

SCRIPTURE AND MYTH IN DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

By Richard Weikart, University of Iowa

Dietrich Bonhoeffer has become a mythic hero in the pantheon of late twentieth-century Christianity. Admiration for him flows from such diverse and contradictory movements as fundamentalism and radical death-of-God theology, as well as from most groups located between these poles. American evangelicals¹ have joined the chorus of his praise and actively promote his works. A recent review of *A Testament of Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Christianity Today* enjoins a predominantly evangelical audience to "sit . . . at the feet of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," whose life "rings with Christian authenticity."² Two guidebooks to evangelical literature list Bonhoeffer's writings as important reading material for evangelicals.³ My own contacts with evangelicals and fundamentalists confirm that Bonhoeffer enjoys widespread approbation among them.

Numerous factors have contributed to the popularity of Bonhoeffer among evangelicals. Unlike so many of his contemporaries, he showed great courage in opposing Hitler's policies. However, this could also be said of Karl Barth, the theologian exercising the greatest influence on Bonhoeffer. Barth took a decisive stand against Nazism and penned the Barmen Declaration, which was the manifesto for the Confessing Church, yet most evangelicals reject his neo-orthodox theology. Of course, Bonhoeffer gained great stature by his death at the hand of the Nazis, which is usually described as a Christian martyrdom.

Bonhoeffer's reputation among evangelicals, however, does not rest solely on his political involvement. Two of his theological works, *The Cost of Discipleship*

12

¹ The words evangelical and evangelicalism will be defined in this essay as pertaining to the movement in the late twentieth century (especially in the United States) that emphasizes the inerrancy of scripture and is exemplified by Carl F. H. Henry and *Christianity Today*. Bonhoeffer was an evangelical in the sense of belonging to the German Evangelical Church, which is the official title of the Lutheran church in Germany, but this is not the sense in which I am using the term.

² Kevin A. Miller, "A Man for Others," *Christianity Today* 35.8 (22 July 1991): 58.

³ Edith L. Blumhofer and Joel A. Carpenter, *Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: A Guide to the Sources* (New York: Garland, 1990), 327; Mark Lou Branson, *The Reader's Guide to the Best Evangelical Books* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982), 2, 104, 149.

SCRIPTURE AND MYTH IN DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

(1937) and *Life Together* (1939), are favorite books in evangelical circles.⁴ Since Bonhoeffer was so closely allied with Barth, it is not surprising that evangelicals sympathetic with Barth respect Bonhoeffer's work so highly.⁵ However, even evangelicals hostile to Barth's theology endorse Bonhoeffer's works.⁶ The evangelical attacks on neo-orthodoxy have generally ignored Bonhoeffer, concentrating instead on Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Emil Brunner, and others.

By their uncritical support for Bonhoeffer, evangelicals have created and perpetuated a myth. The depiction of Bonhoeffer as an evangelical is no closer to the truth than the presentation of him as an atheist, which is how the death-of-God theologians tend to portray him. Evangelicals often misread Bonhoeffer because they are unaware of the theological and philosophical context of his work. Words that mean one thing to Bonhoeffer can mean something quite different to evangelicals. Further, evangelicals tend to read Bonhoeffer's works the way they read the Bible—literally, if possible. In Bonhoeffer's case, this is problematic, as I will demonstrate.

In order to illustrate the chasm separating Bonhoeffer from evangelical—and especially fundamentalist—theology, I will explore Bonhoeffer's view of scripture in this essay. My analysis will demonstrate Bonhoeffer's simultaneous acceptance of biblical criticism and the primacy and authority of all scripture. His views concerning history, myth, and language must be understood in order to explain his paradoxical stance. While emphatically rejecting a dualistic ontology that separates the spiritual from the secular or the earthly from the heavenly, an epistemological dualism underlay Bonhoeffer's view of scripture.⁷ Although he rejected many aspects of liberal theology, he continued its tradition of distinguishing between religious and secular truth as two completely distinct realms of knowledge.

Bonhoeffer's career can be divided into three periods: (1) pre-1931, during which time he studied under liberal theologians at the University of Berlin, embraced Barth's dialectical theology, and wrote his first two theological works; (2) 1931–1939, the period including the Church Struggle, during which he published *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together*; (3) 1939–1945, the time of Bonhoeffer's prison writings. Bonhoeffer's attitude toward the scriptures changed some from one period to the next. Even a superficial reading of his major works reveals this. In his doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio* (1927) and in his "Habilitationsschrift," *Act and Being* (1930), scriptures play a subordinate role and Bonhoeffer cited philosophers more often than scripture to substantiate his

⁴ Blumhofer, *Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism*, 327; Branson, *Reader's Guide*, 2, 149.

⁵ Donald G. Bloesch, *Freedom for Obedience: Evangelical Ethics in Contemporary Times* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 10–11.

⁶ John Warwick Montgomery, *The Suicide of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1971), 476.

⁷ On ontological dualism, see Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage*, trans. Eric Mossbacher et al. (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 777.

points. *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together* provide quite a contrast, since in them scripture is everything and philosophers are rarely if ever mentioned. Further these latter two works enjoin the use of scripture and hold it up as a standard and authority. In his prison writings scripture remained important, but Bonhoeffer began grappling with the question of interpretation of scripture, a theme absent from earlier writings.

The change in Bonhoeffer's life and thought in 1931 was so pronounced that his friend and biographer Eberhard Bethge described it as a conversion experience. (This should not be confused with the contemporary evangelical understanding of conversion, for which Bonhoeffer had no sympathy.) Although Bonhoeffer rarely mentioned his experience, in 1936 he claimed it "transformed my life to the present day. For the first time I discovered the Bible. . . . It was a great liberation."⁸ From that time forward Bonhoeffer was captivated by the Bible, especially the Sermon on the Mount.

The transformation to the third period was not so clear-cut and 1939 is only an approximation. Nevertheless during this final period Bonhoeffer appears to have lost some of his earlier zeal for the Bible. In January 1941, June 1942, and March 1944 he admitted to Bethge that he went days and weeks without reading the Bible much, though sometimes he would read it voraciously.⁹ He wrote:

I am astonished that I live and can live for days without the Bible—I would not consider it obedience, but auto-suggestion, if I would compel myself to do it. . . . I know that I only need to open my own books to hear what may be said against all this. . . . But I feel resistance against everything "religious" growing in me.¹⁰

As he wrestled with the problem of interpreting scripture, his attention shifted from the Sermon on the Mount and the New Testament to the Old Testament.

These shifts in the treatment of scripture, however, important as they are, represent differences in emphasis and attitude more than doctrinal differences. Underlying the superficial twists and turns of his theology were important continuities, which are apparent when one compares his early works with his *Letters and Papers from Prison*.¹¹ Although some of his views submerged during the

⁸ *Ibid.*, 154–55.

⁹ Bonhoeffer to Bethge, 31 January 1941, in *Gesammelte Schriften* (hereafter cited as GS), ed. Eberhard Bethge (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1958 ff.), 5:397; 25 January 1942, in GS, 5:420; and 19 March 1944, in *Widerstand und Ergebung: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft* (hereafter WE), (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1954), 163 (Eng. trans., *Letters and Papers from Prison* [hereafter LPP], trans. Reginald Fuller et al. [New York: Macmillan, 1971], 234).

¹⁰ Bonhoeffer to Bethge, 25 June 1942, in GS, 5:420.

¹¹ Scholars upholding continuity in Bonhoeffer's thought include John D. Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 264; André Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian of Reality*, trans. Robert McAfee Brown (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 154; Ernst Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Martin Rumscheidt (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 54; and others. David H. Hopper, however, in *A Dissent on Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 97, argues for discontinuity in Bonhoeffer's thought, but does not show discontinuity in the area of scripture interpretation.

SCRIPTURE AND MYTH IN DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

middle period, they were never entirely absent. Toward the end of his life Bonhoeffer denied that he had changed much: "Neither of us [Bonhoeffer and Bethge] has really experienced a break in our life."¹² He also acknowledged in 1944 that he "still carries within himself the heritage of liberal theology."¹³

Indeed liberal theology dominated the University of Berlin theological faculty while Bonhoeffer studied there from 1924 to 1927 under Reinhold Seeberg. The famous church historian Adolf von Harnack was not only one of his teachers, but a personal friend whom he admired.¹⁴ Bonhoeffer was thoroughly imbued with biblical criticism and always rejected attempts to dispense with it. In 1933 he wrote that the doctrine of verbal inspiration of scripture must be rejected in favor of biblical criticism. However, he indicated that biblical criticism is not decisive in interpreting scripture. According to Bonhoeffer, even though historical criticism has proved that Jesus did not speak some words ascribed to him in the Bible, this makes no difference. We must still preach the whole Bible and keep moving, like one crossing a river on an ice-pack that is breaking up.¹⁵ In all his works, including *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer stood on the Bible as on a breaking ice-pack. However, he ignored the fissures, since he had full confidence that the ice would support him long enough to get across.

His attitude toward biblical criticism remained constant throughout his career.¹⁶ During the time that Bonhoeffer was working on *The Cost of Discipleship*, he wrote to his brother-in-law that he had nothing against textual criticism, but thought that it only scratched the surface.¹⁷ Not only did he find biblical criticism relatively unimportant for exegesis, but he also thought it could be dangerous. He warned, "Criticism should surely guard against thoughtlessly giving offense to the congregation," because the bible has comforted and helped many.¹⁸ For this reason Bonhoeffer often masked his views on biblical criticism. His stance is reminiscent of David F. Strauss, who in the conclusion of *The Life of Jesus* (1835), recommends that preachers adopting his view of the scriptures as myth nevertheless retain the outward semblance of traditional views and preach on the significance of scriptures without referring to their unhistorical character.¹⁹

Bonhoeffer's lack of emphasis on biblical criticism stemmed from his acceptance of Barth's dialectical theology while studying in Berlin. Barth's famous early work, the second edition of *The Epistle of the Romans* (1922), was widely

¹² Bonhoeffer to Bethge, 22 April 1944, in *WE*, 174 (*LPP*, 275).

¹³ Bonhoeffer to Bethge, 3 August 1944, in *WE*, 257 (*LPP*, 378).

¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Rede zum Gedächtnis Adolf von Harnacks," in *GS*, 3:59.

¹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Christologie," in *GS*, 3:204–6; see also Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 56–57.

¹⁶ Richard Grunow, "Dietrich Bonhoeffers Schriftauslegung," in *Die mündige Welt* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1955), 1:64–66.

¹⁷ Bonhoeffer to Rüdiger Schleicher, 8 April 1936, in *GS*, 3:26–27.

¹⁸ Bonhoeffer, *GS*, 4:256.

¹⁹ Horton Harris, *David Friedrich Strauss and His Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 56–57.

discussed at that time and Bonhoeffer also greatly enjoyed *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie* (1924). Bonhoeffer was more heavily influenced by Barth's early work than by his *Church Dogmatics*. While he did show some appreciation for the volumes of *Church Dogmatics* he was able to read, in *Letters and Papers from Prison* he also became more critical of Barth's stance toward scripture.

In *The Epistle to the Romans* Barth issued an appeal to faith in the whole Bible as the Word of God without reference to the historical or scientific accuracy of its statements. Barth's call resonated with the intellectual currents and the needs of Germany in the early Weimar period. Germans groped for faith in the wake of the horrors of World War I and their devastating defeat, which undermined belief in human reason and progress. An intellectual reaction against positivism had begun before the war among such important figures as Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Max Weber, but it reached new heights during the Weimar period in various forms of irrationalism, such as *Lebensphilosophie*, Nietzscheanism, Spengler's philosophy, Heidegger's existentialism, the Conservative Revolution, völkisch thought, and, of course, Nazism.²⁰

Irrationalism, i.e., the view that knowledge or truth is primarily non-rational and non-conceptual, was an important aspect of both Barth's and Bonhoeffer's thought. Both men were heavily influenced by Nietzsche, who was extremely popular in Weimar Germany. They shared an anti-conceptual mentality that captivated many of their contemporaries. Bonhoeffer continually emphasized the need for faith and revelation, because truth "is not the clear sky of concepts and ideas."²¹ Their irrationalism affected their understanding of the Bible by providing them with radically new ways of conceiving of biblical history and language.

During the nineteenth century liberal theology, based on rationalistic foundations, had increasingly called into question the historical accuracy of scripture and rejected large portions of it as mythical. The task of F. C. Baur, David F. Strauss, Albrecht Ritschl, Adolf von Harnack, and others was to sort out the mythical from the historical and retain only the latter. The supernatural stories in scripture were usually categorized as mythical and no longer taken seriously. The myths may have been necessary to communicate to previous ages, but in the modern scientific age they were superfluous, according to the liberals.

Under the influence of Nietzsche, Franz Overbeck, and others, Barth came to conceive of history and myth in an entirely different way. Nietzsche, instead of contemptuously dismissing myths, valued them as a form of non-conceptual

²⁰ On the reaction against positivism and the embracing of irrationalism, see H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890-1930*, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), ch. 2 and passim; Kurt Sontheimer, *Antidemokratisches Denken in der Weimarer Republik: Die politischen Ideen des deutschen Nationalismus zwischen 1918 und 1933* (Munich: Nymphenburger Verlagshandlung, 1962), chs. 2 and 3; Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 46 and passim; and Karlheinz Dederke, *Reich und Republik: Deutschland, 1917-1933*, 5th ed. (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1984), 137-38.

²¹ Bonhoeffer, *GS*, 4:83.

SCRIPTURE AND MYTH IN DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

knowledge derived through instinct or intuition. He advocated the recovery of myth to solve the problems of society and to unify modern culture. This is no peripheral point in Nietzsche's thought, but is, according to Allan Megill, "the focus of his entire enterprise."²² Nietzsche deplored the role of history in destroying illusions and myths and considered primitive Christianity a vibrant myth that degenerated when Christians began believing in Jesus as a historical figure instead of a myth-maker.²³ For Nietzsche Jesus is not a temporal reality at all, but "an 'eternal' factuality, a psychological symbol redeemed from the concept of time."²⁴

A new appreciation for myth permeated the *Zeitgeist* of Weimar Germany, partly through the influence of Nietzsche. Thomas Mann and other literary figures grappled in their works with the significance of myths.²⁵ Carl Jung investigated the role of mythical thought in the human psyche. Ernst Cassirer, a prominent neo-Kantian philosopher, incorporated ideas about myth in his theory of symbolic forms in the 1920s. Since Cassirer thought all knowledge was constructed by the mind and did not refer to external reality, the symbolic forms—language, myth (including religion), and art—were all valid means of communicating knowledge.²⁶

Like Cassirer, Barth was a neo-Kantian, at least at the time of his early writings. During his student days, he was captivated by Kantian philosophy and went to the University of Marburg to study under Wilhelm Hermann, a neo-Kantian theologian. Barth's early dialectical theology was heavily impregnated with Kantian concepts. Kant had denied the possibility of knowledge about the noumenal realm, including God, and thus created an epistemological division between the noumenal and phenomenal realms. Barth's emphasis on the transcendence of God and his radical otherness in relation to humans flowed from this epistemological dualism.²⁷

Barth's division of knowledge into two realms together with his affirmation of myth spawned his new conception of biblical history. In his early work, Barth drew a radical distinction between scientific or empirically verifiable history

²² Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 65, 76, 82; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, section 23.

²³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1972), 3, bk. 1:291–92; *Birth of Tragedy*, section 10.

²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, section 34.

²⁵ Eberhard Kolb, *The Weimar Republic*, trans. P. S. Falls (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 88; Richard Hinton Thomas, "Nietzsche in Weimar Germany—and the Case of Ludwig Klages," in *The Weimar Dilemma; Intellectuals in the Weimar Republic*, ed. Anthony Phelan (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 74–75.

²⁶ Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, trans. Susanne K. Langer (New York: Dover, 1946), 8; David R. Lipton, *Ernst Cassirer: The Dilemma of a Liberal Intellectual in Germany, 1914–1933* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 116.

²⁷ Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 34–35, 38–40, 44–45, 49.

(*Historie*) and God's history (*Geschichte* or *Heilsgeschichte*), which corresponds to the phenomenal/noumenal dichotomy. According to Barth, "There is . . . not only a transcendent truth, but transcendent events, a world history (*Weltgeschichte*) in heaven, an inner movement in God. What we call 'history' (*Geschichte*) and 'events' is only a confused reflection of transcendent developments."²⁸ Barth considered the Bible a testimony to the history of God (*Geschichte*), not a record of events in the world. Thus he called the resurrection of Jesus an "unhistorical event."²⁹ He asserted in 1920 that "it is beside the point even to ask whether they [miracles in the Bible] are historical and possible. They make no claim to being either. They signalize the unhistorical, the impossible, the new time that is coming."³⁰

Barth's distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte* also translated into a dichotomy between time and eternity. In the 1919 edition of *The Epistle of Romans* Barth informed his readers that their relationship with Jesus and Abraham is timeless and averred that the Bible, when speaking about the "past" is also speaking about that which is both present and future.³¹ In the more influential 1922 edition, Barth introduced Overbeck's concept of *Urgeschichte* (pre-history or primal history) to explain his position. Overbeck had claimed that *Urgeschichte* was a history of events that were not perceptible and were not tied to time.³² In 1920 Barth wrote a sympathetic extended review of Overbeck's posthumously published *Christentum und Kultur* (1919), in which he explained that Overbeck excluded Christianity from history and history from Christianity. Christianity exists only in the timeless realm of *Urgeschichte*.³³

The Barthian influence on Bonhoeffer's conception of biblical history is evident already in the summer of 1925. Concerning the resurrection of Jesus, Bonhoeffer wrote that "it is . . . senseless and crude to make of it a bare historical (*historische*) fact, for God wants to appear *in history* (*Geschichte*). The resurrection occurs in the sphere of faith, of revelation; every other interpretation takes from it its decisive character: *God in history* (*Geschichte*)."³⁴ In a lecture in 1928 Bonhoeffer

²⁸ Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief* (1919 edition), ed. Hermann Schmidt (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1985), 161.

²⁹ Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief* (Munich, 1922; repr. Zurich, 1984), 175, 183; *Römerbrief* (1919), 182; *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton, (n.p.: Pilgrim Press, 1928), 90; Tjarko Stadtland, *Eschatologie und Geschichte in der Theologie des jungen Karl Barth* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1966), 120–21, 132–34.

18 ³⁰ Barth, *Word of God and Word of Man*, 91.

³¹ Barth, *Römerbrief* (1919), 106–7.

³² Franz Overbeck, *Christentum und Kultur: Gedanken und Anmerkungen zur modernen Theologie*, ed. Carl Albrecht Bernoulli (Basel, 1919; repr. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963), 25.

³³ Karl Barth, "Unsettled Questions for Theology Today (1920)," in *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings, 1920–1928*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 61–62.

³⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Jugend und Studium, 1918–1927*, ed. Hans Pfeifer et al., in *Werke*, vol. 9 (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1986), 319.

SCRIPTURE AND MYTH IN DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

stated that the Bible is filled with material that is historically unreliable. Even the life of Jesus is “overgrown with legends” and myth so that we know little about the life of Jesus. Bonhoeffer concluded that “*Vita Jesu scribi non potest*” (the life of Jesus cannot be written).³⁵ Barthian influence is especially pronounced in *Act and Being*, in which Bonhoeffer explained that Christian revelation and proclamation is never concerned with events of the past, but rather with those occurring in the present and oriented toward the future.³⁶

Bonhoeffer’s 1931 conversion did not erase the dichotomy in his mind between history and revelation or time and eternity. However, he obscured this distinction in some of his works by confining his focus to revelation and scripture, while ignoring its relationship to empirical history. One scholar sympathetic with Bonhoeffer criticizes *The Cost of Discipleship* as

a dangerous piece of writing on the New Testament because the author’s intention and method can so easily be misunderstood. For one thing, *The Cost of Discipleship* can be read as a sectarian tract, as a call for the Church to “get back to the Bible” and follow its injunctions just as they stand³⁷

Bonhoeffer himself later admitted that his book had a dangerous side to it, though he did not repudiate it.³⁸

Other writings of the middle period of Bonhoeffer’s life make clear that he had no intention of upholding the historicity of scripture. In discussing the first three chapters of Genesis in *Creation and Fall* (1933) he criticized the idea of verbal inspiration and maintained that the biblical author was restricted by the state of knowledge when it was written. The Garden of Eden is a mythical world and the story is picture language to convey truths which can never be grasped in themselves.³⁹ In *Christology* (1933) Bonhoeffer claimed that through faith historical facts were not past, but present; not contingent, but absolute; not historical, but contemporary. He further asserted that “the Jesus that cannot be historically grasped is the object of resurrection faith.”⁴⁰

Only two passages in *The cost of Discipleship* clearly reveal Bonhoeffer’s view on the unhistorical character of the Bible. One is only part of a sentence: “We cannot and may not go behind the word of scripture to the real events”⁴¹

³⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Jesus Christus und vom Wesen des Christentums,” in *GS*, 5:137–38.

³⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Akt und Sein: Transzendentalphilosophie und Ontologie in der systematischen Theologie*, ed. Hans-Richard Reuter, in *Werke*, vol. 2 (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1988), 107–8, 110.

³⁷ Walter Harrelson, “Bonhoeffer and the Bible,” in *The Place of Bonhoeffer: Problems and Possibilities in His Thought*, ed. Martin E. Marty (New York: Association Press, 1962), 123–24.

³⁸ Bonhoeffer to Bethge, 21 July 1944, in *WE*, 248 (*LPP*, 369).

³⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Schöpfung und Fall*, ed. Martin Rüter and Ilse Tödt, in *Werke*, vol. 3 (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1989), 46–47, 75–77.

⁴⁰ Bonhoeffer, “Christologie,” in *GS*, 3:203, 205.

⁴¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Nachfolge*, ed. Martin Kuske and Ilse Tödt, in *Werke*, vol. 4 (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1989), 75 (English trans., *The Cost of Discipleship* [hereafter *CD*], trans. R. H. Fuller [New York: Macmillan, 1959], 93).

The other is a footnote that is couched in philosophical language, and, while comprehensible to those having studied theology or philosophy, it is probably unintelligible to the average non-philosophically inclined evangelical reader. The footnote is enlightening, because it occurs in a passage in which Bonhoeffer affirmed the truth, reliability and unity of the scriptures in the strongest possible way. To avoid misunderstanding he added a clarifying note denying the literal resurrection of Jesus in the past.⁴² He wrote:

The confusion of ontological statements with proclaiming testimony is the essence of all fanaticism. The sentence: Christ is risen and present, is the dissolution of the unity of the scripture if it is ontologically understood The sentence: Christ is risen and present, strictly understood only as testimony of scripture, is true only as the word of scripture.⁴³

According to Bonhoeffer, the resurrection and other events in the Bible are thus not true as empirical facts of history.

Closely related to his view of history and springing from the same irrationalist bent was Bonhoeffer's conception of language, which depended heavily on Nietzsche and Barth. Barth and Bonhoeffer were by no means alone in viewing language as problematic. Indeed language and hermeneutics was a central problem for philosophy and theology in the early twentieth century and continues to be so. Barth and Bonhoeffer both embraced the need for contradiction and paradox in the Bible and theology, because they rejected the idea that biblical statements could be metaphysical or ontological statements.⁴⁴ Since they saw truth as non-conceptual, language could not adequately convey God's revelation.⁴⁵

Before *Letters and Papers from Prison* Bonhoeffer only occasionally broached the topic of biblical interpretation. In *Christology* he drew a distinction between the word of man and the Word of God, which differ not only in content, but in their very essence. The word of man is in the form of ideas, but this is not true of the Word of God. "The truth is not something resting in itself and for itself, but is something that happens between two persons."⁴⁶ Later Bonhoeffer explained that when the Word of God is preached, it differs from the word of man, since the Word of God is not the expression of something lying behind it, but it is the very presence of Christ.⁴⁷ The truth of God is thus tied to relationship, not ideas or principles.

Another characteristic of biblical language that Bonhoeffer emphasized was that it is essentially a language of action. This theme emerged in *Act and Being*,

20 ⁴² Ibid, 219–21 (CD, 254–56).

⁴³ Bonhoeffer, *Nachfolge*, 219–21 (CD, 254–56).

⁴⁴ Feil, *Theology*, 47.

⁴⁵ For Bonhoeffer's position, see Feil, *Theology*, 47. For Barth's position, see Gordon H. Clark, *Karl Barth's Theological Method* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963), 136–37; Klaas Runia, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 61–62; and Harold Lindell, *The New Paganism* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 182–83.

⁴⁶ Bonhoeffer, "Christologie," in *GS*, 3:185.

⁴⁷ Bonhoeffer, *GS*, 4:240–42.

SCRIPTURE AND MYTH IN DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

where Bonhoeffer called the Word of God the word of decision (*Entscheidungswort*) for those who hear it.⁴⁸ Decisionism is also a dominant theme in *The Cost of Discipleship*, where interpretation of the Bible is divorced from all scientific or historical considerations and simple obedience to the command of Jesus is enjoined. The anti-rationalist disposition of Bonhoeffer caused him to replace critical questioning of the biblical text with a practice-oriented simple understanding of scripture.⁴⁹ The concept of the simple understanding of scripture, which is mistranslated as “literal interpretation” in *The Cost of Discipleship*, does not refer to the conveyance of any kind of historical, scientific, or ontological knowledge; thus it does not correspond in any way with the evangelical conception of a literal understanding of scripture.⁵⁰ Rather Bonhoeffer conceived of the simple understanding of scripture as something that captivates the will and demands a decision.⁵¹

Decisionism was an important aspect of the Weimar *Zeitgeist* and once again Nietzsche was an important precursor. Indeed Nietzsche’s *Antichrist* contains a passage foreshadowing Bonhoeffer’s *Cost of Discipleship*. I do not know to what extent Bonhoeffer was actually influenced by this particular passage and doubt that he consciously relied on it. However, it clearly demonstrates the affinity between his and Nietzsche’s ideas. Nietzsche stated, “It is not a ‘faith’ that distinguishes the Christian: the Christian *acts*, he is distinguished by acting *differently*.” Then he enumerated actions that set the Christian apart, all of which he drew from the Sermon on the Mount.⁵² Nietzsche consistently stressed the primacy of the deed and the will and rejected all dogmas, formulas, and ontology. Bonhoeffer’s clarion call to obedience to the Sermon on the Mount in *The Cost of Discipleship* should not be confused with a fundamentalist view of scripture, but is actually closer to a Nietzschean view of language and the deed.

Bonhoeffer’s stance toward the scriptures, history and language becomes even clearer when we turn to *Letters and Papers from Prison*, since Bonhoeffer began to write a theological work on the interpretation of scripture while he was in prison. His manuscript never surfaced after the close of World War II, but he expressed many of his ideas in letters to Bethge, so we do have access to many of his innermost thoughts during this period. In the writings of his final years, Bonhoeffer pulled together many of the threads I have already traced in his earlier works. There are some new departures, but the groundwork for them had already been laid.

While he was in prison, Bonhoeffer grappled with the problem of how to communicate the truths of Christianity to an increasingly secular world or,

⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Akt*, 131.

⁴⁹ Ernst Georg Wendel, *Studien zur Homiletik Dietrich Bonhoeffers: Predigt-Hermeneutik-Sprache* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1985), 115, 125, 133.

⁵⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Nachfolge*, 75 (CD, 93).

⁵¹ See also Bonhoeffer, *GS*, 4:243.

⁵² Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, section 33; see also sections 32 and 35.

as he termed it, "the world come of age." This was not merely a theoretical question for him, since he now had to relate to fellow prison inmates rather than fellow Christians. In April 1944 Bonhoeffer first broached the subject with Bethge, and in subsequent letters Bonhoeffer called for a "non-religious" or "secular" interpretation of the Bible.

A new way of interpreting the Bible was needed, Bonhoeffer thought, because of the problematic nature of language and because the world could no longer relate to the biblical language. In April 1944 he wrote that his main question was "who Christ really is for us today." Then he continued, "The time when people could be told everything through words, whether theological or pious, is over. . . ." ⁵³ How then can Christians communicate with the world? Bonhoeffer posed the question to himself in this way:

How do we speak of God—without religion, i.e. without the temporally conditioned presuppositions of metaphysics, inwardness, etc.? How do we speak (or perhaps now we cannot even "speak" as we used to) in a "secular" way about "God"? ⁵⁴

From his definition of religion in this passage, it is apparent that his non-religious interpretation must involve a non-temporal and non-metaphysical language.

In May 1944 Bonhoeffer renewed his call for a new non-religious language. He considered the old terminology of Christianity problematic:

But also we ourselves are again thrown back entirely to the beginnings of understanding. The meaning of reconciliation and redemption, regeneration and the Holy Spirit, love for our enemies, cross and resurrection, life in Christ and Christian discipleship is so difficult and distant, that we scarcely dare to speak of them any longer. ⁵⁵

Bonhoeffer wanted the old religious interpretation of the Bible, which involved metaphysical and individualistic interpretation, to give way to a non-religious interpretation. ⁵⁶ Indeed he did not consider Sheol, Hades, or Christian redemption metaphysical realities that exist somewhere in the past or will exist in the future. Rather they are pictures of that which exists in the here and now. ⁵⁷

Picture language of the sort suggested by Bonhoeffer might also be called myth, and he explicitly made this connection. He welcomed the works of Bultmann and deplored the negative reaction accorded to his project of demythologization. Bonhoeffer wrote:

My view of it [demythologizing the New Testament] today would be, not that he went "too far," as most people thought, but that he did not go far enough. Not only the "mythological" concepts, such as miracle, ascension, etc. (which are not in principle separable from the concepts of God, faith, etc.), but "religious" concepts generally are problematic. You cannot, as Bultmann supposes, separate God and miracle, but you must be able to interpret and proclaim *both* in a "non-religious" sense. ⁵⁸

⁵³ Bonhoeffer to Bethge, 30 April 1944, in *WE*, 178 (*LPP*, 279).

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 180 (*LPP*, 280).

⁵⁵ Bonhoeffer, *WE*, 206 (*LPP*, 299–300).

⁵⁶ Bonhoeffer to Bethge, 5 May 1944, in *WE*, 183–84 (*LPP*, 285–86).

⁵⁷ Bonhoeffer to Bethge, 27 June 1944, in *WE*, 266 (*LPP*, 336–37).

⁵⁸ Bonhoeffer to Bethge, 5 May 1944, in *WE*, 183 (*LPP*, 285).

SCRIPTURE AND MYTH IN DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

Thus Bonhoeffer saw all biblical language as problematic and in need of demythologizing. The entire Bible is myth, not just the miracles.

In a later letter he expressed opposition to Bultmann's attempt to distinguish myth from truth in the scriptures:

My view is that the full content, including the "mythological" concepts, must be kept—the New Testament is not a mythological clothing of a universal truth!; rather this mythology (resurrection, etc.) is the thing itself!—but the concepts must be interpreted in such a way as not to make religion a precondition of faith.⁵⁹

Bonhoeffer identified the resurrection and all biblical history as mythology, but "this mythology is the thing itself!" By this Bonhoeffer meant that the mythological language had no metaphysical truth standing behind it. Thus the mythological language stood as truth in its own right and could not simply be replaced with other words as Bultmann tried.⁶⁰ Despite Bonhoeffer's disagreement with Bultmann, many scholars have noted the proximity of Bonhoeffer's non-religious interpretation to Bultmann.⁶¹

His attempt to move beyond Bultmann by introducing a non-religious interpretation of scripture brought Bonhoeffer into opposition to Barth. While lauding Barth for initiating a critique of religion, he criticized Barth's later attempts in *Church Dogmatics* to reinstate all the supernaturalist language of the scripture, such as upholding the virgin birth. Bonhoeffer lamented this restoration and characterized it as a "positivism of revelation."⁶² Whether or not Bonhoeffer misconstrued Barth's position—as Barth complained that he did—it is clear that Bonhoeffer's sympathy lay more with Barth's earlier dialectical theology rather than with his *Church Dogmatics*.

Bonhoeffer's stance toward God's role in the world seems just as paradoxical as his stance toward scripture. In the case of scripture, he denied any necessary metaphysical reality behind language, while in the present world, he denied any metaphysical reality beyond the world. God's transcendence is not some metaphysical transcendence, but is a transcendence within the world. In explaining his position Bonhoeffer used extremely paradoxical language:

God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God.

⁵⁹ Bonhoeffer to Bethge, 8 June 1944, in *WE*, 220–21 (*LPP*, 329).

⁶⁰ Götz Harbsmeier, "Die 'Nicht-Religiöse Interpretation biblischer Begriffe' bei Bonhoeffer und die Entmythologisierung," in *Die mündige Welt* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1956), 2:85–86.

⁶¹ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 777; Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 17–18; Gerhard Ebeling, "Die 'Nicht-Religiöse Interpretation biblischer Begriffe,'" in *Die mündige Welt* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1956), 2:51; Harbsmeier, "Nicht-Religiöse Interpretation," 82; Gerhard Krause, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer und Rudolf Bultmann," in *Zeit und Geschichte: Dankesgabe an Rudolf Bultmann zum 80. Geburtstag*, ed. Erich Dinkler (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1964), 458; Heinrich Ott, *Reality and Faith: The Theological Legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Alex. A. Morrison (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 114, 120.

⁶² Bonhoeffer to Bethge, 30 April 1944 and 5 May 1944, in *WE*, 179, 184–85 (*LPP*, 280, 286).

It is little wonder that conflicting interpretations of Bonhoeffer abound.

Bonhoeffer's concern for locating God in this present world rather than in some transcendent realm caused him to shift his interest from the New Testament to the Old Testament. He saw the Old Testament as more this-worldly than the New Testament, since Israel was concerned mostly with deliverance in the here and now. He criticized any redemption myths that imply there is some salvation for us outside of this present age.⁶³

As we have seen, Bonhoeffer's irrationalist view of language encouraged paradox, and one final paradox concerning scripture emerged in Bonhoeffer's writings. Evangelicals usually construe Bonhoeffer's stress on scripture as a summons for every Christian to read, interpret, and obey scripture. *Life Together* especially seems to convey this message, since Bonhoeffer admonished his readers to meditate daily on the scriptures and even asserted, "Whoever does not want to learn to independently handle the scriptures is no evangelical Christian."⁶⁴

However, in most of his works Bonhoeffer rejected the idea that interpretation of scripture is an individualistic enterprise. Rather he saw it rooted in the community of believers.⁶⁵ In his doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*, he identified the Word of God with the word preached in the church and equated this word with the very presence of Christ.⁶⁶ Bonhoeffer again identified the Word of God with preaching in *Act and Being* and maintained that the preaching office ensures that the preacher speaks for God.⁶⁷

In *The Cost of Discipleship* Bonhoeffer spent many pages urging obedience to the commands of Jesus before informing his audience how to hear the voice of Jesus and how to know what Jesus is saying. Because he was expounding scriptural commands of Jesus, such as the Sermon on the Mount, it seems at first that Jesus' commands should be sought in the scriptures. However, when Bonhoeffer finally explicitly addressed this important question, he directed people to listen to the church rather than to seek personal revelation through studying the scriptures.

If we want to hear his [Jesus'] call to discipleship, we must hear him where he himself is. The call of Jesus Christ goes forth in the church through his word and sacrament. Preaching and sacrament of the church is the place of the presence of Jesus Christ. If you want to

⁶³ Bonhoeffer to Bethge, 27 June 1944, in *WE*, 225–26 (*LPP*, 336); Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 142; James W. Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer's Theology: Classical and Revolutionary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), 223–24.

⁶⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Gemeinsames Leben*, ed. Gerhard Ludwig Müller and Albrecht Schönherr, in *Werke*, vol. 5 (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1987), 47.

⁶⁵ Clyde E. Fant, *Bonhoeffer: Worldly Preaching* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1975), 35; Feil, *Theology*, 14, 75; Grunow, "D. Bonhoeffer's Schriftauslegung," 64.

⁶⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: Eine dogmatische Untersuchung zur Soziologie der Kirche*, ed. Joachim von Soosten, in *Werke*, vol. 1 (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1986), 159, 172.

⁶⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Aft*, 131.

SCRIPTURE AND MYTH IN DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

hear the call of Jesus to discipleship, you do not need any personal revelation. Hear the sermon and receive the sacrament!⁶⁸

Bonhoeffer was even more emphatic on this point in *Ethics*, where he asserted that

scripture essentially belongs to the preaching office and the preaching belongs to the congregation. Scripture must be interpreted and preached. In its essence it is not a book of edification for the congregation.⁶⁹

Bonhoeffer has been criticized by some as elitist, and surely his understanding of the preaching office and the subordination of the congregation to preaching reinforces this image.⁷⁰ If the Bible is not for the congregation to interpret, then they are at the mercy of whomever happens to be filling the pulpit. Further, in *Ethics* Bonhoeffer altered his view of where the command of God could be heard. He came to believe that God's command could be heard not only in the church, but also in the family, the work place, and through the government.⁷¹ Therefore, it is in the authority structures of this world that God is heard and not through personal Bible study and the revelation of the Holy Spirit to the individual. I find this conception of hearing the voice of God through earthly authorities highly ironic in light of Bonhoeffer's own experiences with Nazism and the German state church.

Bonhoeffer's insistence in the final year of his life that God is firmly situated in this world is a denial of ontological dualism. However, he never rejected the epistemological dualism inherent in his earlier work.⁷² He still conceived of the Bible as a book of religious truths in mythological language that had no necessary connection with empirical historical or scientific truths. His rejection of Barth's "positivism of revelation" and his desire to move beyond Bultmann make him a strange ally indeed of American evangelicals.

⁶⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Nachfolge*, 218; cf. 215 (CD, 250, cf. 249–53). A mistranslation in CD, 253, obscures this point slightly. "Höre die Predigt" is rendered "Hear the Word" instead of correctly as "Hear the sermon."

⁶⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethik* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1953), 228–29 (Eng. trans. *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith [New York: Macmillan, 1965], 294–95).

⁷⁰ Hopper, *Dissent*, 99–103.

⁷¹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 214–16 (*Ethics*, 277–78).

⁷² Geoffrey B. Kelly, *A Bonhoeffer Legacy: Essays in Understanding*, ed. A. J. Klassen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 90, 102, contradicts me on this point. Harrelson, in "Bonhoeffer," 136, sees another form of dualism, i.e., a dualism of proclamation.