



RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘The enemy of my enemy is my enemy’: Markus Barth’s awkward hostility to critics of his theology of reconciliation

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Abstract

Markus Barth (1915–1994) is best-known for his pioneering work in Jewish-Christian dialogue, and his Anchor Bible commentaries. Convinced that Ephesians 2:14–16 is the core of Paul’s gospel, Barth concluded that the ‘one new man’ in Christ not only necessitates an indissoluble solidarity between Christians and Jews, but entails that *all* enmities have been negated by Christ’s reconciliatory work. Ironically, this conviction provoked in him an antagonism towards many of his Jewish interlocutors. Their refusal to ‘forget Auschwitz’ caused Barth to accuse them of not being sufficiently conciliatory, and in turn led him, with sadly supersessionistic logic, to eschew reconciliation with them, because he did not think they took reconciliation seriously enough.

Keywords: Jewish-Christian dialogue; Markus Barth; reconciliation; supersessionism; the Holocaust

When Markus Barth, son of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth, died in July 1994, he was immediately hailed as one of the great leaders of modern Jewish-Christian reconciliation.¹ As far back as 1972, the Conservative Jewish rabbi Herman Halperin, from Pittsburgh’s Tree of Life Congregation, had spoken of Barth in glowing terms as ‘one of the genuine *chaside omit ha-olam* of our time, and of all times...’² Anyone who is familiar with the work of Yad Vashem will recognise the term that was employed by Halperin to describe Barth as that which is normally translated as ‘righteous among the nations’. Of course, Yad Vashem did not itself sanction Halperin’s description of Barth as one of the righteous, but Halperin’s gesture was nonetheless an extraordinary honour to bestow upon him. More recently, Randi Rashkover has been similarly affirming of him, commenting that ‘Markus Barth’s work can be appreciated as a tireless effort to exegetically re-order Jewish-Christian relations’.³ While Rashkover’s words are in isolation ambiguous, her overall reception of his reparative work is broadly

¹See e.g. Rudolf Brändle, ‘Markus Barth Gestorben’, *Basellandschaftliche Zeitung* (5 July 1994), p. 21.

²Herman Halperin to Guido Kisch, 16 October 1972. Markus Barth Papers (Princeton) [hereafter MBPP]. Series II. Correspondence. Box 19, file 502.

³Randi Rashkover, ‘Markus Barth: The Jews Are Our Brothers’, *Journal of Reformed Theology* 14 (2020), p. 263.

appreciative. On both exegetical and moral grounds, she avers, Barth insists upon the need for Christians to ‘foster a deep, familial relationship with Jews’.⁴

Nevertheless, there is an ambiguity, not only in Rashkover’s *reading* of Barth’s theology of Jewish–Christian relations, but also in the very enactment of Barth’s own theological and hermeneutical convictions. Notwithstanding his genuine love for Israel and the Jewish people, and his equally sincere yearning for a healing of the schism between Christians and Jews – both of which were evidenced in innumerable ways throughout his life – Barth’s dialogical approach was fraught with contradiction and, even more tragically, with a latent supersessionary logic of which he remained entirely unaware. As Rashkover correctly notes, there is a tension in Barth between his rhetoric and his action, a ‘problem that plagues [his] writings on Israel...’⁵ Part of the problem is his highly critical response to the repressive actions of successive Israeli governments against the Palestinian peoples – actions that were partially elided by Barth into his broader theology of Christian–Jewish unity, such that he found it difficult to speak of one without reference to the other. This alone caused a good many of his Jewish colleagues and friends to be (I suspect unfairly) suspicious of his sincerity. But more fundamentally, the problem that suffuses Barth’s engagement with Jewish–Christian dialogue lies in his identification of the core of the Christian gospel. Much of Barth’s exegetical effort from 1957 to 1984 was expended on the Epistle to the Ephesians. Emerging from that endeavour was a conviction that Ephesians 2 – in particular, the christological act of reconciliation, and the breaking down of the ‘wall of enmity’ – is the fundamental kernel of God’s good news. In an ironic consequence, though, this conviction effectively precluded Barth from engaging meaningfully or fruitfully with people – and in particular with any Jews – who kept open the theological reality of opposition and enmity.

It is hardly surprising that in the decades following the *Sho’ah*, and during the years of the Arab–Israeli wars of 1967–1973, a significant measure of Jewish political and theological thought insisted upon the necessity of precisely those two things – opposition and enmity – that Barth believed were so thoroughly repudiated by the gospel. Retaining the right to be in enmity and opposition was, for many Jewish politicians, rabbis, and public intellectuals, necessary in order to safeguard Jewish security within the newly re-formed Israel from the hostility of neighbouring states. But for Barth, to refuse to be reconciled to one’s enemy – to keep enmity on the table, that is, as both an objective and a needful posture – was so contrary to what he believed to be the core of the gospel that it erected an unsurpassable barrier to genuine dialogue. To hold such a view was, thus, necessarily to be *his* enemy. While he may not have explicitly articulated this attitude in his writing, he did express it in his actions and relationships, even to the point of embodying – in spite of his best intentions – a form of rhetorical supersessionism. To put it bluntly, Barth’s centring of reconciliation as the *sine qua non* of the gospel led him to turn away, in sadly supersessionistic fashion, from the very people with whom he believed reconciliation began.

In this article, then, I will do three things. First, I will outline the core of Barth’s theology of reconciliation. Second, I will narrate in brief his personal history of encounter with leading members of America’s Jewish communities. And third, I will show how their political–theological commitments caused Barth in the end to turn against them, in a way that was not only awkwardly at odds with his prioritisation of

⁴Ibid., p. 264.

⁵Ibid., pp. 263–4.

christological reconciliation, but also indicative of a supersessionistic logic to which he was at once instinctively allergic, and yet nonetheless susceptible.

Markus Barth's theology of reconciliation

Markus Barth was primarily a New Testament scholar, whose doctoral dissertation, *Der Augenzeuge*, was supervised by the formidable form critic, Karl Ludwig Schmidt.⁶ Aside from innumerable short articles, Barth's major contributions to New Testament scholarship were his highly popular *The Broken Wall* – a study guide of sorts written for the American Baptist Convention's Jubilee celebrations in 1959, and based on the Epistle to the Ephesians – as well his three exhaustive commentaries on Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon.⁷ Barth's 'scientific exegetical' methodology allowed – indeed, from his perspective, *compelled* – him to hold views that would, at least in some circles, these days be regarded as somewhat controversial. As he told his one-time student, and later co-author Helmut Blanke, 'Asking questions is not the problem – it's a problem when there is no self-criticism.'⁸ In Barth's view, for example, there could not be any in principle fixity of the scriptural canon.

[W]hat is canonical still remains open. We have not God's word distilled in a bottle. But when we hear it and when He uses it – then it is – by God's grace, not by a past miracle of inspiration – God's word. The church has to ask again and again: Is this the voice of the good shepherd? She will to her surprise hear in these books the voice of God. If further excavations produced another gospel, or letter of Paul, I see no reason why such books should not be recognized as canonical too. The Canon is still open.⁹

Most importantly for the purposes of this paper, however, it was Barth's unconventional view not only that Ephesians is a genuinely Pauline epistle, but that it – rather than Romans – is the apostle's real 'testament'.¹⁰ Whereas Romans must be understood primarily as an occasional piece (*ein Gelegenheitschreiben*), Ephesians is the locus and summary of Paul's mature gospel proclamation. 'Ephesians', says Barth, 'represents a development of Paul's thought and a summary of his message which are prepared by his undisputed letters and contribute to their proper understanding'.¹¹ Indeed, in reflecting critically on Hans Küng's 1967 tome *Die Kirche*, Barth argued that, while

⁶Markus Barth, *Der Augenzeuge: Eine Untersuchung über die Wahrnehmung des Menschensohnes durch die Apostel* (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1946). K. L. Schmidt was at the time dean of theology at the University of Basel. However, due to an acrimonious falling out between Schmidt and Barth towards the end of Barth's candidature, the doctorate was ultimately awarded by Göttingen.

⁷See Markus Barth, *The Broken Wall: A Study of the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1959); Markus Barth, *Ephesians*, The Anchor Bible, vols. 34–34A (New York: Doubleday, 1974); Markus Barth, *Colossians*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 34B (New York: Doubleday, 1994); with Helmut Blanke, *Philemon: A New Translation, with Notes and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000).

⁸Helmut Blanke, 'Markus Barth Biografie', Markus Barth (Lindsay) Collection [hereafter MBL]. Series II. Box 1, p. 2.

⁹Richard Cerretti, lecture notes (verbatim). MBPP. Series V.

¹⁰Blanke, 'Markus Barth Biografie', p. 3. The Epistle to the Romans represented, because of its emphasis on justification, a 'foreshortening' (*Verkürzung*) of Paul's theology.

¹¹Barth, *Ephesians* 34:4 (emphasis added). It should be noted that in holding this opinion Barth differed from his father Karl's assessment. In Karl Barth's mind, Luther was quite correct to say that it is in his

Romans 9–11 continued to be the presumed *locus classicus* for understanding the relationship between Israel and church, on the contrary ‘above all *Ephesians* ought to be listened to...’¹² According to Barth’s particular hermeneutic, then, Paul’s earlier letters are to be read and interpreted in the light of *Ephesians*, with the latter as their most mature summative expression.

But this simply begs a further question. If *Ephesians* represents the paradigmatic Pauline summary of the gospel, what is the kernel of *Ephesians* itself? Writing in 1984, in what was to be the last of his publications on this epistle, Barth answered the question by arguing that ‘the presumption and basis of [the apostle’s] thinking and writing are...the reconciliation and unification of Jews and Gentiles through Jesus Christ...’ Indeed, the ‘unification of Jews and Gentiles is the first, fundamental and paradigmatic event upon which depend and follow the overcoming of sexual, historical, economical divisions’.¹³ Far from the impulse towards harmonious unity being a primary commitment before and outside of Scripture, Barth thus exegetes Scripture – in this case, the letter to the *Ephesians* – as providing the hermeneutical ground for the church’s solidarity with the Jews, and subsequently of all people with all others.

He spelled this conviction out in greater detail in both *The Broken Wall* and his Anchor Bible commentary. In the former, Barth says that, ‘The church lives in a special relationship with Israel...By “Israel” we understand not only ancient Israel...[nor] do today’s Jews in their dispersion over the world (or in the young state of Israel) exhaust what is meant.’¹⁴ Clearly implying a generously comprehensive definition of the ‘Israel’ that is in solidarity with the church, Barth goes on to insist that, while Paul elsewhere (such as Gal 3:28, Col 3:11 and 1 Cor 12:13) includes Jews and Gentiles ‘as but one among many of the inimical pairs that have been reconciled’, in *Ephesians* it is primarily and fundamentally the reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles that is the foundation of all other social healings.¹⁵ ‘According to *Ephesians*, social peace in any realm and in any form is a consequence of the peace which was made between Jews and Gentiles.’¹⁶ Or, to put it the other way around, peace in any other realm must be predicated upon first recognising and inhabiting the peace that Christ has made between Jews and Gentiles.

Similarly in his two-volume commentary on the same letter, Barth argues that

The members of the church are not so equalized, leveled down, or straitjacketed in a uniform as to form a *genus tertium* that would be different from both Jews and Gentiles. Rather the church consists of Jews and Gentiles reconciled to one another by the Messiah who has come and died for both.¹⁷

The resulting ‘one new man’ is

an organic body consisting of distinct members...a continuous mutual encounter, exchange, bewildering or joyful surprise of free persons...Above all, the joining of

Letter to the Romans that St Paul ‘give[s] a short summary of the whole of Christian and evangelical doctrine...’ See Karl Barth, *A Shorter Commentary on Romans* (London: SCM Press, 1959), p. 12.

¹²Markus Barth to Leonard Swidler, 27 January 1967. MBPP. Series II – Correspondence. Box 13, file 380 (emphasis added).

¹³Markus Barth, ‘Traditions in *Ephesians*’, *New Testament Studies* 30 (1984), pp. 18–9, 22–3.

¹⁴Barth, *The Broken Wall*, p. 123.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷Barth, *Ephesians* 34:310.

‘the two’ into ‘one new’ whole reveals that neither of the two can possess salvation, peace, life without the other. Jews need Gentiles, Gentiles need Jews...[in order to be] saved at all.¹⁸

Precisely, however, because of this Jewish–Gentile solidarity, there is a more universal unity. The church, says Barth, exists in necessary ‘solidarity and association...to those that are still “far”, for the simple reason that, in Christ, the ‘far off ones’ are the very ones who have been brought near.¹⁹ Thus, in the breaking down of the wall of enmity between Jew and Gentile, ‘Christ is that reconciliation which is greater and stronger than the hostility of either or of both.’²⁰ The ethical consequence of this theological reality is thus that to continue to live as though enmity is still operative is, for Barth, to deny the sum and substance of the gospel.

This determination to foreground the claim of Ephesians 2 (most particularly, verses 11–22) as the most decisive evangelical summary of the New Testament impelled Barth’s deeply sincere commitment to Jewish–Christian reconciliation, at a time in which such an endeavour was, after the *Sho’ah*, still in its academic infancy.²¹ As he wrote to the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches in August 1963, ‘Personally I do not think that we can be Christians unless in very palpable forms we acknowledge and express that Israel is our older brother [sic]; that we are not “the new Israel”; that only in approaching God the Father together (Eph 2:19) we can come to know and to serve him.’²² In expressing such sentiments, Barth was speaking way ahead of his time. As we shall see, however, it was also this uncompromising commitment of Barth’s to the objective reality of reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles that drove an unintentional wedge between himself and many of his Jewish friends and interlocutors – precisely, that is, with those to whom his theology determined him to be already and primarily reconciled. How and why did this occur?

The rising and shattering of Markus Barth’s relationships with his Jewish friends

In 1974, following an address to the Berne chapter of the *Christlich-Jüdische Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Schweiz*, Barth was described by the local rabbi, Dr. Roland Gradwohl, as ‘an advocate and henchman of...murderous scoundrels’.²³ One other attendee at the event sent Barth, by the very next day’s post, an equally clear message: ‘Shame, shame on you, you little, unworthy son of a great father’ (*Pfui über Sie, schämen*

¹⁸Ibid., p. 311.

¹⁹Barth, *The Broken Wall*, p. 160.

²⁰Ibid., p. 44.

²¹Post-Holocaust Jewish–Christian dialogue was initially driven by the churches through the 1960s–70s. Only from the 1980s did it become part of critical enquiry within the academy. Rolf Rendtorff, ‘Der Dialog hat erst begonnen’, in Manfred Görg *et al.* (eds), *Christen und Juden im Gespräch: Eine Bilanz nach 40 Jahren Staat Israel* (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1989), pp. 41–55; also K. Hannah Holtschneider, *German Protestants Remember the Holocaust: Theology and the Construction of Collective Memory* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2001), p. 37. As early as September (?) 1962, Barth was invited by Stephen Schwarzschild to speak to the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis on the topic of Jewish-Christian dialogue. MBPP. Series II. Correspondence. Box 8, file 310.

²²Markus Barth to Willem A. Visser’t Hooft, 10 August 1963. MBPP. Series II. Correspondence. Box 9, file 314 (emphasis added).

²³‘Jüdische Zuhörer verliessen den Saal’, *Der Bund* (27 June 1974), p. 17.

Sie sich, kleiner, unwürdiger Sohn eines grossen Vaters).²⁴ We will return later in the paper to the reasons that occasioned these harsh words. The point here is that Barth had not always been held in such low esteem by his Jewish conversation partners. On the contrary, his relationships with individual Jews, both before his departure from Switzerland in late 1952, and during his 20 years in the United States, were full of promise, friendship, and warm collegiality. And yet, Gradwohl's angry accusation was sadly representative of the fact that many of Barth's Jewish friendships began to sour – and when they did, they soured irretrievably.

So what were Barth's relationships with Jews like? In the first instance, it is worth noting that from 1943 to 1947 Barth and his wife Rose Marie sheltered a German Jewish family, the Eisenstadts, in their vicarage in Bubendorf, after the Eisenstadts had escaped from the Majdanek extermination camp in mid-1942 and had subsequently fled to Switzerland. Housing the Eisenstadts in their own home did not, of course, pose any risk to the Barths' lives, such as would have been the case in the Nazi-occupied territories. It was, though, nevertheless still a violation of Swiss law, and could have resulted in fines, termination of employment, and even imprisonment. Any suggestion that Barth was implicitly anti-Jewish, or that his later hermeneutic of Jewish-Christian relations was grounded in a purely theoretical understanding of 'Israel' must therefore contend with this act of bravery.²⁵ Later, when living in Chicago, the Barths found themselves close friends with the many Jews who lived in the same part of the city. There was, reported Rose Marie, 'a warmth and liberal-mindedness' amongst their Jewish neighbours, and a premium placed on the centrality of the family, 'that does one good'. Of particular interest is the esteem with which Markus was held by members of the local Jewish community, precisely on account of his father. As one of the local shop-owners once said when Barth's youngest daughter, Rose-Marie, had forgotten her university ID card that was needed for a store discount, but instead mentioned Markus' name – 'O, isn't he the son of the great Karl Barth? It's alright then, it's alright.'²⁶ Indeed, through the Barths' 20 years in the U.S., Markus cultivated significant relationships with many of the key members of America's Jewish communities. From the early 1960s through to the final years of his life, Barth was in regular contact with such luminaries as Abraham Heschel, Jacob Taubes, Stephen and Henry Schwarzschild, Emil Fackenheim, Michael Wyschogrod, and Zalman Schachter. Similarly, during the early 1970s, he worked assiduously alongside Marc Tanenbaum in advocating for the removal of all antisemitic tropes in Oberammergau's (in)famous Passion Play.²⁷ With both Fackenheim and Wyschogrod, at least, contact grew from tentative but cordial correspondence into warm friendship, not only between the men themselves, but indeed between their whole families. But many of these friendships did not last. As hinted above, a good

²⁴M. Kunz to Markus Barth, 26 June 1974. MBPP. Box SF21, file 3.

²⁵Switzerland had closed its border to Jewish refugees in the summer of 1942, thus rendering it illegal to offer material assistance to any such refugees. Paul Grüniger (1891–1972) serves as an example of what the Swiss authorities could, and sometimes did, do to violators of these anti-Jewish laws. See <https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/stories/grueninger.html>.

²⁶Rose Marie Barth, 'Rundbrief', November 1956, p. 4.

²⁷See for example the following letters: Markus Barth to Marc Tanenbaum, 28 February 1971; Marc Tanenbaum to Markus Barth 13 April 1971; Cornelis Adriaan Rijk (Vatican Office for Catholic-Jewish Relations) to Markus Barth, 14 June and 10 September 1971; Markus Barth to M. Tanenbaum, 6 November 1971; Johan Snoek (World Council of Churches) to Markus Barth, 13 April 1972. MBPP. Series Correspondence. Box 25, File 617.

number of Barth's relationships with erstwhile Jewish friends and colleagues deteriorated through the latter half of the 1960s and beyond, with Wyschogrod and Fackenheim being particularly profound losses.

The reasons for this deterioration are instructive and point towards the stridency of Barth's theology of reconciliation that was, in its very centrality for him, ironically divisive. In the case of Michael Wyschogrod, his argument with Barth initially concerned their opposing views on America's involvement in the Vietnam War, before turning heatedly to the rights and wrongs of the Israel–Palestine conflict. Whereas they had at one time been in the habit of sharing family holidays together, by 1975 the breach between them was complete. Angry with Barth, who professed a love for the Jewish people, but was nevertheless deeply critical of the Israeli State, Wyschogrod wrote to him declaring that to 'sit in judgment over Israel...is a very dangerous enterprise'. There could, he said, be no room for such self-righteousness on the part of anyone who confesses Christ and who purportedly recognises the inextricable bond between Jesus and Israel. '[T]he face of the living Jew is the closest you will ever get in this life to seeing the face of your Lord...If you separate yourself from the consensus of this people, you are separated from your Lord...If your morality leads you to the hurting of Jews, it is not the morality of your Lord.'²⁸ What was Wyschogrod's point? Simply that if Barth truly loved the Jewish people as he claimed, he would acknowledge Israel's need and right to take the political and military steps necessary to secure its borders from external terrorist aggression and would refrain from censure or rebuke. He would not, that is, naively demand of Israel that it be necessarily reconciled to the Palestinian peoples, as though the reality of enmity between the two could somehow be ignored.

With Emil Fackenheim, the dispute was more strictly theological, but again revolved around the centrality of reconciliation. To put the question most pointedly, was Barth's insistence upon both him and others living into the objective reality of reconciliation – the core of the gospel and thus the foundation of post-resurrection ethics – naïve, to the point of in fact threatening the safety of post-Holocaust Israel? Even before the promulgation of his famous '614th Commandment', Fackenheim had been insisting that 'Auschwitz' – as symbol and reality – was such a theologically rupturing event that it had necessarily to be the overriding theological criterion and datum for both Judaism and Christianity.²⁹ Barth, on the other hand, while acknowledging the existential trauma of the Holocaust, wanted still to be able to prioritise a Christian belief in resurrection hope.³⁰ As he said to the Canadian theologian David Demson, 'defiance rather than hope is the Leitmotiv of [Fackenheim's] thought...[He] appears to live more from the great enemy, and correspondently [*sic*]: from negation, than from the

²⁸Michael Wyschogrod to Markus Barth, 1 January 1975. MBPP. Series II. Box 21, file 545.

²⁹Fackenheim's 614th Commandment was this: that Jews must survive 'as Jews'; must always remember the martyrs of the Holocaust; must never despair of God; and must never despair of the world. To break this fourfold commandment would be, in his view, to grant Hitler a posthumous victory. According to Fackenheim's own recollection, he first articulated this publicly at the 'Jewish Values in a Post-Holocaust Future' symposium, which was held in New York on 26 March 1967. He had, however, already spoken of it in a letter to Markus Barth four months earlier. Emil Fackenheim to Markus Barth, December 1966. MBPP. Series II. Box 13, file 375.

³⁰For details, see my two articles: Mark Lindsay, 'Jewish-Christian Dialogue from the Underside: Markus Barth's Correspondence with Michael Wyschogrod (1962–84) and Emil Fackenheim (1965–80)', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 53/3 (2018), pp. 313–47; and idem, 'Jewish-Christian Dialogue in Review: Markus Barth's Correspondence with Emil Fackenheim (1965–1980)', *Journal of Reformed Theology* 14/3 (2020), pp. 246–62.

source of hope...'.³¹ Whereas Fackenheim was predicating modern Jewish thought and life on the inevitability of enmity towards Jews, and the consequent need to stand firm in its face, Barth was urging him to recognise the christological defeat of enmity as evidenced through the resurrection. This theological–methodological disagreement proved too great an impasse for either of them to cross.

The uncompromising truth of reconciliation as the ground of perpetual enmity

It is entirely reasonable to ask of someone who was such a committed champion of Jewish–Christian solidarity – indeed covenantal, kindred, *unity* – and of the evangelical imperative of christological reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles, why it was precisely Markus Barth's friendships with *Jews* that deteriorated so bitterly and intractably. Certainly, he had angry and acrimonious relationships with various of his faculty colleagues, both in Chicago and in Pittsburgh, usually over matters of pedagogy and curricular integrity. But it was the breakdown of his friendships with individual Jews that was especially bitter and irretrievable. The reason, ironically, lies in fact in his commitment to what he saw as the unqualified character of that divine reconciliatory work between Jews and Gentiles, of which mention was made earlier. For Barth, the rejection of the reality of reconciliation – or worse, the proposing of qualifications to that reconciliation – was sufficient cause for him not only to withdraw friendship, but indeed to erect new barriers of disillusioned hostility. In late 1966, Barth voiced the premise of his concern to Fackenheim. Unhappy with what he described as a Jewish 'triumphalism' that prioritised Auschwitz as a theological criterion, Barth urged Fackenheim to

try and throw behind you the unbearable guilt and suffering of those endless years and uncounted martyrs... We [need to] look forward, [and] not make sin the basis of our theology... I do still believe that a better witness to resurrection would be the only goal in which both of us, Jews and Christians alike, could meet, in which we would need one another, in which we could catch hope together. Why get fascinated by the abyss of a possible other victory of Hitler, if there is still a victory of God ahead of us?³²

In Barth's mind, the emphasis on the *Sho'ah* that he saw in so many of his Jewish friends did two things. First, it precluded the possibility of genuine kinship between Jews and Christians because it replaced, in priority of significance and consequence, the redemptive unificatory event of the cross with the rupturing event of Auschwitz. (That he could even entertain the notion that a Jew might, in his words, share with a Christian 'a better witness to resurrection' is itself astounding.) What he was objecting to, that is, was a Jewish diminution of Christianity – a sort of reverse supersessionism, in which Christianity is a mere shadow of all that is right and proper within Judaism – justified by reference to Auschwitz, as though that horror must forever delegitimise the church's existence and proclamation. Barth's impression was, in a way, right. As Fackenheim wrote to him: '[F]rom a Jewish standpoint...the very first condition of Jewish-Christian dialogue...is Christian recognition of a still-living bond between God and Israel; and that a Christian who does give this recognition cannot by-pass

³¹Markus Barth to David Demson, 13 August 1979. MBPP. Series II. Box 25, file 601.

³²Markus Barth to Emil Fackenheim, 18 December 1966. MBPP. Series II – Correspondence. Box 13, file 375.

the scandal of the particularity of Auschwitz.³³ That is, only by acknowledging the hermeneutical priority of the *Sho'ah* to modern Jewish and Christian faith is Jewish-Christian dialogue possible. While utterly convinced of the 'still-living bond between God and Israel' of which Fackenheim spoke, and also deeply cognizant of the horror of the Holocaust, and indeed of the churches' complicity in its possibility, Barth was nevertheless unable and unwilling to take the interpretive step that Fackenheim required. In his view, it made reconciliation conditional upon something other than the cruciform work of Christ.

But second, Barth perceived that a Jewish prioritisation of Auschwitz was being used to justify a militaristic Zionism, with Palestinians in particular the intentional targets. That is to say, instead of viewing the Holocaust as the most obvious recent reason for seeking peace amongst enemies, the enormity of the *Sho'ah* was being utilised as a way of justifying a perpetual animosity towards Israel's neighbours. Having been a vocal opponent of the Vietnam War through the early 1960s, the latter years of that decade saw Barth change his focus to the Israel-Palestine conflict, with successive Israeli administrations – particularly those of Golda Meir and Menachem Begin – likened by Barth to Hitler and National Socialism. '[Al]most all Jews are becoming Zionists [*sic*] and are doing this not without the great danger of endorsing Nazi-like features of blood and soil, nationalistic and militaristic thinking of infamous memory.'³⁴ Rejecting the claim that Israel was in a fight for its survival, Barth declared, during a public forum in February 1970, that 'That is what I heard Hitler say in the 1930s...'³⁵ There was no doubt, said Barth, that Israel had a legitimate claim to the land on which it was situated. Nevertheless, its tenure should be as 'steward' not 'possessor', with a responsibility of care and protection for *all* who lived there, and not only Jews.³⁶ Eugene Borowitz, with whom Barth was sharing the forum's platform, was appalled at Barth's suggestion. 'If it wasn't you talking, Dr. Barth', he is reported to have said, 'I would walk off this stage right now.'³⁷ Nevertheless, Barth was adamant that such criticism of Israel was not only justified, but indeed required by Christianity's kinship with the Jewish people. Christians, he said, 'shall bear witness to our solidarity with our suffering brother in a helpful manner only when we have the courage to express a critical solidarity'.³⁸

It was this determination to manifest a *critical* solidarity that, as we have seen, got him into such hot water four years later in Berne. There, in front of the *Christlich-Jüdische Arbeitsgemeinschaft*, Barth sought to argue that, while Jews remained 'unsafe strangers' (*unsichere Fremde*) in the land of their forefathers, Israel was nevertheless guilty of inexcusable criminality against Palestinians.³⁹ Questioning whether the Palestinians' sense of identity had developed sufficiently even to speak of them yet as a people or a nation, he noted that their plight was more desperate than Israel's, simply because Israel had achieved global recognition (*da Israel ein weltweit anerkannter Staat*

³³Emil Fackenheim to Markus Barth, 21 April 1967. MBPP. Series II – Correspondence. Box 13, file 389.

³⁴Markus Barth to Norman Porteous, 15 July 1969. MBPP. Series II. Box 16, file 427.

³⁵Bob Wilcox, 'Inter-communication Critical, Says Rabbi', *Miami News* (5 February 1970), p. 32.

³⁶Bob Wilcox, 'Church Council Might Back Israelis' Rights in Mideast', *The Miami News* (4 February 1970), p. 8.

³⁷Wilcox, 'Inter-communication Critical, Says Rabbi', p. 32.

³⁸Markus Barth, *Jesus the Jew*, trans. F. Prussner (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1978), p. 93.

³⁹'Jüdische Zuhörer verliessen den Saal', p. 17. In a letter to Emil Fackenheim two years previously, Barth had already spoken of Israel retaliation to the Munich terrorist attack as a 'crime of worse dimensions.' Markus Barth to Emil Fackenheim, 10 October 1972. MBPP. Series II. Box 19, file 500.

sei). Of course, Barth was quick to insist that nothing in the Palestinians' desperation justified terrorism. But he was even quicker to denounce Israel. Whatever terrorism might be inflicted by Palestinian fighters – he singled out the Munich and Ma'lot attacks of 1972 and 1974, respectively – it paled into comparison against Israel's excessive response. To make matters worse, Barth effectively implied that Israel had brought Palestinian terrorism upon itself. Terrorism, he said, was 'the last resort to communicate total frustration, when rational communication was no longer possible'.⁴⁰

Naturally, such criticism was strongly rebuffed by Barth's Jewish interlocutors. Ernst Simon took Barth to task for seeking to compare, and weigh up, Jewish and Palestinian tragedies, as something that was 'really extremely inappropriate' (*wirklich höchst unangebracht*).⁴¹ Zwi Werblowsky went even further. In his view, Barth's academic and public commentaries on Israeli policies made him one of those friends 'from whom [may] God protect us'. In the rabbi's opinion, Barth's criticism of Israel disqualified him from being a 'moral partner in any dialogue, since after such obscenity no communication is possible...'.⁴² Barth was, in this sense, the unwitting, and certainly (from his own perspective) unwilling enemy of the Jewish people, and Israel as such.

But it was Barth himself who, when it came to the question of Israel–Palestine, closed the door on any attempt at reconciliation with his friends. Wyschogrod, for example, was prepared to admit that Barth's accusations against Israeli injustices were legitimate and was adamant that he wished to remain on speaking terms with his Swiss colleague. But he was forced to accept that 'you are not on speaking terms to me and...no longer consider me your friend'.⁴³ Indeed, Barth referred to Wyschogrod, on at least one occasion, as 'a blood-thirsty warmonger'.⁴⁴ Why? Because Wyschogrod's acceptance of Israel's need to defend itself against external aggression was seen by Barth as a refusal to enact the reconciliation between enemies that had been occasioned by the cross. As he complained to David Demson, Wyschogrod would never himself visit Israel lest 'his prejudices for the immaculate behavior of the Israelis might be destroyed...At any rate, he insists on telling me that I have to declare wonderful all that the Israelis do and keep quiet about the wrong suffered by the Palestinians – as if I could do that!'⁴⁵ Barth's relationship with Fackenheim was even more decisively and permanently cut off, again from Barth's side. 'It appears to me,' he wrote to Demson, 'that people like Fackenheim who expect from us a *blanc [sic]* check...are actually working not for the peace of Israel but to its disadvantage... What we and Israel need today, are not fanatics but sober people, friends and brothers of Israel, not bootlickers...'.⁴⁶

It is here, I think, that Barth ventures into dangerous territory – indeed territory that the *best* of Barth would surely have wished to avoid, but in the end could not. That Barth – a Christian – was prepared to identify himself as being in closer proximity to the welfare of Israel than people like Fackenheim, Wyschogrod, and Werblowsky,

⁴⁰'Jüdische Zuhörer verliessen den Saal', p. 17. As an aside, it is worth noting that just six months before this ill-fated lecture in Berne, Barth had, in effect, theologically de-legitimised the State of Israel. Writing to Samy Abboud, Barth spoke of Israel as being as much 'an enemy to true Judaism as...to the Palestinians and the Arabs.' Markus Barth to Samy Abboud, 4 February 1974. MBPP. Series II. Box 21, file 528.

⁴¹Ernst Simon to Markus Barth, 6 August 1974. MBPP. Series II. Box 21, file 535.

⁴²Zwi Werblowsky to Markus Barth, 4 May 1975. MBPP. Series II. Box 22, file 553.

⁴³Michael Wyschogrod to Markus Barth, 31 January 1983. MBPP. Series II. Box 28.

⁴⁴Michael Wyschogrod to Markus Barth, 29 January 1969. MBPP. Series II. Box 14, file 416.

⁴⁵Markus Barth to David Demson, 11 January 1975. MBPP. Series II. Box 21, file 544.

⁴⁶Markus Barth to David Demson, 22 July 1976. MBPP. Series II. Box 23, file 573.

was a rhetorically provocative move that was, in its own way, peculiarly supersessionistic. The force of his criticism was in effect to claim that he was more truly 'Israel' than those Jews who disagreed with him. His former friends were now his enemies, because they either rejected what they perceived as his naïve belief in the political reconciliation between militarised opponents (for example, Israel and Palestine), or because they qualified the conditions in which such reconciliation might be achievable. Thus, their reconciliation with him might, theoretically, be possible – but only by agreeing with him.

Quite obviously, for a Christian to demand Jewish conversion to a different perspective has been the hallmark of Christian hostility to Jewishness as such for nearly 2000 years. From John Chrysostom to John Duns Scotus, Martin Luther to (regrettably) Markus Barth, the Jew must convert to the ways of the Christian, in order for the Christian to look upon the Jew with favour. Whether or not Barth thought it likely, or even realistic, that his former Jewish friends might change their minds on those matters that had driven them apart is unclear and, in the end, not the point. Rather, the point is the supersessionary direction of the expectation that he had.

At the heart of the disagreement – and ultimately, the cause of the bitter deterioration of these friendships into, if not enmity, then at least intransigent hostility – was the identification of theological primacy. What, that is to say, should stand as the fundamental and determinative theological criterion and datum? At least for people such as Wyschogrod, Fackenheim, Irving Greenberg, Arthur Cohen, and Richard Rubenstein, the *Sho'ah* was and has become the *tremendum* that cannot be avoided or overcome.⁴⁷ As Jews, they each claimed, and lived – in their own particular ways – the dictum that Dietrich Ritschl would later lay down for Christianity: that theology after Auschwitz can no longer be done 'to the exclusion of this fundamental wound'.⁴⁸ Again, in their own distinctive ways, this has been repeated by both Catholic and Protestant theologians, from Johann Baptist Metz to Martin Rumscheidt.⁴⁹

But Markus Barth did not and could not, agree. As indicated at the start of the paper, he understood Paul's letter to the Ephesians to be the summary of the gospel message, with Ephesians 2 being the inner kernel of that evangelical core. There is no gospel without reconciliation; and the breaking down of the enmity between Jews and

⁴⁷So, for example, Greenberg's now-infamous comment that 'no statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of [the] burning children.' Irving Greenberg, 'Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity after the Holocaust', in Eva Fleischner (ed.), *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?* (New York: Ktav, 1977), p. 23. See also Rubenstein's uncompromising either/or: 'We can either affirm the innocence of Israel or the justice of God but not both. If the innocence of Israel at Auschwitz is affirmed, whatever God may be He/She is not distinctively and uniquely the sovereign Lord of covenant and election. If one wishes to avoid any suggestion, however remote, that at Auschwitz Israel was with justice the object of divine punishment, one must reject any view of God to which such an idea can plausibly be ascribed.' Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 172.

⁴⁸Dietrich Ritschl, *The Logic of Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1986), p. 128.

⁴⁹So, Metz: 'What Christian theologians can do for the murder of Auschwitz, and thereby for a true Jewish-Christian ecumenism is, in every case, this: Never again to do theology in such a way that its construction remains unaffected, or could remain unaffected, by Auschwitz.' Johann Baptist Metz, *The Emergent Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 28. See also Rumscheidt: 'Christian theology and church do not discover Jews, their history and their fate nor the necessity of dialoguing with them except in full and open embrace of the fact of Auschwitz.' H. Martin Rumscheidt, 'Professional Ethics After Auschwitz', in *30th Annual Scholars' Conference on the German Churches and the Holocaust, 4–7 March 2000*, p. 253.

Gentiles is the primary and grounding instantiation of that reconciliation that then proceeds outwards across all other social, economic, sexual and other divisions. Thus, Barth could not tolerate any idea, event or principle that might be posed as a 'still more central point' (to quote his father from 1933). As he said in a homiletics lecture in Rüschiikon in December 1974,

Living after Auschwitz, the preacher in the pulpit these days will have a conscience lacerated by his co-responsibility for the past and maybe for a future holocaust... Yet he will not attempt to calm consciences by quoting Bible verses that promise the former Canaan to Israel, or by calling for all-out support of questionable Zionist intentions, attitudes, and deeds. On the other hand, the preacher will not seek to please the new leftist youth in his congregation...by indiscriminate support of all that the Palestinian guerillas do. Rather, he will speak on the ground that Jesus Christ on the cross stretched out his hands over Jews and Gentiles...⁵⁰

This quote perfectly sums up the chasm between Barth and his Jewish colleagues. For them, Auschwitz was necessarily determinative of both faith, theology and consequently of politics. For Barth, on the other hand, it could only ever be a subsequent and non-determinative criterion that was radically relativised by the reconciliatory and unificatory event of the cross, about which Ephesians 2 speaks so eloquently. That he and his Jewish friends might have come to differing perspectives on this is neither surprising nor especially problematic. The awkward irony, though, is that Barth's insistence on the primacy of reconciliation – in particular between Jews and Gentiles – was the very thing that caused him to retreat into angry enmity, when his Jewish friends refused to prioritise it in their own lives and theo-political commitments. What is tragic about it is that Barth – I think unwittingly – reverted to age-old supersessionary logic in his determination that *they* must change and not him.

There is, of course, much more to say about Markus Barth's theology of Israel, and about his personal friendships with a great many Jews on both sides of the Atlantic. It would be both unfair and untrue to suggest that supersessionist logic characterised the heart of either Barth's theology or his friendships. He was, on the contrary, sincere in his devotion to the wellbeing of Israel and to the removal of anti-Jewish prejudice in the church's teaching and liturgies. Nonetheless, his devotion was, as Rashkover says, ultimately ambiguous. Moreover, it was his insistence that christological reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles lies at the heart of the gospel that was the ironic cause of the fracturing of so many of his Jewish friendships.

⁵⁰Markus Barth, 'Biblical Preaching Today', *Review and Expositor* LXXII/2 (1975), p. 166.