

# The heavenly witness to God: Karl Barth's doctrine of angels\*

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## Abstract

Karl Barth's doctrine of angels has yet to receive sustained scholarly attention. This article begins the work of addressing that omission. In particular, it argues that Barth's unique construal of the angelic being and purpose compels him to propose that the angels have a mediatorial function in the service of God's revelation. While being both necessary to and consistent with Barth's description of the angels' ontology, this service of mediation contradicts his earlier doctrine of revelation and is superfluous to it.

**Keywords:** ambassadors, angels, mediation, revelation witness

Notwithstanding the extraordinary upsurge of interest in Barth studies around the world over the past twenty years, there are important areas of his corpus that remain either un- or under-explored. One of the most intriguing lacunae has been in the broad area of Barth's angelology, located at the very end (§51) of *Church Dogmatics* III/3.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding Wolfhart Pannenberg's claim that Barth's doctrine of angelology 'is the most important discussion of them in modern theology', very few scholars have shown any great interest in what Barth has to say.<sup>2</sup> Barth himself, at the time of this volume's publication in 1950, thought that 'many . . . will turn first to the section on angels' – indeed, he suspected that this was 'inevitable'.<sup>3</sup> In fact, his assumption has proven to be incorrect.

There have, of course, been a few exceptions. Just one year after the volume's publication, W. A. Whitehouse predicted that Barth's doctrine of angels would 'rank with the other two great monuments of angelology, the

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* [hereafter CD], 13 vols, ed. T. F. Torrance and G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75).

<sup>2</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 103.

<sup>3</sup> Barth, CD III/3, p. xi.

Celestial Hierarchy of Pseudo-Dionysius, and the *Summa Theologica* of Aquinas' – and yet Whitehouse himself devoted a meagre six pages to Barth's work, within which he was able to skate only lightly over the topic.<sup>4</sup> Much more recently, and in the same journal in which Whitehouse presented his report, Donald Wood has explored Barth's treatment of angels as it was presented within the Göttingen lectures in 1924–5. While Wood has provided an excellent summary of this early material, he offers only the briefest of comments upon the content of *Church Dogmatics* §51, which therefore remains largely opaque to view.<sup>5</sup> In 1996 papers from a symposium on Barth's angelology were published in the *Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie*.<sup>6</sup> Even then, however, not all the papers from the symposium were published, not all were devoted to Barth's own angelology and none was published in English. Six decades after Whitehouse first called for it, therefore, there remains a demonstrable need for that 'full-scale treatment' of Barth's doctrine of angels.<sup>7</sup>

It is not altogether clear why Barth's angels have received so little critical attention. Donald Wood has suggested that the liminal place occupied by angels in constructive Protestant dogmatics and the focus in recent Barth scholarship on contextual issues help explain the dearth of critical examination of this doctrine.<sup>8</sup> Neither of these reasons, however, seems altogether sufficient. On the contrary, there are a number of more compelling reasons why Barth's angelology should have been considered more thoroughly. For example, the proximity of Barth's discussion of angels to his extensive and remarkable investigation into the origins and nature of radical evil (*das Nichtigte*) might be considered reason enough for it to have received adequate attention.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the popular resurgence of interest in

<sup>4</sup> W. A. Whitehouse, 'God's Heavenly Kingdom and His Servants the Angels: An Account of *Kirchliche Dogmatik* §51 by Karl Barth', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 4/4 (1951), pp. 376–82.

<sup>5</sup> D. Wood, "'An Extraordinarily Acute Embarrassment': The Doctrine of Angels in Barth's Göttingen Dogmatics", *Scottish Journal of Theology* 66/3 (2013), pp. 319–37.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. M. Den Dulk, "'Von guten Mächten treu und still umgeben . . ." Praktisch-theologische Beschreibung der Engellehre Karl Barths'; M. Plathow, 'Luther und die Angelologie'; R. H. Reeling Brouwer, 'Keine Niederlassungsbewilligung? Nein, Ehrenbürgerrecht! Einige hermeneutische und sonstige Bemerkungen zu Barths Angelogie', in *Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie* 12 (1996).

<sup>7</sup> See Whitehouse, 'God's Heavenly Kingdom', p. 381; Wood, 'Acute Embarrassment', p. 321.

<sup>8</sup> Wood, 'Acute Embarrassment', p. 321.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. E. Van't Slot, 'Karl Barth over "das Nichtigte"', *Nederlands Theologische Tijdschrift* 58 (2004), pp. 226–38; John McDowell, 'Mend Your Speech a Little: Reading Karl Barth's *das Nichtigte* through Donald Mackinnon's Tragic Vision', in J. C. McDowell and M. Higton (eds), *Conversing with Barth* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 142–72; M.

both angels and demons, at least within some church circles, should by rights also have stimulated broader consideration of his treatment of this theme.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the structural placement and material content of Barth's doctrine of angels, and conversely the entirely marginal place he accords the demonic, differentiates him markedly from the majority view of his Reformed predecessors. Yet none of these factors has encouraged widespread academic interest in Barth's unique contribution to this intriguing and 'most difficult' of topics.<sup>11</sup>

In even the most recent book-length treatment of this theme, Christopher Green focuses more upon the doctrinal context in which Barth locates his angelology (the doctrine of providence) than upon Barth's material discussion of angels. For Green, the entirety of CD III/3 is an extended excursus on the Lord's Prayer, and so the section on angels corresponds simply to the Prayer's doxological conclusion. Green is not wrong. Nonetheless, the way in which he parses the structure of III/3 necessarily relegates his treatment of the angels to a secondary position. Green's lack of detailed engagement with Barth's own angelology is understandable in light of this overarching hermeneutic, and is doctrinally justifiable. Unfortunately, it also perpetuates the long-standing neglect of Barthian angelology.<sup>12</sup> It would seem indeed that interpreters of Barth have fallen into the modernist trap of which Barth himself spoke, with the result that his angelology has been treated with no more than 'a shrug of the shoulders'; an acknowledgement that it is there, but with little appetite actually to engage with it.<sup>13</sup>

This article begins the process of correcting this scholarly gap. While, as we shall see, Barth's angels rightly exist at the very margins of comprehensibility, I nonetheless wish to retrieve them from the margins of scholarship. I will do so by setting Barth's angelology – specifically, the way he construes their ontology and consequent mediatorial function – alongside his doctrine of revelation. I hope to show that Barth's quite remarkable account of angelic being requires him to interpolate them into his doctrine of revelation, when

Lindsay, 'Nothingness Revisited: Karl Barth's Doctrine of Radical Evil in the Wake of the Holocaust', *Colloquium* 34/1 (2002), pp. 3–19.

<sup>10</sup> See Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), p. 433; L. Osborn, 'Entertaining Angels: Their Place in Contemporary Theology', *Tyndale Bulletin* 45/2 (1994), p. 274. Barth noted that angelology 'has not been resolutely and explicitly treated for a long time', prior to his engagement with it (CD III/3, p. xi).

<sup>11</sup> Barth, CD III/3, p. 369.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher C. Green, *Doxological Theology: Karl Barth on Divine Providence, Evil and the Angels* (London: T&T Clark, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Barth, CD III/3, p. 413.

in fact his earlier articulation of revelation was entirely sufficient without them.

### Placing angels: the uniqueness of Barth's dogmatic location of angelology

Where Barth places angels within his dogmatic architecture provides a fundamental insight into his overall understanding of the doctrine.<sup>14</sup> George Hunsinger has cautioned that there are 'inherent limits' to the *loci* approach of interpreting Barth.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, it remains the case that the placement of doctrinal *loci* relative to one another is key to grasping how Barth approaches both the task and subject of dogmatics. One sees this, for example, in his insistence (in both the *Göttingen* and *Church Dogmatics*) that the doctrine of the Trinity must provide the structural shape of his doctrine of revelation rather than be a constitutive subsection of the doctrine of God. It is also evident in Barth's placement of the doctrine of election within the doctrine of God rather than in the *locus* of reconciliation. It is no less true in the matter of angels. And with the angels, too, Barth is (or at least, becomes) willing to depart from standard dogmatic practice.

The typical architecture of Reformed dogmatics – Polanus, Barth says, is the only exception he knows – placed angelology generally within the context of creation, and particularly as a prefatory adjunct to anthropology.<sup>16</sup> Even Calvin's treatment of the matter serves primarily as an introduction to his discussion of humanity and, only after that, to providence. Calvin notes that he cannot 'treat more fully of the nature of man' until he has said 'something of angels'.<sup>17</sup> Despite the detail with which Calvin goes on to describe both the being and actions of the angels, he wants to move on to more substantial matters as soon as possible.

Other non-Reformed examples also come to mind. Augustus Strong, one of the foremost American Baptist theologians of the nineteenth century, sets his angelology within the boundaries of his doctrine of providence but nonetheless uses it as little more than a preface to his anthropology.<sup>18</sup> More recently, we see in Millard Erickson a modern-day Baptist example of exactly the same thing. In his immensely popular *Christian Theology*, Erickson's discussion of God's 'special agents' is tucked in at the end of a broader

<sup>14</sup> Green, *Doxological Theology*, pp. 194–5.

<sup>15</sup> George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of his Theology* (New York: OUP, 1991), p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Barth, CD III/2, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. H. Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), I.xiv.3.

<sup>18</sup> Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1970).

section on creation and providence, but immediately preceding a far more substantial section on humanity.<sup>19</sup>

Nor has this tendency been apparent only since the time of the Reformation. Prior to Augustine, says Barth, there was an assumption that humans and angels could be classified together as members of the same genus.<sup>20</sup> Thus, to treat angels by way of preface to anthropology was a logically consistent construction. For Irenaeus, for example, angels and humans can be grouped together because they share the same capacity of choosing freely between good and evil (*potestas electionis*).<sup>21</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, taking a broader view of the same opinion, notes that the angel and the human is each a *λογικὴ κτίσις*, a rational creature with ‘undetermined liberty of free-willed choice’, created by God for fellowship with Him.<sup>22</sup> As for Gregory the Great, he argues that both angels and humans have as their shared destiny that they may know God; therefore, insofar as humans and angels share that noetic teleology, they are to be classed in cognate, if not identical, categories of being.<sup>23</sup>

Barth’s concern with all of these previous treatments of angelology was precisely this customary framing of it as a preface to anthropology. ‘They were satisfied to speak about angels and then simply to pass on to man’.<sup>24</sup> Even Aquinas, whose doctrine is ‘so classical a statement’ that he is rightly called the *Doctor angelicus*, nonetheless falls victim to the same error; for Aquinas, the angels’ primary referent is humanity and not God.<sup>25</sup> Therefore it must reasonably be asked whether or not the ‘Thomistic doctrine of angels is only the attempt at a gigantic self-projection of the *anthropos*’.<sup>26</sup>

And yet this, it should be noted, is exactly what Barth did in his articulation of angelology in the Göttingen lectures, in which a discussion of good and bad angels forms the bridge between providence and anthropology.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, pp. 433–51.

<sup>20</sup> Barth, CD III/3, pp. 380–1.

<sup>21</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.37.1.

<sup>22</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Demonstratio evangelica* 4.1. Note, however, Gregory of Nyssa’s comment on the origin of evil: that the ‘angelic power’ that had been given authority to rule over the earth became jealous of humankind, on account of it having been given ‘the godlike beauty of an intellectual nature’ (*Great Catechism* 6). That is to say, he does not seem to share in quite the same way the assumption that rationality is *per se* a characteristic that is inherently enjoyed by both humans and angels.

<sup>23</sup> See Gregory the Great, *Moralia* 4.3.8.

<sup>24</sup> Barth, CD III/2, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> Barth, CD III/3, pp. 393, 400.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 400–1.

<sup>27</sup> See Karl Barth, *Unterricht in der christlichen Religion*, vol. 2, *Die Lehre von Gott, die Lehre vom Menschen* 1924/1925, ed. H. Stoevesandt (Zürich: TVZ, 1990), §§20–2.

Angelology is, he says there, a ‘great metaphysical overture’ to any theological anthropology; it is the ‘gigantic parallel or a projection of the doctrine of the human creature into a second, higher world’.<sup>28</sup> Even more extraordinarily, this spiritual realm provides a mirror onto humanity’s election. The good and bad angels represent in abstract (but real) form the divine determination of each human. As Wood puts it, they ‘foreshadow the dramatics of human life as a kingdom of personal moral agents’.<sup>29</sup>

By the time he was delivering his lectures for CD III/3, however, Barth was more prepared to depart from this standard architecture. Just as he had railed against the liberal modernist assumption of an unbroken ontological line between humanity and God, so now he was critical of this long-standing dogmatic tendency to draw a similarly unbroken line between humanity and the angels. Both attempts fail to distinguish proper ontological difference.<sup>30</sup> Conversely, Barth’s own angelology in CD III/3 finds its proper theological home, not within his anthropology, which appears most fully in the previous part-volume, but within the doctrine of providence.<sup>31</sup>

Structurally, the doctrine of providence is ‘the real substance of this volume’.<sup>32</sup> Thus, it is in this general context that the angels take their place. This providential ruling of God is not, as the editors remind us, the function of a metaphysics, but of the history of creation as parsed by the history of covenant.<sup>33</sup> The entire volume examines the relational dynamic between God as ‘the one who loves in freedom’ and his creation. As we shall see, how and why the angels fit into this scheme is a function of their own being and purpose. It is to this that we now turn.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 315, 344.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 309; Wood, ‘Acute Embarrassment’, p. 330.

<sup>30</sup> We are also warned by Barth not to make the mistake of the earlier dogmaticians, who typically regarded angels and demons to be of the same genus. Whereas Cocceius and Heidegger posit a creaturely category of ‘angels’ – who can be either good or bad – Barth makes clear that the angelic opponents are not ‘bad angels’. They are, rather, part of that which God has not elected but passed over. Thus, demons exist only insofar as they are part of the non-willed reality. See e.g. J. Cocceius, *Summa Theologiae ex Scriptura repetita* 16.2; and J. H. Heidegger, *Corpus Theologiae* 8.3; cited in Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: Allen & Unwin, 1950), p. 201. See also Barth, CD III/3, p. 520; CD II/2, p. 122. Note, however, that this is another modification of Barth’s Göttingen angelology, in which angels and demons form a single ontological category, *de angelis bonis et malis*.

<sup>31</sup> See Barth, CD III/2, the whole of which is devoted to ‘Man’ [sic] as ‘The Creature’.

<sup>32</sup> Barth, CD III/3, p. xii.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. ix.

### Who the angels are, and what they do

That Barth discusses angels within the context of providence – of God’s gracious over-ruling of His creation – is due to their service of tending to and caring for all that God has created. As Barth puts it in the section header for §51, the angels ‘accompany’ (*begleiten*) God’s will on earth and ‘victoriously ward off the opposing forms and forces of chaos’.<sup>34</sup> Earlier in §49, Barth has noted that the ‘second act’ of God’s providential lordship is his ‘accompanying’ of humankind, allowing and enabling us to be companioned by him in the actualizing of our creaturely autonomy.<sup>35</sup> This is precisely the task he now ascribes to the angels, thus suggesting at the outset that they are the agents through whom God shepherds his human creatures in and through their activity.<sup>36</sup> The angels’ location within Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* serves this material point. Before we can address the nature of the angels’ accompaniment, though, it is worth outlining the material content of Barth’s angelology. Only when we grasp what Barth thinks the angels are will we be in a position to explore and assess what he thinks they do.

Barth commences his discussion of angelic ontology with a comment on epistemology. On this point he once again distances himself from others who have treated this particular theme. Angelology is the ‘most difficult of all’ topics and the ‘very limit’ of Christian dogmatics, because the objects of this doctrine belong to an alien and uncertain sphere. They are ‘marginal figures’ who are unknowable by world history but who are nonetheless real in spite of that unknowability.<sup>37</sup> But that the angels are marked by this unknowability necessitates a very particular way of knowing about them. Unlike the church fathers, who preferred to ‘derive their nourishment [on this doctrine] from another source’, we must, insists Barth, follow the ‘pattern’ (*Vorbild*) and the ‘sense’ (*Sinne*) of the biblical witness.<sup>38</sup> As is typical of Barth, scriptural fidelity trumps metaphysics.<sup>39</sup>

But this epistemological method for knowing about angels follows not simply from Barth’s own methodological commitments. On the contrary, it is ingredient to the manner of the angels’ creaturely being. Angels, says

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 369.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 90–4.

<sup>36</sup> Barth again uses the word *begleiten* in relation to the work and ministry of the angels, and so may be better understood as ‘shepherding’ rather than simply accompanying.

<sup>37</sup> Barth, CD III/3, pp. 369–71, 374, 376.

<sup>38</sup> Barth, CD III/3, p. 381 (KD III/3, p. 440).

<sup>39</sup> As Wood says in the context of the Göttingen lectures, in which the same methodology was operative, ‘the grand architectonics of an idealist system make[s] way for a more unassuming movement from one doctrinal locus to the next’. Wood, ‘Acute Embarrassment’, p. 323.

Barth, are creatures ‘under God and above man’.<sup>40</sup> Of course, Barth rejects the form of creaturehood ascribed to them by, for instance, Aquinas on the one hand, and Calvin on the other. He explicitly repudiates Thomas’ angelic ontology as it is presented in both the *Summae*, on the grounds that it is predicated upon abstract metaphysics rather than the Word of God. Similarly, he implicitly denies the Calvinist view of angelic being because, as we have seen, it risks reducing the angels to mere ‘preliminary humans’ – beings with which one must deal before approaching the more substantive question of humankind – rather than acknowledging them to be the companions of divine providence. Nonetheless, the difficulties of describing their creaturely form notwithstanding, creatures the angels most certainly are – creatures who occupy an utterly liminal position somewhere between heaven and earth, between God and humanity and, as we shall see, existing to serve both. Whereas earth is the sphere and limit of humanity’s vision and comprehension, the angels stand at the boundary of knowing and unknowing, at the place where the ‘unknowable waits at the limits of the knowable’.<sup>41</sup> To know about them cannot therefore be a consequence of speculation, but only of reflection upon the biblical witness.

That the angels exist on this cusp of human incomprehensibility is not only for what we might call this ‘spatial liminality’. Far more importantly, it is because the angels have no independent ontology. They exist not for themselves, nor in any genuinely self-referential way. As Stephen Noll puts it, Barth’s angels ‘have no personality of their own’.<sup>42</sup> They exist only for God and for his service, and can therefore only be known in this way. They have, says Barth, no independent standing and can neither be nor act autonomously.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, it is totally alien and unscriptural to wish to know about them, or think it possible to know about them, ‘in themselves’.<sup>44</sup> One can only know them insofar as one perceives them in and through their particular providential service; that is, as the ‘entourage and original witnesses’ of God’s activity toward humankind.<sup>45</sup> In other words, we can

<sup>40</sup> Barth, CD III/3, p. 391. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, qq. 50–64; and also his *Summa contra Gentiles*, II.91.10–11, in which he seeks to demonstrate that angels exemplify the truth that ‘there are some intellectual substances which are not united to bodies’.

<sup>41</sup> Barth, CD III/3, p. 424.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen Noll, *Angels of Light, Powers of Darkness: Thinking Biblically about Angels, Satan and Principalities* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), p. 173.

<sup>43</sup> Barth, CD III/3, pp. 480–1.

<sup>44</sup> See also Barth, CD III/2, pp. 13–14.

<sup>45</sup> Because they are and act as an entourage, Barth also notes that they cannot be thought of as existing singularly, as though one could be abstracted from the many, but only



know them only through their enactment of their *raison d'être* as the heralds of God's revelation.<sup>46</sup> As we will see, much depends on what Barth understands by that heralding work.

Barth insists that this utterly dependent existence is neither a fault nor a failing in the angels' mode of existence. Elsewhere in III/3 Barth outlines what might be termed the 'perfective nichts' of being: that is to say, that God is not a creature is not a fault in his being, but part of his very perfection. Similarly, there are characteristics that the creature does not have, the absence of which is a perfection of creaturely being and not a deficiency.<sup>47</sup> In the same way, the angels' dependency on God and their actions in his service are proper to and constitutive of their very dignity. Angelic dependency is not a privation, but an aspect that is intrinsic to their particular creaturely perfection.

in plurality. Says Barth, angels are the 'concretely operative heavenly collective of concretely operative individual heavenly beings' (CD III/3, p. 451). It is with this in mind that Barth refutes the idea that angelic names and titles bestow any individual distinction. The names of Michael ('Who is like God?') and Gabriel ('Man of God') stand, he says, for all the angels, insofar as those names witness to God's truth as a function of the angelic service generally. Similarly, we misread scripture if and when we interpret – as the early and medieval Fathers did – titles like *ἀρχαί*, *ἐξουσίαι*, *δυνάμεις* and *θρόνοι* as distinguishing a form of militaristic hierarchy amongst the angelic beings (CD III/3, pp. 456–7). Examples of this abound, not least of all in medieval apocalyptic literature. As just one example, we could cite *Tundale's Vision* (1149), in which the Irish monk sees 'nine orders of blessed spirits, namely the angels, archangels, virtues, principalities, powers, dominions, thrones, cherubim and seraphim'. See *Visions of Heaven and Hell before Dante*, ed. E. Gardiner (New York: Italica Press, 1989), p. 191. Barth himself has in mind particularly the ideas proposed by Pseudo-Dionysius in his *Celestial Hierarchy*, in which angelic beings are classed by name, title, function and status in a strict hierarchical order (CD III/3, pp. 385–9). There are two problems with this approach. First, Dionysius is guilty of an almost gnostic epistemology. His hermeneutic is governed by the presumption that scripture 'conceals its mysteries from profane eyes . . . conceal[ing] that which is holy from those who are not initiated' (CD III/3, pp. 385–6). This Dionysian epistemology thus restricts true knowledge of scripture to a select group of enlightened interpreters, thereby privileging cultic initiation over the dynamic work of the Holy Spirit. But Barth's critique goes further. In addition to this wrong-headed hermeneutic, the type of speculation about angelic ordering exhibited by Dionysius seeks to claim knowable individuality, when in fact we can know the angels only as a collective entourage – an entourage of individual beings certainly, but not one in which the collective can be individuated noetically. Note that Heppé similarly assumes a hierarchical ordering of angels: 'It must be assumed that there are among them certain gradations, about which Scripture has not revealed anything adequate' (*Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 210). He thereby does precisely what Barth wishes to reject – making a claim about something that must be, while at the same time acknowledging that there is no scriptural basis for such a claim.

<sup>46</sup> Barth, CD III/3, p. 452.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 295–6, 349.

This dependence is, in turn, a function of and mirrors the dependency of the angels' location in heaven. Heaven as the place where the angels are, is also, as such, creaturely. Whereas we can say of God that he has existed from eternity to eternity, we cannot say that of heaven. Heaven is not an eternally existing throne room that has the same uncreated necessity as God Himself. The boundary (*die Grenze*) between God and creation is 'higher' (*liegt also höher*) than heaven.<sup>48</sup> While having a dignity and status that the earth does not – God is nearer to heaven than he is to earth – nonetheless heaven is part of God's good creation. He rules there 'as in a creaturely sphere'.<sup>49</sup>

Heaven has its own created ontology as the 'whence of God's movement towards earth'.<sup>50</sup> God's movement in grace is always earthward and not heavenward. This means first of all that there is a dignity to earth's lowliness, just as there is a dignity to the angels' dependency. Teleologically earth, not heaven, is the goal of God's action. Economically, heaven is the place of God, who comes from there to here.<sup>51</sup> One cannot divorce heaven, as place, from the God who is the One who comes. As there can be no independent or abstract ontology of heaven, it follows that neither can there be an independent ontology of heaven's creatures. They cannot be described or defined in abstraction, but only in relationship to the heavenly kingdom that, in Christ, comes to earth.

Barth is to be commended for this refusal to depict angels as somehow autonomous and self-sufficient agents. Nonetheless, detailed as he is on this point, Barth is not primarily concerned with a proper description of the angels' dependent whence. His main contention is that the angelic dependence – an ontic status which is necessary to their perfection and function – is in fact crucial to the enactment of the angels' purpose. And yet it is here that Barth's angelology runs into difficulties. In my view, it is when Barth tries to describe the angelic purpose that he falls afoul of precisely that 'free thinking' of which he was otherwise so wary. Once Barth moves beyond his description of the angels' being to a fuller discussion of the angelic service, he transgresses his own dogmatic criteria, by describing that service in a way that compels him to insert the angels into a doctrine of revelation that was entirely complete without them.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 425 (*KD III/3*, p. 494).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 426, 447.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 433.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 442.

### The angelic service

Above all, the angelic function is to exist in praise of God and to be the first of God's messengers of his divine grace to humankind. Theirs is a twofold service. On the one hand, angels exist to acknowledge God as God, always pointing away from themselves to the One who alone is worthy of worship. Repeating the words of John the Baptist, angels are ontically bound to say, 'He must increase, while I must decrease' (John 3:30). In the same way that Matthias Grünewald depicts the Baptist pointing 'prodigiously' towards the crucified Christ, so too the angels always point away from themselves and towards God. Their first service is always God-ward. 'They never take the central position, but always leave it open for the One who alone can occupy it. They merely come and go again . . . never catch[ing] the eye'.<sup>52</sup> Unlike humanity, which has always, since the Garden, sought to be religious – to be, that is, 'like God' (*sicut Deus*)<sup>53</sup> – the angels do nothing that God can do, nor do they try. Rather, they point to God as the only One who can do what God does. As witnesses to and worshippers of the divine glory, the angels participate in prayer, having their own distinctive and heavenly cultus by which they 'authentically, constantly, inflexibly and infallibly' praise God.<sup>54</sup> This is their chief end. As Polanus rightly says, the angels' primary task is in 'ministering to God . . . celebrating and adoring [Him] with unceasing praises.'<sup>55</sup> With this service of praise as their foundational purpose, it is hardly surprising to read van Mastricht suggesting that when they saw God creating the earth, the angels 'are said to have applauded [him]'.<sup>56</sup>

To this point, Barth has developed nothing new, nor contradicted any of his own ideas. But the angels have another function, and it is in his discussion of this secondary purpose that Barth introduces an unnecessary novelty into his understanding of revelation. Rightly, Barth notes that the angels serve humanity as well as God.<sup>57</sup> They do so by acting as the ambassadors of God's heavenly kingdom, proclaiming the message of God's grace. As we saw earlier, they herald the moments of God's revelation. As creatures of heaven,

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 460.

<sup>53</sup> See e.g. Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, 2nd edn (Munich: Kaiser, 1922), pp. 218–19; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, DBWE 3 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2004), pp. 111–12.

<sup>54</sup> Barth, CD III/3, pp. 463, 472–5.

<sup>55</sup> A. Polanus, *Syntagma Theologiae Christianae* (Hanover, 1624), V.12.

<sup>56</sup> P. van Mastricht, *Theoretico-practica Theologia* (Utrecht and Amsterdam, 1687), III.vii.4.

<sup>57</sup> Curiously, Calvin seems to suggest that the service of humanity is in fact the angels' primary function, not their service to God. So, e.g., he says that the angelic delivery of God's bounty towards us is the thing about angels 'on which the Scriptures especially insist' (emphasis added). Also, that the 'one point . . . that we can hold for certain' is that the angels are deployed by God for the protection of the elect. *Institutes*, I.xiv.6, 9.

they naturally and very properly announce the coming to earth of heaven's essence, in the earthward trajectory of God's movement and mission. But in doing so, they are not simply playing an ambassadorial role. Barth's angels act not merely as trumpeting heralds but as mediators of our experience of God. We should note here that Barth does not specifically refer to the angels as 'mediators' (Mittler) – indeed, he insists that they 'are not hypostases and mediators subordinated to and co-ordinated with' God.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, as we shall see below, 'mediation' (*Vermittlung*) is exactly the work he ascribes to them.

'[T]he visitation of the earthly creation by God its Creator means its visitation by its heavenly fellow-creation, and its encounter with God – whether it is aware of it or not – its encounter with angels.'<sup>59</sup> In our encounter with God, being awakened into faith and obedience, we meet not only God in divine form, but also in creaturely form 'in heavenly vesture'. To put it slightly differently, angels are 'the concrete means God chooses to be "transcendent" in the midst of the cosmos known to us', marking the 'trans-empirical presence and agency of God among us'.<sup>60</sup> The particular nature of the angels' being is such that they can and must act in mediation (*Vermittlung*) of God's work on earth, both in form appropriate to God and in form appropriate to us.<sup>61</sup> It is not, says Barth, that there is a second acting subject alongside God in this act. God must be the One who acts – but nonetheless he does so in this angelically mediated form.

We may distinguish this from Calvin, who also says that God uses angels as mediators of his own actions in the earthly realm. For Calvin, though, insofar as God does this, it is *ad hoc* and unnecessary. 'God, of course, does not do this [i.e. have His plans enacted by angelic visitors] of necessity, as though he could not do without them. As often as he likes he passes them over and accomplishes his work with a mere nod'.<sup>62</sup> Barth, by contrast, asks rhetorically whether there can ever be an experience of God or Christ which does not take place 'in supreme truth and reality' in and with the presence and participation of God's angels.<sup>63</sup>

This is, quite simply, an astonishing statement from Barth. Not once in his extensive treatments of revelation and the Word of God, neither in the *Church Dogmatics* nor in the *Göttingen Dogmatics*, does Barth ever state that angels

<sup>58</sup> Barth, CD III/3, p. 514 (KD III/3, p. 603).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 477.

<sup>60</sup> Joseph L. Mangina, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Christian Witness* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 104.

<sup>61</sup> Barth, CD III/3, p. 478 (KD III/3, p. 560).

<sup>62</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xiv.11.

<sup>63</sup> Barth, CD III/3, p. 478 (emphasis added).

serve as necessary mediators of humanity's experience of God. Indeed, in his first angelology from Göttingen, the angels are almost entirely bypassed by God's address. They are not involved, Barth says, in the conversation between God and humanity. '[E]ven the highest angels . . . must keep silent.'<sup>64</sup> Yet at this point in *Church Dogmatics* he now asserts that human experiences of God can never be apart from this angelic mediation. It is important to note that, for Barth, the revelation of God is neither self-evident nor self-actualising. It becomes God's revelation as God makes it an event (*Ereignis*); it has to become revelation, in and as God interprets himself to us through it.<sup>65</sup> But it is precisely this event-character that Barth now ascribes to the actions and mediating presence of the angels. 'Where [God's] presence becomes event (*Ereignis*) . . . for the earthly creature, this is realized in the action of the angels (*das Tun der Engel*).' Through the angels' presence, 'man may and must (*darf und muß*) perceive' that God is present for him.<sup>66</sup>

But Barth goes even further. While he is careful to retain his long-held insistence on God's single subjectivity, he nonetheless states that to experience angels is to experience God. Because they have no cause but God's, when the angels speak and act, they do so with plenipotentiality. 'When an angel says anything, although he is not God, it is God who speaks. When an angel acts, for all the infinite difference between [them], it is God who acts.'<sup>67</sup> Thus, where God is, the angels also are; and conversely, in earthly historical occurrence, where the angels are, there also is God.

This becomes abundantly evident in Barth's excursus on the *maleak Yahweh*, the 'angel of the Lord'. This angel is the pure witness of God's covenant promises to Israel; one who is 'a perfect mirror of God . . . stand[ing] in a remarkable correspondence and affinity with God himself'.<sup>68</sup> And yet it is not quite so simple as to identify the two. Whereas for Calvin, the angel of the Lord is Yahweh himself, Barth wants to retain a distinction between them even within the proximity of mediatorial identification.<sup>69</sup> Stephen Noll has suggested that the *maleak Yahweh* is 'so subservient to his Creator that his own

<sup>64</sup> Barth, *Unterricht*, p. 326. See also Wood, 'Acute Embarrassment', p. 332.

<sup>65</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, *Gottes Sein ist im Werden* (Tübingen: JCB Mohr, 1967), p. 39.

<sup>66</sup> Barth, CD III/3, p. 496 (emphasis added; KD III/3, p. 580).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 484.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 490–1.

<sup>69</sup> On Zechariah 1, Calvin comments: 'We must remember what I have already said, that this chief angel was the Mediator and the Head of the Church; and the same is Jehovah, for Christ, as we know, is God manifested in the flesh. There is then no wonder that the Prophet should indiscriminately call him angel and Jehovah, he being the Mediator of the Church, and also God. He is God, being of the same essence with the Father; and Mediator, having already undertaken his Mediatorial office, though not then clothed in our flesh, so as to become our brother; for the Church could not exist, nor be united

identity dwindles to nothing. But in this transparency God is known as really as if He thundered from Sinai.<sup>70</sup> Yet we cannot do away too quickly with the angel's own being; whatever identity the angel of the Lord in Barth's doctrine has with Yahweh is, as Waldrop says, 'indirect'. There is difference as well as identity.<sup>71</sup> Christ, says Barth, is 'far more than a pure witness' and cannot be subsumed even into the concept of the *ἄγγελος κατ' ἔξοχὴν*. When this angel appears, he is rightly absorbed into the words and actions of God – but it is nevertheless clear that there is a separate being that is, as it were, 'absorbable' in this manner and thus not ultimately identifiable with God himself.<sup>72</sup> The consequence is that Barth cannot easily defer to the Calvinist identification and claim that the *maleak Yahweh* is simply God's own self-revelation. On the contrary, he is caught in the bind of having to accept that, even though the angel of the Lord is subsistently distinct from God, yet he is nonetheless so closely identifiable as to be a perfect revelation of God.

Angels may indeed always point away from themselves, but in Barth's schema they are never apart from God's word and work, even – and perhaps especially – in his self-revelation. They may only be witnesses, but, astonishingly, Barth asserts that God's revelation is in some sense dependent on the angels' obedient service.

Without the angels God Himself would not be revealed and perceptible. Without them He would be hopelessly confused with some earthly circumstance, whether in the form of a sublime idea or a golden calf. But by means of His holy angels He sees to it that this dimension is always open and accessible.<sup>73</sup>

Barth's point is not that God in his revelation is somehow deficient without the angels. Rather, it is our capacity to apprehend God in his revelation that is fatally deficient. This deficiency requires the mediatorial service that the angels provide.

Once again, we are taken back to the angels' ontological dependency. There can be no abstract knowledge, nor (we now learn) no abstract experience of angels – but only knowledge and experience of them in relationship to their

to her God without a head. We hence see that Christ, as to his eternal essence, is said to be God, and that he is called an angel on account of his office, that is, of a Mediator.' See John Calvin, *Zechariah, Malachi*, vol. 5 of *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, trans. J. Owen (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), p. 57.

<sup>70</sup> Noll, *Angels of Light*, p. 173.

<sup>71</sup> Charles T. Waldrop, *Karl Barth's Christology: Its Basic Alexandrian Character* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1984), p. 37.

<sup>72</sup> Barth, CD III/3, pp. 487–8.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 485.

mediation of God's praise and activity. The angels' ontological weakness is thus, says Barth, their *locus* of authority and functional purity. Unlike the rest of creation, the angels 'stand first and perfectly in the service which forms the determination of all creatures', by doing non-autonomously – and therefore in the compulsion of obedient purity – what all creatures are created to do, but do only imperfectly and voluntarily.<sup>74</sup> But what Barth says they do, in mediating to humanity our experience of God's self-disclosure, is something he has never before claimed in relation to his construal of revelation. This does not contradict the ontological nature that Barth has already ascribed to the angels. Indeed, their plenipotentiality, so clearly evidenced in the *maleak Yahweh*, accords with that precisely. The issue is rather that, while it may be necessary to make this constitutive of angelic being, it is not necessary – and indeed likely precluded by – Barth's earlier construal of revelation.

We have now considered both the angels' ontological relationship, and their consequentially dependent functionality of praise and witness. In this, we have noted two points of significance, one that is to be expected of Barth, and a second rather surprising one. First, Barth insists that we cannot know anything about the angels in abstraction or *per se*. This is not qualitatively different from his insistence that we cannot know God in abstraction, but only in his revelation. Insofar as Barth insists upon grounding his doctrine of angels in the concreteness of their relationship to God, he maintains a non-speculative approach. Second, though – and this is surprising – Barth claims for the angels a mediatorial service relative to God's earthward action and self-revelation, that bears very little relation to anything he has previously claimed about the nature of that revelation and that indeed seemingly contradicts it.

This is not, of course, to suggest that outside of this excursus Barth understands God's self-revelation to be in any sense unmediated. On the contrary, Barth's conception of divine truth is that it is necessarily inaccessible to us, and can therefore be known only in mediated form.<sup>75</sup> Barth's doctrine of holy scripture is a good example of this. In its very human creatureliness – indeed, even in the vulnerability of the Bible to criticism and error<sup>76</sup> – we nonetheless have to do with a witness to God's revelation that can and must be understood as the Word of God.<sup>77</sup> We see this principle at work from as early as the prolegomena to his Göttingen lectures in 1924. In those

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 493.

<sup>75</sup> See Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, p. 76.

<sup>76</sup> Importantly, whereas the Bible exists as a witness in the very possibility of error and fallibility (Barth, *CD I/2*, pp. 530–1), the angelic witness is pure witness that, precisely because it is non-autonomously obedient, is by definition free of any error.

<sup>77</sup> Barth, *CD I/2*, pp. 495–7, 507–9.

lectures, Barth turns away from the idea of an 'eternal revelation' towards the view that revelation is 'contingent', which is to say, present in earthly historical form.<sup>78</sup> As Bruce McCormack notes, Barth came to recognise that contingency belongs to the very nature of revelation itself. In contrast therefore with his *Romans* commentaries, the subject of divine revelation as it is presented in the *Göttingen* and *Church Dogmatics* is not now outside of, but within, history.<sup>79</sup> George Hunsinger puts it like this: 'God becomes an object of our knowledge by taking form in the creaturely sphere.'<sup>80</sup> Nonetheless, this historically contingent form of God's revelation is not a free-floating signifier. Revelation cannot be appended to just any historical occurrence; it requires a christological aspect. The creaturely form of God's revelation changes only the form and not the content of God's divine self-truth. Indeed, in order that the knowledge of God revealed in revelation is in fact the knowledge of God, then both form and content must be God, even if the form takes shape as something that is not God, and therefore as something that is apprehensible by us.<sup>81</sup> Consequently, the need for a creaturely form of God's revelation – necessary in order for us to apprehend God – has for Barth always hitherto found its resolution in the Chalcedonian God-man of Jesus Christ. Only in the historical particularity of this God-man, in whom we meet the means and the limit of God's self-revelation, is God truly revealed to humanity. And yet, it is alongside this very christological form and content of revelation that Barth now posits a second creaturely form through which God's encounter with humanity is enacted, namely the angels.

As an aside, it is worth noting that Barth does allow for the possibility of 'other words' that witness to the One Word, Jesus Christ. In 1924, he noted with approval Zwingli's preparedness to 'people the Christian heaven with a whole series of noble pagans'. He does so specifically as a justification for supposing the possibility of secular witnesses to God's truth outside the canon of scripture.<sup>82</sup> More famously, his so-called *Lichterlehre* in CD IV/3.1 proposes the existence of 'other lights' that, even in their frailty and fragility, point towards the true Light of Jesus Christ ( $\tau\omicron\ \varphi\omega\varsigma\ \tau\omicron\ \acute{\alpha}\lambda\eta\theta\iota\nu\omicron\nu$ , John 1:9). Yet Barth's description of the angels' mediatorial function in God's revelation is more than simply a 'witnessing to'. While he states that none of God's actions is done by the angels as though they were his vice-regents, it is

<sup>78</sup> Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 59.

<sup>79</sup> Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 339–40.

<sup>80</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, p. 77.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>82</sup> Barth, *Göttingen Dogmatics*, pp. 149–50.



through the angelic service that God's acts are given the character of divine acts.

By [the angels'] presence He makes it impossible that He should be overlooked . . . It is not that He abdicates in favour of them even for a moment or in a single respect. It is not that any might or power ceases to be directly His own. But as His own these powers are also heavenly powers and in this form cosmic, really active in the world . . . The presence of the angels means that even in that which seems to belong only to the nexus of creaturely occurrence, or to be his own or some other creaturely act, man is summoned to see the intervention of God Himself, and therefore an element in His plan and its execution, an element of the salvation history or universal history directed by Him, and within this context an element in his own life-history as controlled by God. It is the angels who impress this stamp as it were on the acts of God. They serve God in this sense . . . And in this sense we can and must speak of a *mediating ministry* of angels between God and earthly creatures.<sup>83</sup>

That is to say, the angels work with God (*wirken sie mit ihm zusammen*), giving to events that would otherwise lack it the stamp of God's activity. If it were not for this mediating work of the angels, says Barth, we would not, and could not, apprehend God's self-revelation.

### Conclusion

In sum, Barth's angelology provides a rich, joyful account of heaven's creatures. We are transported by him into a happy, beautiful realm in which God rules and is adored, in pure delight. Barth's angels are definitely God's creatures, and not anthropomorphic self-projections of human desire. For that, Barth is to be applauded. Nonetheless, the ontological character that Barth ascribes to them creates significant problems for his doctrine of revelation. Barth's prior theology of christologically circumscribed revelation – which was worked out in great detail between 1924 and 1932, and which he never retracted – in no sense requires the angels to be integrally involved in God's self-disclosure. Angelic mediation simply does not appear as a necessary or even significant feature. And yet his doctrine of angels, conversely, requires him to impose *them* into God's revelatory action, simply because of the way in which he construes their ontological dependency. Try as he might to insist that the angels point always away from themselves, Barth's description of them has them inevitably, if unwittingly, drawing the gaze back on themselves as creaturely mediators of God's own presence.

<sup>83</sup> Barth, *CD III/3*, pp. 496–7 (*KD III/3*, p. 581).

There is further work to be done to ask how Barth might have avoided this consequence. In this article, I have not tried to provide a solution to the problem, but have merely sought to suggest that a problem indeed exists. Hopefully, others might take up the challenge, by affording Barth's angels more than a scholarly shrug of the shoulders, so that this concern might be tackled with the seriousness and sincerity it deserves.