

# INWARD, OUTWARD, UPWARD, DOWNWARD: REPENTANCE AND REDEMPTION IN THE THOUGHT OF KARL BARTH AND FRANZ ROSENZWEIG

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## Abstract

By engaging the thought of Franz Rosenzweig and Karl Barth, this paper explores the mechanics of repentance in Judaism and Christianity, focusing on the connection between repentance and redemption. According to Rosenzweig, repentance for the Jew is a turn *inward* to what one already originally is, and redemption is an *upward* movement effected by humanity and experienced by God. For Barth, Christian repentance is a turn *outward* characterized by a radical break with one's former self, and redemption moves *downward* from God to humanity in Christ. These distinct accounts of repentance and redemption reveal the reliance of Rosenzweig and Barth upon divergent theological anthropologies. For Rosenzweig, humanity is empowered to carry out its redemptive vocation, whereas for Barth, humanity is entirely dependent upon God's redemptive act.

**Keywords:** Franz Rosenzweig, Karl Barth, repentance, redemption, sin, theological anthropology, creation, revelation, reconciliation.

## Introduction

Karl Barth has been described as a “theological Everest,”<sup>1</sup> and any attempt at scaling the heights of Christian theological reflection in the twenty first century must reckon with his impact and influence. Franz Rosenzweig has a similar status in the Jewish world—his comprehensive philosophical system and complementary construal of Judaism and Christianity are landmarks of modern Jewish thought. While these thinkers by no means characterize the entirety of the traditions they represent, their thought offers us a strategic portal into the foundational fabric of Judaism and Christianity.

Of particular interest to the present work are the underlying covenantal narratives employed by each theologian and the way in which human beings are characterized within those narratives. Exploring Barth and Rosenzweig's understanding of repentance—and its connection to redemption—allows us to access and assess those underlying narratives. In what follows, we will examine the structural contours of Barth and Rosenzweig's theological systems and appraise the implicit theological anthropologies at work therein.

For the sake of this particular investigation, the scope of repentance will be circumscribed to merely one aspect of a much larger complex of covenantal behaviors. Repentance here is defined as an awakening to that which one truly is and was created to be, at which moment one's life begins to revolve around participation in God's ongoing purposes for the world. Using this definition, repentance is to be understood as a rebirth that summons one to reorient their life in response.

## Rosenzweig's Theological System

Rosenzweig's magnum opus, *The Star of Redemption*, is notable for its tight, systematic, and architectonic structure. The volume is divided into three Parts, each composed of three Books. The volume as a whole centers around three fundamental elements (God, world, man) and three movements in the relationship between these elements (Creation, Revelation, Redemption). Part I addresses these three elements in their primordial state and corresponds to the movement of Creation (past). Rosenzweig's system begins with each element existing in solitary isolation, detached from any larger, integrated, whole. The God that Rosenzweig here describes is the “mythical” god, who is not connected to man or the world. The “plastic” world's

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<sup>1</sup> Colin Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message* (London: Tyndale Press, 1967), 9.

independent existence parallels the autonomous reality of the “mythical” God. At this stage, man is “tragic,” closed in on himself, and lacking any relation to the world and to God.

Part II of the *Star* identifies the trajectory by which the three elements come into relation with one another and corresponds to the movement of Revelation (present). While the entire second Part of the *Star* falls under the umbrella of Revelation, each Book in Part II addresses one of the three movements by which God, world and man come to be related. In the Book I, Creation, God comes out of his hiddenness, which in turn tears the world away from its inwardness, fundamentally transforming both God and world. In Book II, Revelation is characterized by God’s primary and initiatory reaching out to humanity in love, an act that further concretizes the outwardness of God manifested first by his self-disclosure in the act of Creation. God’s movement toward humanity arrests its independence, issuing a call and a commandment. The substance of the command is love, that, “as he loves you, so you shall love.”<sup>2</sup> While humanity’s love comes in response to God’s love and command to humanity to do likewise, humanity’s love is primarily directed outward into the world, not back at God. In Book III, Redemption is the “reciprocal relation of man and the world,” whereby “man and the world are constituted into completed realities through each other.”<sup>3</sup> Having both been called outside their interiority by God’s awakening touch, the two elements—man and world—that have been acted upon must now complete the arc of relationship by acting upon one another. As Creator and Revealer, God has provided a universal and objective orientation for humanity and the world,<sup>4</sup> and humanity is in turn given a vocation to awaken others to this orientation.

Part III of the *Star*, which corresponds to the exposition of Redemption (future), endeavors to explain the two separate modalities of Redemption’s trajectory, namely Judaism and Christianity. Whereas Judaism’s task is to preserve Revelation in its purest form, Christianity’s task is to effect the proliferation of Revelation. Only when both carry out their complementary redemptive vocations will the entire system be completed. Although Redemption’s primary actors are humanity and the world, God too is affected and in some sense redeemed through this process. “In the Redemption, that of the world through man and that of man through the world, God gives himself his own Redemption. Man and the world fade out in Redemption, God completes himself.”<sup>5</sup> Even when God’s activity is most passive, he is still the center point of the system, grounding that system and ultimately drawing it forward.

In Parts I and II, Rosenzweig uses the image of the Star of David—two triangles overlaid upon one another, with the points of the upright triangle representing God, world, and man, and the points of the downward-pointing triangle representing Creation, Revelation, and Redemption. Rosenzweig’s star imagery shifts in the Part III, and here he employs the idea of a celestial star, with Judaism representing the star’s inner burning core and Christianity representing the rays that emanate outward from the star, carrying light and heat to its surroundings. This image is paradigmatic for the roles that he assigns to Judaism and Christianity. While Rosenzweig’s own system includes a detailed analysis of Judaism and Christianity, here we will focus on his assessment of Judaism, which at times can only be understood by contrasting it with Christianity. We will revisit Rosenzweig’s views on Christianity at a later point.

## Rosenzweig’s Description of Judaism

Rosenzweig’s opening words of Part III, Book I (“The Fire or Eternal Life”) are worth quoting at length:

Praised be he who has planted eternal life in our midst. The fire burns in the heart of the Star. It is only out of the fire of the center that the rays shine forth and flow outwards irresistibly. The heart of the fire must burn without ever stopping. Its flame must eternally nourish itself. It does not want nourishment from anywhere else. Time must roll past it without power. The fire must beget its own time. It must beget itself eternally. It must make its life eternal in the succession of generations, each of which begets the following one, as it itself again will bear

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<sup>2</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara E. Galli (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 220.

<sup>3</sup> Stéphane Mosès, *System and Revelation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, trans. Catherine Tihanyi (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1982), 127.

<sup>4</sup> “After revelation there is an actual, no longer relativized Up and Down in nature—‘heaven’ and ‘earth’...and an actually fixed Earlier and Later in time. Thus: in ‘natural’ space and in natural time the middle is always the point where I simply *am*...; in the revealed space-time world the middle is an immovably fixed point, which I do not displace if I change or move myself: the earth is the middle of the world, and world history lies before and after Christ.” (Franz Rosenzweig, “‘Urzelle’ to the *Star of Redemption*,” in *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, trans. and ed. Paul W. Franks and Michael L. Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 50).

<sup>5</sup> Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 256.

witness to the preceding one. The bearing witness takes place in the begetting. In this connection with the double meaning and single effect of begetting and bearing witness, eternal life becomes real. Past and future, otherwise strangers to each other, the one drawing back when the other's turn comes—here they grow into one: the begetting of the future is a direct bearing witness to the past.<sup>6</sup>

Eternal life is the term that Rosenzweig uses to describe the existence and vocation of the Jewish people. They embody—already in time—the presence of eternity. Like the core of a star, their existence burns without reference to the outside. This fire burns according to its own time, while the continual begetting of new generations links the past and the future, essentially creating the eternal present. The Jewish people bear witness to eternity by *being what it is* and thus serving as a testimony to the world that lives according to natural and human time. The Jewish people's vocation is characterized by a prescribed inwardness and it is within this inwardness that it lives out the commission to love the neighbor.

In order to define and contrast Judaism and Christianity, Rosenzweig makes a distinction between them as two fundamentally different types of communities. Rosenzweig describes the Jewish people as a “blood community”<sup>7</sup> and Christianity as a “spiritual community.”<sup>8</sup> One of the most obvious differences between these two types of communities is their means of self-perpetuation. Whereas spiritual communities “must make arrangements in order to pass the torch of the present on to the future, only the community of the same blood does not have need of making such arrangements for the tradition; it does not need to trouble its mind; in the natural propagation of the body it has the guarantee of its eternity.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, Judaism's self-preservation takes the form of begetting new generations. However, this type self-perpetuation requires “sealing off the pure source of blood from foreign admixture.”<sup>10</sup> Herein the requisite insularity of the Jewish people begins to come into view.

## Repentance and Redemption within Judaism

If repentance is defined as the dynamic process by which one's life begins to revolve around participation in God's ongoing purposes in the world, what does this move look like within Rosenzweig's portrait of Judaism? Because the parameters of Jewish existence are determined by the enduring and distinctive reality of the Jewish community, an individual Jew's inner identity is set even before he is born. Repentance in Judaism is thus returning to what one *already originally is*. A Jew carries their identity,

an inner home that he may as little get rid of as the snail its house, or to use a better metaphor: a magic circle from which he can as little escape as can his blood from circulation, just because, like and with this latter, he carries it everywhere he may ever walk or stand.<sup>11</sup>

Rebirth for the Jew takes place before their own life and decision, for a Jew is born into the Jewish people whose identity was determined in the call of Abraham. “The individual is from now on *born into the Jew*; he does not need to become so first at any decisive moment of his individual life. The decisive moment, the great now, the miracle of rebirth, lies *before the individual life*.”<sup>12</sup> What the Jew lacks before his rebirth is merely an awareness and acceptance of that which he fundamentally is. His rebirth is an awakening, one in which his eyes are opened to what has been true about himself all along. Thus, individual rebirth—a Jew's embrace of his covenant relationship with God—is a process of *turning inward*. It is a matter of actively accepting a reality and vocation already determined by virtue of one's being born a Jew.

This type of rebirth, for Rosenzweig, is possible only in light of the Jewish people's particular redemptive vocation. Because the Jewish people are perched between this world and the world to come, their collective life foreshadows life in the world to come and serves as a pointer toward final redemption. “That which for other communities is future and therefore in any case that which is still on the other side of

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 317.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 317ff.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 362; Mosès, *System and Revelation*, 176–177.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 318. Similarly, Michael Wyschogrod writes about the “scandal” of Jewish corporeality (and election), contrasting this with the much more “rational” notion of a spiritual community determined by cognitive assent rather than birthright. See Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: God and the People Israel* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1996), 175–179.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 362.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 418.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 418–419. Italics added.

the present—is for it [the Jewish community] alone already present; for it alone, that which is future is nothing foreign, but something that is its own, something that it carries in its womb, and it can give birth to it every day.”<sup>13</sup> With regard to Redemption, Jewish rebirth is a turning inward because, in a very real sense, “the Jewish people is in itself already at the goal toward which the peoples of the world are just setting out.”<sup>14</sup> Part and parcel of Judaism’s commission is to transcend time and history and point the world beyond its immediate reality.

As noted above, according to Rosenzweig the primary actor in the work of Redemption is humanity. Whereas God directly acts upon the world through Creation, and on humanity through Revelation, God’s participation in Redemption is different. God *experiences* Redemption rather than directly effecting it. God’s activity in Redemption is passive, for “Redemption is [God’s] day of rest, his great Sabbath, to which the Sabbath of Creation only points beforehand.”<sup>15</sup> Following God’s initiatory action toward the world in Creation and toward humanity in Revelation, Redemption is made manifest via the direct interaction between humanity and the world. Humanity’s commission to love the neighbor enacts the completion of the world and thus the redemption of the entire system. In Rosenzweig’s words, “Redemption is after all not directly God’s work or action; but just as God gave to Creation the power to grow in itself organically, so, too, in his love, he gave the soul freedom for the action of love.”<sup>16</sup>

Drawing on the Jewish mystical tradition, Rosenzweig connects God’s ability to experience redemption with God’s deep and intimate involvement with his creation in the form of the Shekhina (Indwelling). “The Shekhina, God’s coming down to men and his dwelling among them, is explained as a separation that occurs in God himself. God himself separates from himself, he gives himself away to his people, he suffers with its suffering, he migrates with it into the misery of foreign lands, he wanders with its wanderings.”<sup>17</sup>

Following Kabbalistic thought Rosenzweig explains that through God’s descent as the Shekhina, the sparks of the original divine light are scattered throughout the world, and redemption entails humanity’s re-gathering of these divine sparks. Through obedience to the Law, the Jewish people carry out their role in reuniting God’s scattered glory. In “the Jewish man and the Jewish Law—there is played out between the two no less than the process of Redemption that is inclusive of God, world and man.”<sup>18</sup> As the Jewish people re-gather these sparks, the particularity of their existence and commission is universalized to include the whole world. “The descent into the innermost is revealed as an ascent to the uppermost. That which is solely-Jewish is transfigured into the world-redeeming truth. In the innermost narrows of the Jewish heart there shines the Star of Redemption.”<sup>19</sup> In Rosenzweig’s portrayal of Judaism, repentance for the Jew is a call *inward*, and redemption is an *upward* motion from humanity to God.

### Rosenzweig’s Implicit Theological Anthropology

Before exploring Rosenzweig’s interpretation of Christianity, what preliminary conclusions can we draw, regarding his view of humanity, from his elucidation of repentance and redemption for the Jewish people? If according to Rosenzweig’s system, redemption is definitively ushered in by humanity (which for Judaism entails obedience to the Law), and God experiences reunification through humanity’s obedience to its vocation, what does this say about the role and capacity of human beings, specifically the Jewish people?

Rosenzweig’s system presupposes that human beings (here, specifically the Jewish people) are capable of fulfilling their divinely ordained vocation. In giving the Law, God revealed Judaism’s path to Redemption. The Jewish people’s obedience to the Law is the outward sign of their inward election; it activates and confirms their redemptive vocation. “We must keep in mind,” Rosenzweig writes, “the obvious fact that a Law, that the Law as a whole, is the prerequisite for being chosen, the law whereby divine election is turned into human electing, and the passive state of a people being chosen and set apart is changed into the activity on the people’s side of doing the deed which sets it apart.”<sup>20</sup> Election’s telos, therefore, is a pattern of living, not merely the status of having been chosen by God. Rosenzweig thus accords a remarkable significance to human action, for election is ineffectual if it is not reciprocated through

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 406.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 432.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 433.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 434.

<sup>20</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *On Jewish Learning*, ed. Nahum Glatzer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1955), 119.

deeds. Judaism does not fulfill its redemptive vocation if it does not live out its election through obedience to the commandments.

To demonstrate the reciprocal dynamic of election, Rosenzweig pairs God's reaching out to humanity in love with humanity's recognition of its loveless past. Once awakened to God's love in Revelation, humanity confesses both its desire to live only in this love and its shame "of not having, with its own strength, broken this spell whose captive it was." To God's command "Thou shalt love," humanity responds, "I have sinned."<sup>21</sup> Through this act of confession, the sin of lovelessness is wiped away. Upon speaking these words, "the soul no longer needs forgiveness from God, since she has achieved, on her own, through this admission, the inner certainty...of God's love."<sup>22</sup> For Rosenzweig, the confession of sin is part and parcel of the confession of faith. Humanity's acceptance of its redemptive vocation is thus actuated (and not obstructed) by its confession of sin.<sup>23</sup>

Here Rosenzweig's analysis of Yom Kippur is significant. While descriptions of this holiest of Jewish days commonly center around the fundamental themes of repentance and atonement, Rosenzweig re-centers the chief significance of Yom Kippur on the nearness of God—*despite* one's sinfulness. Rather than being a day of despair, Yom Kippur is a poignant recognition of God's forgiveness of sins and unconditional love for humanity. The Day of Atonement serves to reveal the God who

inclines his countenance, the God who loves man before his sin as afterwards, the God whom man in his need can call to account as to why he abandoned him, the God who is compassionate and merciful, patiently full of unmerited clemency and full of faithfulness, who keeps his love to the two-thousandth generation and forgives wickedness and defiance and guilt and pardons him who returns.<sup>24</sup>

Yom Kippur is thus an annual occasion to be reminded of God's indelible love and enduring endorsement of humanity. Rosenzweig characterizes the Days of Awe as the Jewish holidays that directly represent and manifest Redemption, and it is during this annual climax of the Jewish year that the Jewish people transcend their particularity through the recognition that all of humanity constitutes a universal community. On this day alone does the Jew kneel in prayer, anticipating "the day where everything created sinks to its knees and forms one single covenant to do God's will with a whole heart."<sup>25</sup> Yom Kippur is the one day on which the Jew appears before God "in his naked individuality,"<sup>26</sup> outside the context of the collective Jewish community. As the Jew stands alone before God, without the merit of his membership in the community to recommend him, he represents man in general and his sins resonate with the sins of all humanity. The communality that characterizes Jewish existence is eclipsed on this day, and the Jew here expresses his ultimate eschatological unity with the non-Jew.

The Jew's solidarity with the nations on Yom Kippur raises the question of whether the Jew's confession of sin includes within it an element of vicarious atonement. Elsewhere, Rosenzweig states that "Israel intercedes before [God] for the sins of the peoples, and it is smitten with sickness so that they find healing."<sup>27</sup> If the Jewish people suffer on behalf of the sins of the nations, it is possible to see this dynamic imbedded within Rosenzweig's treatment of Yom Kippur as well. Because for Rosenzweig the Day of Atonement serves as an embodied reminder of God's nearness, and because the Jew's confession of sin takes on at least in part a vicarious role, sin is not construed as an obstacle that hinders the Jewish people from living out their redemptive vocation. It poses no significant threat to Judaism's task of ushering in redemption.

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<sup>21</sup> Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 194.

<sup>22</sup> Norbert M. Samuelson, *A User's Guide to Franz Rosenzweig's Star of Redemption* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 161.

<sup>23</sup> In Rosenzweig's words, "Once the soul renounces its shame and dares to acknowledge its own present and so becomes certain of God's love, it can now attest and confess this divine love that it has acknowledged. From the confession of the sin springs the confession of faith; a connection which would be incomprehensible if we did not know that the confession of sins...is nothing other than the confession of love made by the soul when it steps out of the shackles of shame to surrender itself in full trust" (Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 195).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 347.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 343–344.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 344.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

## Barth's Theological System

With regard to repentance and redemption, Barth's theological framework stands in stark contrast to that of Rosenzweig. Whereas in Rosenzweig's system the three primary sections are centered around Creation, Revelation, and Redemption, the three primary chapters of Barth's theological narrative are Creation, *Reconciliation*, and Redemption.

For Barth, "creation comes first in the series of works of the triune God, and is thus the beginning of all the things distinct from God Himself." Moreover, "the purpose and therefore the meaning of creation is to make possible the history of God's covenant with man which has its beginning, its centre and its culmination in Jesus Christ. The history of this covenant is as much the goal of creation as creation itself is the beginning of this history."<sup>28</sup> In other words, for Barth, the covenant between God and humanity is the purpose and meaning of creation, and Christ is the blueprint and focal point of this divine-human relationship. Christ reveals both the identity of God and the identity of human beings, and in him, "God Himself has revealed the relationship between Creator and creature—its basis, norm and meaning."<sup>29</sup> Christ constitutes the fullness of God's commitment to humanity, and creation points toward this fullness from the beginning. As the complete self-revelation of God, Christ makes known to humanity that "God determines to be God, from everlasting to everlasting, in a covenantal relationship with human beings and to be God in no other way."<sup>30</sup>

In contrast to Rosenzweig, for whom God acts on the world through Creation and on humanity through Revelation, Barth's account of creation joins these two movements. The divine-human covenantal relationship—which for Rosenzweig is constituted through Revelation—forms the very fabric of Barth's understanding of creation. As stated above, this covenantal relationship is fully manifested in the person of Jesus Christ, in whom God's covenant with humanity is grounded. Although Christ figures prominently in Barthes' doctrine of creation, his fullest Christological exposition is found in the fourth volume of the *Church Dogmatics*. Here Christ's identity as the Reconciler is thoroughly expounded and the covenant narrative reaches its climax.

That Barth's system has reconciliation at its center (in contrast to Rosenzweig's placement of Revelation at the center of his own system) presupposes that something in the divine-human covenant has gone awry; there is need for God and humanity to *be reconciled*. Barth makes clear throughout that what necessitates reconciliation is humanity's sin and disobedience, a perilous predicament that only God himself can rectify. In Barth's words,

'Reconciliation'...is the history in which God in His own person and act takes to Himself the disobedient creature accursed in its disobedience...'Reconciliation' thus means and signifies Emmanuel, God with us, namely God in the peace which He has made between Himself and us but also between us and Himself.<sup>31</sup>

Accordingly,

'reconciliation' is the restitution, the resumption of a fellowship which once existed but was then threatened by dissolution. It is the maintaining, restoring and upholding of that fellowship in face of an element which disturbs and disrupts and breaks it. It is the realization of the original purpose which underlay and controlled it in defiance and by the removal of this obstruction.<sup>32</sup>

Christ as Reconciler is the locus of this divinely executed restorative activity. As the Son of God and the Son of Man, Christ represents the fullness of God's love for humanity as well as the perfect human response to that love. While Christ's humanity is that which enables human beings to be included in and affected by his reconciling work, we cannot overlook the fact that it is also through Christ that *God* carries out the work of reconciliation.

As "the Judge judged in our place," Christ vicariously takes on humanity's sinfulness and lifts humanity up into restored fellowship with God. On the cross, Christ makes his way "into the far country" and suffers the rejection that sinful humanity deserves. Barth asks,

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<sup>28</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III:1 (London: T & T Clark, 2004, orig. pub. 1945), 42.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>30</sup> Bruce McCormack, "Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 98.

<sup>31</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3, 3–4.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, IV/1, 22.

if God Himself became man, this man, what else can this mean but that He declared Himself guilty of the contradiction against Himself in which man was involved; that He submitted Himself to the law of creation by which such a contradiction could be accompanied only by loss and destruction; that He made Himself the object of the wrath and judgment to which man had brought himself; that He took upon Himself the rejection which man had deserved; that He tasted Himself the damnation, death and hell which ought to have been the portion of fallen man?<sup>33</sup>

Though Barth never completed the *Church Dogmatics* (the volume dealing specifically with redemption was never written), we do know the basic contours of redemption in Barth's system. According to Barth, redemption is the definitive victory over death and the ultimate overcoming of the contradiction in which sinful humanity is engaged. Humanity's final deliverance, which will take place when Christ returns, is effected not by any sort of human action but by the work of God alone. God as Redeemer does not leave it an open question whether humanity in its sinfulness will always stand under the judgment of death. Rather, God declares "himself truly as the one who has taken all power from the death that we deserved, not merely the death that is necessary as an order of nature, but the death that we merited as a punishment."<sup>34</sup> Redemption assures humanity that beyond death lays resurrection, and this promise of eschatological renewal is the very substance of hope.<sup>35</sup> Humanity's proper response to God as Redeemer is gratitude, since God's gracious intervention into humanity's plight is an unmerited gift.<sup>36</sup>

## Repentance and Redemption in Christianity

What does repentance look like for the Christian, according to Barth's theological system? Again, let us recall that repentance is defined by Barth as a definitive turning through which one's life begins to revolve around participation in God's ongoing purposes for the world. For Barth, this act of repentance—what Christianity classically calls "conversion"—entails a radical losing and regaining of one's identity. Barth draws from Paul's Adam-Christ trope in Romans 5, whereby Adam represents the "old" sinful self and Christ represents the "new" reconciled and redeemed self. The history of humanity outside of Christ is characterized by "the sin and death of a single man, of Adam, the man who in his own person is and represents the whole of humanity, the man in whose decision and destiny the decisions and destinies, the sins and the death of all the other men who come after him, are anticipated."<sup>37</sup>

For Barth, the gospel of Jesus Christ arrests human beings in the midst of their ongoing sinful rebellion against God and awakens them to their true humanity as revealed in Christ. Until one becomes aware of the real meaning of human history, their life constitutes a contradiction to reality. The person who

lacks the knowledge of the Gospel...is entangled in a fatal self-misunderstanding and self-contradiction...The man who persists in his alienation from the Gospel...needs to be brought out of his abnormal, contradictory and impossible being in sin...Whether or not he knows and experiences it, and whether or not he acts accordingly, he is most profoundly confused and assaulted and tortured and helpless and troubled.<sup>38</sup>

In the process of being awakened to his identity in Christ, man "becomes aware of another history which in the first instance encounters him as an alien history from without,"<sup>39</sup> but which ultimately compels him to reorient his entire life according to it. Because of this reorientation, one experiences a radical break with their disobedient past, such that their former identity is completely eclipsed. After conversion, "human existence, as constituted by our relationship with Adam in our unhappy past as weak, sinners, godless, enemies, has no independent reality, status, or importance of its own."<sup>40</sup> Barth thus characterizes conversion as a "falling-out" with one's former self, whereby the old identity "cannot remain."<sup>41</sup> It is a critical turning point between death and life, between past and future, in which one moves from participation in Adam's humiliation to participation in Christ's exaltation.

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, II/2, 164.

<sup>34</sup> Karl Barth, *Ethics* (New York, NY: The Seabury Press, 1981, orig. pub. 1928/1929), 468.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>37</sup> Karl Barth, *Christ and Adam: Man and Humanity in Romans 5* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004, orig. pub. 1956), 17.

<sup>38</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, 807.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>40</sup> Barth, *Christ and Adam*, 17–18.

<sup>41</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, 573.

In the quarrel in which a man finds himself engaged in conversion—as he who is still wholly the old and already wholly the new man—he has not fallen out with himself partially but totally, in the sense that the end and goal of the dispute is that he can no longer be the one he was and can be only the one he will be.<sup>42</sup>

Because Christ acts in humanity's place, humanity participates in his death and resurrection. Once swept up into Christ's work, our former selves "have died in and with Him, that as the people we were we have been done away and destroyed, that we are no longer there and have no more future."<sup>43</sup> Similarly, the resurrection of Christ—which Barth describes as Christ's "coronation"—involves humanity's exaltation as well. As Christ himself was raised from the dead and is now seated in majesty, we too are elected to a "relative and subordinate but genuine majesty."<sup>44</sup> By virtue of Christ's humanity, human beings participate in and benefit from his work as Reconciler.

With this radical conversion comes a radical commission. Those who have been awakened to humanity's true identity in Christ are tasked with awakening others to this reality as well. The commission of the Christian community, like Christian conversion itself, is fundamentally a call to turn *outward*. Because sin entails an inward turn away from God, conversion requires the acceptance of an externally focused vocation. The Christian community is sent out among the peoples of the world, "ordained for its part to confess [Jesus Christ] before all men, to call them to Him and thus to make known to the whole world that the covenant between God and man concluded in Him is the first and final meaning of its history, and that His future manifestation is already here and now its great, effective and living hope."<sup>45</sup> Redemption (i.e., the substance of this hope) is not yet fully present, though already the Christian may celebrate its dawning.

For Barth, repentance is an awakening to the objective reality of Christ's saving activity on humanity's behalf that entails a turning away from the godless past. Upon experiencing this awakening, the Christian is tasked with heralding the final redemptive implications of this central event in the divine-human covenantal narrative. Thus, repentance for the Christian is a turn and a call *outward*, and redemption is a reality that moves *downward* from God to humanity.

## Barth's Implicit Theological Anthropology

For Barth, anthropology exists under the umbrella of Christology, for Christ reveals humanity's true identity. In Christ, God declares his solidarity with humanity and this revelatory event constitutes the center and fulcrum of all history. While the Christ event is God's full self-revelation, "a report about ourselves is included in that report about God." This report tells us of "a history which God wills to share with us and therefore of an invasion of our history—indeed, of the real truth about our history as a history which is by Him and from Him and to Him."<sup>46</sup> God's pronouncement that "He does not will to be God without us" exposes human beings as "those who have refused His salvation and in that way denied their own destiny and perverted and wasted and hopelessly compromised their own being, life and activity, and who inevitably therefore find themselves disqualified and set aside." And yet, humans are also those "whose place has been taken by another, who lives and suffers and acts for them, who for them makes good that which they have spoiled, who—for them, but also without them and even against them—is their salvation."<sup>47</sup>

The reality of human sin is only fully revealed for Barth through the reconciling work of Jesus Christ. Only through the death and resurrection of Christ is it possible to know both the severity of the human predicament and the totality of divine redemption. In Barth's system, human sinfulness is defined with respect to three categories—pride, sloth, and falsehood—each of which finds its counterpart in a specific aspect of Christ's reconciling work. Pride is at the heart of disobedience, for it leads humanity to believe that to be truly human is to "love and choose and will and assert and maintain and exalt himself."<sup>48</sup> Humans wish to be their own god, which they understand to be a "self-sufficient, self-affirming, self-desiring supreme being, self-centred and rotating about himself."<sup>49</sup> Similarly, sloth is human beings' refusal to recognize that Christ has relevance for them. It is humanity's desire to be left alone by God, for it does not recognize its

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 574.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, IV/1, 295.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, IV/2, 300.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, IV/3, 681.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, IV/1, 7.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 421.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 422.

own need for renewal.<sup>50</sup> Finally, falsehood is humanity's attempt to evade the reality and consequences of the predicament revealed through Christ. In this sense, "evasion means trying to find another place where the truth can no longer reach or affect him, where he is secure from the invading hand of its knowledge, and from its implications."<sup>51</sup> Humanity seeks to "silence, suppress and eliminate"<sup>52</sup> the revolutionary repercussions of encounter with Jesus Christ.

Barth emphasizes that because individual acts of sin reveal the deeper reality of the human condition, it is not possible to separate the sin from the sinner. While it is true that even in sin humanity remains "the good creature of God," this truth is too often used as "a pretext to separate between us and our sins, between what we are and what we do."<sup>53</sup> However, this separation is false. According to Barth, the truth of sin revealed by Christ "disposes of the idea that actions are merely external and accidental and isolated. They are not, as it were, derailments. A man is what he does...His inward being is the source of his outward actions." In Christ, human beings are exposed as producers of "wicked thoughts and words and works" who would perish if he had not taken their place.<sup>54</sup>

As the central event of history, Christ's reconciling work simultaneously discloses the peril in which humanity is entangled, and radically reorients humanity's posture before God. The Christ event serves as both *action* and *revelation*, for in Christ the divine Judge "exercises real judgment by at once revealing one state of affairs and bringing about another."<sup>55</sup> Even as Christ uncovers sin as "the truth of all human being and activity,"<sup>56</sup> he recreates, reconciles and redeems fallen humanity. In response to God's gracious act, human beings are called to obediently align their lives with God's plan and purposes as revealed in Christ, and to proclaim to the world the reality of redemption.

## Rosenzweig's Description of Christianity

Rosenzweig's understanding of Christian repentance and Christianity's redemptive vocation affirms Barth's construal. According to Rosenzweig, the most profound difference between the Jew and the Christian is that "the Christian man, innately, or at least on account of birth—is a pagan, but the Jew is a Jew." Accordingly,

the way of the Christian must be a way of self-renunciation, he must always go away from himself, give himself up in order to become Christian. The Jew's life on the contrary does not permit him to go out of his Self; he must live increasingly deeply in himself; the more he finds himself, all the more does he turn away from the paganism that he has outside and not like the Christian in his inside—all the more therefore does he become Jewish.<sup>57</sup>

Thus for Rosenzweig, Christian rebirth—constituted by the turn outward—stand in contrast to the inward turn of Jewish rebirth. Likewise, Christian vocation (like the rays of a star) spirals outward, "into the outside."<sup>58</sup> Whereas Judaism's eternity consists in the prolongation of its internal existence, Christianity's eternity is dependent upon its external promulgation. For Christianity, mere self-preservation is not efficacious for eternal existence. As a "spiritual community," Christianity's continuation relies upon a teacher-pupil model that promulgates Christianity's specific doctrinal principles. In the words of Stéphane Mosès, "in order for a spiritual community to perpetuate itself, it is necessary that it recruit new members from one generation to the next and that its values never cease to be transmitted. This involves a constant pedagogical effort whose result is never certain. A spiritual community goes bankrupt and dies when the values on which it is founded are not transmitted anymore."<sup>59</sup>

Because Christianity is not passed on from parent to child, "Christianity must be missionary."<sup>60</sup> While both communities are eternal, Rosenzweig distinguishes between Judaism as "eternal life" and Christianity as "eternal way." Judaism's infinity is like that of a point, and the Jewish people's self-preservation alone ensures that its existence will not be wiped away. By contrast, Christianity's infinity is akin to a line whose

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, IV/2, 403ff.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, IV/3, 435.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 441.

<sup>53</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, 403.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 405.

<sup>55</sup> Colin Gunton, "Salvation" in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, 147.

<sup>56</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, 403.

<sup>57</sup> Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 430–431.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 420.

<sup>59</sup> Mosès, *System and Revelation*, 177.

<sup>60</sup> Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 362.

existence consists in the possibility of unlimited extension.<sup>61</sup> Rosenzweig's own system thus internally reaffirms the distinct concepts of repentance and redemption in Judaism and Christianity that the comparison between Barth and Rosenzweig made clear.

## Conclusion

So far, we have observed that for Rosenzweig, repentance for the Jew is a turn *inward*, and redemption is an *upward* movement effected by humanity and experienced by God. By contrast, for Barth, repentance in Christianity is a turn and a call *outward*, and redemption is a *downward* movement carried out by God in Christ on humanity's behalf. For Rosenzweig, the confession of sin is included within the confession of faith, and sin does not pose an obstacle in the movement from Revelation to Redemption. For Barth, sin occasions the grave predicament in which humanity is entangled, and only the saving work of Christ can redeem humanity from its fallen and imperiled existence.

Underlying these disparate understandings of repentance and redemption (with their implicit theological anthropologies) are two fundamentally different covenantal narratives. Barth's system builds upon the classic Reformed *sin/salvation* model, according to which a catastrophic calamity ("the fall") implicates and corrupts humanity, thereby threatening to derail the trajectory of God's unequivocally good creation. Divine salvific intervention is humanity's only possible means of being rescued from guilt.<sup>62</sup>

Rosenzweig, on the other hand, employs the more typically Jewish *creation/consummation* covenantal narrative in which God designates humanity to collaborate with him in the work of moving creation to its intended telos. At least one theologian has described this movement as creation's transition from being *good* to being *holy*.<sup>63</sup> Israel becomes God's central sanctifying agent whose commission has universal implications. While sin is acknowledged, it does not threaten the forward movement of the narrative, and provision for sin is made within the parameters of the covenant.

Ultimately at stake is the extent to which human activity participates in and finally brings about redemption. Whereas Rosenzweig's system casts human beings as integral players in the redemptive process, Barth presents human beings as thoroughly sinful creatures whose disobedience to God threatens the integrity of creation's intended purposes. For Barth, humans are *acted upon* in the unfolding drama of redemption, and their commission is to awaken others to God's completed work in Christ on humanity's behalf. Rosenzweig, on the other hand, elevates the stature of humanity, assigning the final and climactic movement of the cosmic drama to human beings.

With these differences clearly defined, it is important to recall that theological anthropology does not stand in isolation. For both Barth and Rosenzweig, their understandings of humanity develop out of their doctrine of God. If we take one step deeper into their theological systems, we see that each portrays the character of God and the nature of divine-human covenant in remarkably similar ways. Both theologians present a God who stands in intimate relationship with human beings and reveals himself by drawing near to humanity in love. This God utterly commits himself to the divine-human covenant and calls humanity to identify itself entirely with regard to this covenant. For both Barth and Rosenzweig, God is wholly and finally "God with us."

When we peel back the curtain of their theological anthropologies, we see that both characterizations of humanity—despite their divergence—aim to portray the same radically immanent God who does not stand aloof from his creation. For Rosenzweig, God ties himself to humanity in a dangerously close way; God's very wholeness is bound to humanity's obedience. For Barth, God's devotion to humanity leads him to take upon himself the waywardness of humanity and to heal the devastating rift caused by human sin. In both cases, God gives all for the sake of humanity and calls humanity to mirror his self-abandoning love.

Perhaps it is the case that below a seemingly irreconcilable divergence lays an even more fundamental convergence, one that reveals an important consonance between Judaism and Christianity. Both Jews and Christians confess their radical dependence on the Creator of heaven and earth and understand their own existence in light of God's election to covenant partnership. These profound similarities place the differences between Judaism and Christianity under the umbrella of a much more fundamental unity. As

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> See, for example, John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, esp. Book II, chapters 1 and 6. See also Donald K. McKim (ed.), *The Westminster Handbook to Reformed Theology*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 112ff.

<sup>63</sup> See Mark Kinzer, *Israel's Messiah and the People of God* (Eugene: Cascade, 2011), 91–125.

71 See especially Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1 §28 and Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, Part II, Book 2.

Jews and Christians recognize and proclaim the same God-with-us, perhaps we can collectively take one step closer to that day of final redemption, the day on which the Lord shall be one and his name one.

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