
THE EPISTLE
TO THE EPHESIANS

KARL BARTH

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

R. David Nelson

Karl Barth's lectures on Ephesians from 1921–22 are published for the first time in English in this little volume. The lectures provide a window into Barth's developing theology during the critical period of the early 1920s and right around the publication of the second edition of *Der Römerbrief* (1922).¹ Barth's interest in exegetical work in the New Testament emerged in the preceding decade in the context of his pastoral duties in the Swiss village of Safenwil. It was in Safenwil that Barth's study of Paul's Epistle to the Romans led to his well-known commentary, appearing in two very different published editions.² There he also preached serially through several other New Testament texts—including Acts, the Epistles to the Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians, and the Epistle to the Hebrews—and taught through various portions of the Bible in study groups and confirmation classes.³ Soon after his appointment to a professorship in Reformed theology at the University of Göttingen in 1921, he took on a lecture load that had him teaching exegesis through focused series on New Testament texts; offerings in theology and doctrine on topics such as Calvin, Zwingli, the theology of the Reformed confessions, and Schleiermacher;⁴ and beginning in 1924 a cycle in

Christian dogmatics.⁵ In addition to Ephesians, Barth lectured during the Göttingen period on James, 1 Corinthians 15, 1 John, Philip-
pians, Colossians, and the Sermon on the Mount.⁶ The Ephesians lectures came right at the beginning, composing—with a series on the Heidelberg Catechism—Barth's first lecture load, which he delivered during the *Wintersemester* of 1921/22.⁷

Barth's lectures are interesting not only for the glimpse they offer into this early and critical stage of his theological career but also for the keen expository insights he brings to the interpretation of Ephesians in the context of university course work. As the introductory essays suggest and the lectures themselves exhibit, Barth was ambivalent, perhaps even uneasy, about the utility and appropriateness of historical-critical methods for uncovering the substance of the New Testament texts. In regard to Ephesians, Barth was, to be sure, thoroughly familiar with the contemporaneous discussions of the critical questions concerning issues such as the authorship, situation, and date of the letter, and of the relationship of Ephesians to the other texts in the Pauline corpus. However, in Barth's comments on the epistle, such historical and philological work is subordinated to the concern of hearing the apostolic testimony afresh. For Barth, the yield of good critical research into the biblical texts is the elucidation of the message of Scripture so that the significance of that message is received by hearers in the present. But exegesis can only *support* the communication of the message; it can never be said to *establish* it. God alone is the one who addresses us through the voice of Scripture. The extent to which Barth successfully negotiated the distinction between the speaking God and Scripture's voice, between the two horizons of the text, and between the often competing methodological strategies of critical exegesis and theological interpretation is a matter of ongoing discussion among Barth scholars, researchers in modern theology, and those interested in the theological interpretation of Scripture. The publication of this English edition of the Ephesians lectures sheds new light upon Barth's contribution to theology's perennial labor of sorting out these issues.

Theological commitments evident throughout Barth's writings from the Göttingen period animate his interpretation of the letter. In particular, we find Barth devoting considerable attention to how,

for the Pauline author of Ephesians, the “eschatological character of divine presence and Christian existence”⁸ manifests itself in the revelation of the “mystery of [God’s] will” (Eph. 1:9)—a concern that is also at the heart of the second edition of *Der Römerbrief*, which Barth was preparing at the same time he delivered these lectures on Ephesians. In addition to providing an incisive analysis of the critical quality of Barth’s exegetical moves, Francis Watson’s introductory essay offers a comparison of the eschatology that emerges in these lectures to statements found elsewhere in texts from the period, specifically in the Romans commentary and in Barth’s lectures on 1 Corinthians 15. Watson’s remarks on the cross-currency between Barth and Rudolf Bultmann during the early 1920s are bound to inspire further investigation, as the relationship between Barth and Bultmann is critical for understanding the ascendancy of eschatological and apocalyptic themes in German theology between the wars.

John Webster takes up these themes as well, framing the eschatology of the Göttingen period beneath the broader heading of the relation between God and creatures. Webster shows, among other insights, that Barth’s posture vis-à-vis the text of Ephesians as a historical document reflects his thesis that the God who speaks and the creatures who hear remain distinct even while meeting in the event of revelation. The apostolic texts are caught up in the communicative act of God’s self-disclosure, and thus the exegete’s critical exchanges with the literary features of the New Testament documents are subordinate to the task—which is always beyond the exegete’s control—of hearing God speak through the texts. This account shores up the notion that Barth’s relative lack of interest in historical and philological questions is a thoroughlygoingly *theological* decision about the ontology of Scripture and its location and function in the divine economy.

The first critical German edition of the Ephesians lectures appeared only recently in the *Gesamtausgabe* alongside a series of sermons and notes on the epistle from 1919–20 and a parallel presentation of two lecture cycles on James from 1922–23 and 1928–29, respectively.⁹ While a translation of the James lectures is long overdue (as are translations of the lecture cycles on 1 John, Colossians, and the Sermon on the Mount, all of which also have yet to appear in German in the *Gesamtausgabe*), the decision was made to proceed with

publication of Ephesians independently of other lecture series from the period. We have not included in the present volume a translation of the material on Ephesians from Barth's time in Safenwil, since many of the insights from his sermons and study notes reappear in the Göttingen lectures. In any case, the lectures exhibit a more fulsome engagement with Ephesians than what we find in the documents from the antecedent Safenwil period.

All of this being said, the reader is advised to consider the genre of the literary work at hand prior to advancing into the text. For these are, indeed, *lectures* on Ephesians, intended originally for aural consumption, designed for an audience of degree-seeking students who for the most part were training for public ministry, and prepared in the throes of a transitional period during which the young Barth struggled to orient himself to the demands of "university" theology. Moreover, Barth labored so intensely through the first chapter of the epistle that he was forced to rush through chapters two through six in the single lecture of February 23, 1922. However, although this volume hardly qualifies as a commentary on Ephesians, it is yet a significant contribution to the commentary tradition associated with the letter, as we encounter in these pages one of the great theological minds of the Christian church fully entranced by the ancient text and eager to broadcast its message to his hearers.

The unique circumstances surrounding this publication have required some editorial decisions in need of explanation in this introduction. This is not, as it were, a critical study edition of the Barth text. Rather, the abiding concern met in this publication is to introduce readers to the first English translation of a significant Barth manuscript. As such, the focus of this volume is on the English rendering of the Ephesians lectures. In an effort to keep the text of the translation as close in appearance to Barth's original transcripts as possible, we have used endnotes for citations, cross-references, and annotations and have used footnotes sparingly to mark Barth's own marginal notes and for critical comments on the handwritten manuscripts. The endnotes incorporate translations of materials from the critical notes of volume editor Jörg-Michael Bohnet in *Erklärung des Epheserbriefes W.S. 1921/22* in the *Gesamtausgabe* as well as textual notes from the translator. As per the style suggestions of the

Barth Translators' Seminar, we have retained the German formatting for endnote citations. Barth introduced each unit of Ephesians with the Greek text followed by his own German translation and then referred back to the Greek in his expositions, often without retranslating words and phrases. The English translation mirrors the original text; that is, only the German is rendered in English here, while the Greek remains untranslated. Whenever possible, we have offered translations of other foreign languages, as when Barth quotes from Calvin in the original French. Biblical cross-references in parentheses are from Barth's handwritten manuscript; those in brackets were inserted into the critical edition by the editor. While we have made efforts to provide a gender-neutral translation, there are instances where it was deemed necessary to translate *Mensch* as "man," even when referring to a human individual generically. Likewise, the translation follows the German original in the gender of pronouns and in language for deity.

We have broken up the text of the lectures into four main portions corresponding to Barth's own division of his pedagogical labors. He followed a standard commentary convention of conceiving chapter one of the letter as consisting of three units of material: the epistolary introduction (1:1–2), a single complex Greek sentence extending through twelve verse divisions that Barth refers to as the great "doxology" (1:3–14), and the elaboration of the author's prayers for the letter's original recipients (1:15–23). Within each of these units, we have demarcated the individual lectures by including the dates of delivery.

We are pleased to include remarks on the translation by Ross M. Wright, who frames the production of the English text within the context of his own work on Barth's early theology, provides further commentary on the origins of the lectures, and offers clarification of technical details concerning his English rendition.

Kaitlyn Dugan, curator of the Barth Collection at Princeton Theological Seminary, offered her expertise at several key junctures during the life of this project and helped the Baker Academic team secure permissions for the striking cover image of Barth from 1925. Hans-Anton Drewes, formerly of the Karl Barth-Archiv in Basel, offered enthusiastic support of the project during the earliest phases. His

successor Peter Zocher mediated some early correspondence with the publisher of the German edition, Theologischer Verlag Zürich (TVZ), granted permission for Wright to reuse for the translator's preface material that had previously appeared in an edition of the Archiv's newsletter, and supplied the photographs of Barth's handwritten manuscripts. Niklaus Peter, a member of the Karl-Barth Stiftung, read the translation at the request of TVZ and offered a handful of suggestions for improvement. It was a pleasure to work with Lisa Briner and her team at TVZ to sort out the contract and other legal arrangements. Wright and Francis Watson read through this introductory piece and offered helpful comments. David Chao of the Barth Translators' Seminar provided a summary of the Seminar's style protocols. The contents of the volume were greatly enhanced by David Cramer and Melisa Blok, who joined the editorial team at Baker Academic just before this project entered the production queue.

Barth's *Epistle to the Ephesians* turned out to be my final opportunity to work with my erstwhile *Doktorvater*, John Webster, who passed away unexpectedly on Wednesday, May 25, 2016. His introductory essay, which he delivered to me on the last day of March 2016, is one of his final original pieces. From what I have been able to gather, it also is his last word on Barth, with whose thought he had wrestled his entire career. I had seen John in St Andrews just weeks prior to his death, and on that occasion he shared some constructive comments on the translation of the lectures and on these prefatory remarks. John was actively involved in this project from the very beginning, lending his imprimatur to the publication during the acquisitions phase, eagerly agreeing to pen the essay in spite of his hectic writing schedule, and liberally offering encouragement, advice, and feedback as the manuscript materialized. This project would not have been possible without John's constant support, generosity, and good humor.

TRANSLATING BARTH'S EPHESIANS LECTURES

Ross M. Wright

Barth delivered his exegetical lectures on Ephesians as he made the transition from the pulpit in Safenwil to the podium in Göttingen. They reveal his theological concerns at the time as well as his determination to read and interpret Scripture as a church theologian. The exposition consists of a detailed exegesis of the Greek text of Ephesians 1:1–23, originally delivered as thirteen lectures, including a summary of Ephesians 2–6 in the final lecture. Because Barth delivered the lectures shortly after completing his *Epistle to the Romans*, it is not surprising to find significant continuity between the two works. For example, readers acquainted with the Romans commentary will recognize signature dialectical expressions, such as “God is God” and “the impossible becomes possible.”¹ Likewise, distinctive philosophical concepts from the earlier work appear here: Søren Kierkegaard’s notion of “indirect speech” and Franz Overbeck’s concept of “the original” (*Ursprung*) to describe the creature’s relationship to God. However, the Ephesians lectures also reveal Barth breaking new ground. The theme of the knowledge of God is far more prominent

here than in *Romans*, partly because of Barth's engagement with Calvin (he was preparing the 1922 Calvin lectures while delivering the Ephesians exposition) but also because of the prominence of γυνώσις in the text that was before him. Calvin's influence is evident as well in Barth's careful attention to the grammatical, philological, and structural details of the biblical text. Describing Calvin's "objective study" of the Bible, Barth notes in the Calvin lectures: "We can learn from Calvin what it means to stay close to the text, to focus with tense attention on what is actually there . . . , to track down every detail . . . , to stick with the text and to follow wherever it leads."² Accordingly, in these lectures on Ephesians, Barth manages to maintain traction with the biblical text as he explores its contemporary meaning.

What kind of exegesis is Barth attempting in the Ephesians lectures? Barth used the term *Erklärung* to describe this particular genre of biblical interpretation and to distinguish it from *Kommentar* or formal commentary.³ His explication of the text follows the *lectio continua* format. Two reading strategies are evident throughout the lectures. One move consists of grammatical, philological, and structural analysis. In this posture, Barth stands at the podium with the Nestle edition of the Greek New Testament before him and at his disposal an array of modern critical commentaries and New Testament introductions by Dibelius, Jülicher, Weiß, von Soden, Köhl, Harnack, Holzmann, Meyer, and Beck in addition to Luther's commentaries on Ephesians and Calvin's *Opera Selecta*. At this point the exposition resembles a lively conversation as Barth takes his place in the interpretive tradition. Scholarly debate *about* the text, however, is kept to a minimum in order to maintain focus on the text itself. In a second interpretive move, Barth deploys various forms of "ingenious" paraphrase (Bultmann's locution) to reexpress the meaning of the text.⁴ At this point he relies on dogmatic categories, dialectical language, and philosophical concepts to explore the text's entailments for present Christian existence. Chiefly, however, he uses intratextual allusions to create a web of biblical associations, which reexpress the meaning of the passage within the larger context of God's saving purposes.⁵ Along the way, the lectures crackle with direct address, admonitions about the ministry ("Think about the meaning of the pastoral vocation to which you aspire"),⁶ and polemics with faculty

members (“Is [the resurrection of Christ] ‘only a picture’?”⁷—referring to a lecture delivered the previous day by Walter Bauer). In short, Barth adopts in the Ephesians lectures a form of theological discourse that allows him to engage with issues of New Testament scholarship while honoring the *kerygmatic* nature of the biblical text.

Barth's primary concern in the work of exegesis was to listen to the *Sache* or subject matter of the text. He likened this activity to listening for the sound of someone scratching on the wall, as if from within a prison cell.⁸ He was always trying to find a way to allow that voice to be heard, returning to the same text repeatedly, listening afresh and in new ways. In his 1921–22 reading of Ephesians, verse 1:3 emerges as the interpretive key to everything that follows: “Blessed be God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing, in heaven, in Christ.” This verse, he notes, “sets the tone for the entire epistle.”⁹ It witnesses to the divine action, which proceeds from God, sets the creature in motion, and directs the creature to the glory of God. In the following paraphrase of the verse, he summarizes this movement and states the exposition's main theme: “We are created *by* God, from whom we come [*von Gott her*] and *for* God, toward whom we are moving [*auf Gott hin*]. We are standing on the ground of the *beneplacitum Dei*; we are moving toward the goal of the *gloria Dei*. The knowledge of God is the *presupposition*, and the knowledge of God is the *goal* of all human being, having, and doing, including our present speaking and hearing of divine things!”¹⁰ This theme reflects two of Barth's central theological concerns during the early period: to establish divine prevenience as the basis for the creature's encounter with God and to map out the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom.¹¹ We should understand Barth's approach to Ephesians in light of this concern. He reads Ephesians 1:3 as an indication of the movement from divine action to creaturely existence, and the exposition of the text of the epistle is an attempt to trace this movement.

My translation of Barth's lectures on Ephesians from 1921 to 1922¹² is designed to enable the reader to “hear” the lectures as his students heard them.¹³ The Greek text of Ephesians is retained, in accordance with Barth's delivery, demonstrating how his translation conveys crucial interpretive and exegetical moves.¹⁴ Latin and French

citations are also included in the body of the text, with standard English translations provided in the endnotes. Where no standard translation exists, I provide my own. The German text is provided at points to inform the translation. In the endnotes, Barth's sources are identified and full bibliographical information is provided, including the standard English edition of translated works. Again, where no standard translation of a German quotation is available, I provide my own.

Vladimir Nabokov warns in "The Art of Translation" that translators can commit three types of transgressions. The first and least egregious consists of "errors due to ignorance or misguided knowledge." The second and more serious is the practice of omitting words or phrases that are obscure: the translator simply "accepts the blank look that his dictionary gives him." The worst degree of turpitude, however, is when a piece is "planished and patted into such a shape" as to conform to the prejudices of the imagined readers.¹⁵ My hope is that the errors of this translation fall into the first category and that readers whose knowledge of German is superior to mine will forgive the "errors due to ignorance or misguided knowledge." To avoid Nabokov's third and worst degree of turpitude, I have made every effort to preserve Barth's juxtaposition of lively, direct address with long, serpentine sentences that negotiate considerable technical exegetical detail. Barth made large demands on his listeners, and I have tried to resist the temptation to simplify the lectures or polish them into shape to conform to my own prejudices. I hope that the translation conveys something of the complexity and rhetorical power of Barth's lectures. In the course of translating them, I have often felt as if I were in the lecture hall, hearing Barth hold forth.

The demands of weekly sermon preparation drew me first to Barth's theology and subsequently to his expository courses on the New Testament. If I had to identify a single way in which this project has changed my approach to exegesis and preaching, it would be the influence of Barth's confidence in Scripture as the *viva vox dei*, the medium through which God makes God's presence known—or, to express the matter differently, his confidence in the *Sache* of the text to establish contact with the listeners, as opposed to relying on personal anecdotes or rhetorical flair. Barth's confidence in the text

to refer the reader to the divine voice of God has sent me back to the work of exegesis with renewed confidence in the eloquence or *claritas* of the word of God.

This first published English translation of Barth's Ephesians lectures has been made possible by the enthusiastic support of the editor, Dave Nelson, who recognized their importance early on. Ken Oakes, who read the translation and the German text, saved me from a number of embarrassing errors, tracked down several of Barth's obscure Swiss allusions, and—on the basis of his intimate knowledge of Barth's 1921 *Römerbrief*—pointed out a number of places where the translation needed to reflect the dialectical language and style from this period of Barth's development. Thanks to Good Shepherd Episcopal Church (Richmond), where I serve as rector, I enjoyed a sabbatical in fall 2012 at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, where I had the opportunity to revise the translation.

An earlier version of this translation was submitted as my PhD dissertation at the University of St Andrews in 2007. The project would not have been possible without the encouragement and support of Hans-Anton Drewes, former head of the Karl Barth-Archiv in Basel. Prior to the appearance of the German edition, he kindly consented to the use of the typescript of Barth's handwritten manuscript, on which the German edition is based, and provided invaluable guidance along the way, including a warm welcome to the Barth-Archiv in July 2004 and an invitation to participate in the Karl Barth *Tagung* in Leuenberg, Switzerland. He also read the version of the translation that appears here and made valuable suggestions, particularly about Barth's use of the phrase "the idea of God." Mark Elliott allowed portions of the text to be discussed in a translation study group at the University of St Andrews and offered suggestions, which have been incorporated in the translation. Gisela Kreglinger, a colleague at St Andrews, read several portions of the translation and made valuable suggestions possible only for a native German speaker. My PhD supervisor, Alan Torrance, believed in the project from the beginning and provided the encouragement and guidance necessary for its completion. The late John Webster, then of the University of Aberdeen, alerted me to the importance of Barth's expository lectures at the Barth-Bonhoeffer Conference in 2000 and provided detailed

guidance in the translation and interpretation of Barth's lectures during the completion of the dissertation. A grant from the Russell Trust permitted important archival work in Basel.

The publication of Barth's Ephesians lectures is the culmination of a project that began in 2003. During this time my wife, Lynda, and our sons, Ross, Elliott, and Owen, have sacrificed much to support me in the project. Their love and support have made it possible, and therefore my translation of this theological reflection on the praise of God is dedicated to them.