedom of God for Us: Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Divine Aseity* (London: T&T Clark, 2015). Webster uses a similar term, ‘proseity’, to denote God’s being-for-us in John Webster, ‘Distinguishing between God and Man: Aspects of the Theology of Eberhard Jüngel’ (Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 1982), p. 110.

⁷The development and refinement of the doctrine of aseity in Barth and Webster lie beyond the scope of this essay. On the former, see Asbill, *The Freedom of God for Us*. On the latter, see Webster’s remarks in John Webster, *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II*, 2nd edn (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), pp. ix–x.

infinitely transcends all creaturely being. All that God is God is from Godself and not from another. Webster writes, ‘God simply is, originally, authoritatively and incomparably, and no creature can say, as does God, “I am who I am”’.⁸ Accordingly, divine aseity is reflected in Barth’s writings with the tautology, ‘God is God’.⁹ Barth writes,

Dogmatics – in all and each of its divisions and subdivisions, with all of its questions and answers, with all its biblical and historical observations, with all of its formal and material reflections, examinations, and summaries – in its beginning and in its end, in its entirety and in its parts, can say nothing other than this: God is.¹⁰

God necessarily lives from Godself and in Godself. God is YHWH, ‘I am who I am – I shall be who I shall be’ (Exod 3:14). God is the ‘self-existing, self-living, self-affirming God whose being is his ever-continuing life and whose life is his ever-continuing being’.¹¹

Construed negatively, then, aseity is God’s *independentia* or self-sufficiency, which anchors God’s free relation to created reality.¹² Webster explains, ‘God in himself limitlessly exceeds his relation to what he has made’.¹³ God is thus ‘free from all origination, conditioning or determination from without by that which is not Himself’.¹⁴ God is ‘self-grounded’ and utterly distinct from created reality.¹⁵

⁸John Webster, ‘Life in and of Himself’, in *God and the Works of God*, p. 15. The essay was first published, with slight modification, under the title, ‘God’s Aseity’, in Michael Scott and Andrew Moore (eds), *Realism and Religion: Philosophical and Theological Perspectives* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 147–62.

⁹According to Eberhard Busch, Barth’s axiom, “‘God is God’ is nothing but a paraphrase of the name of God in Exodus 3:14: “I am that I am.” Eberhard Busch, *Die Anfänge des Theologen Karl Barth in Seinen Göttingen Jahren* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987), p. 28.

¹⁰Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* [hereafter CD], 13 vols, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–74), II/1, p. 289. See also Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, ed. Hannelotte Reiffen, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), p. 109. John Webster writes, ‘One of the ways in which the *Dogmatics* can be construed is as a massively ramified reassertion of the aseity of God’. John Webster, *Barth’s Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth’s Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 79. On Webster’s view, God’s perfect life constitutes the centre of dogmatic theology: ‘God’s immanent triune perfection is the first and last object of Christian theological reflection and governs all else’. John Webster, ‘Providence’, in Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (eds), *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016), p. 150.

¹¹Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), p. 235.

¹²Isaak Dorner remarks, ‘God’s self-existence ... remains an eternal distinction between God and the creature, and a safeguard against the danger of confounding the two’. Isaak Dorner, *A System of Christian Doctrine*, vol. 2, trans. Alfred Cave (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1880), p. 17. See further Herman Bavink, *God and Creation*, vol. 2 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), pp. 151–3; Richard A. Muller, *The Divine Essence and Attributes*, vol. 3 of *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), pp. 238–40.

¹³John Webster, ‘Theology and the Peace of the Church’, in *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), p. 143. See further Christopher R. J. Holmes, ‘The Aseity of God as a Material Evangelical Concern’, *Journal of Reformed Theology* 8/1 (2014), p. 68; Christopher R. J. Holmes, *Revisiting the Doctrine of the Divine Attributes: In Dialogue with Karl Barth, Eberhard Jüngel and Wolf Krötke* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 44.

¹⁴Barth, CD II/1, pp. 307–8.

¹⁵Holmes, *Revisiting the Doctrine of the Divine Attributes*, p. 227.

Nevertheless, for Barth and Webster, we must say more. For this mode of independence ‘does not in itself constitute God’s freedom but its exercise’.¹⁶ Barth writes, ‘God’s freedom is not in any way identical with God’s being over against the world, but is just as operative in His relation to the world as in His being in Himself’.¹⁷ Further, a purely negative description falters in making aseity a ‘paired’ or contrastive concept, which defines God as God relates to creatures. For this reason, Barth considers divine aseity to be ‘a primarily positive and dynamic concept’, while the notion of God’s independence is a corollary of God’s life *a se*.¹⁸

Christian dogmatics, as a positive science, is the disciplined practice of thinking after God as God has revealed Godself in holy scripture. It is concerned with the particular identity of God as *this* one. Webster remarks,

When it inquires into divine aseity ... theology is not asking ‘what must be true of a god?’, but a rather more unwieldy question: ‘Who is the God, the enactment of whose utter sufficiency as Father, Son and Holy Spirit issues in his creative, reconciling and perfecting works towards his creatures?’¹⁹

For this reason, Barth and Webster are severely critical of dogmatic accounts of aseity which proceed apologetically, in an endeavour to prove or establish God’s existence, or speculatively, in abstraction from divine instruction.²⁰ In contrast to these approaches, a dogmatic account of God’s aseity serves as a commentary on the triune Lord who possesses fullness of life *a se*.

Divine aseity, then, denotes not only God’s transcendence over creaturely being but positively, the fullness, liveliness and plenitude of God’s triune being *in se*.²¹ God’s perfect and antecedent glory is life-full: ‘God is, and therefore God lives, and therefore God moves; and in this being, his life and movement, he is perfect’.²² Christ’s eternal glory,

¹⁶Barth, *CD* II/1, p. 308.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 347.

¹⁸Asbill, *The Freedom of God for Us*, p. 137. Webster likewise discerns the significance of construing the doctrine of divine aseity positively: ‘First and foremost, aseity is a statement of the divine “I am”; only by derivation is it a statement that God is the groundless ground of contingency.’ He continues, ‘Aseity is not only the absence of external causation, but the eternal life which God in and of himself is.’ Webster, ‘Life in and of Himself’, pp. 19, 27.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁰On the material priority of God’s perfection, see John Webster, ‘Principles of Systematic Theology’, in *The Domain of the Word*, p. 143; Webster, *Confessing God*, p. 2.

²¹See Justin Stratis, ‘Speculating about Divinity? God’s Immanent Life and Actualistic Ontology’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12/1 (2010), p. 24. It is in speaking positively of God’s life *in se* that my use of Barth is most strained. In the foreword to the volume, *Trinitarian Theology after Barth*, Webster remarks, ‘Like the dogmatics in which it is arguably the driving force, Barth’s doctrine of the Trinity is a magisterial but incomplete achievement’ (‘Foreword’, in Myk Habets and Phillip W. Tolliday (eds), *Trinitarian Theology After Barth* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), p. xi). Webster identifies two shortcomings of Barth’s trinitarian teaching: first, a partial reluctance to speak of the divine life *in se*; second, an enlargement of the material role and dogmatic function of christology. According to Webster, the doctrine of God’s perfection serves to remedy both deficiencies. In contrast to Barth, then, Webster speaks more forthrightly of God *absolutely*, ‘that is, God in himself in his antecedent self-existent perfection, integrity, beatitude, and simplicity as Father, Son, and Spirit, *prior to and apart from any relation to creatures*’ (‘What Makes Theological?’, in *God and the Works of God*, p. 213, emphasis added). Nonetheless, Barth also maintains, on certain occasions, that theology must speak ‘about God as such ... even at the risk that we might be speaking “non-historically”’ (Barth, *CD* I/1, p. 426; cited in Webster, ‘Eternal Generation’, p. 40).

²²Webster, ‘God’s Perfect Life’, p. 147.

the apostle teaches, is prevenient, 'before all things' (πρὸ πάντων, Col 1:17).²³ Marius Victorinus, citing John 5:26 ('For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself') comments, 'Therefore, like the Father, so the Son is life and life from himself. Indeed, this is the very life which is power of living for himself and for others, without receiving it elsewhere. Life is, therefore, movement, original movement, unique movement, self-movement, only begotten movement.'²⁴ God is self-originating, self-sufficient and self-moving *life*.

Moreover, a Christianly specific doctrine of aseity indicates the triune glory *ad intra*.²⁵ As this one, God is life *in se* and *per se*, and therefore the source of life, and therefore enlivening. God's aseity, Webster remarks, 'cannot be conceived apart from the mutual relations of Father and Son; its perfection includes the perfect mutuality of the Father's giving of life to the Son who in his turn has life in himself.'²⁶ The incarnate Son prays, 'Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed' (John 17:5).²⁷ This passage speaks of the exchange of self-sufficient glory that precedes God's working *ad extra* (cf. John 1:1; 1:14).²⁸ 'He [the Son] is, while all other things come into existence.'²⁹ God's plentiful life, then, is the perichoretic communion and co-constituting internal relations of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. 'God *a se* is the perfection of paternity, filiation and spiration in which he is indissolubly from, for and in himself.'³⁰ God's life or existence *a se* is the three subsisting modes of existence: The Father eternally begetting the Son and, together with the Son, spirating the Spirit, the Son eternally proceeding from the Father, and the Holy Spirit eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.³¹

Divine aseity is operative and enacted in God's transitive acts. Kenneth Oakes explains, 'God's being *in se* is the "basis and prototype" of his being *pro nobis*'.³² This *modus operandi* rests on the asymmetrical correspondence between the triune

²³See further John Webster, 'Trinity and Creation', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12/1 (2010), p. 12.

²⁴Marius Victorinus, 'Against Arius', in *Fathers of the Church: Theological Treatises on the Trinity*, ed. Hermigild Dressler, trans. Mary T. Clark, reprint (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), p. 224.

²⁵Asbill, *The Freedom of God for Us*, pp. 142–6.

²⁶Webster, 'Life in and of Himself', p. 27.

²⁷Speaking of the divine glory of the Godhead, Barth writes, 'It is clear that in this matter we have to do with a regular circle. It is the circle of the inner life of the Godhead' (*CD III/2*, p. 64). See also Robert B. Price, *Letters of the Divine Word: The Perfections of God in Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), p. 15.

²⁸See J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), p. 861. See further John Webster, 'Eternal Generation', in *God and the Works of God*, p. 37. On the doctrine of aseity in the Gospel of John, see Grant Macaskill, 'Name Christology, Divine Aseity, and the I Am Sayings in the Fourth Gospel', *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 12/2 (2018), pp. 217–41.

²⁹Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (XIII–XXI): Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 743.

³⁰Webster, 'Life in and of Himself', p. 19.

³¹Webster writes, 'The triune God is one simple indivisible essence in an irreducible threefold personal modification. That is, God's unity is characterized by modes of being in each of which the entire divine essence subsists in a particular way; this simultaneous, eternal existence in these three modes is the one divine essence.' Webster, 'Trinity and Creation', p. 8.

³²Kenneth Oakes, 'Theology, Economy and Christology in John Webster's *God without Measure* and Some Earlier Works', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 19/4 (Oct. 2017), p. 500; citing John Webster, *Eberhard Jüngel: An Introduction to His Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1986), p. 17.

God's immanent activity and transitive acts. There is a relationship of 'inseparability, irreversibility and reciprocity between theology and economy'.³³ Barth explains, 'God is who He is in His works'.³⁴ Put again: 'What he is there in the heights (which he also is for us) is what he is here in the depths (which he also is in himself)'.³⁵

To God's absolute *aseity* there corresponds God's relative *pronobeity*, God's being *pro nobis* – the latter fittingly reflecting yet never exhausting the former. 'God's outer works', Webster explains, 'bear a surplus within themselves'.³⁶ From God's triune fullness, God 'bestows himself as the Lord, savior and partner of his creature'.³⁷ In this temporal enactment, God continues to act *a se*. Christopher Holmes writes, 'God is wholly self-sufficient, wholly himself, in his movement toward humanity'.³⁸ In this regard, divine *aseity* is *pronobeity*: the free presence of trinitarian love *pro nobis*. To be sure, the very logic of divine *aseity* indicates that this glorious movement is gracious.

God freely wills to elect, redeem and reconcile creation. And so, Barth remarks, 'God is for Himself but He is not only for Himself'.³⁹ In the missions of the Word and Spirit, God *a se* is God *pro nobis*: 'In its perfection, [aseity] is also a movement of self-gift in which the complete love of Father, Son and Spirit communicates itself *ad extra*, creating and sustaining a further object of love. Of himself, God is *gracious*'.⁴⁰ Divine *aseity* as *pronobeity* is revealed most clearly in the economy of electing grace, 'the communication of God's underived life to the world'.⁴¹

God's pronobeity

What more can be said of God's gracious communication of life? From eternity past, God the Trinity wills to give life through the missions of the Son and Holy Spirit. 'God's *aseity* although it marks God's utter difference from creatures, does not entail his isolation, for what God is and has of himself is life, and that life includes a self-willed movement of love'.⁴² In the Word and Spirit, God overcomes human sinfulness and establishes a sphere of communicative fellowship between God and creatures. Crucially, this temporal bestowal of the life does not compromise divine *aseity* but specifies its shape: 'Out of the plenitude and limitless perfection of his own self-originating life as Father, Son and Spirit, God determines to be God with his creatures'.⁴³ The

³³Oakes, 'Theology, Economy and Christology', p. 497. See Oakes, 'On Evangelical Ecclesiology', in *Confessing God*, p. 157; Webster, 'God's Perfect Life', pp. 143, 148; Webster, "'Love is Also a Lover of Life": "Creatio ex Nihilo" and Creaturally Goodness', in *God and the Works of God*, pp. 104, 107, 110; Webster, 'Eternal Generation', in *God and the Works of God*, p. 34.

³⁴Barth, *CD II/1*, p. 260; cited in John Webster, 'Holiness and Love of God', in *Confessing God*, pp. 114–15. Cf. John Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), p. 45: 'The holy God is who he is in his works'.

³⁵Barth, *CD II/1*, p. 345. See further T. F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), p. 98.

³⁶Webster, 'On the Matter of Christian Theology', p. 8.

³⁷Webster, 'Life in and of Himself', p. 19.

³⁸Holmes, *Revisiting the Doctrine of the Divine Attributes*, p. 45.

³⁹Barth, *CD IV/1*, p. 422.

⁴⁰Webster, 'Life in and of Himself', p. 24.

⁴¹Macaskill, 'Name Christology', p. 223.

⁴²Webster, 'Life in and of Himself', p. 27.

⁴³John Webster, 'The Church and the Perfection of God', in Mark Husbards and Daniel J. Treier (eds), *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), p. 75.

history of election, which rests on God's benevolent will, is the field of God's gracious and enlivening employment of holy scripture.⁴⁴

God's self-communicative movement towards the creature is demonstrative of God's undervied fullness of life. The economy of salvation reaches back to God's inner life *a se*. Election, as the 'first primal movement of God toward man', is grounded in God's antecedent triune communion.⁴⁵ God's prevenient life *a se* undergirds the gratuity of God's movement towards the creature. 'God's holy love for his creatures would be groundless if it were not the outworking in time and space of his eternal being as the holy and loving Father, Son and Spirit'.⁴⁶ Of Godself, God gifts Godself. In this sovereign ἐκλογή, God remains mysterious and utterly free. Election is gracious, 'according to the purpose of his will' (Eph 1:5). Webster explains, 'The divine purpose is eternal, antecedent, wholly spontaneous and unconditioned by any consequent.'⁴⁷ This determination occurs on the basis of God alone and is unhindered by external constraints. Webster again:

God's will is effortless, self-moved, outward movement, flowing from abundance of life and therefore a determination of himself for generosity that does not violate the creature because God is not a rival occupant of some territory in which the creature can also be found struggling to preserve itself.⁴⁸

The God who loves eternally does so determinatively in Jesus Christ; in him God determines to bless the creature. The author of Ephesians locates the act of election ἐν Χριστῷ (Eph 1:3). Further, redemption and inheritance are found ἐν ᾧ (Eph 1:7; 1:11). In the Son, Webster remarks, 'The divine resolve finds its embodied, temporal climax'.⁴⁹ This temporal enactment of God's plentiful life discloses the reality of grace: 'The form of God's aseity, the chosen path of the divine being, is specified in the history of Jesus Christ; God's freedom is freedom for fellowship.'⁵⁰ Barth writes similarly,

God is God by virtue of the fact that in His eternal Son, and therefore from all eternity, He was, is, and will be the God of men, who loved, loves, and will love men. He did this, does this, and will do this in freedom, for He is sovereign, He is majesty. He is the omnipotent God. He has aseity, as the old theologians

⁴⁴Webster argues, 'What ties together the realities of God in himself and God's economic presence is God's will directed to creatures as sovereign decision and determination in their favor.' Webster, 'Perfection and Participation', p. 391. Webster first appeals to the notion of God's will in John Webster, 'God's Perfect Life', in Miroslav Volf and Michael Welker (eds), *God's Life in Trinity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2006), 149.

⁴⁵Stratis, 'Speculating about Divinity?', p. 29.

⁴⁶Webster, 'Holiness and Love of God', p. 116.

⁴⁷Webster, 'Christology, Theology, Economy', p. 52.

⁴⁸John Webster, 'Perfection and Participation', in Thomas Joseph White (ed.), *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or Wisdom of God?* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), p. 394.

⁴⁹Webster, 'Theology and the Peace of the Church', p. 157. Elsewhere, Webster writes, 'He is Emmanuel, the fulfilment of the free divine resolve and promise: I will be your God, you will be my people.' John Webster, 'Evangelical Freedom', in Catherine-Sider Hamilton (ed.), *The Homosexuality Debate: Faith Seeking Understanding* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 2003), p. 118.

⁵⁰John Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), p. 3.

used to say: He is sufficient unto Himself and He needs no other. His loving is in no way a form of needing. But all this is grace.⁵¹

In this self-enactment of the triune life, we encounter the living Lord who determines to be our God. Yet, we must proceed cautiously here so as to not imply that God's freedom grounds God's love. The freedom of God's redemptive acts is a function of God's perfect life that God enjoys as Father, Son and Spirit. This is, again, part of the reason why a positive construal of divine aseity is requisite. The triune God's predestining decree is God's spontaneous determination to thwart humanity's self-imposed 'exile of sin' and bestow *life*, covenant fellowship with himself.⁵²

We may now ask, how does divine aseity, exercised in God's gracious turn towards humankind, inform the doctrine of scripture? First, holy scripture is a function of divine grace. Situating bibliography within this frame of reference overcomes the temptation of ascribing properties to scripture untethered from the reconciling missions of the Son and Spirit. Holy scripture is by virtue of none other than God's gracious, vivifying action. The electing grace of the Father, Son and Spirit constitutes scripture as a sphere of divine activity. The irreversible relationship between God and scripture is freely constituted and, therefore, contingent. Scripture is by virtue of its relation to the Word and Spirit. Unlike God, holy scripture is not *a se*, not necessary, but 'wholly gratuitous'.⁵³ To say otherwise distorts the qualitative distinction between God and creatures, and so upends theological reasoning. The doctrine of scripture, Webster reminds, 'must not contravene the eschatological transcendence of the self-revealing God'.⁵⁴ Barth likewise argues that, '[God] is not bound to [scripture] but it to Him'.⁵⁵ In this sense, dogmatic teaching on holy scripture preserves the incommensurability of uncreated and creaturely being.

Second, as God elects human creatures to *life* of fellowship with Godself, so God elects holy scripture as the servant of the economy of redemption. This election occurs despite the frailty of the human witnesses. The act of eternal election – '[God] predestined us in love' (Eph 4b–5b) – is the enactment of triune communion. It is a 'love which directs itself outwards'.⁵⁶ This movement is gracious – without regard to the worthiness of the object of love – and merciful – with regard to the sinfulness of the object (Eph 2:1–5). Electing grace thus characterises all of God's transitive works: 'Free grace is the only basis and meaning of all God's ways and works *ad extra*'.⁵⁷ God elects and (to use Webster's language) 'sanctifies' holy writ to be a fitting servant of his presence. It is a gratuitous determination to employ finite realities or 'earthen vessels' (2 Cor 4:7), despite their inherent unworthiness, to bear the living voice of the living God. Barth writes, 'The fact that ... His inner glory ... becomes outward, the fact that He wills the creation, and the man Jesus as the first-born of all creation, is grace, sovereign grace, a *condescension inconceivably tender*'.⁵⁸ Likewise, in hallowing textual realities to serve his purposes, 'God's eloquence and intelligibility condescend to

⁵¹Karl Barth, 'The Proclamation of God's Free Grace', in *God Here and Now*, trans. Paul M. van Buren (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 36.

⁵²Webster, 'What Makes Theology Theological?', p. 223.

⁵³Alfred H. Yuen, *Barth's Theological Ontology of Holy Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014), p. 3.

⁵⁴Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 40.

⁵⁵Barth, *CD I/1*, p. 139.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 121; emphasis added.

creaturely form'.⁵⁹ Sacred scripture is at once a contingent, historically located text and a sanctified instrument of divine address. By grace, God superintends the words of scripture to be fitting auxiliaries of his enlivening presence. T. F. Torrance writes, 'In Holy Scripture ... we have to do with *the majestic Word of the Lord God which he has stooped to speak in the frail human words of the Holy Scriptures* thereby constituting them through his grace as the unique authoritative written Word of God to mankind.'⁶⁰ The triune God miraculously overcomes human sinfulness in electing, inspiring and preserving the canonical texts. What more can be said of God's deployment of holy scripture?

'A field of divine activity'

Holy scripture, taken up into the economy of electing grace, is no static or lifeless collection of texts, but the sphere of the resurrected Son and the Holy Spirit, the *vivificantem* ('giver of life'). This movement is demonstrative of the triune bliss and, as such, enlivening. Just so: the doctrine of aseity undergirds scripture's dynamism as the 'herald of the *viva vox Dei*'.⁶¹ For as Webster notes, 'The perfection of God's life as *autotheos* issues in his works as Father, Son and Spirit in creation, reconciliation and redemption.'⁶² Consequently, God's agency in scripture is *a se* and as such, it is life-giving. Barth writes,

Either God speaks, or he does not. But he does not speak more or less, or partially, or in pieces, here a bit and there a bit ... If God speaks, then *God* speaks, and we have to do with the one Logos that the prophets and apostles received, the one revelation in the incarnation which the people of the Bible know and attest as either promised or manifested.⁶³

The risen Christ speaks by his Spirit through the elected servant of divine revelation. Holy scripture is, in Webster's expression, 'a field of divine activity'.⁶⁴ Proceeding from the Father, the living Word of God speaks as one who is *a se*.⁶⁵ Representing a principal theme of Barth's dogmatics, Webster writes, "'God is Lord in the wording of his Word" ([*Church Dogmatics*] I/1, 139) – that is, as God's self-utterance makes itself heard as human speech, it does so in its full dignity, spontaneity and aseity (self-existence) as the Word of the Lord.'⁶⁶ Divine aseity characterises God's speech in, with, and under holy scripture. Such is the force of Barth's well-known formula, 'God reveals Himself. He reveals Himself through Himself. He reveals Himself.'⁶⁷ *God is God* in this bestowal of divine instruction.

⁵⁹John Webster, 'Verbum Mirificum: T. F. Torrance on Scripture and Hermeneutics', in *The Domain of the Word*, p. 90.

⁶⁰Torrance, *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian*, p. 89.

⁶¹Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 72.

⁶²Webster, 'Life in and of Himself', p. 19.

⁶³Barth, *Göttingen Dogmatics*, p. 92. Elsewhere, Barth remarks, 'Only the Living is God. Only the voice of the Living is God's voice' (*CD II/1*, p. 263).

⁶⁴Webster, *Karl Barth*, p. 56.

⁶⁵Yuen, *Barth's Theological Ontology of Holy Scripture*, p. 106.

⁶⁶Webster, *Karl Barth*, p. 56.

⁶⁷Barth, *CD I/1*, p. 296.

God's vivifying speech encompasses past events, present reality and future expectation: 'God is never an echo'.⁶⁸ Concerning Christ's past speech, the author to the Hebrews writes, 'In these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son' (Heb 1:2). In the present, the gospel is proclaimed by the Holy Spirit, who says, 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion' (Heb 3:7).⁶⁹ Moreover, in expectation and hopefulness, this present reality carries forward to the future: 'exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today"' (Heb 3:13). In every instance, Christ speaks by his Spirit as the ὁ ζῶν (Rev 1:18; cf. John 6:51). Webster remarks, 'As the living one, Jesus is alive with divine life. His resurrection is thus not simply the prolongation of creaturely existence, but the demonstration of the fact that in him there is life, that he has life in and from himself, *in semetipso* and so *a se*.'⁷⁰

The Son shares in the triune life, and so 'the Son gives life to whom he will' (John 5:21).⁷¹ Therefore, God's agency in, with, and under scripture is not merely an inert deposit or past happening, but rather, a present reality whereby the risen Christ witnesses to God the Father by the Holy Spirit. This miraculous and vivifying occurrence is beyond human control or manipulation and so conditions all readerly activity. 'The door of the Bible texts can be opened only from within.'⁷² Even as the doctrine of God digresses into obscurity insofar as it floats free from the discrete revelation of Jesus Christ, so bibliology suffers a similar fate insofar as it is untethered from the continued agency of the elected and risen Christ, who has life ἐν ἑαυτῷ (John 5:26). Webster explains, '[Christ's] exaltation is the condition for and empowerment of his unhindered activity and address of creatures. This address takes the form of Holy Scripture.'⁷³ Jesus Christ, now exalted 'above the heavens' (Heb 7:26) 'at the right hand of God' (Acts 2:33), sends the Holy Spirit as a witness.

The Holy Spirit, as 'the giver of life' (τὸ ζωοποιοῦν, John 6:63) and 'the Spirit of holiness' (πνεῦμα ἁγιωσύνης, Rom 1:4), testifies to the resurrected Christ through sacred scripture. Webster states, 'Scripture is the Spirit's auxiliary'.⁷⁴ The Holy Spirit is the one 'in whom the resurrection power of the Father and the resurrection life of the Son are unleashed in creation'.⁷⁵ In the Spirit's eternal procession from the Father

⁶⁸Barth, *CD* II/2, p. 183.

⁶⁹See John Webster, 'Traditions: Theology and the Public Covenant', *Stimulus* 6/1 (1998), p. 21. On the Holy Spirit as the primary divine agent in Hebrews 3:7–4:11, see Madison N. Pierce, 'Hebrews 3.7–4.11 and the Spirit's Speech to the Community', in Katherine M. Hockey, Madison N. Pierce, and Francis Watson (eds), *Muted Voices of the New Testament: Readings in the Catholic Epistles and Hebrews* (London; New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), pp. 175–84.

⁷⁰John Webster, 'Resurrection and Scripture', in *The Domain of the Word*, p. 33. According to Webster, Jesus' resurrection from the dead characterises God's being and thus is 'part of the material definition of God's aseity: in and of himself, in free self-determination, God is and acts *thus*' (Webster, 'Resurrection and Scripture', p. 35). The Son is *autotheos* 'not in respect of his person (which he has from the Father) but in respect of the common aseity which he has as a sharer in the one divine essence. The Father is *a se* in his person (as the *principium* of the triune life); the Son is *a se* only in his divine essence' (Webster, 'Eternal Generation', p. 37; see further, Webster, 'Life in and of Himself', pp. 20–2). Elsewhere Webster refers to the 'common aseity of the persons which is theirs by virtue of the one divine essence in which they all share from eternity'. John Webster, 'Webster's Response to Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 62/2 (2009), p. 207.

⁷¹See Webster, 'Christology, Theology, Economy', p. 52.

⁷²Barth, *CD* I/2, p. 533.

⁷³Webster, *The Domain of the Word*, p. 8.

⁷⁴Webster, 'Christology, Theology, Economy', p. 58.

⁷⁵Webster, 'Resurrection and Scripture', p. 35.

and the Son, the Spirit is life.⁷⁶ Webster explains, ‘The Spirit is the one who is sent by the Father in the name of the Son (John 14:26) and by the Son from the Father (15:26) and so acts towards creatures as the life-giving Spirit (Rom. 8:2; 2 Cor. 3:6).’⁷⁷ The Spirit, with the Son, gives life by illuminating scripture. The Holy Spirit’s internal testimony is an integral element of the ontology of scripture as the Word of God. T. F. Torrance remarks,

We are swept along by the mighty driving wind of the Spirit into direct encounter with the wholly other reality of God who may be heard only through his own self-witness and be understood only through the eternal Word that he himself is and has caused to become incarnate in the world, made flesh in the midst of Israel in Jesus Christ.⁷⁸

The ‘Spirit of Christ’ (πνεῦμα Χριστοῦ, 1 Pet 1:11) once at work among the prophets and apostles now bears witness to the ‘living and abiding Word of God’ (λόγου ζώντος θεοῦ καὶ μένοντος, 1 Pet 1:23), thus fulfilling Christ’s promise: ‘the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live’ (John 5:25).

The life-bestowing movement of the Word and Spirit is the greater reality in which the Christian reader finds herself.⁷⁹ Webster writes, ‘As we hear Scripture read, we are in the presence of one who speaks to us by his Holy Spirit. These ancient texts are not curios, little windows on an antique religious culture into which we peer from afar. They’re the speech of Christ to us.’⁸⁰

Hearing the *viva vox Dei*

To recapitulate the path taken thus far. The triune God who lives *a se* speaks life through the prophetic and apostolic auxiliaries of divine teaching. Scripture thus serves God’s triune movement of underived life *pro nobis*. As the triune God’s elected and sanctified instrument, scripture mediates the *viva vox Dei*. In light of the previous discussion, this section asks, ‘How does the doctrine of God’s aseity – the underived, abundant life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit – determine the church’s task of reading sacred scripture?’ As it edges towards the significance of a metaphysics of scripture for its ecclesial reception, the present discussion concentrates on one feature of scriptural reading which follows from Christian teaching on divine aseity: the prayerful expectation of hearing God’s life-bestowing address.

Divine aseity has a constraining function for scripture’s ecclesial reception. It sponsors a distinction between created and uncreated being, between God’s life *a se* and creaturely life *ab extra*. Webster explains,

Created being, time and movement are just that: created. If this is so, they cannot be understood as self-standing elements. Their existence and nature must be

⁷⁶See Michael Allen, ‘Divine Attributes’, in Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (eds), *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), pp. 65–6.

⁷⁷Webster, ‘God’s Perfect Life’, p. 150. See further Brad East, ‘John Webster, Theologian Proper’, *Anglican Theological Review* 99/2 (2017), p. 342.

⁷⁸Torrance, *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian*, pp. 87–8.

⁷⁹See Webster, ‘Resurrection and Scripture’, p. 32.

⁸⁰John Webster, *Confronted by Grace: Meditations of a Theologian* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), p. 59; emphasis added.

understood by reference to their cause or origin, by virtue of which they have and are held in being and are directed to their perfection – that is, by reference to the missions of divine love undertaken in time by the eternal Son and the Holy Spirit, and to the inner divine love, wisdom and power on which those missions rest.⁸¹

The sheer difference between uncreated and created being is the *sine qua non* of all creaturely activity. Theological theology, then, with its due concentration on God's life *a se*, depicts the church's reading of holy scripture by prioritising divine action as the condition and ground of creaturely acts. For this reason, the section above outlined the action of the Son and Spirit which establishes holy scripture as a field of life-bestowing address.

Scriptural reading proceeds *from* God, the principle of creaturely being. The ecclesial task of reading scripture, then, is neither self-initiated, self-willed nor self-derived but stands in desperate need of 'divine assistance'.⁸² The renewal of human intelligence, with which fallen humans hear the divine Word, derives from the determination of the triune God to restore fellowship with humankind. More closely, ecclesial hearing of the Word is engendered by the Holy Spirit who awakens, quickens and illumines fallen intellects to read rightly.⁸³ Webster writes, 'God's Word does not stun creatures into immobility; it moves them, it is a *path* (Ps. 119:35), a divine movement summoning and ruling a corresponding creaturely movement'.⁸⁴ This regenerative grace – 'Grace does not devastate creatures but rectifies them and sets them to work' – encloses scriptural reading.⁸⁵ Heraldng the divine Word, scripture is a sphere of blessing.

Corresponding to God's gratuitous action is that basic act of creaturely existence: prayer. Invoking God, the church anticipates God's vivifying speech. First, then, as God's 'absolute life' undergirds scripture as a field of divine activity, so it establishes an expectancy on the part of scriptural reader. Again, divine aseity is God's 'underived fullness of life that is lovingly shared with a cosmos that can only ever enjoy life derivatively'.⁸⁶ Knowing that the God who has life *in se* gives life in the reconciling missions of the Son and Spirit, the church anticipates God's vivifying speech in, with and under God's prophetic and apostolic witnesses. The church's anticipation of God's bestowal of life takes the form of 'exceeding attentiveness' to the elected instrument of divine speech.⁸⁷ Webster writes, 'Here, not there, we are to expect God's address of us, and

⁸¹Webster, *The Domain of the Word*, p. viii.

⁸²John Webster, 'Holy Scripture', in Dennis Ngien and Rob Clements (eds), *Between the Lectern and the Pulpit: Essays in Honor of Victor A. Shepherd* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2014), p. 178. Webster writes, 'The entire process of the church's knowledge of God is God's own work, the work of the Father, Son and Spirit'. John Webster, 'Scripture, Reading and the Rhetoric of Theology in Hans Frei's Analysis of Texts', in Georgy Olegovich (ed.), *Ten Year Commemoration to the Life of Hans Frei 1922–1988* (New York: Semenenko Foundation, 1999), p. 46.

⁸³See Webster, *The Domain of the Word*, p. 19.

⁸⁴John Webster, 'Biblical Reasoning', in *Ibid.*, pp. 121–2. Elsewhere, Webster explains, 'The Spirit moves creatures, and in moving gives them their proper spontaneity and integrity, that is, their dignity as the active children of God.' John Webster, 'On the Theology of the Intellectual Life', in *Virtue and Intellect*, vol. 2 of *God without Measure* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), p. 44.

⁸⁵John Webster, 'Communion with Christ: Mortification and Vivification', in Kent Eilers and Kyle C. Strobel (eds), *Sanctified by Grace: A Theology of the Christian Life* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), p. 131.

⁸⁶Macaskill, 'Name Christology', p. 223.

⁸⁷John Webster, 'One Who is Son', in *God and the Works of God*, p. 60.

so here, not there, *is where we will wait*.⁸⁸ To speak of anticipation signals both the dependence of the creature on the Creator as well as the need to attend to scripture as divine address. The reader of scripture, then, stands as one addressed, awakened, quickened. In this way, 'We listen to Scripture as the living voice of the living Christ'.⁸⁹

Second, divine aseity demands that scriptural reading *is* prayerful. 'Prayer', Webster reminds, 'is the humbling and reorientation of our agency'.⁹⁰ Creaturely acts are derived, having their being from another. '[Prayer] accompanies and permeates every human act, including the act of the mind. Invoking God, we enact our created nature.'⁹¹ For this reason, prayer is a requisite of properly ordered scriptural reading. The basis of this prayer is God's life *a se* which enacts limitless grace: 'Needing nothing from any other, God is sheerly beneficent, since there is nothing he can gain.'⁹² Respecting this principle, the interpreter invokes the triune God to give life – the capacity to receive his Word. God's abundant life undergirds scripture as a field of divine activity, and just so, establishes a prayerful expectancy and readiness to hear the *viva vox Dei*.

Conclusion

Holy scripture is God's elected instrument to extend fellowship between God and humankind through the Word and Spirit. Scripture is thus situated in the wider scope of God's communicative action, which in turn finds its origin in the prevenience of God's triune life. On this basis, scripture is the sphere of God's life-giving movement of the Word and Spirit. Such is to follow Webster's dogmatic principle: 'To expound any Christian doctrine is to expound with varying degrees of directedness the doctrine of the Trinity; to expound the doctrine of the Trinity in its full scope is to expound the entirety of Christian dogmatics.'⁹³ Scripture and its ecclesial reception are no exception. The triune God speaks as the living Lord of holy scripture by sending the Word and Spirit to create faithful readers of scripture. All of this is grace – the unmerited, unconditioned, unrestrained life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which is perfectly possessed *in se* and perfectly set forth *ad extra*.

⁸⁸ Webster, *Confronted by Grace*, p. 137; emphasis added.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁹⁰ Webster, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology', p. 83.

⁹¹ Webster, 'Holy Scripture', p. 174.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ John Webster, 'Rector et Iudex Super Omnia Genera Doctrinarum? The Place of the Doctrine of Justification', in *God and the Works of God*, p. 159.

Cite this article: Rempel BA (2020). 'A field of divine activity': Divine aseity and holy scripture in dialogue with John Webster and Karl Barth. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 73, 203–215. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930620000320>