

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Karl Barth's ontology of holy scripture revisited

Ximian Xu\*

School of Divinity, New College, Mound Place, Edinburgh, UK

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: [simeonximian@hotmail.com](mailto:simeonximian@hotmail.com)

## Abstract

This paper seeks to examine Barth's ontology of holy scripture by appropriating the latest nomenclatural analysis of Barth's usage of *Wesen* and *Sein*. Given the difference between the *Wesen* and the *Sein* of the Bible, and the claim that the *Sein*-in-becoming of the Bible is determined by its *Wesen*-in-act, it follows that for Barth the Bible is ontologically the Word of God in the sense of *Wesen*, which underlies the Bible's becoming the Word of God in the sense of *Sein*. In short, the Bible ontologically *becomes* the Word of God in the sense of *Sein* because the Bible *is* the Word of God in the sense of *Wesen*.

**Keywords:** actualistic ontology; Karl Barth; being-in-becoming; holy scripture; incarnational analogy

Karl Barth famously or notoriously identifies holy scripture as the human expression of the Word of God and the witness to God's revelation. This witness is determined by the event of scripture's becoming the Word of God by God's action. Barth's position has drawn considerable criticism from both liberal and conservative circles. Whereas the liberal theologian considers that such becoming or witness to God's revelation ignores the scholarship of higher criticism, the conservative theologian charges Barth with undermining the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible because scripture has to *become* the Word of God rather than *being* the Word itself. Nonetheless, in view of the profound and abundant biblical exegesis in Barth's work, most theologians agree that Barth reasserts the authority of holy scripture for the church and theology in the modern age, as the Reformers did in the Reformation era.<sup>1</sup>

Several questions arise at this point. How can Barth reclaim the authority of scripture by identifying scripture as a human expression that bears witness to the Word of God? To what extent does scripture that has to become the Word of God convey the Word of God? What does Barth mean by speaking of scripture's *becoming* the Word of God?

It can be argued that the answers to these questions are eventually related to Barth's view of the humanity of scripture – that is, Barth's analysis of scripture as the human witness to the Word of God in itself. Various attempts have been taken to probe into Barth's view of the humanity of the Bible. Francis Watson invokes the doctrine of the economic Trinity, arguing that for Barth '[t]he theological significance of the Bible is derived not from any of its immanent characteristics ... but from the indispensable role assigned to it in the outward movement of the divine communicative action

<sup>1</sup>For example, David L. Mueller, *Karl Barth*, ed. Bob E. Patterson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2016), p. 125.

into the world'.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, despite the humanity of scripture, it is trustworthy and authoritative because of the truthfulness of God's self-revelation in divine economy. That is to say, the witness of scripture to the Word of God is grounded on the fact that the human word is rooted in the event of the divine communicative act.<sup>3</sup> In distinction to Watson, Kevin Vanhoozer appropriates Nicholas Wolterstorff's theory of divine discourse and speech-act philosophy to argue that the Bible becomes the Word of God by the Spirit's action on the locutions (speaking of words) and illocutions (the act performed in such speaking) of the Bible.<sup>4</sup>

Both Watson and Vanhoozer's explorations presuppose what the humanity of scripture is. This means that the ontology of scripture should be examined before other further studies.<sup>5</sup> Bruce McCormack offers a detailed analysis of Barth's ontology of scripture. He characterises the being-in-becoming of scripture as follows:

First, what the Bible is, is defined by the will of God as expressed in his act of giving it to the church. And this means that where and when the Bible becomes the Word of God, it is only becoming what it already is. But, second, where and when the Bible does not become the Word of God, there God has chosen provisionally, for the time being, not to bear witness to himself in and through its witness to this particular reader or this particular set of readers of it.<sup>6</sup>

McCormack's emphasis falls on how the ontology of scripture is determined by the sovereignty and freedom of God. However, he does not afford a clear-cut nomenclatural or terminological account of being-in-becoming (*Sein-in-Werden*).

This paper seeks to examine Barth's ontology of holy scripture by focusing on the analysis of his ontological terminology. As will be seen anon, this methodology is resonant with the latest studies on Barth's actualistic ontology. This paper argues that for Barth scripture's *becoming* the Word of God is determined by its *being* the Word of God, and vice versa. That is to say, for Barth, the Bible is always the Word of God, which determines its becoming the Word of God. At the same time, the Bible is always the human expression and becomes the Word of God because it never ceases to be the Word of God.

<sup>2</sup>Francis Watson, 'The Bible', in John Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), pp. 60–1.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>4</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'A Person of the Book? Barth on Biblical Authority and Interpretation', in Sung Wook Chung (ed.), *Karl Barth and Evangelical Theology: Convergences and Divergences* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), pp. 56–9; Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), p. 72.

<sup>5</sup>It should be noted here that this assertion is not oblivious to the development of Barth's theology of scripture, which started from his break with Protestant liberalism. On this, see Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 'The Authority of Scripture in Karl Barth', in D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (eds), *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2005), pp. 271–94; Ben Rhodes, 'Barth's Theology of Scripture in Dogmatic Perspective', in Ben Rhodes and Martin Westerholm (eds), *Freedom under the Word: Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), pp. 44–5; Martin Westerholm, 'Barth's Theology of Scripture in Developmental Perspective', in *Freedom under the Word*, pp. 9–33.

<sup>6</sup>Bruce L. McCormack, 'The Being of Holy Scripture is in Becoming: Karl Barth in Conversation with American Evangelical Criticism', in Vincent Bacote, Laura C. Miguez and Dennis L. Okholm (eds), *Evangelicals and Scripture: Tradition, Authority and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), p. 66.

In what follows, I will first set forth Barth's ontological nomenclature, which will define 'being' and 'becoming'. Second, I will single out three major theses from Barth's *Church Dogmatics* I/1–2 to articulate how Barth deploys these ontological terms in his ontology of scripture. Third, I will conclude with an assertion that according to Barth's ontology of scripture it is a mistake to qualify the Bible as errant or inerrant; rather, what the Bible really is, is always infallible.

### Barth's nomenclatural account of being and becoming

Recent Barth studies pays close heed to Barth's theological or, better, actualistic ontology. Bruce McCormack's famous article, 'Grace and Being', defines Barth's actualistic ontology by the claim that for Barth God's being is constituted by divine election in Jesus Christ, which means God's being is determined by his relationship to the world.<sup>7</sup> McCormack and his followers are designated by George Hunsinger as revisionists. For Hunsinger (who is the most important representative of those whom he terms traditionalists) God's trinitarian being 'is always logically and ontologically antecedent' to God's election.<sup>8</sup>

Hunsinger's argumentation begins with the disambiguation of the term 'ontology'. He distinguishes between 'ontology<sub>1</sub>' and 'ontology<sub>2</sub>', arguing that ontology<sub>1</sub> 'deals comprehensively with the nature of being and of beings', whereas ontology<sub>2</sub> 'signifies only a field of inquiry pertaining to the material covered and the sorts of things and relations one finds in it – to a general area of action, inquiry, or interest'.<sup>9</sup> Hunsinger observes that, while Barth allows for ontology<sub>2</sub> at times, he makes use of ontology<sub>1</sub> 'in an ad hoc and nonsystematic way, but no more'.<sup>10</sup> Then, he accuses revisionists of confusing these two kinds of ontologies. Hunsinger's differentiation of ontology<sub>1</sub> and ontology<sub>2</sub> is not detailed according to Barth's usage of ontological terms, and he moves instead to the analyses of the revisionist approach in various writings.

Shao Kai Tseng's latest study fills in a gap in this regard. Although his work is preoccupied with Barth's ontology of sin and grace, his nomenclatural analysis of Barth's ontological terms lends great support to unpacking Barth's views of being and becoming in general. Tseng consciously follows and expands Hunsinger's disambiguation of the term ontology and argues that it is a mistake to pit Barth's actualistic ontology against traditional substantialist ontology.<sup>11</sup> That is to say, Barth's ontology pertains to Hunsinger's ontology<sub>2</sub> and blends together actualistic and substantialist ontology, which leads to the reformulation of Barth's actualism. Accordingly, Tseng contends:

Barth adopts the grammars of both substantialism and process philosophy, in eclectic and dialectical ways, while remaining ever critical of their underlying metaphysics taken as a system. For Barth, being and becoming are equally basic

<sup>7</sup>Bruce McCormack, 'Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology', in Webster, *Cambridge Companion to Barth*, pp. 92–110.

<sup>8</sup>George Hunsinger, *Reading Barth with Charity: A Hermeneutical Proposal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2015), p. 10.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 2. It is striking that Gockel's critique of Hunsinger's challenge to revisionists is oblivious to Hunsinger's terminological disambiguation; see Matthias Gockel, 'How to Read Karl Barth with Charity: A Critical Reply to George Hunsinger', *Modern Theology* 32/2 (2016), pp. 259–67.

<sup>10</sup>Hunsinger, *Reading Barth with Charity*, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup>Shao Kai Tseng, *Barth's Ontology of Sin and Grace: Variations on a Theme of Augustine* (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 2.

and mutually determinative: being-*in-act* is not to be misconstrued as being-*as-act*.<sup>12</sup>

Viewed in this light, Tseng presents an actualistic ontology which is utterly contrary to the revisionist one. As he asserts, for Barth, ‘the triune God as being-*in-act* is already fully actual in God’s primary absoluteness and objectivity, and that God’s secondary absoluteness and objectivity are grounded in the former’.<sup>13</sup> To put it differently, God’s being is not determined by his election; rather, God’s being and election are ‘equally basic and mutually determinative’.

Tseng’s construal of Barth’s actualism as being-*in-act* is contingent upon the nomenclatural differentiation between the German words *Wesen* and *Sein*. First, Tseng points out that for Barth *Wesen* generally carries the connotation of ‘being’ and ‘essence’ in the sense of ‘nature’, which, like the Latin word *natura*, refers to ‘the formal-causal attributes of a substance’.<sup>14</sup> With this in mind, Tseng suggests that in Barth’s dogmatic system there are two conceptions of ‘being’, which cannot be confused or made identical. Specifically, Barth’s notion of *Wesen* differs from that of *Sein*, though both German words can be rendered ‘being’. He distinguishes the two terms as follows:

*Wesen* is the *conceptual* underpinning of a thing: it is the *determination* of the thing as it really is, not just *in itself*, but *in and for itself* (i.e. what it has in it to become), behind the veil of *appearance* (*Schein*). *Sein*, by contrast, is the appearance of a thing. More precisely, *Sein* is the essence of a thing *as it appears* in its existential form, disclosed phenomenally through the veil of contingencies, transience, and irrationalities.<sup>15</sup>

Two observations are notable here. First, as Tseng remarks, ‘Barth’s usage of “*Wesen*” incorporates both a substantialist dimension and a process one.’<sup>16</sup> This means that Barth’s conception of ‘*Wesen*’ is intrinsically dialectical: being must lead to becoming, and the potential for becoming is rooted in being. It should be noted that while Barth speaks of the actualistic ontology of God, he only uses ‘*Sein-in-act*’ and never describes God’s *Wesen* as being-*in-act*. Second, *Sein-in-act* cannot be comprehended without reference to *Wesen*. In other words, the distinction between *Sein* and *Wesen* implies that the proper understanding of *Sein-in-act* should have *Wesen* as its object of reference.

Tseng’s nomenclatural analysis of Barth’s ontology is of importance to our understanding of Barth’s theology of scripture, a key aspect of which is how Barth spells out the being-*in-becoming* of scripture. This means that a study of Barth’s ontology of scripture must address two questions. (1) What are the *Wesen* and *Sein* of scripture

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 10. In this regard, one may recall Wilfried Härle’s reminder that for Barth the construal of God’s being as an act is applicable initially to the revealed being of God, which means God’s being is revealed to and recognisable to humans as his being-*in-action* (*Sein in der Tat*); then, this actualism can be applied to the intra-trinitarian being because, for Barth, the word ‘event’ (or ‘act’) is the last word to describe God’s being. Cf. Wilfried Härle, *Sein und Gnade: Die Ontologie in Karl Barths kirchlicher Dogmatik* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1975), pp. 47–8; and Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* [hereafter *CD*], 5 vols, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance (London: T&T Clark, 2004), II/1, p. 263.

<sup>14</sup>Tseng, *Barth’s Ontology of Sin and Grace*, 14.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 15. Tseng reminds us that Barth dissociates God’s *Sein* from *Schein*, whereas the association between *Sein* and *Schein* is applicable to creatures only.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

in Barth's system? (2) Is scripture's becoming a witness of God's revelation concerned with its *Wesen* or its *Sein*?

### Barth on the being-in-becoming of scripture

Barth's view of the ontology of holy scripture can be well summarised by the phrase 'being-in-becoming' in his discussion on scripture as the written word of God at the beginning of the *Church Dogmatics*.

The Bible, then, becomes God's Word in this event [God speaking through the biblical word of humans], and in the statement that the Bible is God's Word the little word 'is' refers to its being (*Sein*) in this becoming (*Werden*). It does not become God's Word because we accord it faith but in the fact that it becomes revelation to us.<sup>17</sup>

In a certain sense, this statement lays out the thrust of Barth's ontology of holy scripture. At the same time, it is nevertheless the cause of all disputations about his theology of scripture. These disputations come down to the fundamental question: what does it mean to say that the Bible becomes the Word of God or the revelation of God to humans?

Reading the quote above from the angle of Tseng's nomenclatural study of Barth's ontology, the fundamental question concerning Barth's theology of scripture in turn hinges upon the meaning of *Sein* and *Werden* as pertinent to the being of holy scripture. In what follows, I shall single out three theses from *Church Dogmatics* to figure out how Barth deploys *Sein* and *Wesen* in the discourse on the ontology of scripture.

[Thesis 1] It is the *Deus revelatus* who is the *Deus absconditus*, the God to whom there is no path nor bridge, concerning whom we could not say nor have to say a single word if He did not of His own initiative meet us as the *Deus revelatus*. Only when we have grasped this as the meaning of the Bible do we see the full range of its statement that God reveals Himself, i.e., that He has assumed form for our sake.<sup>18</sup>

The first thesis is picked from Barth's discourse on theological prolegomena, more specifically, from his elaboration on the revelation of the triune God. As per Barth's theology, this selection is methodologically determined. Barth contends that 'we find revelation itself attested in Holy Scripture in such a way that in relation to this witness our understanding of revelation, or of the God who reveals Himself, must be the doctrine of the Trinity'.<sup>19</sup> As such, the ontology of scripture is determined by the ontology of the Trinity. To put it in McCormack's terms, the being-in-becoming of scripture should be understood based on Barth's affirmation of the being-in-becoming of the Trinity.<sup>20</sup>

This thesis connects the ontology of scripture to that of the Trinity in such a way that the dialectic of the revealed God (*Deus revelatus*) and the hidden God (*Deus absconditus*) ultimately grounds the meaning of scripture. In other words,

<sup>17</sup>CD I/1, p. 110; Karl Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik* [hereafter *KD*] (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1980), I/1, p. 113.

<sup>18</sup>CD I/1, p. 321; *KD* I/1, p. 338.

<sup>19</sup>CD I/1, p. 312.

<sup>20</sup>McCormack, 'Being of Holy Scripture', p. 64.

Barth's exposition of divine hiddenness and revealedness is the *sine qua non* of his construal of what scripture *is*. Hence, at the beginning of the section of this thesis in *Church Dogmatics*, Barth maintains that '[r]evelation in the Bible means the self-unveiling, imparted to men, of the God who by *Wesen* cannot be unveiled to men'.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, Barth does not identify the Bible as the revelation of God because it involves God's hiddenness. If holy scripture *is* on a par with divine revelation immediately, it is no less to say that the *Wesen* of God is disclosed to human beings. However, as noted earlier, the *Wesen* of God cannot be *becoming* (or *acting*), which means God's hiddenness is always underlying the essence of scripture.

This dialectic of God's hiddenness and revealedness forces Barth to submit the sentiment that the form or means of God's revelation cannot replace God and becomes a medium between God and humans.<sup>22</sup> As such, the Bible as the means of God's revelation never fathoms the veiled *Wesen* of God. In fact, whilst speaking of the revelation of the hidden God, Barth associates the *Sein* of the triune God with the revealed knowledge of God in scripture. Having argued that 'even in [God's] revelation we know Him only in consequence of the fact that knowledge of God is real as God's own hidden work in His being (*Sein*) as the triune God from eternity to eternity', Barth asserts that holy scripture should be understood as speaking of the contradiction between God's hiddenness and His 'revealedness in His works and signs'.<sup>23</sup> Viewed in this light, that holy scripture becomes God's revelation hinges upon the dialectic between the hiddenness and revealedness of God's *Sein* as pertinent to God's works *pro nobis*. To put it another way, scripture in its revelation of God also honours God's hiddenness, and the *Sein* of scripture discloses both God's hiddenness (in terms of *Wesen*) and revealedness. Francis Watson puts it well: 'The theological significance of the Bible is derived ... from the indispensable role assigned to it in the outward movement of the divine communicative action into the world.'<sup>24</sup>

By conjoining God's *Sein* and the dialectic of God's hiddenness and revealedness, Barth's intention is to defend the inscrutability of God, because God's *Wesen* cannot be disclosed to humans. From this vantage point, it can be argued that the Bible becomes God's revelation insofar as God's revelation is actualistic in such a sense that the *Sein*-in-act of God is both hidden and revealed in divine works. Hence, the being-in-becoming of holy scripture is determined by the being-in-becoming of God as actualised in divine economy *pro nobis*. This principle laid down in Barth's theological prolegomena is foundational to his viewpoints of the *Sein* and *Wesen* of the Bible, which in turn set the scene for the description of the essence, character and function of the Bible from the perspective of God's self-revelation.

[Thesis 2] If we want to think of the Bible as a real witness of divine revelation, then clearly we have to keep two things constantly before us and give them their due weight: the limitation and the positive element, its distinctiveness from revelation, in so far as it is only a human word about it, and its unity with it, in so far as revelation is the basis, object and content of this word.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup>CD I/1, p. 320; KD I/1, p. 338. According to Barth, hiddenness is a major predication of the God in the Bible: 'But inscrutability, hiddenness, is of the very essence of Him who is called God in the Bible' (CD I/1, p. 320).

<sup>22</sup>CD I/1, p. 321.

<sup>23</sup>CD II/1, p. 50; KD II/1, p. 54.

<sup>24</sup>Watson, 'The Bible', pp. 60–1.

<sup>25</sup>CD I/2, p. 463.

This thesis is taken from the first part of §19 ‘The Word of God for the Church’, titled ‘Scripture as a Witness to Divine Revelation’. As noted in the discussion of Thesis 1, holy scripture is a sign that is involved with both God’s hiddenness and revealedness. This entails two outcomes. First, humans should be obedient to the authority of holy scripture as it is a witness to God’s revelation.<sup>26</sup> Second, holy scripture as a witness cannot be ‘absolutely identical with that to which it witnesses’.<sup>27</sup> It is in the context of the second outcome that Thesis 2 appears.

The core of Thesis 2 is Barth’s reminder that the humanity of scripture must be recognised. One cannot claim the divinity of the Bible at the expense of its humanity.<sup>28</sup> In so doing, Barth’s purpose is to highlight ‘the basis, object and content’ of the human word, which is divine revelation mediated through the means of revelation. In other words, the human expression of the Bible has to become the Word of God in order to mediate the revelation of God.

It is noteworthy that Barth’s pointing us to the humanity of scripture does not primarily aim to humanise the ontology of scripture by identifying the Bible as a *human* text only. Rather, his intention is to ask us to ‘listen to what it says to us as a human word’.<sup>29</sup> As such, it is quite reductionist to say that Barth’s theology of holy scripture is ‘opened to linguistic relativism’ and raises the ‘dualism between revelation and the word of Scripture in the interest of preserving the full humanity of the Bible’.<sup>30</sup> This is because the thrust of Barth’s emphasis on scripture as the human witness to revelation is the reality that God has chosen *this* human word to mediate His revelation. The point of gravity here is that the Bible as the witness of God’s revelation indicates that the Bible actually speaks of God’s revelation.<sup>31</sup>

It is by this human witness that the being-in-becoming of holy scripture is actualised. Barth contends:

confession of Holy Scripture, i.e., the explication of the knowledge of its actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) and its being-in-act (*ihres Wesens in der Tat*) contained in obedience to it, is in fact a superfluous and dangerous and in spite of its exactness and completeness an incredible protestation, if the obedience which it presupposes is itself alien to us. On the other hand, if the doctrine of Holy Scripture is simply the necessary exponent of its correct exegesis, we do not forget that the right doctrine of Holy Scripture cannot claim abstract validity, but its confirmation must always be sought and found in exegesis and therefore in Holy Scripture itself.<sup>32</sup>

Three observations can be made regarding this passage. First, the actualistic ontology of holy scripture is ultimately concerned with its *Wesen*. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, Barth avers that the Bible as God’s Word means the *Sein* of the Bible in its

<sup>26</sup>CD I/2, p. 457.

<sup>27</sup>CD I/2, p. 463.

<sup>28</sup>Kenneth Kantzer contends that this point is Barth’s contribution to evangelical theology. Kenneth S. Kantzer, ‘Biblical Authority: Where Both Fundamentalists and Neoevangelicals are Right’, *Christianity Today* 27 (7 Oct. 1983), p. 11.

<sup>29</sup>CD I/2, p. 466.

<sup>30</sup>Paul Wells, ‘The Doctrine of Scripture: Only a Human Problem’, in Gary L. W. Johnson and Ronald N. Gleason (eds), *Reforming or Conforming? Post-Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), p. 35.

<sup>31</sup>CD I/2, pp. 468–9.

<sup>32</sup>CD I/2, p. 462; KD I/2, pp. 510–11; revised translation.



*Werden*.<sup>33</sup> This means that Barth's theology of holy scripture is by and large to deal with the actualism of scripture's *Sein*-in-becoming. To be sure, in Barth's writings, actualism concerns *Sein in der Tat* in most cases; indeed, there is only one exception, which appears in the displayed quotation above, which is the only place where *Wesen in der Tat* is used in relation to the doctrine of holy scripture.<sup>34</sup> We need to recall the difference between *Sein* and *Wesen* in Barth's system as noted earlier, according to which *Wesen* pertains to the thing as in and for itself, whereas '*Sein* is the essence of a thing as it appears in its existential form'.<sup>35</sup> Granted, Barth does not use *Wesen in der Tat* to refer to the triune God; however, the being-in-becoming of scripture is not the same case. For Barth, there is a twofold 'being-in-becoming': *Wesen*-in-becoming and *Sein*-in-becoming. Thereby, on the one hand, Barth does not define the *Wesen* of scripture as absolutely veiled. On the other hand, whilst pointing us to the humanity of scripture (namely, the human witness of divine revelation), he refers to the *Sein* of holy scripture, as scripture is designated the *written* form of the Word of God, which is the existential form of scripture. That is to say, the *Sein*-in-becoming of holy scripture is ultimately determined by its *Wesen*-in-becoming insofar as *Wesen* is the conceptual underpinning of the Bible. As will be seen in the elaboration on Thesis 3, the witness to Jesus Christ as the *Wesen* of holy scripture determines the *Sein*-in-becoming of scripture.

Second, the *Wesen*-in-act of holy scripture is foundational to human obedience to the authority of scripture. Barth makes it clear that scripture's actualism as *Wesen*-in-act drives one to be obedient to the authority of scripture 'by the clarifying and expressing of the character and value peculiar to the witness of revelation as such'.<sup>36</sup> As such, Barth stresses that the relationship between humans and what is mediated in the Bible should be transformed first. This transformation is effected by none other than God Himself, which discloses divine sovereign freedom.<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, Barth maintains that this divine sovereign freedom makes the reader of the Bible grasped by the subject-matter of the Bible.<sup>38</sup> By arguing so, his intention is to highlight the ontological freedom of the *Wesen*-in-becoming of scripture, as determined by the revelation of God itself. 'It is not, then, that by a knowledge of the mystery of what is said in the Bible we acquire the right to turn to some other understanding of the Bible than that which is based upon this subject-matter and therefore upon God's revelation.'<sup>39</sup> This means that human obedience to the authority of the Bible is predicated upon the fact that humans are grasped by the Bible, the means of God's revelation. This passivity regarding human obedience to scripture has already been set out in Barth's early writings. In his lectures on the Epistle to Ephesians, Barth argues that '[t]he word of God does not become more real by being refashioned into human reality. We should be content with its own reality rather than trying to make it conform to ours through such attempts.'<sup>40</sup> He contends elsewhere that God is not known by the human

<sup>33</sup>CD I/1, p. 110.

<sup>34</sup>By arguing that 'Barth's famous actualistic notion of "being-in-act" is "*Sein in der Tat*" and never "*Wesen*", Tseng seems to neglect this exceptional usage of actualistic language in Barth's *Church Dogmatics*. See Tseng, *Barth's Ontology of Sin and Grace*, p. 15.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>CD I/2, p. 461.

<sup>37</sup>CD I/2, p. 469.

<sup>38</sup>CD I/2, p. 470.

<sup>39</sup>CD I/2, p. 471.

<sup>40</sup>Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, trans. Ross M. Wright, ed. R. David Nelson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), p. 108.



word about God but by *that* definite human word about God, that is, the word of scripture that witnesses to God.<sup>41</sup> In short, underlying human obedience to the Bible and the passivity therein is the *Wesen*-in-becoming of the Bible.

Third, the displayed quotation above shows that for Barth the *Wesen* of holy scripture determines the nature of biblical hermeneutics, which is the evidence of human actual obedience to the authority of scripture. It is the subject-matter of the Bible and God's revelation which grasp the reader of the Bible. That is, the *Wesen*-in-act of holy scripture determines biblical hermeneutics. Viewed in light of Thesis 2, the *Wesen*-in-act of holy scripture shows that biblical hermeneutics is ultimately determined by revelation rather than the human interpreter. As John Webster remarks, 'it is a hermeneutical directive in which primacy is accorded to divine communicative acts over the interpretative undertakings of human agents'.<sup>42</sup>

Given this, Barth argues, 'what is said in the biblical word of man is divine revelation, and as such the *analogia fidei*, that everything which is said by human word is drawn into the darkness and light of its mystery'.<sup>43</sup> For Barth, as George Hunsinger summarises, the *analogia fidei* 'posits an analogy between a human action (faith) and a divine action (grace) in just a situation where no ontological commonality is conceived to exist'.<sup>44</sup> As such, the triad of the human word of the Bible, divine revelation and the *analogia fidei* is of considerable significance to the exegesis of the Bible. That is, the *analogia fidei* indicates that there is no ontological commonality between the biblical human word and divine revelation. This means that the exegesis of the Bible deals with its *Sein*-in-becoming, which is determined by its *Wesen*-in-becoming. Barth explains that

whatever is said to us by men always demands of us what God's revelation in the *human word* of Holy Scripture – but that alone – can actually achieve in relation to us. God's revelation in the *human word* of Holy Scripture not only wants but can make itself said and heard. It can become for us real subject-matter, and it can force us to treat it objectively.<sup>45</sup>

Accordingly, the *Sein*-in-becoming of holy scripture, which is concerned with the written form or human expression of the Word of God, denotes that God's revelation *becomes* the subject-matter of holy scripture in terms of the *analogia fidei*, which safeguards objective biblical hermeneutics. Precisely because of this *Sein*-in-becoming, Barth insists that biblical hermeneutics should refrain from 'the totalitarian claim of general hermeneutics' and focuses on the subject-matter of the Bible.<sup>46</sup> As Martin Westerholm observes, for Barth, 'the elements of biblical hermeneutics are found not in grammatical and psychological principles that facilitate apprehension of the human thinking that underlies the text but rather in the divine activity that creates the "situation" in which the faithful reader encounters Scripture'.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>41</sup>Karl Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, trans. Darrell L. Guder and Judith J. Guder (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), pp. 48–9.

<sup>42</sup>John Webster, 'Barth's Lectures on the Gospel of John', in *Thy Word is Truth: Barth on Scripture*, ed. George Hunsinger (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), p. 131.

<sup>43</sup>CD I/2, p. 471.

<sup>44</sup>George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of his Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), p. 283.

<sup>45</sup>CD I/2, p. 471; emphasis added.

<sup>46</sup>CD I/2, p. 472.

<sup>47</sup>Westerholm, 'Barth's Theology of Scripture in Developmental Perspective', p. 25. Richard Burnett notes that for Barth '[h]istoricism and psychologism, the two main tools in modernity to reduce theological

Thus far, I have demonstrated that the *Sein*-in-becoming of the Bible, which is determined by its *Wesen*-in-act, displays the Bible's distinctiveness from God's revelation. What is more, Barth's use of *analogia fidei* heightens the truth that this distinction is ultimately caused by the difference between the *Wesen* of God and that of holy scripture: the former is absolutely veiled, whereas the latter can be actualised and disclosed.

[Thesis 3] If what we hear in Holy Scripture is witness, a human expression of God's revelation ... what we hear in the witness itself is more than witness, what we hear in the human expression is more than a human expression. What we hear is revelation, and therefore the very Word of God.<sup>48</sup>

The third thesis is the opening sentence of the second part of §19 'The Word of God for the Church', which is titled 'Scripture as the Word of God'. In this section, Barth demonstrates that it is in and with the church that holy scripture is the Word of God. Hence, Barth asserts that it is the canonical scripture, which has been defined by the church and is the witness of divine revelation.<sup>49</sup> On the one hand, this canonical scripture is still the human word. On the other hand, as Thesis 3 shows, it is more than a human expression of God's revelation.

The phrase 'more than' here is indicative of something regarding the essence of the Bible, which points to divine revelation and the Word of God. In other words, God's revelation and Word, heard by humans through the human word of the Bible, points to the core of the doctrine of holy scripture. Following this, it can be argued that the canonical scripture as the witness of divine revelation is in essence linking to divine revelation itself.

Barth offers a christocentric account for this essential linking, which in turn illustrates the ontology of holy scripture. Barth contends:

In general, therefore, the witness of Holy Scripture to itself consists simply *in its Wesen as the witness of Jesus Christ (in ihrem Wesen als Zeugnis von Jesus Christus)*. And the knowledge of the truth of this self-witness, the knowledge of its unique authority, stands or falls with the knowledge that Jesus Christ is the incarnate Son of God.<sup>50</sup>

Barth's christocentric narrative here is crucial to the ontology of holy scripture. The ontological referent in this statement is the *Wesen* of the Bible rather than its *Sein*. This *Wesen* as the witness of Jesus Christ determines the veracity of holy scripture's self-witness. As noted earlier, as *Sein* connotes the essence of a thing manifested in its existential form, the *Sein* of scripture refers to the human word of God, or (using the words in Thesis 3) to the human expression of God's revelation. That being so, whilst claiming that scripture is *more than* the witness of divine revelation, Barth in fact has in mind the *Sein*-in-becoming, rather than the *Wesen*-in-becoming, of holy scripture. This is

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claims to matters of mere history or psychology, has not only reduced Paul to his historical context and/or his psychological parts but made him unintelligible on his own terms'; Richard Burnett, 'Barth and Theological Exegesis', in George Hunsinger and Keith L. Johnson (eds), *Barth in Dialogue*, vol. 2 of *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), p. 732.

<sup>48</sup>CD I/2, p. 473.

<sup>49</sup>CD I/2, pp. 473–81.

<sup>50</sup>KD I/2, p. 538; cf. CD I/2, p. 485; revised translation.

because, given that Barth's usage of *Wesen* is both substantialist and actualistic, the substance of holy scripture is the witness of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, that is, the witness of the Word of God.

At this juncture, we need to recall Barth's theology of the three forms of the Word of God. For Barth, there is 'no distinction of degree or value' of revelation, the Bible and the proclamation of the church as the threefold Word of God.<sup>51</sup> As Bruce McCormack remarks:

Barth really does intend his doctrine of the Word to be understood as one Word with three forms and not three distinct Words that might somehow be hierarchically related to one another. So it is not correct to say that Barth distinguishes revelation from Scripture and to leave the matter there. He distinguishes them as forms, yes, but he distinguishes them only then to insist on their unity-in-differentiation.<sup>52</sup>

This unity of the threefold Word of God underlies the truth that holy scripture as the Word of God is the witness of Jesus Christ, the eternal Word of God. Viewed in this light, it is by the substance of the Bible, namely the *Wesen* of the Bible, that the Bible *acts* to participate into the unity of the Word of God.

Furthermore, Barth's christological account of the *Wesen* of holy scripture offers an incarnational analogy of the being-in-becoming of holy scripture, which reinforces the statement in Thesis 3 that 'what we hear in the human expression is more than a human expression'. As will be seen below, although Barth recognises this analogy as not perfect, it likens the coexistence of the human word and God's Word in the Bible to the union of the two natures of Jesus Christ. Ontologically, this analogy is justified in Barth's system because the *Wesen* of the Bible is the witness to the incarnate Son, as noted above. According to Barth, the incarnational analogy serves to spell out the meaning of 'the Word of God' in terms of the confession that the Bible is the Word of God.<sup>53</sup>

The incarnational analogy lays bare the fact that, although faith is vital to the confession that the Bible is the Word of God, it is not by the human faith that the Word of God is grasped.

Rather, the energy of this grasping itself rests on the prior coming of the Word of God. Faith does not live by its own energy and therefore not even by its arousing and strengthening by the Word of God. It lives by the energy of the movement in which the Word of God in Holy Scripture has come to us in spite of all the offences which we might take at it, and has first created our faith.<sup>54</sup>

The 'prior coming of the Word of God' points to the only one eternal Word of God, the incarnate Son. It is in this context that Barth draws a critical distinction between the Bible and the Word of God that is God Himself. For Barth, to identify the Bible with the Word of God directly is to make God be 'an attribute of something else'.<sup>55</sup> It is apparent that Barth's concern about the ontology of the Bible plays a major role

<sup>51</sup>CD I/1, p. 120.

<sup>52</sup>McCormack, 'Being of Holy Scripture', pp. 58–9.

<sup>53</sup>CD I/2, p. 512.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 513.

in this regard. The divine otherness and the ontological difference between the one eternal Word of God and the Bible as the Word of God set the scene for Barth's incarnational analogy with reference to the being of the Bible. Barth contends:

The Bible is not the Word of God on earth in the same way as Jesus Christ, very God and very man, is that Word in heaven. The being (*Sein*) of Jesus Christ as the Word of God even in His humanity requires neither promise nor faith. The act in which He became the Word of God in His humanity requires neither repetition nor confirmation. But in His eternal presence as the Word of God He is concealed from us who now live on earth and in time. He is revealed only in the sign of His humanity, and especially in the witness of His prophets and apostles. But by nature these signs are not heavenly human, but earthly- and temporal-human. Therefore the act of their institution as signs requires repetition and confirmation. Their being [*Sein*] as the Word of God requires promise and faith – just because they are signs of the eternal presence of Christ.<sup>56</sup>

Two crucial observations can be made here. First, Barth clearly realises the imperfection of the incarnational analogy that it primarily serves to describe the dissimilarity between the one eternal Word of God and the Bible as the Word of God. As noted above briefly, this dissimilarity is intrinsic to this analogy insofar as the Word of God as God Himself cannot be an attribute of the created thing, that is, the human expression of and witness to God's revelation. That is to say, this dissimilarity is of considerable importance to Barth since the divine nature of Jesus Christ makes the one eternal Word of God not subordinate to temporality. By contrast, the Bible as the Word of God is always the sign of the eternal presence of the one eternal Word of God. In his later work, Barth clarifies this ontological dissimilarity as follows:

That He is the one Word of God means further that His truth and prophecy cannot be combined with any other, nor can He be enclosed with other words in a system superior to both Him and them. As the one Word of God, He can bring Himself into the closest conjunction with such words. He can make use of certain men, making them His witnesses and confessing their witness in such a way that to hear them is to hear Him (Lk. 10:16).<sup>57</sup>

This means that the dissimilarity inherent to the incarnational analogy refers to the fact that to identify this one eternal Word of God immediately with the Word of God in the form of the Bible is *de facto* to undermine the divine nature of this eternal Word and blur the distinction between the divine and the human.

Second (and more importantly), Barth's incarnational analogy operates on the ontological level of *Sein* rather than *Wesen*. In the quoted passage above, Barth sets forth the analogy between the *Sein* of Jesus Christ and the *Sein* of the Bible as the Word of God. That is to say, this analogy stresses the essence that appears in the thing's existential form. Hence, the *Sein*-in-becoming of the Bible mirrors the *Sein*-in-becoming of the Word of God as manifested in the incarnation. We need to recall Barth's sentiment that the *Wesen* of the Bible is the witness of Jesus Christ. As such, the statement in Thesis 3 – namely that 'what we hear in the witness itself is more than witness, what

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.; *KD I/2*, p. 570.

<sup>57</sup>*CD IV/3.1*, p. 101.

we hear in the human expression is more than a human expression' – indicates, on the one hand, that the *Wesen* of the Bible is disclosed through its *Sein*-in-becoming, and on the other hand, that the *Wesen* of the Bible faithfully and veraciously unveils the one eternal Word of God. Thus, '[w]hat we hear is revelation, and therefore the very Word of God'.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

As per David Gibson's observation, the 'puzzling aspect' of Barth's theology of scripture consists in his double affirmation that the Bible as the human expression is the Word of God and that the human expression becomes the Word of God.<sup>59</sup> This paper's nomenclatural analysis of Barth's ontology of holy scripture suffices to ease this puzzling aspect.

Three theses have been used to demonstrate the difference between the *Wesen* and the *Sein* of holy scripture. As per the first thesis, grounded in the being-in-becoming of God, the *Sein*-in-becoming of the Bible shows the dialectic of God's hiddenness and revealedness as inherent to the Bible. This means that the Bible's becoming the Word of God reveals God's works *pro nobis*. Following this, Thesis 2 demonstrates that, as the witness to divine revelation, the *Wesen*-in-act of the Bible places emphasis on biblical hermeneutics and the sovereign freedom of God, and underlies human obedience to the authority of the Bible. Note that the *Wesen*-in-act of the Bible is never used by Barth to refer to holy scripture's becoming the Word of God. Thereby, it has been explicated that the *Sein*-in-becoming of the Bible is determined by the *Wesen*-in-act of the Bible.

Following this, Thesis 3 points to the nomenclatural difference between *Wesen* and *Sein* in reference to holy scripture. Whereas the *Sein* of the Bible refers to the human expression of God's revelation (as the Bible as the written form of the Word of God), the *Wesen* of the Bible is the witness of Jesus Christ. Combining this nomenclatural differentiation with Barth's insistence on the unity of the threefold Word of God and given his christological account of the ontology of holy scripture, it can be argued that for Barth holy scripture *is* the Word of God insofar as the *Wesen* of scripture is the witness of Jesus Christ, the one eternal Word of God; meanwhile, holy scripture *becomes* the Word of God insofar as the *Sein* of scripture is the human expression of the Word of God.

As Tseng has demonstrated, Barth's ontology assimilates both the substantialist and the actualistic. Given the difference between the *Wesen* and the *Sein* of the Bible, and the claim that the *Sein*-in-becoming of the Bible is determined by its *Wesen*-in act, it follows that for Barth the Bible *is* ontologically the Word of God in the sense of *Wesen*, which underlies the Bible's becoming the Word of God in the sense of *Sein*. On the other hand, the Bible ontologically becomes the Word of God in the sense of *Sein* because the Bible is the Word of God in the sense of *Wesen*.

It should be conceded that Barth's view of the being-in-becoming of the Bible speaks to broader concerns. The most important of these is how the Holy Spirit works in and through the being-in-becoming of holy scripture. In this regard, Katherine Sonderegger offers an excellent summary of the operation of the Holy Spirit regarding the ontology of the Bible: 'The Bible ... is witness; and its holiness stems from an event, the act of the

<sup>58</sup> CD I/2, p. 473.

<sup>59</sup> David Gibson, 'The Answering Speech of Men: Karl Barth on Holy Scripture', in D. A. Carson (ed.), *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans 2016), p. 270.

Holy Spirit, by which it once and will once again become that witness. The Bible still retains the character of revelation, but it does so as an historical text that bears witness to the living Act of God.<sup>60</sup>

Finally, I wish to conclude this paper with the significance of the nomenclatural reading of Barth's ontology of holy scripture to his view of the fallibility of scripture. Theologians who are in sympathy with Barth seek to provide a workable explanation to Barth's position. For example, Donald Bloesch contends that for Barth 'Scripture is humanly fallible as well as divinely infallible, but his judgment on the fallibility of Scripture is a theological, not a cultural or scientific one. Barth makes an attempt to show that it has its roots in the scriptural witness itself and not in secular historical criticism.'<sup>61</sup> This theological justification of Barth's position is telling; yet the question of how and to what extent the tension between the humanly fallible and the divinely infallible is reconciled remains to be debated.

The nomenclatural analysis of Barth's ontology of holy scripture, as set forth in this paper, to a certain degree handles such a tension. Barth's usage of *Wesen* and *Sein* forces us to take a nuanced reading of his position on the fallibility of holy scripture. It can be seen that for Barth there seems no such a tension.

The Bible has proved and will prove itself to be a true and fitting instrument to point man to God and his work and his words, to God who alone is infallible. *Since the Bible is a human instrument and document, bound and conditioned by the temporal views of nature, of history, of ideas, of values, it to that extent is not sinless, like Jesus Christ himself, and thus not infallible, like God.* No wonder that seen from the perspective of the worldviews and the concepts of other ages; the question may arise whether we have to conclude that the Bible is not solid. *I should never say such a thing,* but would admit rather the occurrence of certain, let us say, tensions, contradictions, and maybe if you prefer, 'errors', in its time-bound human statements.<sup>62</sup>

Accordingly, Barth is reluctant to say that there are errors in the Bible. Moreover, he is of the opinion that the alleged tensions and contradictions in the Bible merely occur in terms of the humanity of the Bible. To speak of it ontologically, these tensions and contradictions are pertinent to the *Sein* of the Bible. In other words, the *Wesen* of the Bible as the witness of the one eternal Word of God is always underlying the truth that the Bible is the Word of the infallible God. What the Bible really *is*, is determined by its *Wesen*, which, in view of the unity of the three forms of the Word of God, is characterised as infallible. Given this, it is understandable that Barth insists on the fallibility of holy scripture as the human text while he never pinpoints any actual error in scripture. Considering this fact in light of the nomenclatural reading offered in this paper, it can be argued that Barth opposes a straightforward ascription of 'errors' to holy

<sup>60</sup>Katherine Sonderegger, 'Barth on Holy Scripture', in George Hunsinger and Keith L. Johnson (eds), *Barth and Dogmatics*, vol. 1 of *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2019), p. 77.

<sup>61</sup>Donald G. Bloesch, *Jesus is Victor! Karl Barth's Doctrine of Salvation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), pp. 89–90.

<sup>62</sup>Karl Barth, *Barth in Conversation*, vol. 1, 1959–1962, trans. The Translation Fellows of the Center for Barth Studies, ed. Eberhard Busch (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), p. 179; emphasis added.

scripture. In short, even if it would be an exaggeration to describe Barth as an inerrantist in the generally accepted use of the term, it is beyond doubt that for Barth the Bible cannot be qualified either by 'inerrant' or 'errant' because of the difference between the *Wesen* and *Sein* of scripture.