Ausschnitt ist). Should we not rather, perhaps, see the formedness of a particular essence (*die Gestalthaftigkeit des Wesens*) as just as much an experience of reality (*Sein*) as the fullness which for us is always empty?' (378-379)

9 E.g. *The Moment of Christian Witness*, 65, on the heart of Christ; *Cordula*, 125, on how intersubjectivity, 'the I-thou encounter, personal love' is decisive in any account of what makes Christian revelation possible.

10 *Karl Rahner, Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, translated by William V. Dych (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1978), 210. For fuller treatment see my 'Rahner, Christology and Grace', *Heythrop Journal*, 37 (1996), 284-297.

11 *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 194— typography and second emphasis supplied PE.

12 'Geist und Feuer. Ein Gespräch mit Hans Urs von Balthasar', *Herder Korrespondenz*, 30 (1976), 72-82, here 76.

13 Eamonn Conway (*The Anonymous Christian*, 91 n.1), drawing on information given him by Herbert Vorgrimler, can give only a handful of perfunctory references in Rahner's published work.

14 Karl Rahner, 'Leben in Veränderungen—Perspektiven der Hoffnung für die Gesellschaft Jesu' (Karl-Rahner-Archiv I B 46), 8. Quoted by permission of the South German Province of the Society of Jesus.

15 On this figure see Jeremiah L. Alberg, 'Alfred Delp: Jesuit', *The Month*, 24 (1991), 289-294; Philip Endean, 'Jesuit Presence and the Struggle for Justice in Nazi Germany', *The Month*, 26 (1993), 240-246. Though a translation exists of the earliest edition of his writings, it is rare, and needs to be replaced by something based on Alfred Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5 volumes, edited by Roman Bleistein (Frankfurt: Knecht, 1982-8). On how there were negotiations for Delp to become involved in a Dogmatik that had originally been conceived as a joint enterprise of Rahner and von Balthasar (from which the table of contents in *Theological Investigations* I.19-37 derives), see Karl H. Neufeld, *Die Brüder Rahner: Eine Biographie* (Freiburg: Herder, 1994), 178-186.

16 Alfred Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4.93-4. [...] indicates passages omitted in the original for reasons of personal delicacy.

17 Alfred Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4.108.

Von Balthasar as Biblical Theologian and Exegete

John Riches

> '[T]heology in the Bible can have no fundamentally different form from later theology in the Church: each is an interpretative act of standing and circling around a midpoint that can indeed be interpreted, but is always in need of interpretation and has never been exhaustively interpreted.'[1]

Balthasar's affirmation of the identity between the theology of the Bible and later church theology, like so much of his writing and work, poses a fundamental challenge to powerful tendencies in the contemporary church, both Protestant and Catholic, at the same time as it claims to be in harmony with the tradition itself. Where Protestant theology from Ritschl and Harnack wants to draw a sharp line between the Bible and the theology of the early church, Balthasar claims a continuity which sees in both the same process of reflection on the relation of the 'Christ-event' to the history of God's love in the Old Covenant *and* the same

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb02805.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

interpretative effort to express the central mystery in the language of their contemporaries: Jewish or Hellenistic. If Catholic 'school' theology wants to emphasise the nature of theology as the formulation and exposition of 'truths to be believed', Balthasar asserts that theology, both in the Bible and the Fathers, is part of an inexhaustible and never-ending process of reflection on the experience of grace in the encounter between the Word made flesh and the community of believers. Such an experience of the outpouring of the divine love can never be encompassed by a reading of the Bible as a collection of prooftexts or what Balthasar calls a 'mere "fundamentalism" of facts of salvation'[2], for all such attempts at meditation on and expression (*Auswortung*) of the divine reality fall under the law of the *deus semper maior*: they can never exhaust the reality of the divine mystery.

In what follows I offer an account of Balthasar's biblical theology—and within that of his exegetical practice—which attempts to evaluate Balthasar's success in searching out a third way between these two very different styles of theologising. Assessing the continuing significance of Balthasar's biblical theology is not an easy task. Not only has Balthasar had few followers in the exegetical world of Biblical studies, but the fronts on which he fought in the '60s have also changed. Yet while debates have moved on his work is only now seriously engaging scholars: there is a—superficial—'datedness' about his work, which hardly eases the task of assessment and evaluation.

Let me start then by setting it in relation to what in many ways remains the defining mode of Protestant biblical theology: that of Martin Luther. Luther's views may be summarised conveniently if simplistically as follows: 1. the central, defining characteristic/mark of Scripture is that in it is heard the Word which 'promotes Christ' (*Christum treibet*); writings that do not allow this, have no proper place in the canon (cf. the celebrated dismissal of the epistle of James as an 'epistle of straw'). 2. The proper mode of understanding Scripture is one which seeks out its literal sense, and this is closely associated (at least in the case of the epistles) with the intention of the author. Luther comes to his understanding of the gospel by struggling to find what Paul really wanted (to say) in Rom 1.17 by the genitival phrase the 'righteousness of God'. It was discovering Paul's meaning at this point that opened up to Luther the real sense of the Scripture, its literal but also its spiritual sense, which meant that he could hear the Word, the 'living voice of the gospel' speaking through the text of the Epistle which till then had sorely oppressed him.[3] 3. If for Luther the centre of the canon was 'what promotes Christ', then clearly there was a serious question about the relation of the Old and the New. Particularly in the light of the central importance for Luther of Paul's doctrine of justification by faith, the Old Testament with its emphasis on the Law was at best indirectly related to the preaching of the gospel. But it is just this dialectic of law and gospel which enables Luther to hold on to the unity of the canon: the law has a theological use, which is to drive people to seek the grace and mercy of Christ.

This summary, though brief, may at least enable us to compare and contrast Balthasar's position with Luther's and his descendants. 1. If for Luther the centre of the canon was the Word which promotes Christ, for Balthasar it is the word-less *Gestalt* of the crucified. In this particular historical figure hanging on the cross God has revealed himself to his people. In the glory of the crucified, the reality of God appears, in a strange beauty which takes form and from which there goes out

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb02805.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

a power (*Wucht*) which impresses itself on those who encounter it and which in particular is mediated to others through the *Gestalten* of Scripture and the church.[4] 2. The proper mode of reading this *Gestalt* is with the eyes of faith.[5] This says, initially, two things: i. the revelatory form which has at its centre the crucified Christ has to be seen. Only those who have the gift of contemplation, who know what it is to see the beauty/glory of such a form can sight it; ii. it can be seen *only* by those whose eyes have been illuminated by the light which flows from the revelation figure, who are drawn into the reality of his—archetypical—faith. That is to say, it can be read only within the company of his followers, the church. 3. Balthasar gives a reading of the canon which sees the historic Christ as the centre of the Old and New Testament, anticipated by and giving form to the one; mediated by 'the interpretative act of standing and circling around [that] midpoint that can indeed be interpreted, but is always in need of interpretation and has never been exhaustively interpreted' which as we saw was for Balthasar the primary characteristic of biblical theology in its New Testament and Patristic practice.

I would like to expand on each of these three points, giving examples of Balthasar's exegetical practice before returning to the broader questions of interpretation which I raised at the beginning.

1. At the centre of the Bible there stands, for Balthasar, the *Offenbarungsgestalt* of the crucified Christ. To speak of the revelation *Gestalt*, for Balthasar, is primarily to speak aesthetically. Beauty, for the scholastics, was a transcendental: it was, that is to say, something which pertained to each and every existent in so far as it existed at all. It might be more or less deficient of beauty, as of goodness and unity and truth: but in so far as it existed at all it must share in some measure in all these. Without them it would not exist at all. The beauty of a thing is a mark of its reality: to be struck, caught by the beauty of a body, or a building or a picture is to be transfixed by its reality, to be attracted to it, captivated. Beauty, for the scholastics, was encompassed by two sets of concepts: on the one hand those related to the words *formosa, speciosa,* concerned precisely with form, with the order and proportion, the rightness of a body, a work of art, a scene; and on the other those related to the word *splendor*, the beauty that shines forth from the object of beauty, and which transfixes and transforms those who behold and *see* it. It is the form, the *Gestalt*, which gives expression to the artist's vision; and yet the splendour of that vision, the glory which shines forth, is nowhere present except in the form. That is to say, the beauty of a picture is neither a particular aspect of it, nor something over and above the work of art itself, to which the work merely points; the beauty is in the work itself in the manner in which the individual passages of the picture are 'formed' together by the artist's vision; in the rightness of the artist's choice of colour, composition, texture, etc. The work itself is a miracle, not something we can finally explain, but which we can only contemplate, love, be captured by. 'If the finale of the Jupiter symphony exists—which nothing in me would lead me to suppose, which I cannot derive from anything I know, for which I can find no explanation in myself—then it exists only as it is; it is as this form that it possesses its 'necessity', a form that could not be changed by so much as a single note unless by Mozart himself.'[6]

Thus for Balthasar to speak of the *Gestalt* of the crucified Christ is to speak in aesthetic terms and indeed to develop a particular kind of apologetic of his own, which is sharply contrasted with the anthropological scope of much Protestant work, and with the rationalistic nature of much Catholic theology of his time. It is

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb02805.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

not, primarily, in the existential impact of the Word that its truth, evidential force, lies—such that the narratives and images of the scriptural texts would be merely signs pointing to their existential significance; nor are the narratives merely the inspired and veridical proof of prophecies and the attestation of God's miraculous acts: what they mediate to us is the form and splendour of the divine glory, revealed albeit in the hiddenness of the figure hanging wordless on the cross.

But here a dilemma arises for Balthasar. What we have are the testimonies of the evangelists and the other New Testament writers to what they have seen: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory. Scripture itself is not the centre of the revelation *Gestalt*: it is that which mediates it to us, it is the interpretative reflection on and circling round that mystery. Nor does it stand alone in this mediating, witnessing function: the church too as it lives out its life in worship and practice also mediates this reality to the faithful. Thus what is seen of the revelation *Gestalt* is seen only with the help of the Scriptures as they are read in the church, within the faith of the church; and what is seen, in so far as it is given expression in theology, is always itself part of the continual process of reflection and interpretation. The centre is something that can be reached only through that which is mediated, derivative.

All this might well lead one to suppose that in his own volume on the New Covenant in *The Glory of the Lord* he would allow the New Testament writings to mediate to him the central *Gestalt*, and then offer his own readings as further mediations of that central reality which can be approached only through such forms. Instead, surprisingly, he offers his own reconstruction of the revelation figure of the Word made flesh,[7] and places it *before* the section in which he treats of the New Testament writings' account of glory: 'Vidimus Gloriam Eius'.[8] It is a deeply moving, kenotic account, profoundly indebted to the mysticism of Adrienne von Speyr, reaching its climax in the cross and descent into hell. But moving though it is, the *descensus*, which is so important a part of it, is hardly one of the more central motifs of the New Testament writings. What effectively Balthasar has achieved by setting this highly idiosyncratic vision of the *triduum mortis* in such a privileged position within his theology is to ensure that it controls his whole subsequent reading of the canon, indeed that it assumes pride of place over the canon.

2. What does this then tell us about how the Scriptures are to be read that this glory may be sighted and form those who read and see it? The structure of *Glory 7* is of considerable interest here. The work falls into three parts: *Verbum caro factum; Vidimus gloriam eius; In laudem gloriae*. The first 'constructs' the *Gestalt* of the incarnate lord under the headings, claim, poverty, self-abandonment, and then explores the momentum (*Wucht-splendor*) of this form in terms of the momentum of time and of the Cross. The second then explores the way in which this *Gestalt*/glory is sighted and reflected by the New Testament writers and comes closest to more standard treatments of New Testament theologies; finally in the third section Balthasar gives an account of the new existence into which those who see the glory are transported (*Erblickungslehre* is followed by *Entrückungslehre*) and treats aspects of this new existence (in reality a recovery of true human existence) thematically under headings such as fruitfulness, encountering God in one's brother, solidarity, nuptiality. New Testament texts are cited, discussed more or less closely under each of these headings, stressing their interrelationship, alongside their particularity. Each of these sections handles the

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb02805.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

exegetical discussion differently. Section one engages/exploits historical discussions of the life of Jesus (drawing specifically on the so-called 'new quest'), while at the same time bringing the whole discussion to a climax in the discussion of the divine kenosis in the descent into hell; section two certainly treats the different New Testament writings more as distinct entities, different reflections of the central *Offenbarungsgestalt*, while nevertheless still being controlled by a thematic interest deriving from Balthasar's own aesthetic, treating questions of appearance, revelation and concealment. This thematic control becomes uppermost in the final section where Balthasar reaches the goal of his enquiry: the glorification of God which represents the human return to its true existence. Here themes which play a rich part in Balthasar's spiritual writings—and, as with the *descensus*, in the writings of Adrienne—are unfolded with the help of the New Testament writings.

Let me look in a little more detail at Balthasar's treatment of the Word-flesh, in the first section. What manner of reading is this? For Balthasar the first question about Jesus is not 'What was the chief concern of Jesus in his preaching?' but 'What was the chief impression that remained from his earthly existence?' What distinguishes Jesus from the Baptist is not his preaching of the nearness of the kingdom of heaven but his claim to authority. John points to the one who comes after him: Jesus points to no one: 'he is identical with the content of his call' . (116-7) This thesis about Jesus is supported by historical (or at least historical sounding) claims. On the Law of Moses, whatever his position on points of detail, 'it is certain that he took it upon himself to make a judgement about the whole law, and thereby set his own authority alongside (and thus above) that of Moses.' (118) This is in turn supported by appeal to E. Käsemann[9] and G. Bornkamm, the proponents of the New Quest of the historical Jesus[10] in speaking of Jesus' ability to see into the hearts of men and women.

Within this schema of historical enquiry he can point to the impact which Jesus made on his contemporaries and to the way this is subsequently taken up and developed in the theologies of the New Testament writers. Jesus' *exousia* as a feature of the evangelists' portrayal of Jesus, 'provides the grounding (*Begründung*) for his being the present Word of God ... His deeds and words, his whole giving of himself and his being, would be impossible without the presence and indwelling of the entire power of God in him.'(124-5) And this leads on to a highly suggestive sketch of the development of the themes of Jesus' authority and truth, his role as judge in the Gospels and in Paul (125-6).

Thus far there are considerable points of contact between Balthasar and contemporary exegesis, and indeed he draws, albeit selectively, on such work for these purposes. His willingness to trace out trajectories and communalities among the New Testament writings and to trace them back to their roots in historically reliable traditions about Jesus is broadly continuous with tradition historical and redaction critical studies of the New Testament. But where does Balthasar get his confidence that the different theological visions (*Auswortungen*) are all equally 'objectively correct' in their attempts to comprehend the revelation *Gestalt*; that they are all complementary and never (seriously) contradictory — while at the same time affirming that they can never exhaust the reality which they are describing, *and* that our knowledge of the revelation is not direct, only mediated through the forms of the Bible and the church?

One way to answer such questions would be simply to say that i) it is the

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb02805.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

aesthetic rightness of these mediating forms—their coherence, their 'fit'—which guarantees their correctness; and that ii) such a perception of their rightness is given precisely to those whose aesthetic vision has been schooled in the community of faith formed by such writings. Now this move undoubtedly has its difficulties, not least because of the very considerable diversity of theologies to be found in the canon and their at least apparent contradictoriness. Yet I very much doubt that such difficulties would in themselves have deterred Balthasar. Such an approach would not however yield the results which Balthasar needs, if he is to show that his own chosen—Trinitarian-Ignatian-Johannine-Speyrian—vision of the divine kenosis with its terminus in the *descensus* is itself a true reflection and interpretation of the central mystery: for the obvious reason that the *descensus* myth is at best peripheral to the New Testament writings.

In fact what he offers is his own—normative—account of the centre of the revelation *Gestalt*, which culminates in his discussion of the *Wucht des Kreuzes*: with its three sections, collision, kenosis and hell. Now this is of course done with great refinement and subtlety. In the first place, he is certainly not claiming to offer a non-mediated account of the revelation *Gestalt*, as opposed to the mediated versions of Scripture. It is the *Wucht*, the momentum, the *splendor* which flows from the centre, that he attempts to catch: the presupposition (*Voraussetzung*) of the various expressions (*Auswortungen*) in Scripture, not the centre itself. But in practice what he offers is much more than a consideration of the impact of the incarnate Word on men and women: it is a theological account of that reality, not identifiably different from the accounts he offers of the mediating forms of the Gospels and Epistles. It is rooted in the history to which the Gospels witness (hence his appeal to Käsemann and Bornkamm); but it presents these facts of history from a theological, trinitarian persepective which is ecclesial, specifically Johannine, Ignatian and Speyrian. The story he tells is not 'just' of the progress of Jesus of Nazareth to his death on a Roman cross; it is of the *logos asarkos* entering the world of the flesh and emptying himself, taking on himself not only the substance but the condition of sinful nature (Leo the Great)[11]; of the eternal Son entering that which is radically opposed to the Father, the world of sin *and death* (*descensus*!), and who yet is held to the Father by the Spirit and transforms that hostile reality by the very presence of his loving self: the strange beauty of his suffering glory, which reaches its term in the descent into the abyss of sin and death.

In the end then Balthasar's exegesis of Scripture is 'incurably' theological: the historical discussions which we noticed are subsumed within a theological perspective which derives from a very specific late twentieth century ecclesial context. In his own terms, it is an example of the mediating form of church theology. But of course, in its context in his volume on the New Testament it fills a privileged position and the result of this is to turn what is an imaginative and creative theological mediatation into something which looks as if it is canonical. This is not to say that it is not instructive, or fruitful, any more than it is to deny that other forms of church biblical theologies are instructive and fruitful, whether they come from the pen of Augustine, or of Chrysostom or indeed of Luther. Like them his readings are informed by the light of his own ecclesial faith, which is in turn deeply coloured by the mysticism of Adrienne von Speyr. Such readings nourish the church; they may be disturbing and controversial; what they are not is canonical.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb02805.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

3. I can consider only briefly what light this discussion of Balthasar's attempt to portray the central revelation *Gestalt* in *The Glory of the Lord* might shed on the further question of the relation of the Old Covenant to the New. As I remarked above, Balthasar sees the centre of Scripture as lying not in its literal sense but in the wordless figure on the cross, to whom it witnesses, and whose glory is mediated through its writings. The effect of this is to present the writings of the Old and New Covenants as revolving round this central figure. It is only as we see the way in which the writings of the Old Covenant are fulfilled in Christ that we can discern their overall *Gestalt*; the New Testament writings have their unity in the way that they together mediate the glory of the Word Incarnate. What sort of a view of the canon is this, might this be? At its best it is one which stresses the immense fruitfulness of God's grace and revelation, its ability to spawn ever new forms of life in the church. The very fact that there are four Gospels, as Balthasar himself stresses, is a mark of the fact that the reality of the incarnate Christ cannot be encompassed in a single view or from a single ecclesial vantage point. And such a view stresses the sense in which the writers of the Bible and, subsequently, the theologians of the church are themselves involved in the synergy of grace[12], as they create the very forms which will mediate the gracious and fruitful reality of the incarnate Word to their readers. This view informs much rich and liberative writing in the Balthasarian corpus. But it is not the only one. There is another view, more fearful of diversity, more desirous of controlling the seemingly infinite fecundity of the divine grace. And it is this view which, one must conjecture, has betrayed Balthasar into setting his own very idiosyncratic theology into the controlling central point of his theology.

As I observed at the beginning, Balthasar's theology was consciously opposed to two powerful trends in the theology of his time: an experiential-expressivist theology which identified the meaning of scripture with its existential effect; and a propositional one which saw scripture as witnessing to and providing the proofs of saving history and the doctrines of the church[13]. By giving us a Bible whose writings are seen as attempts to capture the strange beauty of God's revelation to his people and which in so doing mirror the creativity and graciousness of that revelation, Balthasar has left us profoundly in his debt. The irony is that the one who is in his early years fought to 'raze the bastions'[14] of the old orthodoxies and to open the church to the world at the same time as opening it more fully to the *deus semper maior,* should in the end have developed his own kind of siege mentality. Maybe the unmasking of the defensiveness at the heart of his *Glory of the Lord,* will open the way for more liberating readings of this 'Master in Israel'.

1 H. U. von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord* [*GL*], Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989, 103.
2 *GL*, 7,113–4.
3 Preface to the Latin Writings, *Luther's Works*, vol. 34, Concordia: St. Louis, 1960, 336f.
4 The fullest discussion of the notions of the revelation form and its mediating forms is to be found in *GL* 1, Pt. III, 'The Objective Evidence'. Further important texts in *Word and Revelation: Essays in Theology, 1*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1964, see esp, 'Word and Silence', 165–191.
5 The notion is borrowed from Pierre Rousselot, see *GL* 1, 'The Light of Faith', 131–218, esp. 175–6.
6 *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe*, Einsiedeln:Johannes-Verlag, 2nd ed. 1963, 34; see the discussion of beauty in GL 1, 18–23.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb02805.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

7 *GL*, 7, I, 'Verbum Caro Factum', 33–235, esp. the final section 5.c. 'Hell',
8 *GL*, 7.239–385.
9 E. Käsemann, 'The Problem of the Historical Jesus', in *Essays on NT Themes*, London, 1964, 37f.
10 G. Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1960, 60. Volker Spangenberg, whose monograph *Herrlichkeit des Neuen Bundes*, Tübingen: Mohr, 1993 contains an extremely thoughtful account of Balthasar's biblical theology and his exegesis, has criticised Balthasar sharply at this point. 'What makes the interpretation of Balthasar's utterances so difficult at this point is that Balthasar so to speak programmatically refuses to draw any sort of precise distinction between the historical and the dogmatic.' (53) But it is doubtful whether his method of procedure is any the less theologically controlled than that of the scholars of the New Quest, see my *A Century of New Testament Studies*, Cambridge: Lutterworth, 1993, 89–92.
11 *GL*, 7.212
12 For an illuminating discussion of the different understandings of grace in Balthasar's theology, see N.D. O'Donoghue, 'A Theology of Beauty' in ed. J. Riches, *The Analogy of Beauty*, Edinburgh: T.&T.Clark, 1986, 1–10.
13 The terms are of course taken from G. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, London: SPCK, 1984.
14 See his *Schleifung der Bastionen*, Einsiedeln: Johannes-Verlag, 1952.

Von Balthasar and the Dialogue with Karl Barth

Ben Quash

Dramatis Personae

Karl Barth suits the role of a kind of theological Petruchio. Petruchio, you will recall, bursts upon the stage in *The Taming of the Shrew*, with the 'shrew' herself, Katherina, in his sights. He is determined to win the right to the hand of a maiden whom he construes as hostile, just as Barth (the early Barth at least) saw the theological establishment representing all the arrogance and vanity of a liberal theology in thrall to bourgeois complacency. He invades this hostile world in the name of the Word of God; he elects to be 'rough, and woo not like a babe', as Petruchio puts it. And as much of the theological establishment in Europe at the beginning of the 1920s reeled back in shock at Barth's onslaught in *The Epistle to the Romans*, so Katherina is thoroughly taken aback by this

> '. . . one half lunatic
> A mad-cap ruffian and a swearing Jack,
> That thinks with oaths to face the matter out'. (II i)

Petruchio will not deal with Katherina on her own territory. He whisks her away to his own remote and inhospitable house, and then turns her every expectation on its head. This is 'crisis wooing'. Just as, in the early Barth, for the world of the creature to cross over the threshold into the divine world would entail its destruction and immolation, because of the utter difference of God's ways and

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb02805.x Published online by Cambridge University Press