

Encountering the Word: A Dialogue between Merton and Barth on the Bible

By Ryan Scruggs

Thomas Merton and Karl Barth may initially seem like strange bedfellows: Merton, a pioneer of inter-religious dialogue, and Barth, a staunch defender of true religion as revelation; Merton, who possessed a generous natural theology, and Barth, who famously declared, “Nein!” to Emil Brunner on the possibility of a natural theology and moreover proclaimed that he regarded the *analogia entis* as “the invention of the antichrist”; Merton, a modern mystic, and Barth, a theologian of “mediate” and “objective” truth; Merton, who did much to reinvigorate monasticism within the growing secularization of the Western world, and Barth, who rejected any “rule” apart from simple obedience. Where then can we find common ground?

If nothing else, they share a fateful day: December 10, 1968. Together they would grace the front page of *The New York Times* in the obituaries.¹ Although they died on the same day, Barth, born in 1886, had already lived a long life, while Merton, born twenty-nine years later, in 1915, died abruptly by accidental electrocution during his Asian journey. Both men influenced a generation through successful religious literary production, and both were active and influential in social resistance: Barth, against Nazi Germany through the Confessing Church, and Merton, for civil liberties during the American civil rights movement, and against the Vietnam War and nuclear proliferation in general. While it is highly unlikely that Barth ever read anything of Merton’s works, Merton read at least a little of Barth.² Part of this influence is the focus of our present study. Specifically, Merton appropriated Barth’s thinking in a small book, unpublished at Merton’s death, entitled *Opening the Bible*.³ There are two questions we would like to explore. First, how did Merton receive Barth? And then more specifically, how did Merton’s biblical hermeneutics incorporate a theologian like Barth? Too many of Merton’s interpreters (critics and fans alike) are content to view him as a mystic without any theological borders. The reality is that throughout his life Merton remained very much committed to Catholicism as a revealed religion while remaining unafraid to reach beyond those prescribed boundaries for the sake of humankind. Merton was able to incorporate Barth into his thought because they shared a common view of biblical revelation: the Word of God breaking through human words in the



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Bible and into a world of sin and oppression. For both of them, interpreting the Bible moved beyond technique and critical evaluation to a personal encounter with Christ.

1. Merton and the Bible: A Brief Look at the Early Years

After entering the Trappist monastery of Gethsemani in 1941, Merton confessed in *The Sign of Jonas*: “How little Scripture I used to read in the novitiate.”²⁴ By the time that he wrote this comment in 1949 he had begun reading through the Bible along with what was assigned by the flow of the liturgy. However, the one scriptural book that all the monks did consistently read was the Psalms. In *Bread in the Wilderness*, Merton reminds the reader that “Benedictine and Cistercian monks chant their way through the entire Psalter, once a week.”²⁵

Bread in the Wilderness is the most important book in Merton’s early monastic life on the topic of biblical interpretation. In it he describes a process of typological interpretation whereby the reader moves beyond the literal meaning of the text (without disregarding it altogether) to an encounter with Christ. Of course, this process is not uniquely Merton’s: in *The Waters of Siloe* he encapsulates the Cistercian way of reading the Bible as “seeing Christ in every page of the Bible.”²⁶ He borrows his title, *Bread in the Wilderness*, from John’s Gospel, one of the most influential of Christian typological works, in which Jesus says, “I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (John 6:32-33). Just as the manna sustained the Israelites after the Exodus, Christ sustains the metaphorical wilderness-wandering believer. Merton gladly perpetuates the traditional interpretation of this passage by linking the manna to Christ’s body in the Eucharist, but he wants to go further here by suggesting that it is Christ in the Psalms, chanted by monks in the Liturgy, that sustains their spiritual lives (*BW* 74). (The link between the Eucharist and Christ in the Psalms is most clearly exhibited by Merton’s use of the term “transubstantiation” in both cases.) This encounter with Christ shows that typology is simply a tool in the process of interpretation. The real understanding of scripture comes for readers when they move beyond mere knowledge to a religious experience in the Spirit. In that Spirit they exhibit their true grasp of the content of revelation through an outward expression of love.

In the Epilogue of *Bread in the Wilderness* Merton comments on Paul’s famous statement, “for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6). He draws on Augustine to suggest that the letter kills not only by hiding from the reader its most true spiritual meaning, but also by limiting understanding to the realm of cognition alone. The letter promotes knowledge of the law, but only the Spirit provokes the believer to love. Love is the fulfillment of the law (Rom. 13:10), and the love of God and of neighbor sums up the entire law and prophets (Mt. 22:37-40). Therefore, “charity,” Merton writes, “not as a pale abstraction but as the flame breathed through our being by the presence and action of the Holy Spirit, alone enables us to plumb the depths of the ‘spiritual sense’ of Scripture” (*BW* 133). It is by love

that lives are transformed: “In order to fulfill the law, we must be dead to the kind of life which the law intends to kill, and live by the new life which the law sets before us. This is a matter not of knowledge but of love” (*BW* 134). The letter kills by making interpretation an intellectual endeavor rather than a spiritual transformation. If interpretation is solely about the apprehension of knowledge, then the word of God is not fulfilled. The Psalms are fully understood only as the believer actually fulfills them by living in the love of Christ. Without neglecting knowledge, for love is the fulfillment and not the abolition of the law, Merton clearly wants to suggest that interpretation is primarily about transforming the reader through love. Therefore, for Merton, love is both the key to, and the result of biblical interpretation. “This ‘meaning’ of Scripture is never grasped if it is merely ‘known.’ It must be possessed and lived” (*BW* 134).

However, Merton never neglected knowledge as the foundation for his contemplative spirituality. In 1951 Merton wrote *The Ascent to Truth*⁷ as “the dogmatic essentials of mystical theology.”⁸ His methodology here consists in expounding the mystical theology of John of the Cross in light of the dogmatic theology of Thomas Aquinas. Merton briefly describes John of the Cross’s perspective toward scripture and in so doing we receive a glimpse into Merton’s own hermeneutics. He describes the wake of the Reformation on Catholic interpretation of the Bible in the following way: “The innocent irresponsibility of an earlier and perhaps more spiritual age had led many of the saints to interpret the Scriptures with a freedom that was consonant, no doubt, with piety, but which often had taken them far away from the literal sense of the revealed word of God” (*AT* 138). In the end, John of the Cross sides with the “scriptural” party fighting for new ideas over against the conservative “scholastic” party who were clinging to allegorical interpretation (*AT* 139).

It is not enough, thinks Saint John of the Cross, to use Scripture as the mirror of one’s own interior life. Therefore, even though he draws upon his experimental knowledge of mysticism, he does not attempt to prove anything by that experience alone. All that he says of the graces of prayer serves him as an occasion to seek out the final theological answer, the true Catholic doctrine on each point, in the revealed word of God. (*AT* 124)

John of the Cross remained through Merton’s life the model of a mystical theologian, and like John, Merton too felt as though he was living in a time of biblical renewal.⁹ Perhaps then, in a context not unlike the description he gives of John of the Cross, Merton felt obliged to engage somehow with the scholarship of the day. What follows is one stream of Merton’s engagement.

2. Merton Reads Barth

Before addressing our main concern – Merton on Barth and the Bible – let us take a look at Merton’s interaction with Barth’s thinking. In Merton’s posthumously published journals, there are twenty separate references to Barth between 1960 and 1966.¹⁰ Many of these same references Merton redacted for his book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.¹¹

Despite the fact that Merton claims this book is not a sequel to *The Sign of Jonas*, both the genre of “personal reflection” and the fact that it picks up some four years later provide strong similarities. The primary difference lies in the range of Merton’s interests. While the former book is focused on life in the Trappist monastery of Gethsemani, the latter is slightly less autobiographical and reflects Merton’s “turn toward the world.” This included, though certainly was not limited to, a growing interest in ecumenism, and in the preface to *Conjectures* Merton explains his numerous musings on Protestant theologians:

Though there are frequent references to Barth and Bonhoeffer, among others, this is not a book of professional ecumenism. . . . On the contrary, the approach is completely personal, informal, and tentative. I simply record ways in which theologians like Barth have entered quite naturally and easily into my personal and monastic reflections, indeed, into my own Christian world-view. To put it plainly, the book attempts to show how in actual fact a Catholic monk is able to read Barth and identify with him in much the same way as he would read a Catholic author like Maritain – or indeed a Father of the Church. This is not a critical – if sympathetic – analysis of Protestant thought by a Catholic, but a Catholic sharing the Protestant experience – and other religious experiences as well. This is not to say that I am in perfect agreement with everything in Barth and Bonhoeffer, still less in J. A. T. Robinson. That would be impossible, since, in the first place, these writers are not in agreement with each other, and all of them make statements which a Catholic would not readily accept as they stand. Nevertheless, some of their books have proved relevant and stimulating to me in a cloistered and contemplative monastery. In the climate of the Second Vatican Council, this no longer requires apology or justification. (CGB vi)

So then, while we must admit that Merton’s comments are informal, they are still informative. One thing that we must be careful of is side-by-side direct analysis of Merton against these Protestant theologians. More than just the fact that in his journals Merton writes informally, there is a significant difference between the careful precision that a writer like Barth gives to his thought and the relatively free, experiential writing of Merton. The key word, as George Kilcourse points out, is “*experience*” (Kilcourse 110). The point though, of course, is not to judge one in light of the other, but to reflect on how Merton may have been influenced by Barth.

Some of Merton’s reflections on Barth are very basic, such as a quotation with a brief comment following, or a short comparison between Barth and someone else. For some quips there is really no content to discuss, yet other entries show intense interest and empathy. Therefore, in order to succinctly introduce Merton on the topic of Barth we will have to choose judiciously which sections to discuss. Most significant of all, *Conjectures* begins with Merton’s well-known interpretation of “Barth’s Dream.” I cannot retell the story better than Merton, so I quote at length:

Karl Barth had a dream about Mozart.

Barth had always been piqued by the Catholicism of Mozart, and by Mozart's rejection of Protestantism. For Mozart said that "Protestantism was all in the head" and that "Protestants did not know the meaning of the *Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi.*"

Barth, in his dream, was appointed to examine Mozart in theology. He wanted to make the examination as favorable as possible, and in his questions he alluded pointedly to Mozart's masses.

But Mozart did not answer a word.

I was deeply moved by Barth's account of this dream and almost wanted to write him a letter about it. The dream concerns his salvation, and Barth perhaps is striving to admit that he will be saved more by the Mozart in himself than by his theology.

Each day, for years, Barth played Mozart every morning before going to work on his dogma: unconsciously seeking to awaken, perhaps, the hidden sophianic Mozart in himself, the central wisdom that comes in tune with the divine and cosmic music and is saved by love, yes, even by *eros*. While the other, theological self, seemingly more concerned with love, grasps at a more stern, more cerebral *agape*: a love that, after all, is not in our own heart but only in God and revealed only to our head.

Barth says, also significantly, "it is a child, even a 'divine' child, who speaks in Mozart's music to us." Some, he says, considered Mozart always a child in practical affairs (but Burckhardt "earnestly took exception" to this view). At the same time, Mozart, the child prodigy, "was never allowed to be a child in the literal meaning of that word." He gave his first concert at the age of six.

Yet he was always a child "in the higher meaning of that word."

Fear not, Karl Barth! Trust in the divine mercy. Though you have grown up to become a theologian, Christ remains a child in you. Your books (and mine) matter less than we might think! There is in us a Mozart who will be our salvation. (CGB 3-4)¹²

Barth's love for Mozart is well known. In a short "Testimonial to Mozart" Barth confesses, "if I ever get to heaven, I would first of all seek out Mozart and only then inquire after Augustine, St. Thomas, Luther, Calvin, and Schleiermacher" (Barth, *Mozart* 16). Barth's high regard for Mozart seems difficult to reconcile with his "wholly other" God. For Barth, human knowledge of God is always mediate. First and foremost God is revealed through Jesus Christ who is the "image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15), and then also through the Bible which is really the sign of a sign: the Bible points to Christ as Christ points to God. It would seem that to suggest it is a "'divine' child" who speaks in Mozart's music is to suggest one of two things: that within God's good created order there is divinity, i.e., the *analogia*

entis;¹³ or, that somehow Mozart has received direct inspiration and therefore immediate contact with God, apart from the mediation of Christ or the Bible. Neither of these options, one would assume, would be acceptable to Barth. Barth vigorously denies the first option in his rejection of natural theology, and the second he denies in any form of mysticism.¹⁴ Surprisingly, however, Barth does allow for the possibility of the second option in the very unique case of Mozart. Setting aside Zwingli's propensity to grant "all kinds of virtuous pagans" direct access to God, Barth remarks quite unexpectedly that, "In the case of Mozart, we must certainly assume that the dear Lord had a special, direct contact with him" (Barth, *Mozart* 26). No less surprising, though probably more commensurate to Barth's theology, is his proposal to "leave open the question . . . whether Mozart could possibly have been an angel" (Barth, *Mozart* 45). What are we to make of this seeming exception to Barth's theological rule?¹⁵ Merton also seems genuinely perplexed by Barth's two sides: in his journal on October 4, 1963, Merton writes of Barth's "Evangelical absolutism" and yet recognizes "another side to him – his love of St. Anselm and of Mozart" (*DWL* 22).¹⁶ Barth's love of Anselm actually provides an important key to Merton's interpretation of Barth, and so to this we briefly turn before concluding our thoughts on Mozart.

Two articles by Merton, one published in 1965 and the other in 1966, place Barth's theology within the context of Anselmian studies. Merton says of Barth that "he is not only a diligent student of St. Anselm, but has done perhaps more than any other one man to stimulate study and discussion of Anselm in the twentieth century" ("Reflections" 221). His praise for Barth's study on *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum (Faith in Search of Understanding)* is almost unreserved. Merton appropriates Barth's thought in so far as Barth rejects the notion that Anselm's so-called "ontological argument" is primarily a proof for the existence of God. Despite the fact that Anselm proceeds by way of reason alone, Barth sets out to show that Anselm's method is explicitly theological rather than philosophical because it begins in prayer and rests on faith. Merton also wants to reject the view of Anselm as rationalist and in this line he suggests: "It is quite true that Anselm proceeds *sola ratione* as if there were no revealed explanations. But he never proceeds as if revelation as such were to be temporarily set aside as irrelevant" ("Argument" 250). By rejecting Anselm as rationalist Merton also rejects Anselm as apologist; instead, he offers up Anselm's theology as a model for interreligious dialogue ("Reflections" 223-24). However, in the midst of proposing Barth as a positive corrective to various studies that have reduced Anselm's thought to the level of "banal argumentation," Merton subtly makes adjustments to Barth's position. For instance, he inserts the term "religious" when commending Barth on his interpretation of Anselm.¹⁷ Moreover, he inserts the term "experience" when discussing the faith that directs itself to God's revelation.¹⁸ Neither term appropriately describes a Barthian theology that sharply distinguishes religion from the revelation of God in Christ,¹⁹ and experience as prideful desire to lay hands on God. The two terms come together more than once confirming Merton's distance from Barth.

The purpose of pointing this out is to say that Merton was deeply engaged in an attempt to unite theology and spirituality through concrete ontological experience. He greatly admired Barth but also had significant reservations about his objective theology. Anselm was, for Merton, a model for the unity of theology and spirituality.

It is true that later on, in the decadence of Scholasticism, a dry and cerebral theology was the enemy of mysticism and spiritual elevation. It is equally true that a decadent and sentimental spirituality drove men to technical theology in search of intellectual substance. But in Anselm there is no divorce between intelligence and mysticism. They are one and the same thing. (“Argument” 243)

The term “cerebral” directs us back to Merton’s analysis of “Barth’s Dream.” That Mozart says “Protestantism [is] all in the head,” that Merton qualifies *agape* with the term “cerebral,” that he suggests, “Your books (and mine) matter less than we might think,” all point to the fact that Merton was making a distinction between the head (as intellect) and the heart (as whole person). Merton objected to Barth’s theology when it remained too intellectual or impassive.

Merton concludes his second essay on Anselm by uniting the heart and the mind. He quotes “a few well known lines of Pascal’s *Pensées* which explain the Anselmian experience quite perfectly”:

The heart has reasons which the reason does not know at all; that is evident in a thousand things. I say that the heart loves universal being naturally and itself naturally in the measure that it surrenders itself to it; and it hardens itself against one or the other as it chooses. . . . It is the heart that senses God and not the reason. (“Argument” 262)

And then responding, Merton asks: “Did not Anselm know this very well, or better, than Pascal? Yet instead of setting heart and reason in opposition, he united them in his *ratio fidei*, surrendering both to God in an act of understanding in which the ‘reasons of the heart’ become lucid and beautiful witnesses that convince the mind of God’s infinite being” (“Argument” 262). In this way Merton opens the door to unite Barth’s dogmatic theology with his own contemplative spirituality.

However, it is not sufficient to say that Merton’s hesitation toward Barth remained on the level of theology and spirituality, if, that is, we were to define spirituality as simply a sentimental (or even a moral) supplement to a reasonable faith. The ontological nature of Merton’s spirituality must be stressed, and it is apparent in his statement above: “the heart loves universal being naturally.” This moves Merton’s disagreement with Barth beyond mysticism and to the far more controversial topic of revelation, that is, to the question of the *analogia entis*.²⁰ Merton never addresses this question directly, though it is implicit in his criticisms of Barth on nature in general and natural theology specifically.

On the topic of nature the limit of Merton’s appreciation for Barth becomes most apparent

in his comparison with Bonhoeffer. In opposition to Barth's "austere faith" that is capable of maintaining him against the world, Merton saw in Bonhoeffer a deep understanding that civilization – "reason, culture, humanity, tolerance and self-determination" – originates in the Church (CGB 176). That is to say that the Church does not only lay claim to a redeemed world, but it establishes, maintains, and upholds culture as part of the created world with all of the attributes that God has imbued it with. Merton believed this was his own task too. He felt that it was his purpose to keep alive the valid traditions of the past, whether they were Western or Eastern, and he believed that "Man's sanity and balance and peace" depended on their maintenance. "What is needed," Merton argues, "is the recapitulation of culture and civilization in Christ. And this means also the renewal of Christian culture" (CGB 177). In the same vein, and against what he calls "Barthian radicalism," Merton also recognizes in Bonhoeffer an emphasis on "the rights and dignity of nature in a very Catholic, humanistic way" (CGB 182). Merton quotes Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* where he describes the "natural joys" of life: a home that is more than mere shelter but is an abode for intimacy and security; food and drink for more than health but for "natural joy in bodily living"; clothing as more than a covering "but also as an adornment for the body"; recreation, play, and sex, all possessing more than mere function. And so, Bonhoeffer concludes, "From all this it emerges that the meaning of bodily life never lies solely in its subordination to its final purpose. The life of the body assumes its full significance only with the fulfilment of its inherent claim to joy" (CGB 182). All of these differences between Bonhoeffer and Barth were for Merton evidence that Bonhoeffer was much closer to the theology of Irenaeus, "and this gives him a great advantage over Barth" (CGB 176).

Finally, and most specifically, in his fifth posthumously published journal Merton says outright that the point on which he disagrees most with the Barthians is that of natural theology. Merton espouses the traditional Catholic position that even creation itself is a beginning of revelation.

Our very creation itself is a vocation to union with Him and our life, and in the world around us, if we persist in honesty and simplicity, cannot help speaking of Him and of our calling. But the trouble is that there are no "pure" natural traditions and everything gets overlaid with error. Still, there is truth there for those who are still able to seek it, even if they are few. Ought it to be called "theology"? That is a technical question. Certainly it implies – and can develop – a definite personal relationship to God in faith (cf. the *Proslogion*). Barth's interest in Anselm is very revealing. (DWL 279 [8/12/1965])

While Barth never rejected the notion that creation is the beginning of revelation, in his study on Anselm (1931) he argues that created truth can never be equated with divine truth, and that Truth is only available by way of God's self-revelation and by humanity's response in faith (see von Balthasar, *Barth* 143). So, although Merton is not willing to address the "technical question," it is clear that he thinks the unbeliever may come to knowledge of

God apart from the “specific” revelation of God in Jesus Christ; however, the extent of that knowledge (whether it may be called theology) still remains unclear. Moving beyond neo-scholasticism Merton is careful to say that there are no “pure” natural traditions, and by this he means that even our creation is a matter of grace and therefore “a vocation to union” with God.

Too many people leave both Barth and Merton standing in this dichotomy, totally divided and worlds apart: Barth with his austere faith and Merton with his Christian humanism, as if the two were irreconcilable. But Merton himself was eager to reconcile faith with ontology. While Merton certainly possessed a much more generous natural theology than Barth, he still had deep concern and respect for Barth’s transcendent and revealed God. The day before the journal entry entitled “Barth’s Dream” was written, Merton contrasts Karl Barth and Gemistus Pletho (*TTW* 49 [9/16/1960]), a fourteenth-century Byzantine philosopher. Pletho, he says, wanted to revive the Olympian gods, and Merton calls him a “Pitiful, symptomatic, symbolic figure of the humanist renaissance.” But Barth, he replies, “with his earnest, reforming Christianity, and his insistence that the Incarnation makes it impossible to invent even a Christian god – or to reach into ‘the infinite’ to select our own concepts (idols) of them. Two extremes, but Barth is salutary. There is so much truth there, so much of the Gospel.” Continuing, Merton quotes Barth and then responds with his positive appraisal: “Divine revelation cannot be discovered in the same way as the beauty of a work of art or the genius of a man is discovered. . . . It is the opening of a door [that] can be unlocked only from the inside . . .’ etc. I like Barth.” Although here Merton also calls Barth’s position “too absolute,” it is Barth’s free and spontaneous description of grace that resonates with Merton: God cannot be contained by any system, philosophical or otherwise. It would be a fair evaluation to suggest that Merton perceived Barth’s theology as one-sided, though completely true and even inspiring in that one respect.

One passage by Merton summarizes well the fact that he and Barth have much in common. In a discussion on the nature of heresy, Merton says that in the climate of the Second Vatican Council such a word “has become not only unpopular but unspeakable” (*CGB* 306). In opposition to this attitude Merton argues that a heretic is first of all a believer, and second, one who is so eager to open new aspects of the faith that essential Christian truths are left behind.

I think a Catholic is bound to remember that his faith is directed to the grasp of truths revealed by God, which are not simply accessible by reason alone. That these truths are not mere opinions or “manners of speaking,” mere viewpoints which can be adopted or rejected at will – for otherwise the commitment of faith would lack not only totality but even seriousness. The Catholic is one who stakes his life on certain truths revealed by God. If these truths cease to apply, his life ceases to have meaning. (*CGB* 306)

This statement is absolute enough to belong to Barth himself. In fact, Merton’s use of

the term “seriousness” directs the attentive reader back to his reading of Barth.²¹ From a statement like this we begin to see how Merton might feel so inclined to base much of his later biblical hermeneutics on Barth’s thinking.

In agreement with Anselm’s *ratio fidei*, Merton’s concrete ontology works inside the epistemological framework of “faith seeking understanding” (“Argument” 250).²² He explicitly understands the “Anselmian experience” of faith in revealed truth as an “*intuition of being*” (“Argument” 254). But he also calls Anselm’s *Proslogion* “a meditation on the ‘I am who am’ of Exodus 3:14” (“Argument” 244). Neither the authority of revelation, nor an intuition of being may be sacrificed for Merton. Following Barth’s lead, Merton wants to affirm the explicitly biblical and therefore entirely theological aim of Anselm’s argument, and this requires neither a “spiritual” reading in the tradition of *lectio*, nor biblicism in the sense of extreme literalism.

If anyone would be expected to protest against a supposed “rationalism” in Anselm, it would be Karl Barth. And yet it is precisely Barth who has most forcefully insisted that Anselm’s “*intellectus*” is a spiritual understanding of the “inner text” of the Bible, and indeed a more validly theological penetration of Biblical revelation than that of the typologists and the allegorists who had so far arrogated to themselves a kind of religious and mystical monopoly on theological investigation. Anselm’s thought is not a mere *lectio* of the biblical text, but an *intellectus* (*intus legere*) of the inner theological content of revelation or in Barth’s words, the apprehension “of sanctifying truth in all its fullness.” Anselm is not content to “recite articles of faith” with a quotation of chapter and verse, he seeks to understand the *ratio fidei*, and this *ratio* is not mere logical reasoning but theological and ontological truth, it is the *ratio veritatis* revealed in the Incarnate Word. (“Argument” 244)²³

Based on Barth’s study of Anselm, Merton comes to the conclusion that even dialectical reasoning is proper to monastic theology when it is bathed in the “ardor of prayer.” “We must not . . . exclude the totally new and original contribution made by Anselm to monastic theology by his dialectical quest for objective truth in the *ratio fidei*” (“Argument” 245). On this note, with Merton clearly ready to move beyond the typology and allegory of traditional monastic interpretation and yet determined as ever to discover the Word of God, that is, the *ratio* of the *Logos*, through the “inner text” of Holy Scripture, we turn to his final attempt at a biblical hermeneutics.

3. Opening the Bible

There is a parallel to be drawn between John of the Cross’s decision to side with the “scriptural” party over against the “scholastic” party and Merton’s own mature hermeneutics. In the same way that John of the Cross held to the letter of the text while still seeking to understand the spiritual meaning of the Bible, centuries later Merton too outlines this as his task. He commends the growing field of biblical scholarship and all that it has done for

academics, simple believers, or mere interested readers by opening the Bible. However, his appreciation has limits:

Good Biblical scholarship is essential for a serious understanding of the Bible, but this scientific itch for arid and pointless investigations which throw no new light on anything whatever has deadened our sensitivity to the existential reality of Biblical experience. Doubtless that is what Barth means when he says: “The Bible gives to every man and to every era such answers to their questions as they deserve. We shall always find in it as much as we seek and no more . . . nothing whatever if it is nothing whatever that we seek.” (*OB* 25)

Unlike John of the Cross, however, the choice facing Merton is no longer one of literal versus allegorical interpretation. For Merton, the question of interpretation has become one of the historico-critical method versus an existential encounter with the text. In the same way that John of the Cross held that both were necessary to proper interpretation, Merton agrees that neither aspect should be neglected. On the relationship between critical biblical scholarship and existential encounter Merton draws briefly on the work of Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976); he argues that the first level of understanding is acquired by study and that the deeper level “grows out of personal involvement and relatedness” (*OB* 60-61).²⁴ This second level, Barth’s “inner text,” is where Merton finds much help from Barth.

Merton draws on Barth to speak of an existential encounter with the Bible, but neither of them is so naïve as to think that reading the Bible necessarily leads one to such an encounter: “Barth also makes plain that this kind of confrontation is not inevitable. There are many less radical ways of reading the Bible. Curiously, the most serious religious people, or the most concerned scholars, those who constantly read the Bible as a matter of professional or pious duty, can often manage to evade a radically involved dialogue with the book they are questioning” (*OB* 24). Instead, argues Merton, all that is needed is a serious and personal approach. It does not matter if one is a scholar, a believer, or an atheist; if, as a reader and interpreter, one takes one’s task seriously, engaging the Bible with questions, then the Bible has a way of turning the tables on the reader and asking personal questions right back. Merton calls this personal, existential interaction a “question of *identity*” (*OB* 17).²⁵ “As Barth pointed out: when you begin to question the Bible you find that the Bible is also questioning you. When you ask: ‘What is this book?’ you find that you are also implicitly being asked: ‘Who is this that reads it?’” (*OB* 17). Merton assures the reader that this is nothing supernatural or mystical; in fact, he admits, the much more common response to reading the Bible is boredom, confusion, and even sleep. This question of identity has more to do with the fact that any serious reading of the Bible will end up becoming personal. Merton offers an example:

Thus if we ask the Bible, as we ultimately must when we enter into serious dialog with it: “Who is this Father? What is meant by Father? Show us the Father?” we in our turn are asked in effect: “Who are you who seek to know

‘the Father’ and what do you think you are seeking anyway?” And we are told: Find yourself in love of your brother as if he were Christ (since in fact he ‘is Christ’) and you will know the Father (see John 14:8-17). (*OB* 23)

Merton takes this existential encounter further than perhaps Barth would have accepted by likening it to a *Zen mondo* where the disciple may ask the Master, “Who is the Buddha?” and the Master replies, “Who are *you*?” The psychological results are similar in that the person is jolted out of their complacent reasoning and into a personal struggle.²⁶

To see the ultimate effect of Barth’s influence on Merton in *Opening the Bible*, one must read Barth’s *The Word of God and the Word of Man*. Particularly in the second chapter, called “The Strange New World of the Bible,” Barth reminds the reader that the Bible does not offer all that one might expect. Barth ponders whether the Bible is history? Certainly it is filled with historical events, he muses, but in the end historians are unable to understand the relationship between cause and effect in the Bible: “How much trouble the Bible makes the poor research workers!” (Barth, *Word* 36). Does the Bible primarily deal with morality, Barth wonders? How can it, he responds, when it offers David the adulterer as hero, or Abraham who was willing to sacrifice his son, or Moses the murderer. What we do find in the Bible, Barth concludes, is God. “We have found in the Bible a new world, God, God’s sovereignty, God’s glory, God’s incomprehensible love. Not the history of man but the history of God!” (Barth, *Word* 45). In similar fashion, Merton warns the reader not to hope to receive from the Bible something that it is not meaning to give. He suggests that if one is looking primarily toward the afterlife, the *Vedas* are far older than the Bible and “express the deepest longing for immortality and eternal life.” If one wants to live the contemplative life, the *Upanishads* are “perhaps the most profoundly contemplative collection of texts ever written.” If one is looking for a concrete ontology, then the *Tao Te Ching* is fundamental, and if one wants an ethical code, he says, go to Plato or Confucius. Certainly, Merton points out, we must not search the Bible for a scientific account of creation, and even Jerome knew that if one were looking for literature, then the Greek and Latin classics are far superior to the Bible (*OB* 50-58). It is not that the Bible does not contain all of these things, but that these are not the Bible’s primary concern.²⁷ Just as Barth suggests that the strange new world of the Bible is God himself in his triune nature (Barth, *Word* 48-49), so Merton proclaims: “The word of God is now not only event but person, and the entire meaning and content of the Bible is to be found, say the Apostles, not in the message about Christ but in an encounter with Christ, who is at once person and word of God and who lives as the Risen Lord” (*OB* 69).

The existential encounter with the Bible is not really an encounter with the Bible at all, but an encounter with the Word of God in human words. Merton calls this a “breakthrough of the ultimate word into the sphere of the human” (*OB* 15). If in Merton’s early biblical hermeneutics he was able to utilize typology as a method to find Christ in the Psalms, his later biblical hermeneutics draws on the work of Barth to find the Word of God speaking in human words. Douglas J. Hall describes Barth’s hermeneutics in a way that is more than

reminiscent of Merton's early method of reading the Bible:

We do not meet the incarnate Word, the Logos of God in Jesus Christ, apart from hearing the written word as it is made present to us through the preached word. Nor have we really heard the biblical word or the word of proclamation until they have become the means through which we are encountered by the living Word. Apart from that encounter, the biblical word and the preached word remain mere words, even though they are themselves indispensable to the encounter. Something almost comparable to a transubstantiation must take place if these scriptural words are to become for us God's word to us.²⁸

This notion of transubstantiation is central to Merton's early reading of the Psalms and Hall finds something like it in Barth's biblical hermeneutics as well. While Merton drops any notion of the "preached word" there are definite similarities in the two christocentric hermeneutics. The continuity in Merton is evident: the Bible serves the reader in facilitating a personal, existential encounter with Christ. But an encounter alone is insufficient; the encounter must also lead to transformation.

Here again, fourteen years after *Bread in the Wilderness*, the passage from 2 Corinthians 3:6 takes on great import. In reminding the reader that the "letter kills, but the Spirit gives life," Merton again emphasizes that this is not simply a matter of "spiritual" interpretation. "This Spirit of liberty is ultimately a Spirit of love which makes us live not for ourselves but for one another. . . . One who is reborn in the Spirit and who therefore lives by love is liberated from all the narrow claims of sectarian prejudice, nationalism, legalism, and from every division that breeds hatred and conflict" (*OB* 11). Merton claims that the central message of the Bible is one of liberation (*OB* 37-38). If interpretation does not go beyond knowledge to the practical works of love that liberate humanity from bondage, then it provides no understanding at all. Merton goes as far as to propose something similar to what at the time were only whispers of liberation theology by suggesting, "the Bible is above all a message preached to the poor, the burdened, the oppressed, the underprivileged" (*OB* 41). The central message of the Bible is the Word made flesh, and this is only fully understood when the reader begins to live a life within the power of that liberating love that Christ fully embodied.

Conclusion

Although he would avoid any suggestion that he was a theologian and even less a biblical scholar, Merton engaged consistently and seriously with the important Christian thinkers of his day. Much like his view of John of the Cross, Merton did not think it enough to use scripture as a mirror of his own interior life. He searched for the true Catholic doctrine in all of his spiritual experience, in the revealed Word of God. This did not mean engaging in the reductive mode of Biblicism; rather it meant investigating the words of men in order to encounter the Word of God as the crucified and risen Christ.

In the last decade of his life Merton encountered Karl Barth who for him spoke so much

truth. Merton did not engage with Barth uncritically, but he embraced in him all that he found of the Gospel. Their disagreement on natural theology did not dissuade Merton from appreciating Barth on the topic of the revealed Word of God. In fact, in the conservative Protestant thinker Merton found a biblical hermeneutics not unlike his own: one that moves beyond the words of the text to a personal encounter with the One whom the Bible proclaims. Ultimately, Merton's early biblical hermeneutics are consistent with his later hermeneutics in that they both call the reader to move beyond intellectual comprehension to a way of being in the world. They both call the reader to Love.

1. William Clancy, "Karl Barth and Thomas Merton: Grace as Demand," *Worldview* 12 (January 1969) 11.
2. It is evident that Merton read a collection of Barth's essays on *Christmas* (1931) in 1960; his short book on *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (1956), trans. Clarence K. Pott (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1986) in 1960 (subsequent references will be cited as "Barth, *Mozart*") parenthetically in the text); *Dogmatics in Outline* (1947), trans. G. T. Thomson (New York: Harper and Row, 1959) in 1963; *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (1931), trans. Ian Robertson (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1960) in the early to mid-sixties (subsequent references will be cited as "Barth, *Anselm*") parenthetically in the text); and *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (1928), trans. Douglas Horton (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1957) in the mid- to late sixties; (subsequent references will be cited as "Barth, *Word*") parenthetically in the text). Moreover, George Kilcourse suggests that "there is evidence that Merton had read Henri Bouillard's *Karl Barth* (3 vols., Paris, 1957)" (*Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993] 245; subsequent references will be cited as "Kilcourse" parenthetically in the text); no doubt this is due to the citation and recommendation Merton provides in his 1966 article, "St. Anselm and His Argument" (*American Benedictine Review* 17 [1966]: 238-62), in which he draws sympathetically on Barth's *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (subsequent references will be cited as "Argument" parenthetically in the text); Merton also recognizes Barth's contribution to Anselmian studies in his article, "Reflections on Some Recent Studies of St. Anselm" (*Monastic Studies* 3 [1965] 221-34) subsequent references will be cited as "Reflections" parenthetically in the text. Merton's library housed at the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY, includes the French translation by Jean Carrère of Barth's *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, entitled *La Preuve de l'Existence de Dieu* (Lonay, Switzerland: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1958), as well as *The Word of God and the Word of Man*.
3. Thomas Merton, *Opening the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1970); subsequent references will be cited as "OB" parenthetically in the text. Merton wrote this extended essay in 1967, one year before his death, at the request of his friend, rabbi and biblical scholar Abraham Heschel. It was to be used for an edition of the Time-Life Bible, a project that later fell through.
4. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 213.
5. Thomas Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness* (New York: New Directions, 1953) 3; subsequent references will be cited as "BW" parenthetically in the text. *Bread in the Wilderness* is a significant source of information on Merton's early biblical hermeneutics; it requires much further discussion but because it is not the topic of our present discussion I will only summarize its significance briefly.
6. Thomas Merton, *The Waters of Siloe* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949) 298.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951); subsequent references will be cited as "AT" parenthetically in the text.
8. Unpublished letter to Sr. Thérèse Lentfoehr of February 15, 1949, quoted by William H. Shannon in his entry on *The Ascent to Truth* in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 11. Although in analysing his own work Merton did not like *The Ascent to Truth* very much, the reasons have more to do, in my opinion, with the academic approach he took than with the results of his exploration. I see *The Ascent to Truth* very much as the foundation of much of his later more experimental writings.
9. Merton writes: "We are fortunately living in an age of theological ferment and of Biblical renewal. All of us – scholars, simple believers or mere interested readers – stand in immense debt to the specialists who have done so much to really open the Bible to us" (*OB* 25-25).
10. These references range from simply mentioning Barth's name to paragraph-long quotations with Merton's commentary following: see Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor

- A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 47 [9/14/60], 48 [9/16/60], 49 [9/16/60], 49-50 [9/17/60], 51 [9/23/60], 155 [8/22/61] (subsequent references will be cited as “*TTW*” parenthetically in the text); Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 7 [8/13/63], 20 [9/30/63], 22 [10/4/63], 23 [10/7/63], 24 [10/9/63], 26-27 [10/24/63], 27 [10/26/63], 27 [10/27/63], 28-29 [10/28/63], 29 [10/29/63], 86 [3/6/64], 91 [3/19/64], 279 [8/12/65] (subsequent references will be cited as “*DWL*” parenthetically in the text); Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 12 [1/28/1966]. There are also six references to Barth in the five volumes of Merton’s published correspondence: see Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 497 [3/16/64 letter to Karl Rahner]; Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) 189 [12/20/63 letter to Fr. Kilian McDonnell], 219 [7/3/64 letter to Hans Urs von Balthasar], 312 [9/12/66 letter to von Balthasar]; Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 274 [9/22/66 letter to Julien Green] (subsequent references will be cited as “*CT*” parenthetically in the text); Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 331 [5/12/67 letter to Masao Abe]. Barth is also mentioned in Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 150; Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 191, 237; Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967) 191; Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 5, 17.
11. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) vi, 3-4, 8-9, 10-11, 144, 176, 182, 284, 288-89, 303-305, 311, 317; subsequent references will be cited as “*CGB*” parenthetically in the text.
 12. The form presented here is slightly revised from that in Merton’s original journal entry (*TTW* 49-50 [9/17/60]).
 13. Barth rejects the *analogia entis* (analogy of being) because it posits a similarity between the Creator and the created on the basis of the abstract category of being. Instead, Barth forwards the *analogia fidei* (analogy of faith) as a similarity between the Creator and the created on the basis of God’s concrete action: humanity responds by faith to God’s faithfulness, or by gratefulness in response to God’s grace. Barth’s very definition of God as “Being in Act” refuses to divide God’s essence from his action. His concern is twofold: first, to maintain the unity of God as both Creator and Reconciler; and second, to ensure that participation in God is rooted in God’s grace and not in any natural human capacity. However, insofar as the *analogia entis* is subordinate to the *analogia fidei*, it is acceptable to Barth. It could be overstating the case to suggest that Barth here opens himself up to the *analogia entis*. The doctrine of Incarnation must certainly be foremost in Barth’s mind in the use of this term, though he never makes it explicit; for Barth, there is no grace, no specific revelation or knowledge, and certainly no divinity within creation apart from the person of Jesus Christ. To ensure Barth’s consistency we would have to interpret him as saying that Mozart’s child-like faith in Christ (and therefore his union to Christ) was the foundation of the “divine” voice within his music. On the other hand we certainly cannot say that Merton’s musings are unhinged from his faith. Merton’s interpretation overtly recognizes the “‘divine’ child” as Christ; the primary difference between the two might be that Merton is much more likely to see Christ in many places, precisely because the Incarnation is God’s affirmation of his good creation. Barth would certainly have rejected any notion that Mozart, through his music alone, could have come to a saving knowledge of God.
 14. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II.1: The Doctrine of God*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (1940; repr., London: T. & T. Clark, 2004). Barth attacks the concept of the *analogia entis* as the underlying principle of Catholic theology and the basis for natural theology (81 ff.). He also charges Augustine with seeking to transcend and therefore “wanting to abandon, the place where God encounters man in His revelation and where He gives himself to be heard and seen by man,” that is, in his Word (10-11); this is the fault of mysticism in Barth’s thought.
 15. Paul Louis Metzger argues that Barth’s view on Mozart was in fact not at all an exception, but rather the rule of Barth’s mature theology: see *The Word of Christ and the World of Culture: Sacred and Secular through the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).
 16. Although his reading of Barth was limited, it is significant that Merton picked up on these two central figures in Barth’s theology. Merton rightly focused his interest in Barth on these two figures, locating precisely the aspects of Barth’s theology that were most compatible with the Catholic view on nature. Surprisingly, given his positive view of Barth, Merton had not read Hans Urs von Balthasar’s important work, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation* (1951), trans. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1992); subsequent references will be cited as “von Balthasar, *Barth*” parenthetically in the text. Von Balthasar argues that Barth, through his study on Anselm, did eventually develop a method of theological analogy (the *analogia entis* within the *analogia fidei*) that

- allowed him to affirm the notion of grace building on nature (see Kilcourse's evaluation: 245-46, n. 84).
17. "In the twentieth century, when Anselm has been to a great extent taken for granted by Catholics, a powerful stimulus to the study of his thought was given by Karl Barth in a book on 'the Argument' which continues to be much discussed and which amounts to a real rediscovery of the profound religious dimensions of Anselm's thought" ("Argument" 239).
 18. "Anselm's *ratio* always begins and ends with a religious experience of the truth of faith concerning which his reason meditates and inquires" ("Reflections" 225).
 19. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I:2: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (London: T. & T. Clark, 1980) par. 17.
 20. Or perhaps more accurately, it roots Merton's mysticism in ontology.
 21. There is strong evidence in Merton's journals to suggest that Merton's use of the term "serious" is often directly related to his study of Barth. The continuity becomes entirely clear in *Conjectures* as Merton strings together his various meanderings on Barth into a sequence of thought culminating in this discussion on heresy (CGB 303-07); see *TTW* 48 [9/16/60]; *DWL* 20 [9/30/63], 26 [10/24/63], 27 [10/26/63], 27 [10/27/63]; also CGB 317, and CT 274 [9/22/66 letter to Julien Green]. Generally, Merton's "seriousness" opposes what he calls a "naïve optimism," or "heresy." But it also opposes a deterministic pessimism (a caricature of Calvinism) that Merton writes about in his article on Green's *Chaque Homme dans sa Nuit* (1961): see Thomas Merton, "To Each His Darkness," in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), 27-33. Barth's "seriousness" is grounded in both God's justice and his mercy, and therefore refuses to take either perfection lightly.
 22. Merton makes his interpretation of Anselm's argument (and by implication his method of theology) explicit in his reading journal #56: "To understand [the argument] we must – 1) Accept the primacy of being. 2) Recognize that we have a natural intuition of being & are thereby naturally disposed to recognize the existence of God. 3) We see that A. is linking up his *theological faith* with his *natural intuition of being*. This is the basis of his *ratio fidei*" (39).
 23. See Barth, *Anselm* 41-46. T. F. Torrance stresses the importance of this "inner text" for Barth: "it means that genuine theology cannot remain at the level of a biblical theology that is concerned only with the recital of the acts of God as recounted in Holy Scripture, or with a linguistic and phenomenological exegesis of the Scriptures. Certainly theology takes place only within the field of exegetical study and only on the ground of what the apostles and prophets have witnessed, but because it is only in God himself, in whom Truth and Being are one, that the basis of knowledge and speech about him is identical with its proper content, theology must press on to inquire into the relation between biblical thought and speech and their source in the Truth and Being of God. . . . True interpretation arises where perception of the meaning of the letter of Holy Scripture and understanding of the reality it indicates are one" (*Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology, 1910-1931* [New York: Continuum, 2004] 188-89).
 24. Merton's understanding of Bultmann here is quite limited. In fact, Merton's understanding of Bultmann's two terms, *Vorverständnis* and *Lebensverhältnis*, is patently incorrect. However, despite lacking the philosophical sophistication of Bultmann's hermeneutics, Merton's spiritual method of interpretation is still valuable from the perspective of religious experience.
 25. He ponders whether or not to call it a "metaphysic of identity," or perhaps even a "theological revelation of identity beyond all grasp of metaphysics," but settles to suggest that, "*the Bible raises the question of identity in a way no other book does*" (OB 17).
 26. Merton distinguishes between Zen existentialism and Christian revelation by saying: "In many ways Zen, which explicitly repudiates all authoritarian scriptures, is poles apart from the Bible, but in its uniquely zestful appreciation of the concrete happening and of concrete, living time, Zen does come close to the existentiality and spontaneity of the personal act of Biblical faith, though here we must distinguish carefully between faith in dogmatic propositions about God and faith as a personal, inscrutable event and encounter which revolutionizes one's entire sense of being and of identity" (OB 51-52).
 27. Of course the Bible cannot have concerns of its own, but both Barth and Merton speak as though it did because they see something, i.e., Someone, behind it.
 28. D. J. Hall, "Who Can Say It As It Is? Karl Barth on the Bible" (paper presented at the University of Calgary, March 8, 2004) 8.