

Romans 9-11 in Karl Barth's Doctrine of Election

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I

It is well known that Paul's letter to the Romans has played a central role in Karl Barth's theology time and again. His departure out off conventional theological patterns and his emergence into a theology which responds to the epochal disruptions and crises of the 20th century started with his famous "Römerbrief" from 1919. This book was in more than one respect the flourish of trumpets not only for a protest against a theology which was not taken in by the moral and human catastrophe of the first world war and the revelation of naked barbarism in Europe. He rather protested with his commentary against a modern liberal exegesis of the bible which according to him dissociated itself from the contents of the texts by scholarly interpretation. Not against historico-critical exegetics as such, but against its keeping distance to the subjects of the bible he demanded: "We are inside not outside." "Barth's protest lives", as *Eberhard Jüngel* has put it, "from the certainty, that theology" has to confront "the claim of truth of the biblical texts." "The act of interpretation must expose itself to the faculty of judgement of these very texts, more so: it has to turn to the texts with all present experiences in order to let" the faculty of judgement of the interpreter "be guided by them" (E. Jüngel, *Kein Nein ohne Ja*, in: NZZ, 4. 10. 2004). It is therefore according to Barth the task of interpretation to seek for judgements, which biblical texts offer to those, who are dealing theologically and of course ethically with challenges of their present situations, not at least in times of crises.

II

This hermeneutical principle of reflecting contemporary problems in the light of biblical texts lies also at the heart of Barth's insistent interpretation of Romans 9-11 in *Church Dogmatics* II,2 and its doctrine of election. Barths explanation takes these very chapters of Paul's letter as a kind of "railing" in those darkest of times. By

interpreting them he seeks for orientation in the confusions and turmoils of the Second World War and especially in the face of the holocaust underway. First published in 1942, the year, in which most European Jews were murdered, Barth declared the “Judenfrage” (the “Jewish question”) as even more important than the question of war (“Kriegsfrage”). For Eberhard Busch the genocide of the Jews underway was the “key” (E. Busch) of Barth’s interpretation although there do almost no open hints to the murderous events occur in the text, perhaps following Barth’s principle to do theology “as if nothing had happened”.= But there is, as I am convinced, another and even more important contextual framework for Barth’s interpretation, namely German Christians’ and their theological and academic spearhead’s efforts to deJudaize Christianity and redefine it as a teutonic religion, especially by racializing Jesus and making him a non-Jew or even an Aryan. This “Nazification” of Christianity done by Hitler’s willing executioners amongst theological scholars like for example Walter Grundmann and Immanuel Hirsch is also not openly mentioned. But for Barth it was very clear that all these efforts which pretended to be serious historical research were based on lies, cheat and self-deception. There was for him no doubt that Jesus Christ was a Jew, that he was “not from Greece, not from Rome, not from Germany, but from Israel” (CD 2:2:204). Jesus’ “environment” was Jewish. His apostels were Jews. “Whoever has Jesus Christ in faith cannot wish not to have the Jews. He must have them along with Jesus Christ as His ancestors and kinsmen. Otherwise he cannot have even the Jew Jesus. Otherwise with the Jews he rejects Jesus Himself. This is what is at stake, and therefore, in fact, the very basis of the Church, when it has to be demanded of Gentile Christians that they should not approach any Israelite without the greatest attention and sympathy” (CD 2:2:289). And even the patriarchs of Israel, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses, David, and Elijah, “and they alone, ought in strict justice to be called ‘fathers of the Church’”(CD 2:2:224).

III

Against the tendencies to get rid off the Old Testament, the Jewishness of Jesus, and to purge Christianity from its fundamental connection with Judaism, which only culminated in German Christians' "nazification" of Christianity, Barth formulated almost the total opposite. He conceptualized a doctrine of interconnection between Israel and the Church in God's election which did not leave any possibility for independence. Just as the Jewish people is indivisibly bound to the Church and has its ultimate goal in joining the Church's belief in Jesus Christ, even if it refuses to recognize this and resists this as impertinence, the Church is, although it is as the gathering of Gentiles and Jews the perfect form of God's community, not complete without Israel. The Church "is constituted only in a provisional form so long as the Synagogue persists in its resistance, so long as there is still an Israel outside the Church" (281). Therefore the Church "waits for the conversion (better: repentance/*Umkehr*) of Israel" (213). Israel has to give up its disobedience, has to repent and join the Church's faith in its own Messiah Jesus Christ to become the true Israel. But the Church has no right to give up its confession to Israel's Messiah as Lord of the Church and the hope in Israel's repentance and giving up its resistance. One can like Katherine Sonderegger in her brilliant book on Barth's "Doctrine of Israel"ⁱⁱⁱ wonder whether Barth "overdetermines" the interconnection between the Church and Israel (73ss.). But while Grundmann and his anti-semitic ilk tried to deny the Jewishness of Jesus and separate Christianity from the Jews and Judaism, how brutal and idiotic this denial was, Barth was not so much interested in historical facts, how plausible they are, but in "the indivisible bond between the Church and Israel" (Sonderegger 140), which he defined as God's election of the one community in its twofold form or shape, namely Israel and the Church. Therefore with Paul's exhortation addressed to Gentile Christian arrogance in Romans 11 he criticizes Christian anti-Semitism. Its "main argument ... up to our own time" is, he says: "The Jews crucified Jesus Christ.

Therefore this people has ceased to be the chosen, the holy people of God. Into its place there has now stepped the people of Christians from among Jews and Gentiles./ The Church is the historical replacement of Israel. Israel as such has become with the foundation and existence of the Church a thing of the past./As for those rebellious ones who in past and present make up the majority of Israel , of them it remains only to be said that they are outside, that they are forsaken by God” (290).

IV

Barth’s critique of this traditional Christian anti-Semitism does not dismiss its supersessionism as such. It does not even leave out the heart of Christianity’s negative myth about the Jews, namely that the Jewish people or Israel is to be held responsible for Jesus’ crucifixion. Israel has “delivered up its Messiah to be crucified” (201), Barth says. Or: “Israel is the people of the Jews which resists its divine election ... By delivering up its Messiah , Jesus, to the Gentiles for crucifixion, Israel attests the justice of the divine judgment on man borne by God Himself” (198). The point of Barth’s critique is rather that he denies with Romans 11,1 that God had *cast away* his people. “The question which Paul faces (sc. in 11,1) is the question asked by Christian anti-semitism, whether the crucifixion of Jesus Christ does not settle the fact that the Jews are now to be regarded and treated *only* as the people accursed by God” (269). But consider this *Only!* Barth does not deny that Israel is the accursed people, but it is that not only. For Barth Israel is the witness of God’s wrath and judgement. Israel is, as Barth interprets the parable of the potter in Romans 9, 20-21 ”the vessel of dishonour”. “It embodies human impotence and unworthiness” (224). It has become “finally a single ‘vessel of wrath’. In delivering up its Messiah to be put to death, it must become in its totality a witness to the divine judgement” (226). And so on and so forth. In other words: For Barth Christian anti-semitism is right in nearly all of its negative labels. But Christian anti-semitism is wrong for him when it states that God has forsaken his

people. That Israel is out. There remains hope, there remains a chance for repentance. And therefore Barth reads Romans 9-11 as an urgent exhortation of the church not to give up now the hope for God's mercy for Israel in the future. In contrast to his first commentary on Romans from 1919 he explains the second *vuv* of 11, 31 as "critically well established." It seems to be out of place, since the mercy of God shown to the Gentiles is present, while the mercy shown to the Jews is not present but future. For Barth, however, God's mercy shown to the Gentiles now means that "the mercy of God is already secretly operative in relation to the Jews. What this striking second *vuv* makes quite impossible for Christian anti-semitism (he that has ears to hear, let him hear) is the relegation of the Jewish question into the realm of eschatology. That Israel's hope is really the *hope* of Israel and the Church, and is therefore *future*, makes no difference to the fact that in relation to Israel the responsibility of the Church, which itself lives by God's mercy, is already a wholly present reality" (305).

V

The fundamental basis of Barth's doctrine on Israel and the Church is his theory of the election of God as the election of God's *one* community founded in the election of Jesus Christ. Barth creates the construct of "God's *one* community" in order to exclude a respective "independent election" (196). If we would put that definition in question, he tells us: "Only Jewish or clerical phantasy and arrogance can try to exalt the community above (or better: past) Jesus Christ into the beginning of all things" (196). But the underlying hermeneutical principle of his doctrine is to search guidance for his faculty of judgement from the word of God in the scripture and especially from Paul's Romans 9-11. Just this principle, however, implicates that Barth is involving himself for his judgement in a web of Christian anti-Judaism which has its very origins in the history of

interpretation and reception of Paul's text for a doctrine of Israel. It is the blindfolded Synagogue in which the medieval iconographic concept of this teaching of contempt culminated. Therefore it is hardly no surprise that Barth operates with a strategy of defining Jews not according to what they are and want to be, but according to what they are not and don't want to be, namely Christians. Therefore he imputes to Jews an identity of deficiency and accuses them to be blindfolded, disobedient, refractory, resistant to God's will, guilty sinners and so on and so forth. What Jews are imagining of themselves, which discourses about their religious, cultural and philosophical self-conceptions they are conducting is of no interest for him. In other words: Barth continues the old Christian discourse of power, the old discourse of "stigmatization of the Jews on the basis of the Christian doctrine", he continues to spread old stereotypes and negative myths about Jews. Of course, he refrains from the absolute demonizing of Jews, from that version of teaching of contempt which declares Jews as eternally rejected by God. Like medieval mainstream anti-Judaism his version has, as Jacob Katz has put it, „redeeming features“. Those Christians and theologians „kept open an escape hatch for Jews who would accept Christianity“ (J. Katz, *From Prejudice to Destruction* Harvard University Press 1980, 323). But for him the very existence of Jews as Jews after the destruction of the Second Temple is anachronistic, too. Jews' pure presence as Jews is an "enigma." But this "enigma" of world history, even this "scandal of world history" (CD 2:2:299) has to be understood for him by Christians as a *mystery*, as a decree of God. Here Barth takes up Romans 11,25 ("I want you to understand this mystery (to mysterion touto): a partial hardening has come upon Israel"). The Jews as Jews are sinners and rebellious against God's will. And the "escape hatch" which Barth opened was indeed the expectation that Jews repent and convert to Christianity. But, their present existence has to be tolerated since it is God's mystery that they exist as Jews and as Synagogue. And even institutionalized

missions to the Jews will not really help. "It is not the Church but God himself", it is „Jesus Christ in his glory of His second coming, who will convert the Synagogue" (CD 2:2:284). Let me put it this way: Barth is teaching the old Christian negative myth about the Jews as witnesses of God's judgement and wrath. Subdued visibly and persecuted manifold they reveal themselves as the troublemakers of the great world theatre. But Barth stops short of justifying their sufferings. At the same time, when the Jews of Europe fell victim to massmurder and German Christians purged their Christianity from all Jews and Jewishness, when Jesus became an Aryan and when even in Switzerland the wellknown Old Testament scholar Walter Zimmerli wrote the terrible and callous sentence that „the thousandfold dying of the Jewish people" were "the most vivid sermon about the fact", that "life and death" are being decided on the grounds of faith in Christⁱⁱⁱ, Barth developed a theological theory on the church's indivisible bond with Israel and the solidarity with the Jewish people which derives from it. But he did not criticize the negative myth of Jews as such. That is, he never asked himself in those darkest of times and those most brutal and murderous manifestations of anti-Semitism whether there was a Christian anti-Judaism which prepared the ground for it. After the Holocaust, only after it, he did so.

VI

Barth's interpretation of Romans 9-11 contains a lot of remarkable insights and that what Jewish hermeneutics call a "chiddush". Since I have summed up some of these in a German article I ask you to save a busy man's time to recall them here. What really counts in connection with what I have argued before is that Barth followed a traditional shaping of Paul's text in order to make it suitable to his doctrine of election. I find this mainly and cardinally in his

replacement of Paul's apocalyptic concept of *salvation* by a concept of God's community which has its perfect (but incomplete) form in the *Church* as the gathering of Jews and Gentiles. So he dislocates Israel's and the Gentiles' goal from salvation to membership in the Church. Of course this is an old understanding of Paul's text. The *achri hou to pleroma ton ethnon eiseltbe* – until the fullness of the Gentiles comes in - Rom 11:25 was read as pointing to the full number of Gentiles joining the church. And Barth repeats this understanding: “until the ‘fullness of the Gentiles’ has come into the Church, until the election of these Gentiles has reached its temporal goal with their calling and conversion” (CD 2:2:299). So it is no surprise that he follows the old correspondent interpretation of *pas Israel sothesetai* – all Israel shall be saved – as emphasizing the unification of all Jews and Gentiles in the Church: “All Israel’ is the community of those elected by God in and with Jesus Christ both from Jews and also from Gentiles, the whole Church” (CD 2:2:300). Since the *eiseltbe* has no object the temptation is huge to amend the one which suits one's own interest. But is there really for Paul a Church of Jews and Gentiles? There is an *ekklesia* or a plural of *ekklesiai tou theou* existing in Judea (Gal 1,22; 1 Thess 2:14), there are “all the *ekklesiai* of the Gentiles” (Rom 16,4), there are *ekklesiai* existing in Corinth, Kenchraeae, and in Thessaloniki and so on. But there is no *ekklesia ton Ioudaion kai ton Hellenon* or *ton ethnon* for Paul. That is, I am afraid, an invention of the church. There is for Paul not “one eschatological church containing the predestined full number of Jews and Gentiles (so R. Jewett in his otherwise wonderful commentary on Romans, p. 701). And there is for Paul not an *Israel* to which as a so called “true Israel” believers out of the Gentiles belong. This is an usurpation of the name of honour of the (ethnic) people of Israel, the Jewish people. So with most of the contemporary interpreters and Bob Jewett I take *pas Israel* as meaning the whole ethnic Israel (Jewett 701), and *pas* as the emphatic expression of the reunification of *all of Israel* or all Israelites (Rom 9:6) in the apocalyptic salvation, the salvation at the end of times and history, namely the reunification of the remnant or the rest (11:5.7) with the part of Israel, which is

hardened by God. And if one accepts the sentence in 11,26 at its face value, namely that “all Israel shall be saved in such a manner, as it has been written: ‘The deliverer shall come *from* Zion ...’”, that is from the “Jerusalem above” (Gal 4:26), the “*politeuma* in the heavens” (Phil 3:20), the construction of Romans 11:25ss. seems clear to me: The hardening of a part of Israel (namely all Israel minus the remnant) lasts until the fullness of the nations *eiselthe*, namely the believers of the Gentiles, comes in or arrives (that means: reaches the heavenly Zion), and then the deliverer shall come *from* or out of Zion to pick up all Israel and prepare it to follow him to heavenly Zion, too. So it is not the entering of one of the earthly *ekklesiai*, which Paul is looking at, but the unification of mankind in salvation in heaven.

VII

We are always exchanging conflicts, we are always plotting something when we interpret texts. When Barth wrote his doctrine of election he was not able to distance himself from the essential stereotypes which the stigmatization of the Jews on the basis of the New Testament and an ongoing Christian teaching of contempt provided. Although the Holocaust was underway he could not refrain from uttering the negative Christian myth of the Jews. He demanded to tolerate this troublemakers, he exhorted Christians to have hope in their future conversion. But as long as they insisted to be Jews he called them sinners, rebels, enemies, hated of God (CD 2:2:303). Finally it is not important for me whether he could justify his thoughts and words with thoughts and words of Paul in Romans 9-11. It is important that he justified Paul's words in the face of massmurder: “For although this judgement (that the Jews are the hated of God) is right, it can be valid only in the framework and context of the situation that their election is irrevocable. Therefore in all its seriousness and importance it cannot say more than that in the present situation between the Church and the Synagogue they certainly confirm and attest the sentence of death passed on sinful

man in the cross of Christ, the necessary abasement of everything which seeks to exalt itself in the sight of God, the utter pitiableness of the creature as such” (CD 2:2:303). That means: The merciless Nazi-German genocide of the Jews shows God’s wrath on sinful man.

Of course I could and perhaps I should mention Barth’s *retractationes* after the Holocaust. But I want to stop here for I want to articulate the utter darkness of anti-Judaism which captured even the best of Christianity’s thinkers.

ⁱ (differently as with)

ⁱⁱ Katherine Sonderegger, *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew. Karl Barth’s ,Doctrine of Israel’,* The Pennsylvania State University, 1992.

ⁱⁱⁱ Vgl. Walter Zimmerli, *Die Juden: in: Dter Grundriss. Schweizerische Reformierte Monatsschrift* 4 (1942) 225-240, hier S.239.