

Dutch Reflections on God's Word

A History of the Reformed Doctrine of Scripture
from Kuyper to the Present

by

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... de diverse pogingen, om Genesisberichten te spannen voor het wagentje van onze biologische en biofilosofische taak. Bij deze poging raakt de exegese uiteraard onder de wielen. We vragen ons wel eens, een beetje moedeloos, af hoelang dit gemodder nog zal duren. De vraag is niet verstandig, want dit en dergelijk gemodder zal zonder twijfel worden voortgezet tot de dag van Christus' wederkomst. Dan zal Hij vuur op de aarde werpen, waardoor deze bouwwerken van hooi, stro en stoppelen zullen worden verteerd.

---- K.J. Popma, *Levensbeschouwing* I, p. 236.

English Translation by John H. Boer:

Regarding the various attempts to tie the meaning of the Genesis creation accounts to our biological and bio-philosophical carts—These attempts amount to crushing legitimate exegesis under the wheels of the cart. We ask ourselves occasionally, in somewhat discouraged spirit, to be sure, how long people will continue to muddy the waters with such interpretations. Actually, this is not a wise question, for these muddying attempts will undoubtedly be continued till the day of Christ's return. Then He will cast His fire on the earth that will consume all these constructions of hay, stubble and straw.

----K. J. Popma, *Levensbeschouwing* I, p. 236.

Preface

The background of this paper is a deep interest in the relationship between the early chapters of Genesis and other ancient documents of the Near East. After having read a considerable number of works on this subject, I began to feel the need for a point of reference. In view of the fact that I often relate myself to the theological efforts of the leading theologians of *De Gereformeerde Kerken van Nederland*,¹ I thought it well to investigate the tradition of that community with respect to the problem at hand. It soon became evident that this would require an even more basic study, namely the doctrine of Scripture current in that community. As it is, we live in changing times and few things or people can escape changes. One cannot understand the present climate of thought in *De Gereformeerde Kerken* without knowing something of the background. The result turned out to be a brief history of the doctrine of Scripture, with special emphasis on the treatment of Genesis 1–11, a history beginning somewhat arbitrarily with Abraham Kuyper and ending equally arbitrarily just short of Kuitert. In addition to an arbitrary beginning and end, the selection of books and articles tapped for the project is arbitrary. There are many more that could and, perhaps, should have been read – some very major even. The only excuse for these arbitrary choices was shortage of time.

A word of acknowledgement is due to Prof. John Stek of Calvin Theological Seminary. The opinions expressed in this paper are entirely mine, not his. However in the few sessions we have had together, his pointed questions continued to prod me on in the direction I took.

¹There is a variety of Reformed churches in The Netherlands. The denomination mentioned here was actually the second largest Protestant church that in which Abraham Kuyper and all the other theologians you will meet in this paper were very prominent. It was the denomination in which my ancestors as well as my wife and I were baptized and the one with which my North American denomination, The Christian Reformed Church in North America, is most closely associated. The largest Protestant church was the Hervormde Kerk, the much older former state church. “Hervormd” and “Gereformeerd” are synonyms for “Reformed.” Recently, these two denominations reunited under the name of “The Protestantse Kerken van Nederland” (The Protestant Churches of The Netherlands).

Preface to the 2016 Edition

The birth year of this document is 1969—47 years ago. Any wonder that I'm starting to feel ancient? It is one of the few early academic papers of mine that are still left. At the time, the issues in this paper were most relevant in my own life, in the life of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), my denomination, and in the life of the Dutch denomination in which the events of this paper took place. These theological developments have been overtaken during the intervening decades, not the least by the reunification that took place between that Dutch denomination, the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, and the parent church from which it originally seceded. My main reason for including this early academic paper along with a few others that remain is simply to complete the Boeriana legacy this website represents. However, it also represents a theological snapshot of almost a century of Reformed theologizing in The Netherlands that will have relevance to any future student of that history. For a more complete background story for this paper I refer you to our memoires.²

The text of this 2016 version is exactly as the original unpublished version of 1969. There are a few additions to the footnotes and Dutch quotations have been translated. In this version, the longer quotations appear first in English with the original Dutch following immediately. Shorter quotes appear in the text in English, while the original Dutch is relegated to the footnotes. In addition, there is a short table of abbreviations of magazine sources, most of which are in Dutch with English translations of titles and other information added.

You can find the Bibliography by finding < xxxx >.

I remind you that if you really want to read the one single existing original copy of this document, in the future you can contact Heritage Hall at Calvin College, Grand Rapids MI.

²Jan H. Boer & Frances A. Boer-Prins. *Every Square Inch—A Missionary Memoir*, vol. 2, p. 82.
www.SocialTheology.com/boeriana (the first document on the same page as this paper).

Abbreviations

- CN--* *Church & Nation* (a former Reformed Canadian magazine)
- CRC(NA)* Christian Reformed Church (in North America)
- GTT--* *Gereformeerd Theologisch Tijdschrift (Reformed Theological Journal)*
- IRB--* *International Reformed Bulletin* (the official journal of the now moribund
International Association for Reformed Faith and Action)
- GW--* *Gereformeerd Weekblad (Reformed Weekly)*
- PR--* *Philosophia Reformata* (A predominantly Dutch-language journal of the
philosophical arm of the Kuyperian movement of which all of these
theologians
are a part. A highly technical, sophisticated and international journal, PR is still
being published.)

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PostScript: Letter from Professor John H. Stek

I. Introduction

In 1938, Berkouwer devoted a lengthy chapter to the isolation of the Reformed view of Scripture.³ The isolation to which he referred was the insistence of the Reformed community that the Scripture is not merely a human book that may be subjected to critical-historical analysis on basis of the presuppositions of modern science. The true character of Scripture will always elude the grasp of those approaching it on this basis for the *Scripture judges man*, also the scientific man. Man is not to degrade the Scripture to the status of a scientific *Gegenstand*, but he is rather to subject himself to the judgment of Scripture. Scripture is not merely the word of man: it is the Word of God. That is what places it in a unique relationship over against man. Insistence upon this truth marks the isolation of the Reformed community, according to Berkouwer.

The question that concerns us in these pages is whether or not this traditional Reformed isolation is still adhered to in the Reformed community known as *De Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*. There is a great deal of alarm and suspicion with respect to the current trends in that community of faith, a suspicion not confined to the Christian Reformed Church in North America, but also very prevalent within the confines of the *Gereformeerde Kerken* themselves. There are those who detect a radical break with the traditions of the past.

Praamsma, for example, claims that the new direction is not a matter of increased knowledge, but of a different viewpoint.⁴ That is, there has been a change in the criteria for Bible study. He describes the present attitude towards Scripture as “cavalier.”⁵ An unhealthy dualistic principle of formal and material authority has been introduced.⁶ His concern is not exclusively with Kuitert: it includes Berkouwer, who, according to Praamsma, has reversed his theological stance in his *Het probleem der Schriftkritiek* of 1938, in which he warred against *all* forms of dualism and associated himself unashamedly with the isolation of the Reformed position.⁷

Arntzen is another critic of the new developments. He objects to what he considers the “dehistorization” of the Biblical accounts.⁸ He challenges Koole to demonstrate the consequences of his heavy dependence upon literary genre, though he does not outrightly deny the legitimacy of the approach.⁹ The main difference between Kuyper and Bavinck on the one

3 G.C. Berkouwer, *Het probleem der Schriftkritiek* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, n.d.), chap. viii.

4 L. Praamsma, “1926-1967,” *CN*, XI (April 4, 1967).

5 “On Historicity,” *CN*, XII (April 23, 1968).

6 *Ibid.*

7 “Progress – in which Direction?” *CN*, XII (August 27, 1968).

8 M.J. Arntzen, “*De betrouwbaarheid van de Bijbel*,” *GTT*, LXVI (1966), 147.

9 *Ibid.*, 148.

hand and the new direction on the other hand is, according to Arntzen's article, that the former did not draw the far-reaching conclusions from the same data.¹⁰

Berkouwer, Koole *et al*, however, deny that they have made a radical break. There is a change – that they readily admit – but it is a change within the same principal framework. The earlier generation always insisted on a careful listening to Scripture itself. That, asserts Koole, is still being done. In fact, the present generation listens *more* carefully to Scripture than the previous one and in so doing, has discovered nuances in Scripture that previously had gone undetected.¹¹ Furthermore, the *situation* at the turn of the century was different from ours. Kuyper and Bavinck had to struggle against a comparative religion approach that placed the entire Scripture into an evolutionistic framework. That accounts for their guarded conclusions.¹² Baarda, in his reply to Arntzen, also suggests that the strong statements of Aalders with respect to science and exegesis must be understood in their conflict situation.¹³ He, in company with others, notes that there is a new emphasis on exegesis in contrast to the earlier emphasis on philosophical and dogmatic categories.¹⁴ H. Ridderbos, likewise, suggests that conclusions have been drawn from the *self-testimony* of Scripture that have tended to place the Reformed in a “dubious position”¹⁵ over against the *phenomena* of Scripture.¹⁶ Finally, Berkouwer detects a reaction in Reformed theology against the efforts of higher criticism to reduce Scripture to a purely human and fallible book, a reaction driven by a worthy pastoral motif of insisting on the trustworthiness of the *divine* witness of Scripture, but which ended up by paying insufficient attention to the human aspect of Scripture.¹⁷ It is in the light of this battle that one must understand Kuyper's famous *De hedendaagsche Schriftkritiek in haar bedenkelijke strekking voor de gemeente des levenden Gods*,¹⁸ according to Berkhouwer.¹⁹

10 *Ibid.*, 152

11 J.L. Koole, “Het soortelijk gewicht van de historisch stoffen van het Oude Testament,” *GTT*, LXV (1965), 81.

12 *Ibid.*, 103

13 Tj. Baarda, “Het gezag van de Heilige Schrift,” *GTT*, LXVI (1966), 90.

14 *Ibid.*, 87.

15 “onzuivere positie”

16 H. Ridderbos, “Opmerkingen over de leer aangaande de Heilige Schrift,” *GW*, XX (March 5, 1965).

17 G.C. Berkouwer, *De Heilige Schrift (Dogmatische Studien; Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1966)*, I, p. 16.

18 A. Kuyper (Amsterdam: J.H. Kruyt, 1881).

19 *De Heilige Schrift*, p. 12.

This, then, is the question with which we shall concern ourselves in these pages. One warning is in order: it is not easy to determine what precisely is taking place. We will probably have to exercise our patience for a few years before we can determine this, but also before the theologians in question can determine this to their own satisfaction. It is all too new and unsettled at this point.²⁰ Certainly, the increased awareness of the composition of Scripture is to be noted with appreciation. The necessary and valid consequences of this new awareness, however, will have to be left for the future to decide. Not everyone is as daring as Kuitert in making pontifical statements in public as to the consequences of the new approach. His colleagues tend to be much more guarded and less sure in their judgment. A good example is Koole's discussion regarding the use of numbers in Scripture, a discussion which he concludes with the confession that he is not certain about all he wrote and that further reflection is required.²¹

II. The Kuyper-Bavinck Era

A. A. Kuyper

One could justifiably complain that this historical survey has an arbitrary beginning. After all, Kuyper and Bavinck were not the first Reformed theologians. True, they were preceded by a long tradition of Reformed theology, beginning with John Calvin. It is also true, however, that with Kuyper and Bavinck we reach a new plateau in the Reformed tradition, a plateau that we only now seem to be leaving. Whether the new theology is descending to a lower stage or whether it is reaching out to new heights cannot now be said.

We concluded the Introduction with a remark about the self-assurance that characterized the post-Kuyperian era. One can afford to be assured when he is on the middle of a plateau: there is little danger of falling off the cliff. It is he who is at the edge who has to be careful. Kuyper, a genuine pioneer, was close to the edge for most of his career. He had taken a new direction in theology and was frequently uncertain as to where this would lead. There is, of course, the guidance of the Holy Spirit that accompanies the Church in her deepening search for the Truth of God's Word, but, he writes: "The human factor is thus not excluded, but it is stimulated to play the highest role, but this role will always move between all sorts of uncertainties and diversions. We find our way only by groping among uncertainties."²² He recognized an adventurous aspect to this human search in that its results cannot fully be predicted.

²⁰ These discussions are new within Reformed circles. In other communities the new ideas have long ago gained acceptance.

²¹ "Het soortelijk gewicht," 98.

I. Kuyper's Quest for Certainty

There was one great certainty, though, that captured Kuyper and directed him throughout his search for a Biblical position in a theological climate that was essentially atheistic, as Berkouwer describes it.²³ This certainty was that the Scripture represents the Word of God and that it does so in its entirety, not excluding any part.

The higher criticism of Kuyper's day was steeped in an evolutionary framework. Science had a hypnotic effect on theology. Faith in the natural science of the day knew few bounds.²⁴ Infallible science was considered competent to judge the trustworthiness of Scripture and found it wanting in that it did not adhere to the standard of precision required by modern historiography. The spirit of this science was immanentistic: it posited natural laws independent from God and did not allow any infringements usually referred to as miracles. The Bible was reduced to a purely human book and, like all other human words, could not be relied upon for one's salvation, for man knows his own word to be fallible in matters of salvation.

Kuyper took a strong stand against these prevailing notions, for the critical attitude was making its inroads into the Reformed churches too. The Church of Christ was in danger of being swallowed up. For this reason his *De Hedendaagsche Schriftekritiek in haar bedenkelijke strekking voor de gemeente des levenden Gods* became a "faith imperative"²⁵ for him.²⁶ The deepest question of the critical-historical approach was not whether it advanced new hypotheses concerning inspiration, nor whether it uttered new literary judgments about the Scripture, but "only and exclusively that it will help us retain an assured Biblical inspiration that will offer us an unmitigated guarantee of divine assurance with respect to the entire content of the Bible."²⁷ Kuyper was exclusively concerned that the congregation would retain the certainty that the Scripture is the inspired Word of God. "This is the crux of the matter.... Whoever receives that testimony stands on a firm foundation. Whoever lacks that conviction is tossed about on the waves of the ocean." It is "the divine assurance over against the uncertainties of

22 "De menselijke factor wordt dus niet tot werkeloosheid gedoemd, maar tot de hoogste actie geprikkeld, en deze actie moet altoos door allerlei onzekerheid en allerlei slingeringen gaan. Eerst tastende vinden wij den weg."

23 *Het Probleem*, p. 64.

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

25 "geloofsplicht"

26 P. 5.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 22. "alleen en uitsluitend, of ze ons zulk een Schriftingeving behouden laat, wier resultaat ons voor geheel haar inhoud onverzwakten waarborg biedt van goddelijke gewisheid."

all human theorizing.”²⁸ that makes the Scripture the Word of God for the congregation of Christ.²⁹ This certainty is a *sine qua non est* and lack of it is what characterizes the ethical school of theology, the prevailing brand of Liberalism of Kuyper’s day. This lack is their great weakness.³⁰

1. Organic Inspiration and Criticism

The scripture is the inspired Word of God in its entirety – that is Kuyper’s basic point of departure. The nature of inspiration is to be determined from the Bible itself. One can pursue two methods for determining this nature. First, we can examine the self-testimony of Scripture; secondly, we can trace for ourselves the evidences of inspiration. Both are legitimate methods but “of course we have to begin with the latter.”³¹ This is an important statement in view of the tendency of a subsequent generation of theologians to emphasize the self-testimony of Scripture rather than the phenomena.

Inspiration is organic. That is to say, God honoured and utilized the writers in their full humanness. This was not new with Kuyper: his predecessors had already taken note of certain human factors in the Bible, but Kuyper complains that they operated with a rigid theory of inspiration that did not do justice to the “dynamic organism of Scripture.”³² He demands that organic inspiration be accepted for all its consequences. God has called the words of Scripture out of the writers’ own consciousness. He made use of terms that “were a natural part of the linguistic pool of the author.”³³ Man has a natural capacity for a multiformity of expression: lyric, didactic, epic, dramatic and others. For this reason, it was only to be expected that the Holy Spirit should have used this multiformity.³⁴ And Kuyper finds then that there are indeed

28 *Ibid.*, p. 40. “En daar nu zit het in Wie dat getuigenis ontving, die staat vast als een muur. Wie dat nog mist, golft nog als een baar der zee.”

29 *Ibid.*, p. 21. “goddelijke vastheid tegenover het onzekere van al’s menschen peinzen”

30 *De Gemeene Gratie* (Leiden: D. Donner, 1902), I, p. 95.

31 *Encyclopaedia*, p. 378. “natuurlijk heeft men daarbij met het laatste te beginnen.”

32 *Ibid.*, p. 428. “bezielde organisme der Schrift.” This charge sounds almost identical to that of the present-day theologians in The Netherlands who make such a charge with respect to their predecessors, the generation between Kuyper and themselves Cf. H.N. Ridderbos, “An attempt at the Theological Definition of Inerrancy, Infallibility, and Authority,” *IRB*, XI (January-April, 1968), pp. 33-34. Cf. also Berkouwer, *De Heilige Schrift*, p. 78..

33 *Hedendaagsche*, p. 21. “in het geestelijk sensorium van den schrijver voorhanden waren.”

34 *Encyclopaedia*, p. 468.

various literary genres in the Scripture. With respect to historiography also, the authors have followed the usual procedures of their day and have not risen above their underdeveloped perspective.”³⁵ An example is the way the writers “have welded sections of existing writings together...and thus brought their stuff together in a completely natural way.”³⁶ One will look in vain for scientific precision in these accounts. Rather, it appears that they have undergone considerable editorial revision: here and there additions were made.³⁷ Kuyper speaks of “a human deficiency” in Scripture.³⁸

These are daring terms Kuyper uses: “underdeveloped” and “deficient.”³⁹ They suggest a comparison or, rather, contrast with historiography as understood today, but it is impossible to posit any contrast between two reports unless one understands them as belonging basically to the same literary genre. How must we understand Kuyper’s description of Biblical historiography as imperfect, except in terms of its alleged modern counterpart? Reformed tradition has generally rejected the notion of the possibility of such a contrast, for Scriptural historiography is thought to be naïve, non-scientific, and thus of a different genre.

Whatever Kuyper may have intended with these terms, he did not mean to undermine the trustworthiness of the historical accounts, for the guarding function of graphic inspiration covers also the work of the final editors.⁴⁰ The total impact left by Scripture upon the Church does full justice to the actual words of Christ.⁴¹

One of the tasks of theology is to analyse the Scripture critically as to its human character. It must advance all kinds of difficulties regarding the Scripture and no limits must be placed around such critical activity, provided it does not undermine the certainty of the *principium* of theology.⁴² In the immediate context it is not clear what Kuyper means here by critical activity, but in another context he explains further the type of criticism he has in mind. We must search out the authors of the various books, the time and circumstances of their origin, the reason for

35 *Ibid.*, p. 496.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 497. “*brokstukken uit bestaande werken hebben ingelascht ... en zoo op geheel natuurlijke wijze hun stof hebben bijeengebracht.*”

37 *Ibid.*, p. 498. The term “notariele” continues to receive much attention from subsequent generations of theologians.

38 *Dictaten Dogmatiek: Locus de Sacra Scriptura* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, n.d.), p. 64.

39 “*onvolkomen*” and “*gebrekkig*.”

40 *Encyclopaedia*, p. 498.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 499.

42 *Ibid.*, pp. 510-512.

writing, the addressees, the sources, and so on.⁴³ The Church of Christ is concerned with the end product, not with the methods by which these writings were created.⁴⁴ Theology must trace both the human and divine aspects of Scripture and research the dynamics and meaning of both.⁴⁵ Apostate research has brought much to the surface with respect to the human aspect of Scripture for which we may be grateful. In so doing, it has frequently served as a wholesome stimulant for orthodox theology.⁴⁶

Though the human and divine aspect must both be traced, this must never be done in a dualistic framework which allows for the Word of God *in* Scripture, but does not recognize *all* Scripture as such.⁴⁷ Kuyper rejects the rationalistic escape of the ethical school of thought which allows for a separation of Scripture and Word of God. The ethical school tends to draw conclusions from the humanness of Scripture so that nothing remains of the Word of God. According to this school, Scripture contains myths; the creation account is the product of pious imagination; the witness of Christ and His apostles concerning the Old Testament lack normativity. Still the adherents of this school claim to find the Word of God in Scripture. Exclaims Kuyper: "This is more than I can take; it goes too far for me..."⁴⁸ He protests against their attempt to degrade Christ's use of the Old Testament as mere accommodation to His time, for this approach would do violence to His sinlessness, if, at least, accommodation were practiced consciously. If, on the other hand, He accommodated Himself unconsciously, it would make no sense to speak of accommodation at all.⁴⁹ The suggestion that there are myths in canonical books, inspired by the Holy Spirit, is "goes against His honour," for to represent myth as history amounts to lying.⁵⁰

We have seen, then, that Kuyper wishes to allow organic inspiration its full consequences, but does nevertheless delimit it – at the point where Scripture is no longer recognized as being the Word of God. The results of higher critical scholarship are to be appreciated in so far as they do not rob the Church of her certainty and as long as they can be fit within the framework of a theology that seeks to bow before the authority of Scripture.

43 *Encyclopaedia der Heilige Godgeleerdheid* (2nd ed., Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1909), III, p. 57.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 48

47 *Encyclopaedia*, II, p. 421.

48 *Hedendaagsche*, pp. 35-36.

49 *Encyclopaedia*, II, p. 380.

50 *Hedendaagsche*, p. 31. Cf. also *Dictaten Dogmatiek: Locus de Creatione*, p. 31.

It is one thing to posit general principles with respect to the Scripture; it is another to put these principles into practice. There are few places in Scripture where one's actual hermeneutics becomes more obvious than Israel's pre-history as recorded in Genesis 1-11. For this reason, our procedure will be to summarize Kuyper's comments on these chapters. Then we will become more clear about his real intentions.

2. Kuyper on Genesis 1 – 11

A reading of Kuyper's discussions on the problems of the so-called "pre-history"⁵¹ impresses one with the fact that, whatever the nature of the change may have been in Reformed theology since his time, there is no doubt that it is far-reaching in its effect. The change is more obvious in this discussion than it is in his discussion of principles in general. Perhaps Arntzen's observation is correct: Kuyper did not draw such radical conclusions as members of the new school are doing.

In keeping with Kuyper's firm insistence on certainty, his predominant emphasis here is on the historicity of the related events. This is not a history on a plane different from history as usually conceived: it everywhere ties in with the history that is *Gegenstand* for historians. In contrast to the theologians of the ethical school who suggest that perhaps in its larger outline the history of these chapters is acceptable, but not in its fine details, Kuyper blurts out:

Talk about broad outlines is useless here. It is the small, fine and individual details that count. These must first be determined. You have no ground to stand on unless you know what your God created, spoke and ordained, what the archpatriarch of our human race did in reaction, what judgement was then pronounced over us, which promise was then given and which grace was then poured out over us....

Aan de groote trekken hebt ge hier niets. Juist op de kleine, fijne, enkele trekken komt het aan. Eerst als die vaststaan; als ge weet wat uw God schiep, sprak en verordineerde, en wat het hoofd van den stamvader van ons geslacht daarna deed, en welk oordeel toen over ons ging, en welke belofte toen gegeven, en welke genade toen geschonken werd, hebt ge grond onder de voeten
....⁵²

A few pages further he adds,

51 "Oergeschiedenis."

52 *Gemeene*, p. 95.

It does not help anyone to say that something like this or that may have happened. No, you need to know it exactly and with confidence. Only then can you depend on it.

*“Ge hebt er dus niets aan, of men u al zegt, dat er wel ongeveer zoo iets zal gebeurd zijn. Neen, gij moet het nauwkeurig en zeker weten. Dan alleen kunt ge er op afgaan.”*⁵³

Kuyper is not indifferent to data provided by science, but that of his day enjoyed too high a status among theologians. Undoubtedly, this is the reason he makes few comments regarding science in the present discussion, silence often being more effective than argument. He does state that paleontology may well serve to shed light on the Scriptural account, but just what kind of light is not spelled out.⁵⁴

The only real creation account is that of Genesis 1. Genesis 2, of course, contains information about creation also, but it is primarily designed to relate what took place *after* creation. Man is here seen in relationship to the world rather than to God.⁵⁵

The length of days is difficult to determine before the sun and moon become the rulers of day and night.⁵⁶ For this reason, the age of the earth is unknown.⁵⁷ The age of *man*, however, is something like six or seven thousand years. The reason for the uncertainty expressed is the disagreement between the LXX (Septuagint) and other standard texts.⁵⁸

The creation account is exceptional in the Scripture in that, though it intends to report historical facts, the normal historiographical avenues have not been followed: it is the fruit of divine revelation. No person was present at creation; there were no records of it, either oral or written. Scripture does not indicate the recipient of this revelation originally. It may have been Adam or Moses. As far as the *meaning* of the account is concerned, the question is irrelevant.⁵⁹ Kuyper nevertheless thinks that Adam must have been the recipient of this revelation. He *must* have known it, for the alternative would have been that the Body of Christ was ignorant with respect to origins; i.e. it would not have been able to confess God as the Creator, an impossible situation.⁶⁰ This is the reason Kuyper assumes Adam to be the recipient of the creation revelation. Subsequently, it was handed on from one generation to the next, the longevity of

53 *Ibid.*, p. 97.

54 *Locus de Creatione*, p. 6.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 37

56 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 43 and p. 105.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

the early patriarchs being a great aid in preserving the tradition in a nearly uncorrupted form. It may have been Moses who, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, purified and inscripturated it.⁶¹

Later Reformed theologians, as we shall observe later in this paper, insisted that there are no traces of geocentrism in the Scripture. Kuyper does speak of geocentrism, but it functions differently for him as it does for the succeeding generation. From a physical point of view, and in relation to other heavenly bodies, Scripture does indeed speak geocentrically, but that is the normal human way of speaking.⁶² This insight he shares with the next generation. But then he speaks also of another, more pregnant, sense of Scripture's geocentrism. Man is the head of creation, being made in the image of God. In him the whole universe is sublimated; he is a microcosm. This is then a *religiously* oriented geocentrism, not open to astronomical research, but nonetheless real. Those who object that the geocentrism of Scripture is outdated on basis of astronomical data have limited their vision to the material world.⁶³

If, then, these chapters are meant to be understood historically, why should Kuyper object to the question whether or not Adam had one rib less after the forming of Eve.⁶⁴ The reason is not that the account is not historical, but, according to his exegesis, the whole situation is not summed up in "one of his ribs." The intention of the passage is to indicate that Eve was not taken from the dust of the earth, but that she had her origin from Adam's flesh and bone.⁶⁵ One cannot escape the impression that Kuyper is here on the verge of breaking with his own principle: there appears a tension here between history and its revelation.

There are a number of anthropomorphic elements in these chapters, especially in chapters 2 and 3, where we are told about God's speaking to Adam and Eve and also to the serpent. God has no mouth like ours, but that does not prevent him either to speak directly to the heart of man or to cause sounds to come through man's ears.⁶⁶

60 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

63 *Ibid.*, pp. 79-81. This more pregnant geocentrism appears to have been dropped from view by the following generation. It is later picked up again by Dooyeweerd *cum sui*, but with them the principle is broadened to include the entire account of creation.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

65 *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111.

66 *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.

The curse of the serpent cannot be fully understood by us, for we do not know the serpent's original form.⁶⁷ The longevity of the early patriarchs must be understood in terms of natural years and may not be weakened. The gradual decrease in life expectancy is the result of the fall.⁶⁸ Kuyper assumes the deluge to have been a universal occurrence without discussing it. That, at least, is my impression of his treatment of it. On the other hand, he emphasizes that human society in Noah's day was restricted to his immediate area, for Noah was instructed to preach to them in order to warn them of impending judgment.⁶⁹ The ark far outstripped contemporary vessels in size, God having provided its blueprint. It was nevertheless real and constructed by real craftsmen. The Babel account is also to be understood historically. The accepted theory that differences in language are the result of dispersion is a false reversion of the Genesis account which tells plainly the opposite: first the differences in language arose and then the dispersion came as a result of the breakdown of communication.⁷⁰

Kuyper's position on the question of the relationship between the Genesis account and parallels found elsewhere is identical to that long cherished in Reformed circles. These parallels are corrupted memories of events that have been recorded accurately in Scripture. Since Adam already knew the creation story, his progeny retained it but allowed it to degenerate slowly as the alienation between man and God progressed. Furthermore, Israel was in constant communication with surrounding nations and they may have learned something through this traffic.⁷¹ It is thus not a matter of Israel having borrowed from pagans or even vice versa. Both go back to historical events, purified in one tradition, corrupted in the others.

It hardly needs saying that we have not exhausted Kuyper's views on the above matters. His reach was too expansive to capture it in just a few pages. Enough has been said, however, to indicate his approach to the Scripture as a whole, to the early chapters of Genesis specifically and to the historical-critical method of reading the Scripture as practiced in his day.

J. H. Bavinck

Bavinck's view of Scripture is closely allied to that of Kuyper: in my research I have not discovered any significant difference between the two. They were contemporaries and thus

⁶⁷ *Gemeene*, p. 230.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 111-113.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

faced the same philosophical and spiritual climate. Bavinck expresses himself less vigorously than does Kuyper, but his intentions are just as clear. Like Kuyper, he recognized that the attacks of his contemporaries on the Scripture were not spiritually isolated phenomena. These were part and parcel of the spiritual climate of the culture.⁷² That is the reason he warned against the current higher critical approach, for the church is ever in danger of being swallowed up by the spirit of the age.

1. Authority and inspiration

The Scripture is the Word of God in its entirety, according to Bavinck. He will allow no dualism on this score. He discusses a number of dualistic distinctions, all of which are designed to somehow limit the authority of Scripture to less than its whole and he rejects them all. Form and content may be distinguished, but not separated.⁷³ Some have attempted to posit a distinction between what is necessary for salvation and what is contingent in Scripture, but this distinction is also to be rejected, for it is in conflict with the usage of Scripture as practiced by Christ, the apostles and the church.⁷⁴ The rationalistic distinction of fact versus idea in Scripture, of the temporal versus the eternal, of *zufällige Geschichtswahrheiten* versus *nothwendige Verhunftwahrheiten* -- Bavinck rejects them all, for such separations are impossible. "The decoupling of the idea from its history results in nothing less than the loss of the idea itself."⁷⁵ Furthermore, if the authority of Scripture is limited, then every theologian has to devise his own criterion as to the limit of authority. The result would be a deep subjectivism.⁷⁶

Bavinck himself posits certain distinctions in the Scripture, but these function differently: they are not intended to limit the authority of Scripture. There is, for example, the distinction between *auctoritas historiae* and *auctoritas normae*. This distinction expresses the fact that though everything written in the historical sections of the Bible is actual history, not every act or speech has normative value for us. An example are the speeches of Satan.⁷⁷ Another distinction of Bavinck is that between center and periphery, but even the peripheral belongs to

72 H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Kampen: J.H. Kok N.V., 1928), I, p. 411

73 *Ibid.*, pp. 414 and 419.

74 *Ibid.*, p. 387.

75 *Ibid.*, p. 350. "De losmaking der idee uit de historie komt ... op niets minder dan het verlies der idee zelve te staan."

76 *Ibid.*, p. 429.

77 *Ibid.*

the “circle of God’s thoughts.”⁷⁸ Prophetic literature constantly confronts one with the necessity to decide between a realistic and symbolic interpretation. But, again, this distinction has hermeneutic value without calling into question the authority of the Scripture.⁷⁹ *All* Scripture has authority – that is his conclusion.

The basis of the authority of Scripture lies in the fact of inspiration. Take away the inspiration of Scripture and it will be robbed of its authority as well. Those who deny inspiration are *forced* by Scripture to posit some other basis for its authority and they will seek it in the person of Christ, in the church, or in experience, but it always ends up in a disappointment.⁸⁰ One will have a mere human book left. *Nothing* is superfluous in Scripture, for it is inspired in its smallest detail; everything has meaning, every letter, every sign, even the appearance and shape of a letter.⁸¹ No doubt this extreme statement must be understood in terms of Bavinck’s rejection of every type of dualism. Whether he actually intended this statement to be understood literally, I do not know, but the point is sufficiently obvious resistance to any attempt to diminish the inspired authority of the Bible, attempts that were all too common in his day.

Inspiration is organic.⁸² Here too, Bavinck coincides with Kuyper. The writers remain in possession of their powers of reflection, of their emotions and freedom. They engage in research and utilize all the resources usually employed by writers. All the current literary genres, too, are found in Scripture, whether prose or poetry, ode or hymn, epic or drama, psalm or letter, history or prophecy. Each genre retains its own nature and must be judged according to its own laws.⁸³ Our decision as to the literary genre of a particular passage must be made on basis of the passage itself. Here a warning against arbitrariness must be heeded.⁸⁴

Since they have been employed organically, the Scriptural authors did not free themselves of the worldview of their contemporaries.⁸⁵ Thus the Scripture speaks geocentrically, but this is

78 *Ibid.*, p. 410.

79 *Ibid.*, p. 420.

80 *Ibid.*, p. 431

81 *Ibid.*, p. 372.

82 *Ibid.*, p. 409.

83 *Ibid.*, pp. 404 and 414.

84 *Ibid.*, II, 462.

85 *Ibid.*, p. 446.

not because of the worldview of the authors so much as the fact that they write in terms of daily experience which remains constant throughout history.⁸⁶

While discussing the nature of Scripture and how to arrive at a proper evaluation of it, Bavinck enters into argument with those who teach that one cannot come to a proper doctrine of Scripture without examining the phenomena of Scripture. This discussion is of significance for our purpose, for one closely related to it is taking place within the current circle of Dutch theologians. There were those who charged orthodoxy with a lack of respect for the Scripture, because orthodoxy does not do justice to the phenomena of Scripture. It operates, so the charge had it, with an *a priori* view of Scripture that does not conform to its data. Bavinck objects that this position presupposes a tension between the self-witness of Scripture and its phenomena. The basic fact of inspiration cannot be arrived at through a study of the phenomena of Scripture; it can only be accepted on basis of Scripture's testimony regarding itself. The data doubtlessly will serve to illumine this self-testimony, but they can serve only the function of clarification. One who makes the inspiration of Scripture dependent upon critical-historical research has begun by rejecting the self-testimony of Scripture and thus already stands outside the pale of faith. He has placed his own thoughts above those of Scripture.⁸⁷

Does historical criticism have any legitimate function at all in Bavinck's view? Indeed it has. It can give clear insight into the origin, history and structure of Scripture, but no more than that. It cannot determine the qualifying function of Scripture.⁸⁸ Once again, we note the close similarities between Bavinck and Kuyper. More often than not, historical criticism has exceeded its bounds and imposed standards foreign to Scripture – that of precision, for example. Having accepted this standard of modern historiography, theologians then invariably took the next step of declaring the Scripture to be imprecise and therefore not trustworthy.⁸⁹ It is, of course, indisputable that Scripture is incomplete and not altogether trustworthy if these standards are to be applied, but the standards happen to be foreign to Scripture. Scripture is a "*tendenz-boek*," meaning to instruct us in hope; it does not intend to give us complete or precise historical reports.⁹⁰ It is not first of all concerned that we should know precisely what took place

86 *Ibid.*, I, 417. On this point Bavinck is open to challenge. My brief term of service in Nigeria has made it clear to me that people experience the universe differently. Naïve experience is culturally conditioned. Furthermore, in Bavinck's own terms, language is the soul of the nation (*Ibid.*, p. 340) and it is in its own language that Israel produced the Old Testament and the Church the New. The thesis of a constant naïve experience crossing cultural lines is appealed to time and again by later theologians.

87 *Ibid.*, pp. 393-394.

88 *Ibid.*, p. 394.

89 *Ibid.*, pp. 415-416.

90 *Ibid.*, pp. 418-419. *Cf.* also p. 356.

in the past. We must remember then to judge the history in Scripture according to its own cannon and not, on basis of historical criticism, degrade the accounts to mythology.⁹¹

We see, then, that Bavinck does not deny historical criticism a legitimate place in theology, but it is not to be given a *ruling* function over Scripture. Scripture judges man, including his critical activities; not man, Scripture. That is his main concern and in this Bavinck is at one with Kuyper.

2. Genesis 1-3

In his evaluation of the early chapters of Genesis, Bavinck seeks to remain faithful to the Scriptural data without allowing science undue influence. He warns that theology ought not to make concessions too easily to science, for science is fickle and too often at variance with itself.⁹²

The doctrine of creation in Scripture is most definitely designed to answer questions about origins, but its *deepest* intention is religious-ethical in nature.⁹³ Genesis 1 means to relate history and should be accepted as such.⁹⁴ It rests on a tradition handed on through generations, preserved by Israel in all its purity.⁹⁵ Extra-Biblical parallels point to the same truth as their Scriptural counterparts, but they are corrupted accounts. This explanation is more palatable to Bavinck than the more prevalent theory that has Israel borrowing from the accounts of pagans about them.⁹⁶ The so-called pan-Babylonian school of thought is not as purely scientific as it pretends: it has its basis in the spiritual climate of the day.⁹⁷

Bavinck seeks to explain the difference between Genesis 1 and 2 by the theory that Genesis 2 does not have a chronological arrangement, but, rather, topical.⁹⁸ Bavinck does not indicate the basis for this judgment. Genesis 2 describes the relationship in which man stands to creation and it serves as introduction to Genesis 3.

91 *Ibid.*, p. 418.

92 *Ibid.*, pp.471, 483.

93 *Ibid.*, p. 371.

94 *Ibid.*, pp. 435, 462.

95 *Ibid.*, p. 439.

96 *Ibid.*

97 *Ibid.*, p. 436.

98 *Ibid.*, p. 472.

Bavinck discounts the high age science attributes to mankind. Because of the fickleness of science, he feels no need to consider these findings in understanding the Genesis account.⁹⁹ The Garden of Eden he locates in Asia, but he fails to discuss the crucial issue of the identification of the rivers.¹⁰⁰

Though brief, these remarks about Bavinck's view of Genesis 1-3 suffice to indicate a deep identity with that of Kuyper. Together these two men have been able to give new impetus to Reformed theology in The Netherlands and provided it with a tool to resist the encroachment of the atheistic method. They gave Reformed theology a new vigor that can in no way be described as merely reactionary. A new plateau had been reached. It remains to be seen how their heirs handled the basic principles handed over to them.

K. M. Noordzij on Archeology

Kuyper and Bavinck were the theological giants in the Reformed community at the turn of the century (1900); they gave the movement new impetus. They were not the only scholars, however. M. Noordzij¹⁰¹ paid much attention to the archeological developments of the time. He presented a lecture at the *Theologische Hoogeschool* at Kampen in which he accounts for the parallels between Scripture and other documents of the Near East.¹⁰² This contains a rather lengthy description of the data uncovered and the appreciative conclusion "that the materials that the Lord our God has provided us from these new findings from the East are indeed generous."¹⁰³

For our purpose it is not necessary to reproduce the list of parallels. Rather, we should briefly note Noordzij's evaluation of the findings. He discovers remarkable similarity between the Biblical Sabbath and that of its general Semitic counterpart. The latter, he suggests, represents a residue of special revelation in the corrupted Semitic circles." It shows clearly how the one

99 *Ibid.*, p. 483.

100 *Ibid.*, pp. 488-490.

101 Care must be taken not to confuse M. Noordzij with his son A. Noordzij, whose theological interest was similar to his father's. His contributions will be discussed below.

102 M. Noordzij, "*Oostersche lichtstralen over westersche Schrift-beschouwing*," *Reden te Theologische School te Kampen*, n. ed. (Kampen, J.H. Bos, 1897).

103 P. 13. "*dat het inderdaad niet weinig is wat de Heere onze God ons bij vernieuwing uit het Oosten toeschichte.*"

divine institution degenerated among the pagans, but was sanctified and purified in Israel. Such discoveries point to an original monotheism.¹⁰⁴

The study of these archeological data will help us understand and remember the differences between eastern and western thought patterns. This, in turn, will be an aid to a deeper understanding of Scripture.¹⁰⁵ The over-all thrust of this lecture is that the data of archeology often vindicate the historicity of the Bible over against the onslaughts of higher criticism. There may be little that is exciting in this publication for our present generation, but one must remember that this was given at a time when the Reformed position on such matters was still being hammered out. Noordzij worked with material that had generally been thought to support the liberal position, but he discovered that such support was wholly wanting.

III. The Debate Around Assen

During the third decade of the 20th century, a heated theological debate was carried on in the *Gereformeerde Kerken* concerning the interpretation of Genesis 2 - 3. The central figure in this debate was Geelkerken, who challenged the traditional exegesis of these chapters, but did not advance a new one. The atmosphere became so charged that a synodical pronouncement on the matter was deemed necessary. In 1926, the by now (in)famous Synod of Assen ruled that the trees in the garden of Eden and the serpent and his speaking, "according to the clear intention of Scripture's account of Genesis 2 and 3, are to be accepted in their actual literal sense. They were empirically observable realities."¹⁰⁶

Both before and after this Synod, a number of theologians published their reflections on the issues involved, both in pamphlet form as well as in magazines, notably the *Gereformeerde Theologisch Tijdschrift (GTT)*. It will not be possible for us to consider all the contributions, for reasons of time and space. For this reason we will concentrate our attention on a pamphlet published by Jan Ridderbos in 1925, and on a debate carried in the journal mentioned above *after* Assen.

A. J. Ridderbos: *Het Verloren Paradijs*

104 Pp. 30-31. "nawerking van de bijzondere openbaring in de verbasterende Semietische kringen."

105 P. 48.

106 *Generale Synode van De Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, Acta der buitengewone Generale Synode van De Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland gehouden to Assen van 26 Januari tot 17 Maart, 1926* (Kampen: Boekdrukkerij Kok, 1926), p. 53. "nawerking van de bijzondere openbaring in de verbasterende Semietische kringen."

In 1925, Jan Ridderbos published a pamphlet entitled *Het Verloren Paradijs*.¹⁰⁷ In his introduction he states that he is not directly concerned with the Geelkerken case. In fact, however, the pamphlet deals directly with questions intimately related to the ongoing debate of the day. Above all, Ridderbos seeks to defend the historicity of the paradise account.

In principle, writes Ridderbos, we have only to determine the intention of the account,¹⁰⁸ for only Scripture itself can decide for us whether or not any passage is to be understood historically.¹⁰⁹ Here we meet again the classic Reformed principle already operating strongly in Kuyper and Bavinck that man is not to stand above Scripture, but Scripture above man. In fact, the author of Genesis 2 – 3 does clearly intend the story to be understood historically – and that ought to settle it. Besides, the New Testament treats it as such.¹¹⁰ Once any one aspect of the account has become subject to doubt, there is no internal reason for not doubting the remainder. Then one may reject the historicity of Genesis 4 as well.¹¹¹ Ridderbos opposes those who posit a historical kernel to which non-historical elements have been added. Writes he,

It is clear that, should we proceed in this fashion, we would be dealing with a kind of defective and unreliable historical record that we cannot accept in Scripture without clashing with our confession of her infallibility and historical trustworthiness.

*Het is duidelijk, dat we dan met een sort gebrekkige en onbetrouwbare geschiedschrijving (saga) te doen zouden hebben, dat we in de Schrift niet kunnen aannemen, zonder met onze belijdenis van haar onfeilbaarheid en historische betrouwbaarheid in strijd te komen.*¹¹²

This is another expression of that deeply Reformed resistance to any form of dualism that would leave the final criterion up to the reader who would somehow have to sift the true from the imaginary. Berkouwer, as we shall have occasion to note later, has insisted time and again that such an approach has no *internal* resistance to a complete dehistoricization of the entire Scripture.

Ridderbos inserts a warning in the discussion: we must not simply identify the intentions of the two authors, the authors being the Holy Spirit and the human writer. *The intention of the Holy Spirit is frequently much wider than that of the human author.* This is clear especially in

107 Kampen: J.H. Kok N.V. "Paradise Lost."

108 P. 11.

109 Pp. 16, 18.

110 Pp. 17, 19.

111 Pp. 35-37.

112 P. 29.

prophetic literature. For this reason, we much search the *entire* Scripture for determining the significance of the chapters under discussion, not simply limit ourselves to the passage itself.¹¹³

If the Scripture must be allowed to decide questions of historicity, then what is the function of extra-Biblical materials uncovered by archeology? Ridderbos refers to the Galileo case to demonstrate that it is always possible that scientific data expose a certain interpretation of Scripture to be untenable,¹¹⁴ but the areas in which science can have this correcting influence is very limited. We don't have to wait for science before we can understand the Scripture.¹¹⁵ Yet it was science that led Kuyper and Bavinck to suggest that the days of Genesis 1 were perhaps periods, according to Ridderbos,¹¹⁶ even though they referred to prophetic literature to justify themselves hermeneutically.¹¹⁷

Ridderbos can sympathize with the notion that Genesis 2 -3 might have to be interpreted as prophetic literature, but then as retrospective prophecy in which the concepts are borrowed from the author's *Unwelt*. He would not be surprised, he writes, if some Reformed theologian, while attempting fully to honour the authority of Scripture, would thus explain the passage. It would not be illegitimate to suppose that we are dealing here not only with a tradition, but also with special prophetic revelation. Scripture seems to point to a tradition among Abraham's ancestors, but that was not preserved purely. It would have required divine inspiration for sifting out the false elements in this tradition. However, when one observes the avenue in which other historical information in the Bible has come to us and we pay attention to the traces of ancient traditions concerning earliest human history among other peoples, then "*is deze opvatting wel de minst waarschijnlijke.*"¹¹⁸ Ridderbos would be sympathetic with such an attempt, but he cannot accept it for himself, because it would at best be based upon "*vage vermoedings.*" It would represent a "*geheel lichtvaardige wijze van Schrift-verklaring.*"¹¹⁹

It is not difficult to imagine Ridderbos' approach to the details of the Paradise account, especially since he closely identifies himself with the Kuyper-Bavinck tradition. If the account is to be interpreted historically in the usual sense of that term, the question of the location of the garden of Eden cannot be avoided. Ridderbos recognizes the difficulty surrounding the

113 P. 11.

114 P. 12,

115 P. 15.

116 P. 14.

117 P. 31.

118 Pp. 29-30.

119 P. 32.

identification of two of the four rivers, but, he suggests, no one knows how many changes may have taken place there. This difficulty does nothing to disprove the historicity of paradise.¹²⁰ Citing Kuyper, he reminds us that relationships at that time were very different from those we experience. Great caution is therefore needed in the interpretation of the details of the account. There are anthropomorphic elements in the story, for example 3:21. He considers himself well within the legitimate limits of the Scripture itself on this score.¹²¹ Unfortunately he does not explain the criterion for determining what is to be understood anthropomorphically, a failure that frequently weakens Reformed discussion of this passage.

The remarks made so far pertain to Genesis 2 -3 only, not to Genesis 1. Genesis 1 is a case *sui generis*. The difference lies in the fact that the first chapter relates events that preceded human history. The entire account *must* rest upon special divine revelation. By that token, it partakes more of the character of prophecy. It is *possible*, according to Ridderbos, for God to reveal history in detail, but there are reasons for considering the possibility that in explaining Genesis 1 the hermeneutical principles generally applied to prophecy are valid here. Consequently, one must guard himself against an interpretation that is too literal. The first days may well have been something different, especially since there was no sun initially.¹²²

This discussion of the prophetic character of Genesis 1 is a novelty in the Reformed literature we have been considering. It is pointed out here because it re-occurs in later publications. Ridderbos does not here indicate the consequences to be drawn from such an interpretation of Genesis 1.

B. The Debate in *GTT*

The debate carried on in the pages of *GTT* solved few problems for its participants or, for that matter, for the reading public. Neither side was prepared to concede even the slightest point; both had their minds made up, so that they were talking *at* rather than *with* each other. Both sides appealed to Kuyper and Bavinck, but according to the Dutch adage, "*elke ketter heeft zijn letter.*" There was a polarization of positions, neither of which did full justice to Kuyper and Bavinck.

The deepest concern in the debate was the question of the reliability of the Bible. If the Scriptural message lies embedded in an ancient world view, as one side in the debate asserted,

120 P. 23.

121 Pp. 26.27.

122 Pp. 34-35.

then the Scripture is no longer trustworthy, according to Aalders *cum sui*. On the other hand, it was argued that the organic nature of inspiration demands greater recognition of the presence of such a worldview and this in no way reduces the reliability of Scripture. The degree of appreciation of science played no small part in the debate.

We wish to enter the debate with the question of the criterion for interpreting the Scripture. Van Der Vaart Smit asserts unequivocally that “*alleen door de Schrift heen is het mogelijk om kennis der openbaring ter verkrijgen.*”¹²³ Aalders insists that as long as we cannot demonstrate from the Scripture itself that a story presented in the form of a historical account is not in fact a trustworthy account of what actually occurred, we must retain the facticity of the account.¹²⁴ Grosheide concurs: we have no right to deny the historicity of events related in the historical accounts of Scripture, unless one can demonstrate from Scripture itself that an account appearing at first glance to present history in fact has no such intention.¹²⁵ These writers all express in their own words the Reformed principle of “*Sacra Scriptura sui ipsius interpres.*”

Aalders particularly is vigorous in his defense of the trustworthiness of the historical accounts of the Scripture. It is simply impossible, he writes, to doubt the veracity of events described in historical sections of Scripture and still to accept this written account as “a trustworthy report of what actually took place.”¹²⁶ Just previous to this he asserts: “Still, the Reformed insist: That’s what it says, that’s what the writer intends. Hence it really did happen, for the Bible is the Word of the trustworthy God.”

*“Doch de Gereformeerde zegt: dat staat er, dat bedoelt de verhaler, en dus is het ook werkelijk gebeurd, omdat de Bijbel is het Woord van den waarachtigen God.”*¹²⁷

The alternative is that “we no longer work with what is written but, instead, begin to work with a really relativistic dubious perspective in exegesis and we ask whether it possibly could have been intended differently from what was written?”

123 H.W. Van Der Vaart Smit, “*Historie en Exegese,*” *GTT*, XXVI (May, 1926), 17.

124 G.Ch. Aalders, “*Het Bijbelsch wereldbeeld, het Paradijsverhaal en de tekstkritiek,*” *GTT*, XXVI (September, 1926), 169.

125 F.W. Grosheide, “*Iets over de geschiedenisbeschrijving in den Bijbel,*” *GTT*, LVI (1956), 18. Though this particular article was written 30 years after the debate, Grosheide did participate in the debate itself and his basic position has not changed.

126 “*Wereldbeeld en Paradijsverhaal,*” *GTT*, XXVII (January, 1927), II, 381.

127 *Ibid.*, p. 379.

“men rekent ... niet meer met wat er staat, maar opent een echt relativistisch dubium op exegetisch gebied: zou het mogelijk ook heel anders bedoeld kunnen zijn dan het er staat?”

The catalyst for this strong insistence on the veracity of the historical accounts was the thesis that the Scripture is written in terms of an ancient and outdated worldview. There is *general* agreement that Scripture is not written in scientific, but in naïve terms, in the terms of experience. Both sides in the debate agree on this. Consequently, Grosheide’s attempt to prove that there is no *scientific* worldview in the Bible amounts to an attack on a straw man.¹²⁸ All are also agreed that naïve experience is universally constant, in keeping with Bavinck’s position. The rub comes when Van Leeuwen states that in *addition* to this naïve experience we have our cosmological views – our modern cosmology is heliocentric; that expressed in Scripture is geocentric.¹²⁹ The presence of *any* cosmology is denied by Aalders *et al*, ancient or modern. This would mean that historical events, written in a false cosmological framework, become uncertain. Then doubt is cast on the “reliable account of the factual circumstances....” Then we do not know exactly what happened.¹³⁰ If the writers of Scripture expressed themselves in terms of an ancient worldview they would have been wrong, according to Grosheide. He recognizes this to be an *a priori* argument, but, nevertheless, valid and based upon the Reformed view of inspiration.¹³¹

The principle of organic inspiration plays an important part in the debate. Both sides accept the principle, but they draw opposing conclusions from it. Van Leeuwen appeals to it in his plea for recognition of his position that the Scripture expresses itself in terms of its *Unwelt* and, hence, also in terms of ancient cosmology. Doing justice to organic inspiration, he writes, demands that we reckon with the cultural milieu in which Scripture came into being.¹³² A few months later, he adds that there is no difference in principle between him and other Reformed Old Testament scholars who seek to do justice to the organic nature of inspiration, only one of degree in that he takes more seriously into account the cultural milieu in which God’s revelation was expressed. He wants to distinguish between the divine and human factors in Scripture in order to do justice to the cultural factor *as a Reformed theologian*.¹³³ Van Der Vaart Smit counters this use of the doctrine by pointing out that it was never intended to be

128 “Kan van een Bijbelsche wereldbeeld worden gesproken?,” *GTT*, XXVIII (May, 1927), 22. Cf. also Aalders, *Het Bijbelsch wereldbeeld*,” p. 162.

129 N.D. Van Leeuwen, “*Iterum Contra*,” *GTT*, XXVI (October, 1926), 280-281.

130 Aalders, “*Het Bijbelsche wereldbeeld*,” p. 166. “getrouwe weergave van de feitelijke toedracht der gebeurtenissen”

131 “Kan van een Bijbelsche wereldbeeld worden gesproken?,” p. 34.

132 “*Contra*,” *GTT*, XXVI (July, 1926), 118.

employed in the service of dualism,¹³⁴ while Grosheide claims that the doctrine *forbids Van Leeuwen's conclusion*.¹³⁵

Let it be understood that Van Leeuwen is not suggesting that divine revelation has its *basis* in the cultural milieu of the ancient Near East, that this milieu *explains* the revelation. Van Der Vaart Smit apparently understands Van Leeuwen to be making this fatal conclusion. There is no reason, he argues, for speaking of an

environment that consists of an ancient-Eastern history and worldview in which the revelation of God originated. The Revelation of God pre-existed every such environment and did not originate in any such environment. Rather, that ancient-Eastern history and worldview owes its existence to the Revelation of God.

*milieu, een oud-Oostersche historie – en denkwereld, waarin de Openbaring Gods is ontstaan. De Openbaring Gods was er eerder dan elk milieu en is niet uit eenig milieu “ontstaan.” Veel eer is de oud-Oostersche historie – en denkwereld juist aan de Openbaring Gods te danken en uit deze afgeleid.*¹³⁶

Van Leeuwen charges that he is misunderstood and that Van Der Vaart Smit has misrepresented his position. The revelation of God cannot be explained by that milieu, for it did not have its origin there. It came *into* this culture, not *out* of it.¹³⁷

Aalders *cum sui* consider the positing of a worldview in Scripture as a threat to the trustworthiness of the historical accounts. Schouten denies such a threat. He adduces inexact chronological data and geographical designations as well as minor differences in parallel Gospel accounts to demonstrate that the Scripture's standard of trustworthiness differs from that of Aalders.¹³⁸ Elsewhere, Schouten agrees with both Aalders and Assen that the historical accounts are reliable, but he adds, “the standard of trustworthiness and exactness is not that of Western historiography of the twentieth century.”¹³⁹ Aalders agrees that the culture of the Biblical

133 “*Iterum Contra*,” p. 281.

134 *Handhaving der critiek*,” *GTT*, XXVI (September, 1926), 189.

135 “*Kan van een Bijbelsche wereldbeeld worden gesproken?*,” p. 33.

136 “*Historie en exegeese*,” p. 26.

137 “*Contra*,” p. 118.

138 W.J.A. Schouten, “*Eische van Schriftgezag of exegeese?*,” *GTT*, XXVII (March, 1927), 452.

139 Schouten, “*Wereldbeeld en exegeese*,” *GTT*, XXVI (November, 1926), 265. “*de maatstaf van ‘getrouw en juist’ is niet die van de Westersche geschiedbeschrijving van de twintigste eeuw.*”

writers influenced their historiography,¹⁴⁰ but this is true for the historiography of the entire Scripture, not just for that of the first few chapters. He sees no reason for introducing this matter into a discussion that is concerned with the principles for understanding the Paradise accounts. Neither does he draw the conclusion from it that the historiography of Scripture is inexact as opposed to modern historiography: it may be incomplete, but not inexact.

Schouten also objects to placing the historiographical method employed in the Paradise account on the same level as that employed in certain other sections of Scripture. Aalders thinks that we must treat all historical passages equally. Genesis 3 and Exodus 2 require similar treatment for there is no principial difference between them from a historiographical point of view.¹⁴¹ This he posits over against Schouten who, though he has not worked it out principally, wants to introduce a distinction within the historical genre so as to interpret the Paradise account differently from accounts that are more easily understood by modern man. Exodus 2 is easily understood, he writes, but Genesis 3 shows a picture that is altogether strange to us. Can we place them on one line?¹⁴² Aalders objects to this approach, for it suggests a unique historiography for Genesis 2 – 3.

The varying degrees of appreciation of the givens of science, including archeology, certainly played a large role in the entire discussion about Assen. As in the case of other Reformed principles, it was commonly agreed by both sides that science is not to rule our exegesis of Scripture, but the one side was more hospitable towards the data of science and had more confidence in science than the other.¹⁴³ Van Leeuwen seeks to make appreciative use of the data provided, for they can add light to the Scriptural givens.¹⁴⁴

Aalders *cum sui*, on the other hand, emphasize the danger of compromise with science. The sufficiency of Scripture forbids such a compromise.¹⁴⁵ The accomplishment of Assen, according to Van Der Vaart Smit, is that it rejected any concord with science that would end in opposition to the history of revelation.¹⁴⁶ Even the point of the length of days must be settled solely on

140 *Wereldbeeld*,” p. 307.

141 *“Wereldbeeld en Paradijsverhaal,”* p. 308.

142 *“Wereldbeeld,”* p. 366.

143 Schouten, *“Wereldbeeld en Paradijsverhaal,”* p. 259.

144 *“Contra,”* p. 121.

145 Van Der Vaart Smit, *“Historie en exegese,”* p. 16.

146 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

basis of exegesis.¹⁴⁷ It is only after we have done our exegesis – as opposed to eisogesis – that we may use extra-Biblical data to further clarification.¹⁴⁸

In this *GTT* debate little was said about the *origin* of the Paradise account, though a few scattered remarks are found. Van Der Vaart Smit, for example, assumes that all knowledge of God has been derived from the oldest witnesses to the history of revelation. That was initially handed down orally and later inscripturated.¹⁴⁹ In other words, he posits a holy, uninterrupted chain of tradition. Aalders contends that the distance between event or revelation of the event and its inscripturation is of no consequence because of the guidance of the Holy Spirit.¹⁵⁰ This is, of course, the representative position of the Reformed community that has been challenged only recently.

With respect to the concrete data of the first chapters of Genesis, little was said during this debate, for it was mainly a discussion of principles. It is quite clear, however, that Aalders *et al* favored a literal historical interpretation of the account. They insist on what Assen considered “obvious.”¹⁵¹ If the days of Genesis 1 are not to be understood literally, this must then be demonstrated purely and solely exegetically.¹⁵² Van Leeuwen asks whether the literal interpretation of Genesis is adequate to what actually occurred or whether Genesis 1 perhaps does not intend to give an adequate picture, but rather to explain what actually happened in terms that were fitting and understandable for the original addressees of this divine revelation.¹⁵³ For him to ask this question is to answer it – in favor of the latter alternative.

The difficulty regarding the location of the rivers of the Garden of Eden is caused by the tremendous changes the earth has undergone, according to Van Der Vaart Smit. The situation presently is vastly different from that of the past.¹⁵⁴ For once, Aalders and Schouten agree that the geography of the rivers must be seen in the context of current geographical knowledge.¹⁵⁵

147 *Ibid*, p. 30.

148 Aalders, “Laatste word over wereldbeeld en Paradijsverhaal,” *GTT* XXVII (April, 1927), 523.

149 “*Historie*,” p. 13.

150 “*Wereldbeeld en Paradijsverhaal*,” p. 310.

151 Van Der Vaart Smit, *Historie*,” p. 29. “*klaarblijkelijkheid*”.

152 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

153 “*Contra*,” p. 124.

154 “*Handhaving*,” p. 188.

Schouten and Van Leeuwen were basically sympathetic to Geelkerken and they were therefore inclined to interpret some elements in Genesis 2-3 nonliterally. Aalders agrees that the sword of Genesis 3 belongs to a time later than that of paradise era. It serves to designate a weapon God used. Certainly it is not an ordinary sword as people think of it. The description does not fit that kind, but this does in no way give the liberty to think that therefore the tree and serpent are to be understood in a nonliteral sense also.¹⁵⁶ If I understand Aalders' remarks, he is saying that the sword must be understood anthropomorphically, but that does nothing to encourage a nonliteral meaning of non-anthropomorphic elements in the story. I confess to not understanding the difference here between the one and the other.

It is extremely difficult to point to a basic difference between the two sides participating in this debate. There is agreement on both sides with respect to the basic Reformed doctrine of Scripture. Both sides accept organic inspiration, but draw opposing conclusions from it. Both regard the historical documents reliable, but demand different degrees of reliability. Neither side wishes to give science predominance over exegesis, but one side is much more appreciative of the role of science than the other. How does one account for these differences? Could it be found in the greater pastoral concern of Aalders *cum sui* or is it simply conservative fear that made the one side so much more hesitant? The latter is definitely an unfair characterization. Perhaps it should simply be stated that the main stream in the *Gereformeerde Kerken* was not yet ready for the next step, one beyond Kuyper and Bavinck. By this we are not suggesting that Schouten and Van Leeuwen deserve our full support, but they were among those laying the groundwork for a new treatment and a new awareness of the phenomena of Scripture.

IV. Post-Assen Statements

A. F.W. Grosheide

The Assen debate had hardly subsided when Grosheide published his *Hermeneutiek ten dienste van de bestudeering van het Nieuwe Testament*,¹⁵⁷ in which he dealt systematically with the entire range of Reformed hermeneutics. For the purposes of this paper we will listen carefully to what he wrote regarding the function of criticism and its limits.¹⁵⁸

155 Aalders, "Wereldbeeld en Paradijsverhaal," II, p. 374. Schouten, "Wereldbeeld en exegese," p. 260. Schouten appeals to A. Noordtjiz. Cf. also Van Leeuwen, "Contra," p. 117.

156 *Ibid.*, p. 373. "gewoon steek- of houwwapen,"

157 (Amsterdam: H.A. Van Bottenburg, 1929).

The Bible is both fully human and fully divine in *all* her parts. These two aspects cannot be separated into two *parts*, one of which would then be divine and the other human. Every passage has these two aspects simultaneously.¹⁵⁹ The *human* aspect of the Scripture makes criticism possible and legitimate. If the Scripture were a purely divine book, then there could be no question of criticism.¹⁶⁰ The *divine* aspect designates the limits of criticism. "That principle leads to simple rule that all criticism that robs God's Revelations of its character as God's Word, that denies it that character, is to be condemned and rejected." It may never violate the norms of the Scripture as the authoritative word of God.¹⁶¹

The question of the limits of criticism is then to be solved by Scripture itself. Grosheide warns against criticism based upon *our* premises. It always is called to an arbitrary stop when undesirable results are produced.

Over against that, we propose instead which kind of criticism Scripture itself, that we accept as divine revelation, demands from us. Scripture itself must teach us not what is permitted so much as what is mandated.

"Daartegenover stellen wij: tot welke kritiek roept de Schrift, die we als Goddelijke openbaring aanvaarden, ons op. Zij zelf moet ons leeren, niet wat mag, maar wat moet."

He adds, "Now, well then, Scripture invites criticism all over the place...."¹⁶² Every form of criticism is bound by the authority of Scripture.

This approach is the basic principle by which Grosheide evaluates current modes of theological attention paid to the *forms* of Scripture. Form and content may be distinguished, but never separated, for God gave His Word in the most suitable form. Consequently, criticism is bound in its evaluation of the form also by the normativity of the Word of God. Grosheide recognizes that traditional dogmatics tended to underestimate the importance of the variety of forms in Scripture and they did not dare to take these into account.¹⁶³ On the other hand, he strongly objects to the method known as *formgeschichte*. The basic objection to this method is that it is

158 Chapter IV, par 19, pp. 81-110.

159 Pp. 85-86.

160 P. 86.

161 P. 85. *"Daaruit volgt de eenvoudige regel, dat all kritiek die aan de Schrift haar karakter als Woord Gods, als Goddelijke openbaring ontnemt, die dat karakter aantast, te veroordeelen is."*

162 P. 86. *"Welnu, de Schrift vraagt op allerlei plaatsen om kritiek"*

163 P. 90.

allowed to tyrannize exegesis. The form determines the content of a given account or its trustworthiness.

Each specific genre demands a specific kind of composition and forces upon us to write specific things.”

*Een bepaalde genre eischt een bepaalde compositie, dwingt tot het schrijven van bepaalde dingen.*¹⁶⁴

Grosheide asserts the opposite: the forms

are completely determined by the intention and the occasion of a document or a part thereof. The deciding factor here is not the form so much as the intent and occasion.

“zijn volkomen bepaald door het doel en de gelegenheid van een geschrift of een onderdeel daarvan. En het beslissende is dan niet de vorm maar doel en gelegenheid.”

He reminds us that during the Reformation, people were singing hymns to folktunes, an unlikely form.¹⁶⁵

Grosheide does not deny that the Bible is an eastern book. In fact, he asserts it vigorously. It is obvious from every verse. It concerns not only forms, but also concepts. The question here is: “What is the right kind of criticism here?” This may never become a device for undoing the reality behind the historical accounts.

Indeed, in terms of time period, location and colouration Scripture is Eastern, but Scripture did not accept what the East imagined and unjustly adopted.

“Oostersch is de Schrift in tijd, plaats, coloeriet, maar wat het Oosten verzen en gabelde, wat het zich inbeelde en ten onrechte aannam, dat kwam niet in de Schrift.”

Inspiration is organic and it came to us via “Eastern spirituality,” but it did not cease being the Word of God. It did not absorb the untruths of the east, for inspiration has also a negative function of guarding against mistakes. Hence it is illegitimate to appeal to eastern historiography in order to justify attack on the correctness of historical accounts: there is not a “random mixing of the facts.” The New Testament itself indicates great care in historiography, for example Luke 1:1-4. Where God reveals himself, a break occurs. Revelation opposes principally all that

164 P. 91.

165 P. 92.

emerges out of the world. The particulars of the East do certainly shed light on the written word, but they do not unlock or interpret it. That unlocking process must derive from the writing itself; the content of the written word must grab us.

*“uit de wereld opkomt, ook ... het Oostersche gegevens wordt het ‘geschreven woord wel toegelicht, maar niet ontsloten. Die onsluiting moet van het geschrevene zelf uitgaan, de inhoud van het geschreven moet worden gegrepen.”*¹⁶⁶

The conclusion Grosheide draws from this basic principle is that the historiography of Scripture is entirely reliable in the sense of Aalders, not of Schouten or Van Leeuwen. If there are differences in parallel accounts, they should not simply be harmonized, for harmonization does not take into account the individual approach of the various authors. If they cannot be resolved exegetically, we must resort to *non liquet*.¹⁶⁷

How are we to determine the form of a given account? This problem solves itself, according to Grosheide.

Everyone senses whether he is reading history, discourse or prophecy, even though he may not always be able to present a reasonable basis for his judgement.

“Ieder mensch merkt, of hij met geschiedenis, met betoog of met profetie te doen heeft, ook al kan hij niet altijd redelijke gronden voor zijn oordeel opgeven.”

Hosea and Luke 16:19-31 are exceptions that confirm the normal rule.¹⁶⁸ There is a form known as anthropomorphic. This gives a true, but not an adequate revelation of God. In this literary genre there is “a unique relationship between the word and its background, which in this case is absolutely divine.” This special relationship exists only in this genre and it may never become a lever to demonstrate the incompleteness or inadequacy of other genres, for then different genres are mixed.¹⁶⁹

B. A. Noordzij

166 Pp. 93-94. The quotation was taken from J.C. Sikkels, *De Heilige Schrift en haar verklaring*. (Amsterdam, 1906), p. 105. “Wat is hier de juiste kritiek?”

167 Pp. 98, 101.

168 P. 99.

169 *Ibid*. It is not immediately clear why Grosheide regards anthropomorphism as presenting us with an inadequate revelation of God, unless he thinks in ontological terms, seeking to know God *an sich*. “een zeer bijzondere verhouding tusschen het woord ... en hetgeen er achter licht, het absoluut Goddelijke.”

It is rather remarkable that A. Noordtjij did not enter the debate in *GTT*, for it dealt largely with problems with which he concerned himself throughout his career. Already in 1912, he published a pamphlet in which he discusses the relationship between Israel and the Scripture, her relationship to surrounding nations, and the manner in which the latter relationship came to expression in divine revelation.¹⁷⁰ After the debate had subsided, he published a voluminous work dealing extensively with the same issues.¹⁷¹

In his first pamphlet, Noordtjij deals in general with the value of oriental studies. He draws attention to the fact that its results were slow in being accepted among the Reformed of The Netherlands. He recognizes two reasons for this slow acceptance. First, the conclusions drawn were often too bold while the material was still scarce.¹⁷² In the attempt to discover similarities between Israel and the surrounding cultures there was an unhealthy emphasis on formal similarities and it was forgotten that the basic similarities depend not so much on vocabulary as on ideas.¹⁷³ The second reason for slow acceptance was an insufficient eye for the organic nature of revelation on the part of the Reformed. For some, this led to an outright rejection of external influences and in other cases this influence was seen wrongly. He warns:

Still, we must insist that it is precisely this that must be placed at the forefront if we are to understand fully this organic revelation in the midst of Israel.

“En toch moet juist dit op den voorgrond worden gesteld, zullen we haar actie in het midden van Israel ten volle verstaan.”

God has not isolated Israel from her environment and culture. He took her as she had developed in the course of history with her forms and concepts related to the ancient east, with her polygamy and divorce and other evils.¹⁷⁴

How is the revelation given to Israel related to the ancient culture of the oriental world? Noordtjij expresses some hesitation in defining it. We are like mountain climbers who see the tops of the various mountains above the clouds, but do not see how they are related below.¹⁷⁵ Difficult as it may be to define this relationship positively, he knows what it is *not*. He disapproves of Gunkel's thesis that

170 *De O.-T. ische Godsopenbaring en het Oud-Oostersche leven* (Utrecht: G.J.A. Ruys, 1912)

171 *Gods Woord en der eeuwen getuigenis* (Kampen: J.H. Kok N.V., 1931)

172 P. 7

173 P. 14.

174 P. 15. Note well that Noordtjij is here speaking of organic *revelation*, not inspiration.

175 P. 7.

the history of Revelation follows the same psychological laws that govern all other human events.

“de geschiedenis der Openbaring gaat onder de mensen naar dezelfde psychologische wetten als iedere andere menselijke gebeurtenis.”¹⁷⁶

Israel is related to the surrounding nations and their cultures on many levels, but God entered her history with His revelation and slowly raised her to a higher plateau. He writes,

Thus according to this process of development and unfolding...was the knowledge of God that penetrated Israel continuously purified. And from this centre it governed all of life in an increasingly broadening periphery. It could not be otherwise. The Revelation of God can bear fruit only when God plugs into the existing culture....

Zoo is in den weg van ontplooiing en ontvouwing ... de in Israel ingedragen Godsgedachte tot steeds groter reinheid gebracht en van dit centrum uit in steeds breeder periferie het gansche leven beheerscht. Dat kan ook niet anders. De Gosopenbaring toch kon dan alleen vrucht dragen, wanneer God zich aansloot aan het bestaande¹⁷⁷

Thus the history of revelation developed, but it

continues—and this we Reformed have forgotten all too often—to radiate via the prism of Israel’s consciousness, from which it borrows its forms and draws her images.

“blijft –en dat is van Gereformeerde zijde maar al te dikwijls vergeten—uitstralen door het prisma van Israels bewustzijn, daaraan hare vormen ontleenend, daaruit hare voorstellings-wijze puttend¹⁷⁸

These comments are of a general nature and do not tell us how Noordtzij understands this relationship concretely in connection with the early Genesis chapters. For this we will have to turn to his *magnum opus*, *God’s woord en der eeuwen getuigenis*. However the succeeding discussion ought to be understood, Noordtzij leaves no doubt that he condemns a dualism between form and content, for both are determined by God.¹⁷⁹

According to Noordtzij, one of the basic failures of the Reformed tradition with respect to Genesis 1 is that it has tended to insist on the chapter as “a natural-historical report” of creation without paying much attention to the doctrine of creation as found in the rest of

176 P. 10. Quoted from H. Gunkel, *Israel und Babylonien*, p. 37.

177 P. 16.

178 *Ibid.*

179 *Gods Woord*, p. 75.

Scripture.¹⁸⁰ The significance of creation must be understood in the light of re-creation. This thesis is backed up by a discussion on the prologue to the Gospel of John and of Colossians 1:15-17 and a number of other passages.¹⁸¹ Neglect of this Biblical emphasis has led men to seek agreement between Genesis 1 and “the irrefutable factual materials” of science. Invariably injustice was done to both science and Scripture by forcing concord.¹⁸² Such efforts have stranded on exegetical and “*natuur-historische*” difficulties (restitution theory); or they have come into flagrant conflict with scientific data (anti-geological theories); or refuge has been sought in myth, usually accompanied by an evolutionary framework.¹⁸³

Genesis 1 clearly does not intend to report the process of creation from the point of view of science or history. It seeks to portray the creating activity of God in the light of his plan of salvation.¹⁸⁴ Noordtzij warns against too literal an interpretation of the chapter. The six days are not designed to report on the chronological progress of the creation process. It is a projection to demonstrate the glory of God’s creatures in the light of his saving purposes. The Sabbath is the climax.¹⁸⁵

Noordtzij rejects the idea that Genesis 1:2 implies a battle between God and chaotic forces, though *tehom* is related to the Babylonian goddess Tiamat.¹⁸⁶ Here he is at one with Bavinck. The general cosmology of the other Near Eastern peoples is shared by the Bible, however. A list of Biblical references is adduced to prove this point.¹⁸⁷

Genesis 2 is not a creation account: it serves as background to chapter 3.¹⁸⁸ Its sequence differs from that of Genesis 1 because of the author’s intention.¹⁸⁹

In his discussion of the trees and serpent Noordtzij leaves us a bit in the dark: are they to be understood according to Assen’s interpretation? He gives no answer. He simply states that

180 *Ibid.*, p. 107. “*natuur-historisch getrouw relaas.*”

181 Pp. 112-113.

182 P. 114. “*het niet to weerspreken feitenmateriaal.*”

183 P. 111.

184 P. 114.

185 P. 119,

186 P. 136.

187 P. 135.

188 P. 143.

189 P. 145.

God's use of the tree in a prohibition ought not to surprise us, since this is characteristic in the history of religions.¹⁹⁰ The serpent likewise appears frequently in religions. To us a story of a speaking animal is unbelievable; not so to the primitive.¹⁹¹ The description of the four rivers can be understood only in the light of ancient geography. Two of them we know; the other two, we do not. Certain is, however, that the author means to place the garden in Babel.¹⁹²

The deluge coincides with the flooding of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers. It began on the 17th day of the 2nd month, i.e. likely the end of April or beginning of May. This is the time of the melting snow from the mountains of Armenia.¹⁹³ Noordtzij opposes the view that the Biblical account of the deluge was taken over from the Babylonians and subsequently purified of its mythical elements. This conclusion would possibly be valid if it were not for the fact that identical elements are found in the flood stories of other nations as well. He cites a flood story from Mexico in which there is a divine command to build an ark and in which the sending out of birds is also found.¹⁹⁴ But neither does he draw the typically Reformed conclusion that these universal elements are corrupted forms of the true Scriptural tradition. He keeps silent.

Genesis 10 - 11 present us in schematic form with the unity of all men. This unity is limited, of course, to Israel's horizon.¹⁹⁵ As to the tower of Babel, the materials are typically Babylonian. So is the combination of city and tower. In Babylon every city had its tower and ziggurat.¹⁹⁶

The above summary may leave the impression that Noordtzij makes revelation dependent upon the culture of ancient near east, but that would be a misunderstanding. He strongly insists on the sovereign deed of a revealing God who chooses the ways and means of his revelation.¹⁹⁷ Berkouwer, a few years later, asks how we are to understand this "connection." It must not be confused with accommodation.¹⁹⁸

190 P. 150.

191 P. 151.

192 P. 161.

193 P. 173.

194 Pp. 181-182.

195 P. 188.

196 P. 193.

197 P. 99.

198 *Het Probleem*, p. 322. "aansluiting."

It is unfortunate that Noordt zij has not more explicitly expressed himself on the historicity of these chapters. What about the Assen decision? This lack does not erase the fact that he has performed genuine pioneering service for the Reformed community.

c. **G.C. Berkouwer: *Het probleem der Schriftkritiek***

Anyone acquainted with the Berkouwer of *Dogmatische Studien* is bound to experience surprise if, *after* having gained this acquaintance, he reads his *Het probleem der Schriftkritiek*. To be sure, it is the same Berkouwer with his constant insistence on evaluating the *motifs* that drive theologians and the consequent rejection of the more common, but also more superficial, method that concerns itself with the final outcome of theological thought only. Nevertheless, there is also discontinuity between Berkouwer of *Het probleem der Schriftkritiek* and that of the later studies. Our method will be to first discuss Berkouwer's position in his earlier work. His later statements will be discussed in connection with the more recent developments in The Netherlands.

Berkouwer opens his discussion in *Het probleem* by a description of the influence of the science of nineteenth century. It had a hypnotic effect on people, including theologians, and as such became the primary motive for engaging in higher criticism. There was an "unlimited faith in the 'power' of science."¹⁹⁹ The exact sciences were placed over against theology in the sense of a non-dogmatic versus a dogmatic approach. Neutrality was demanded, also in theology.²⁰⁰ This demand invalidated the doctrines of inspiration and infallibility,²⁰¹ for they were not discovered through neutral observation. Man's idea of science may have undergone a transformation of sorts since the last century, but the insistence that any definite conclusions with respect to the intent, meaning and nature of Scripture must come as the fruit of human research has not diminished and continues to serve as the underlying assumption of much theological activity in Berkouwer's day.²⁰²

There is another motif of historical criticism, namely the

unbreakable correlation between evangelical faith and Divine Revelation that can be grasped purely only via a purified vision on Holy Scripture as a human and fallible means of and witness to the revelation.

199 P. 8. "grenzeloos vertrouwen in de 'macht' der wetenschap."

200 P. 9.

201 Pp. 18-19.

202 P. 10.

*“onverbreekbare correlatie tusschen evangelisch geloof en Goddelijke Openbaring, die alleen zuiver kan worden gevat bij een zuivere visie op de Heilige Schrift als menschelijk en feilbaar middel en getuigenis der openbaring.”*²⁰³

This last motif was then placed in the framework of autonomy as opposed to authority, whether of a book or a church. The demand for autonomy made subjection to a written book intolerable. The relationship between faith and revelation was one of trust that could not be based upon an impersonal book, even if supposedly infallible.²⁰⁴

Berkouwer does not devote much attention to those who have accepted these principles as well as their logical fruit: deep skepticism, but he spends many pages describing the method of those who have accepted the *principle* of historical criticism, because they could not resist the motifs described above, but who have hesitated accepting the logical *conclusion*. They posit a limit to the principle, because its full consequence is too radical and robs one of the entire Gospel. Thus attempts were made to distinguish valid from invalid criticism, but based on one and the same principle, in the hope of achieving a synthesis between faith and criticism.²⁰⁵ Such a synthesis is rejected by Berkouwer in true Kuyperian fashion. Criticism and faith cannot be synthesized, he asserts, for it is a question of *principlial* recognition of the Scripture.

The point of Scripture-critical thinking is not merely about a few findings in historical research so much as a certain attitude and method with far-reaching consequences.

*“Het gaat in het Schriftkritisch denken maar niet om enkele vondsten van het historisch onderzoek, maar om een bepaalde instelling en methode met verstrekkende consequenties.”*²⁰⁶

The critical method is basically *atheistic*. It is based on a philosophy that is anti-supernatural and which recognizes only immanentistic standards.²⁰⁷ Attempts at synthesis underestimate the width of the critical method,²⁰⁸ for it is not merely a matter of not accepting this or that passage in Scripture, but it involves a certain attitude over against Scripture in which the relationship

203 Pp. 18-19.

204 P. 22.

205 Pp. 60-61.

206 P. 62.

207 P. 64.

208 P. 67.

between Scripture and student is much looser. It is no longer one of authority and subjection, but of dialogue between equal partners.²⁰⁹

Wherever the Scripture has been subjected to the critical principle, the battle of delimiting the principle *must* continually flare up, if, at least, the consequences are not acceptable.²¹⁰ The problem of criticism cannot be solved by limiting its effect,²¹¹ for

in this way a person hides the largest part of the problems of his Scripture-critical attitude in the shadow by means of his completely arbitrary reduction of the “points of contact” as well as having put pseudo safeguards around the Christian faith by means of a “possible” synthesis.

*op deze wijze heeft men door z'n volstrekt willekeurige reductie der 'aanrakingsvlakken' de problemen van z'n Schriftkritische instelling voor het grootste gedeelte in de schaduwen verborgen en het Christelijk geloof in schijn 'veiliggesteld' door een zeer wel 'mogelijke' synthese.*²¹²

It speaks for itself that it is principally impossible for the atheistic principle in the critical approach to open for us the Scripture and then to limit the force of the principle at given points on basis of “reasons borrowed from a completely different terrain.”²¹³ The placing of such limits is always *arbitrary*. The critical method itself has no such limiting criteria.

In addition to vigorously rejecting the critical-historical approach to Scripture, Berkouwer opposes all forms of dualism. There is, he writes, a current dualism between the religious and the historical that has entered into the interpretation of Genesis 2 – 3, but, he observes,

The religious aspects of the Biblical data do not function in any way in opposition to the historical. In fact, the religious relationship between a person and her Creator is intimately related to the creative deeds of God that stimulated this history.

*Het religieuze staat in de bijbelsche gegevens in geen enkel opzicht in tegenstelling met het historische. De religieuze verhouding tusschen den mensch en zijn Schepper hangt juist ten nauwste samen met de aan de geschiedenis een aanvang gevende scheppingsdaad Gods.*²¹⁴

209 P. 113.

210 P. 83.

211 P. 90.

212 P. 91.

213 P. 82. “gronden aan een geheel ander terrein ontleend.

214 P. 131.

There was the general resistance to the identification of Scripture with the Word of God, but this was based on a desire for human autonomy and, as such, invalid.²¹⁵ Likewise, the separation of the human and the divine in Scripture is illegitimate, for it does injustice to the mystery of Scripture and is principally one with all attempts at a dualistic theory of inspiration that thinks to have uncovered a criterion by which it can distill the real Word of God from the Scripture.²¹⁶ Finally, the separation of form and content or of kernel and husk is also to be condemned, for it violates the historical character of Scripture.²¹⁷

Like all other Reformed theologians, Berkouwer adheres to the organic view of inspiration, but he does not think the term to have as useful a function as did, for example, Schouten and Van Leeuwen. Throughout his chapter entitled “*Isolement der Gereformeerde Schriftbeschouwing*”, he warns against drawing too many conclusions from the term. He points out that already Jan Ridderbos questioned the usefulness of it. It does not really refer to the *deepest* intention of the doctrine of inspiration, namely to point to the supernatural character of Scripture.²¹⁸ Originally it was coined to point us to the mysterious way of the Lord, who took human instruments into His service in order to present man with His reliable Word.²¹⁹ Often it has been used as basis for solving difficulties in Scripture, but then it can easily violate the authorship of the Holy Spirit. It may never be used to *rob* the Bible of its mysterious character. We must guard against the danger of positing a human element independent from the divine and thus lapse into dualism. We may not separate the modifier from the noun it is designed to qualify.²²⁰ The most important question concerning organic inspiration is

in how far the influence of personality, of the time and history have a place in the effect of the inspiring deed of the Spirit, namely the Holy Scripture.

*“in hoeverre ook de invloed van die persoonlijkheid, van dien tijd en die historie een plaats kon krijgen in het effect van de inspireerende daad des Geestes, nl. de Heilige Schrift.”*²²¹

215 Pp. 19, 163.

216 Pp. 326-327.

217 P. 348.

218 P. 352. A possible translation of this chapter title might be “The Isolation of the Reformed View of Scripture.”

219 Pp. 352-353.

220 Pp. 317-318.

221 P. 316.

It is here that the battle constantly emerges, for through this door, science, especially archeology, has been allowed to enter the realm of exegesis and become predominant over exegesis.

Sacra Scriptura sui ipsius interpres. This is a classic doctrine Berkouwer wishes to retain in order to stem the predominance of extra-Biblical materials over exegesis. Science may not rule exegesis. That does not preclude that it may goad us on to renewed reflection on a given passage. It can give us *aanleiding* to such renewed questioning and in this function the use of science is no denial of the authority of Scripture as long as we remember that

this renewed questioning after the intent of Scripture may never lead to a conclusion that you cannot derive from Scripture itself. It is only thus that a more pure relationship between Scriptural authority and scholarship will be possible.

“nimmer zal dat hernieuwde vragen naar den zin der Schrift tot een conclusie mogen leiden, die niet uit de Schrift zelf kan opkomen. Alleen zoo is een zuivere houding tusschen Schriftgezag en wetenschap mogelijk.”²²²

A. Noordtjij, as we have seen, paid much attention to the relationship between divine revelation and the ancient culture of the Near East. He defined this relationship as one of *aansluiting*, a characterization of which Berkouwer approves. The decisive question, suggests Berkouwer, is the nature of this *aansluiting*. One must carefully distinguish this from accommodation, an example of which is the theory that Christ expressed Himself in terms that were untrue in themselves but nevertheless intelligible to His contemporaries. We lack the criterion to judge when Christ did and when He did not practice accommodation. Secondly, such accommodation would cast doubt on the truth and veracity of His words.²²³ Berkouwer himself does not define the exact difference between *aansluiting* and accommodation except to lay down the criterion for distinguishing them: every theory that would lead to a dualism between the divine and human aspects of Scripture is unacceptable accommodation, for it violates the mystery of Scripture.²²⁴

From his discussion regarding *aansluiting* Berkouwer almost automatically turns to the problem of the alleged presence of an outdated cosmology in the Scripture. This cosmology would not be normative for us, but, according to the proponents of this view, including Geelkerken,

222 P. 274.

223 Pp. 321-322. “Aansluiting” is a favourite term of Berkouwer in this context. It means something like “point of connection.”

224 P. 326.

Schouten *et al*, this would not harm the authority of Scripture, for the Bible does not intend to present us with scientific data. Thus Berkouwer describes the basic position he wishes to oppose.²²⁵ Geelkerken *cum sui* have no reason to ridicule the church's initial refusal to accept Galileo's standpoint until they themselves demonstrate that *their* thesis regarding the presence of such a cosmology in the Scripture does not conflict with the authority of Scripture. The Church initially refused Galileo's position because of *this* concern: the complete authority of Scripture.²²⁶ In his concluding words of this discussion, Berkouwer expresses complete agreement with the position of Aalders and Grosheide as they expressed themselves in the *GTT* debate.

A closely related problem is that of Biblical history. With respect to the *GTT* debate, Berkouwer points out that it was not a question about whether the historiography in Scripture is different from its modern counterpart. Aalders as well as Schouten recognized the uniqueness of Biblical historiography.²²⁷ But that does not mean that the notion of *history* is therefore also different. Schouten failed to make this necessary distinction and therefore fell into a dualism.²²⁸ Geelkerken, likewise, did not consider this carefully and thus also lapsed into dualism.²²⁹

The uniqueness of Scriptural historiography must not be understood in *opposition* to scientific historiography, but in *distinction* from it. The purpose of Scriptural historiography differs from that of today; it means to announce the way of salvation.²³⁰ Hence it may not be judged according to the categories of modern historiography. The historicity of the events related may not be called into question. Certainly, there are differences in the Gospels, but these can be explained in terms of the purpose of Scripture. To explain them in terms of a kerugmatik approach over against the historical is invalid.²³¹

225 P. 327.

226 P. 329.

227 P. 337.

228 P. 338.

229 P. 340.

230 Pp. 341-342.

231 P. 343.

In summary: working with an alleged ancient cosmology and an ancient idea of history--as distinguished from historiography—in Scripture necessarily leads to dualism.

It requires that one apply the brakes at all kinds of arbitrary points and refrain from endangering the historical character of various Bible stories by way of an (imagined) historical perspective of the Holy Scripture.

*“men moet dan wel op allerlei incidenteele punten de remmen aanzetten en niet via het ‘historiebegrip’ der Heilige Schrift het geschiedkundig karakter van verschillende Schriftverhalen in gevaar to brengen.”*²³²

This objection is parallel to Berkouwer’s objection to higher criticism.

The question of myth is breached briefly in *Het probleem*. Here one comes to a dangerous area, for there is a threat here that inspiration is reduced. The category of myth in theology often ends up in a positing of a revelation of *ideas* purified from all relationships with history.²³³ Myth *pretends* to be history. Thus one must ask whether it is in conformity with the nature of Scripture as the Word of God to assume the presence of myths. Furthermore, it is clear that one can point to myths or sagas in Scripture only on basis of an *a priori* criterion, because myth pretends to be history. On *exegetical* grounds it is impossible to discover myths.²³⁴

Berkouwer, as we have seen, insists on the historicity of events reported in Scripture. A non-historical fall would eventually end up in a non-historical redemption.²³⁵ If the paradise account has been derived from Babylonian sources, then one can no longer speak of an actual historical paradise and fall into sin.²³⁶ Though Berkouwer does not touch upon Genesis 4 – 11, the thrust

232 P. 348.

233 P. 349.

234 Pp. 350-351. This is identical to Aalders’ argument.

235 Pp. 147-148.

236 P. 128. *“werkelijk historisch paradijs en een zondeval.”*

of his entire work is such that it leaves no doubt he would insist on the historicity of events related in these chapters as well.

V. The New Approach

We have now come to the new era. That the present theological era contains new elements is highlighted by the so-called “fall of Assen.” This change is most strikingly seen in Berkouwer, who, in his *Het probleem der Schriftkritiek* of 1938, defended the decision of the Synod of Assen, but who in 1967 became a signee of the report submitted by a synodical committee which recommended that Assen be no longer considered binding.²³⁷

We may well ask whether the new development is a deepening of the pre-W.W. II tradition or have new elements entered that are essentially foreign to that tradition? In his 1938 publication, Berkouwer spoke of the isolation of the Reformed doctrine of Scripture, the basic characteristic of which is, as H. Ridderbos describes it, the identification of Word of God and the *written* Bible, or, in other words, insistence upon the “it is written” as highest authority, a principle that must be retained if we wish to continue being Reformed.²³⁸ The question is: Is this isolation endangered by a spirit of accommodation or can one qualify the new direction as a healthy adventurous enterprise that has left behind an earlier reactionary attitude?

We shall attempt to find a tentative answer to this question by examining the writing of a number of the recent theologians. Here again, it must be remembered that the list of authors and sources appealed to is somewhat arbitrary in its exclusion of Kuitert.

A. Scripture: Word of God

²³⁷ *Generale Synode van De Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, Rapport Leeruitspraak “Assen 1926”* (Amsterdam: *Generale Synode 1967*).

²³⁸ H. Ridderbos, “*Het Schrift-beginsel*,” *GW*, XX (March 12, 1965).

1. Inspiration and infallibility

The very reason for the unrest in the Dutch churches with respect to the new theology is that the confession of the Scripture as the Word of God is regarded as under threat. The Scripture *is* the Word of God; it does not merely contain it in addition to other words. We have seen that this certainty was the dynamic behind Kuyper's vigorous opposition to the higher critics of his days. It is feared that the increased emphasis on the humanness of Scripture is undermining the certainty of the Church.

The question of certainty *is* vital to the Church. Berkouwer recognizes that this certainty of the faith has been closely related to the trustworthiness of the Scripture as the Word of God throughout the history of the Church.²³⁹ As we have already seen, H. Ridderbos insists that the Church needs the "it is written" as an expression of the "infallible validity and certainty of God's Word."

"onfeilbare geldigheid en zekerheid van het Woord Gods." This is a "faith-apriori."²⁴⁰ The essential quality of Scripture or the confession of Scripture as the Word of God is not called into question by anyone of the present theologians, but it is, of course, possible to retain this confession while no longer allowing it to function fully. That is the thrust of Berkouwer's warning that we must watch for estrangement that can creep in before we are aware of it.²⁴¹ However, even in her certainty, the Church must keep her eye open for the fact "

that the church must feel the weight of norms even in her assurance and that a feeling of subjective assurance cannot guarantee the purity of this assurance.

*dat de kerk ook in haar zekerheid zich genormeerd moet weten en dat niet het gevoel van subjectieve zekerheid de zuiverheid der zekerheid kan garanderen.*²⁴²

In relation to the confession of the Scripture as the Word of God, Reformed theology has always emphasized the Scripture's inspired quality and the resultant infallibility. This doctrine has undergone a change in these latter days in the *function* it is allowed in present-day theological activity. Schelhaas, a leader of a disturbed group in *De Gereformeerde Kerken*, writes with respect to the inconsistencies found in Scripture that those who accept the infallibility of Scripture have always regarded these difficulties either as the result of copyist

²³⁹ *De Heilige Schrift*, I, p. 9.

²⁴⁰ "De Speelruimte van de Geest," *GW*, XX (March 16, 1965). "onfeilbare geldigheid en zekerheid van het Woord Gods." "geloofs-apriori."

²⁴¹ *De Heilige Schrift*, I, p. 7.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

mistakes or as difficulties that will be solved in time as we receive increased light.²⁴³ This is an *a priori* method of approaching such difficulties based on a certain doctrine of Scripture, a method considered valid by Reformed tradition. Today, such an approach is considered invalid, for it reduces infallibility and inspiration to formal categories that *precede* the content of Scripture. Infallibility must be seen in connection with the purpose and nature of Scripture, according to H.N. Ridderbos.²⁴⁴ He cautions us not to permit exegesis to be forced by an *a priori* conception of inerrancy. It will then be guided by theological and dogmatic postulates and take insufficient account of the factual content of Scripture.²⁴⁵ He attempts a tentative definition of inspiration:

Inspiration consists in this: that God speaks His Word through men, that He makes their words the instruments of His Word. As such, the human word stands in the service of God and participates in the authority and infallibility of the Word of God. But it remains a human, and therefore also an inadequate, instrument.²⁴⁶

As to the relationship between inspiration and infallibility, he suggests that it will always be difficult, if not impossible, to arrive at a theological definition of this relationship. We must always be careful to “exercise modesty and not permit ourselves to be tempted by all manner of *a priori* statements and postulations.”²⁴⁷ One can readily detect the contrast between the new theology’s view of the *function* of inspiration and infallibility and the traditional function allotted to them.

Ridderbos’ position is representative of the new theology. Berkouwer also recognizes it must be understood to refer to the central witness of Scripture, namely Christ.²⁴⁸ Inspiration is not intended to increase our knowledge, he writes, but to point us to salvation in Christ. This is its *scopus*.²⁴⁹ This is an important discussion for an understanding of the later Berkouwer, for a definite shift can be detected here. During the *GTT* debate, Aalders *cum sui* asserted that the doctrine of inspiration precludes the presence of an ancient cosmology in Scripture, for this would mean that God spoke in wrong categories. In his *Het probleem der Schriftkritiek* Berkouwer agreed with this view and detected a dualism in Schouten and Van Leeuwen, who

243 J. Schelhaas, “Verstaat gij wat gij leest?,” *Waarheid en Eenheid*, XI (January 10, 1969). “oneffenheden.”

244 “An Attempt at the Theological Definition of Inerrancy, Infallibility, and Authority,” *IRB*, XI (Jan-April, 1968), 31.

245 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

246 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

247 *Ibid.*

248 *De Heilige Schrift (Dogmatische Studien; Kampen: J.H. Kok N.V., 1967)*, II, p. 86.

249 *Ibid.*

asserted the presence of such a cosmology. The later Berkouwer disagrees with the stand taken by Aalders *et al.* He now charges that such a view contains “a drastic formalizing of the concept of error. The concept is here far removed from its Scriptural connotation which always refers to a disruption in our relationship with God.”²⁵⁰

Herman Ridderbos, like his contemporaries, warns that one should not make too many *a priori* statements as long as inspiration, i.e. the authority of the Holy Spirit is not denied.²⁵¹ We must be careful in stating what is or is not possible under inspiration. We must honor the freedom of the Spirit and follow the path He has gone, instead of making pronouncements that are all too self-assured.”²⁵²

Remke Kooistra does not reside in The Netherlands, but his theological affinity to the present movement in that country is sufficiently close to consider his statements in this context, especially since he has expressed himself clearly and unhesitatingly. Referring to the common Reformed statement, “This must be true, for it says so in the Bible and the Bible is infallible,” he asks whether this does not indicate that Reformed tend to use the Bible as a paper pope.²⁵³ In connection with Matthew’s quoting Zechariah 11:13, Kooistra shrugs off the difficulty involved in a delightfully careless and childlike manner: “What if Matthew made a mistake? Then the conclusion is obvious that the Holy Spirit did not deem it necessary in His inspiring activity to correct this mistake. So let it be.”²⁵⁴ Behind this “careless” statement is, it will be recognized, a theological affinity to Berkouwer *et al* in their opposition to employing the categories of inspiration and infallibility in an *a priori* fashion, apart from the phenomena of Scripture. In commenting on certain decisions of the Christian Reformed Church, Kooistra expresses the thought that the church fell into a *trap* “of believing our doctrine regarding the Scripture, rather than that we submitted ourselves listening obeyingly to the authority of Scripture.”²⁵⁵ He regarded Wijngaarden’s charge against Kromminga, who held to the possibilities of actual historical inaccuracies as just “one more example of the Christian Reformed foot in the trap of an infallibility-inerrancy doctrine.”²⁵⁶

250 *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90. “*een ingrijpende formalisering van het begrip dwaling.*”

251 “*Gods Woord en mensen-woord,*” *GW*, XX (April 2, 1965).

252 “*Speelruimte.*” “*al te welverzekerde uitspraken.*”

253 R. Kooistra, “Scripture and Its Authority,” *CN*, XI (August 27, 1968).

254 *Ibid.*

255 *Ibid.*

256 *Ibid.* This last sentence refers to disagreements among the faculty of Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Mich., a place one could consider at the time a “theological satellite” of the Gereformeerde Kerken in The Netherlands and for which this paper is being written.

Here we are at some theological distance from Aalders *cum sui*, but not so far as may appear at first glance. The difference lies not in a denial of inspiration and infallibility themselves, but in their *function*. They are no longer accepted as *a priori* guidelines for Scripture study in the same way the previous generation handled them. They still do function as basic principles, but they no longer are thought to determine the exclusions of the previous generation. They are now more closely related to the *intention* of Scripture, the *scopus*. It is no longer considered valid to define inspiration without reference to the actual phenomena of Scripture.

Let it be understood, however, that the phenomena of Scripture are not asked to provide or even support the doctrine of inspiration, for this is part of the Scripture's self-testimony and not under dispute. We have previously noted Bavinck's warning that no tension ought to be supposed between the self-testimony of Scripture and the phenomena of Scripture and that the doctrine of inspiration is to be based upon the self-testimony rather than on the phenomena. To base the doctrine on the phenomena, he cautioned, is only another, more subtle, form of higher criticism. The present theology has not neglected this warning. It does insist, however, that the data of Scripture can help in defining or qualifying it, rather than to allow the doctrine pre-determine the interpretation of phenomena. In other words, the relationship between the self-testimony of Scripture and the phenomena is now regarded as one of interdependence.

2. Organic inspiration

It hardly needs stating that it is the *organic* theory of inspiration that continues to be espoused. H. Ridderbos asserts that it has deeper implications and further consequences than one can notice at first glance. It implies that we must understand the writers in their context: how they wrote books, the literary forms common to their age. We cannot expect these writers to adhere to our standard of historiography. Then he warns that the mechanical often enters in again through the backdoor when the full implication of the doctrine is not accepted.²⁵⁷ There is nothing new and startling in these statements. Already Kuyper made remarks identical to these and gave a similar warning.²⁵⁸ During the debate around Assen this point was frequently repeated, but the *leading* theologians then objected to drawing too many conclusions from the theory. Berkouwer, in his earlier book, pronounced the same caution,²⁵⁹ but in his later two-volume work he is more ready to accept the wider consequences of which Ridderbos speaks. One who seeks to avoid a mechanistic view

²⁵⁷ "Organisch," *GW*, XX (March 19, 1965).

²⁵⁸ *Supra*, p. 11.

²⁵⁹ *Supra*, pp. 38-39.

sees himself automatically confronted with what is often regarded as the connection point of the speech of God with the human as the real dimension of the Word of God...

“ziet zich als vanzelf geplaatst voor wat men gemeenlijk neemt de aansluiting van het spreken Gods bij het menselijke als wezenlijke dimensie van het Woord Gods”

It ought not to surprise us that exactly at *this* point the question forces itself upon us

as to which way the Word of God retained its sovereign and aprioristic character in that connection and not become dependent on the humanness, temporality and historicality with all their relativity.

“op welke wijze het Woord Gods in die aansluiting z’n souverain en apriorisch karakter behield en niet afhankelijk werd van menselijkheid, tijdelijkheid en geschiedenis met al de hun eigen relativiteit.”²⁶⁰

I detect no *principial* change in Berkouwer in this matter, but there definitely is a shift of emphasis, a shift that will become more apparent as these pages unfold.

3. Dualism

Another major characteristic of the traditional Reformed view of Scripture has been its strong opposition to any semblance of dualism. The entire Scripture is Word of God, in form as well as in content. One cannot separate the divine and human aspects of the Bible in an effort to find the abiding message. Kuyper, Bavinck, Grosheide, Berkouwer – to name but a few – all were adamantly opposed to any such dualism. Though there is a shift in emphasis here as well, it cannot be said that the new theology tends towards dualism, in the sense that it has begun to separate the divine from the human aspects of Scripture. Koole, for example, objects to the separation of *kerugma* and history, for this would emasculate the historical accounts of the Old Testament.²⁶¹ H. Ridderbos rejects the notion that certain parts of Scripture are not inspired.²⁶²

The same Ridderbos very carefully and hesitantly suggests that some distinction cannot be avoided altogether:

No matter how difficult and “dangerous” it may be to accept the form-content scheme, no one should kid himself that this will not force him in one way or another, sometimes

²⁶⁰ *De Heilige Schrift*, II, pp. 62-63.

²⁶¹ “Het soortelijk gewicht,” pp. 82-83.

²⁶² “Het gezag van het Nieuwe Testament,” *Heilsgeschiedenis en Heilige Schrift* (Kampen: J.H. Kok N.V., 1955), p. 116.

in a drastic way, to get involved in the study of the Bible. It all depends on which way and with what intention one handles such a scheme.

*Hoe moeilijk en “gevaarlijk” het ook moge zijn met het vorm-inhoud-schema te werken, niemand moet denken, dat hij daarmee niet op de een of andere, soms ingrijpende wijze te doen krijgt bij de bestudering van de Bijbel. Alles hangt er maar van af, op welke wijze en met welke doel zulk een schema gehanteerd wordt.*²⁶³

In the service of an evolutionist, naturalistic approach, such a distinction will become a destructive instrument. This has usually been the case and this accounts for the Reformed rejection of it in the past.²⁶⁴ There is a center in Scripture – Christ – and this centre is clear. As one moves from the center to the periphery, He will slide into the shadows.²⁶⁵

Again, Ridderbos’ distinction is not new in the Reformed camp. We have shown that Bavinck already posited the distinction and immediately adds that even the peripheral belongs to the “circle of God’s thoughts,”²⁶⁶ thus avoiding any hint of approving a dualism, a danger that always lurks just around the corner. Berkouwer acknowledges that this center-periphery-scheme can easily lead to such a dualism. Nevertheless, according to him, there is a legitimate speaking of such a center on basis of Scripture itself. In fact, the Scripture becomes nonsense if it is not understood as the witness of Christ. Positing this as center of Scripture is not an arbitrary reduction but an “uncovering of the riches of this one event of which the Scriptures give witness.”²⁶⁷ Organic inspiration has traditionally been discussed in the context of the instrumentality of the authors, but then it becomes a formal category, disassociated from the content of Scripture, Christ.²⁶⁸ The report to the *Generale Synode* of the *Gereformeerde Kerken* of 1967, concurs with this judgment. The writings arising within the church, so goes the report, demonstrate a serious endeavor to subject themselves to the Scripture, always emphasizing the character of the authority of the Scripture, a Christocentric authority. This is not introducing a new dualism, but it rests in the self-testimony of Scripture.²⁶⁹

263 “God’s Woord en mensen-woord.”

264 *Ibid.*

265 “Gelijk zelfs de blinden kuunen tasten,” *GW*, XX (April 9, 1965).

266 *Supra*, p. 17. “cirkel der gedachten Gods.”

267 *De Heilige Schrift*, II, pp. 56-57, 84. “ontdekken van de rijkdom van het ene gebeurtenis, waarvan de Schriften getuigen.”

268 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

269 P. 4.

Christocentrism, then, is rapidly becoming the key used by recent Reformed theology to open the Scripture. It is not new as such except for the *concentration* it now receives. It differs from a dualistic approach in that it does not rest upon imported distinctions, but is based on the witness of Scripture. Though it is recognized that there is also a danger in this scheme, we must not allow fear to become the leading principle in our reflection on the Bible.²⁷⁰

The doctrine of organic inspiration automatically confronts one with the question as to the nature of the interplay of the divine and human aspects of Scripture. How is it possible that a word that is very human -- there is great emphasis on this -- is simultaneously divine and therefore trustworthy? What of the temporality²⁷¹ that invariably characterizes man and all his efforts? How is the cultural influence on the various authors to be defined? We have indicated briefly the prevailing opinion of the previous generation of theologians. We will now describe the current trends.

Though accommodation theories have generally had inherent reductionist tendencies, Berkouwer notes that opposition to accommodation has usually not meant denial of every theory of *aansluiting*. Hardly anyone has reached a totally negative conclusion regarding *aansluiting*. Long before rationalism misused the theory, Calvin already appealed to it. Berkouwer suggests that this *aansluiting* must be seen in relationship to the center of Scripture -- Christ -- and then it does not have to degenerate into dualism.²⁷²

4. Temporality

One of the specific problems of *aansluiting* has been that of the alleged presence of an outdated cosmology or worldview in Scripture. The previous generation attempted to account for this in terms of naïve experience. It was felt that talk of an outdated cosmology would lead to dualism and that it undermined the reliability of Scripture. Even today, no one objects to the theory of naïve experience, but it is not regarded as sufficient an explanation. It is in this connection that Berkouwer acknowledges a shift in his own thinking. In his *Het probleem der Schriftkritiek* he had opposed Schouten, charging that the latter's view would force him into dualism. In his later work, he admits to having done injustice to Schouten -- he places this admission in a footnote --, for inspiration may not lead us to demand correctness in Scripture regarding its worldview. Such a demand can only be based on the false presupposition that the presence of cultural, temporal conceptions excludes inspiration.²⁷³ There is a temporality to

270 *De Heilige Schrift*, II, p. 99.

271 "tijdgebondenheid."

272 *De Heilige Schrift*, II, pp. 74, 86.

273 *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

Scripture that can no longer be denied, for the simple fact of its three languages points to it.²⁷⁴ To be sure, this insight can be employed to relativize the Scripture,²⁷⁵ but it can also help us see the true and permanent normativity of God's Word.²⁷⁶

Herman Ridderbos' position is similar to that of Berkouwer. Concerning the New Testament he writes that it

does not precede the natural development of the human race or of the opening up of nature. Neither does it correct every time-bound depiction of the universe or what takes place there in....

“loopt niet vooruit op de natuurlijke ontwikkeling van het menselijk geslacht of op de ontsluiting van de natuur; het corrigeert niet iedere aan een bepaalde tijd gebonden voorstelling van het heelal en hetgeen daarin plaats vindt”²⁷⁷

This is a general statement. Specifically regarding the presence of a cosmology in Scripture, he states that in addition to using poetic language and the language of naïve experience, sometimes Scripture also employs language

that clearly refers to or makes use of certain contemporary conceptions of the arrangement of the universe that are strange to us and difficult to assimilate, because they assume a different worldview from that of ours....

“met duidelijke toespeling of op gebruikmaking van bepaalde contemporaine voorstellingen van de inrichting van het heelal, die voor ons vreemd en moeilijk te assimileren zijn, omdat zij van een ander wereldbeeld uitgaan dan het onze”²⁷⁸

5. Role of science

In order to understand the present view on Biblical historiography, we must not only be aware of the acceptance of an outdated cosmology in Scripture, but also of the greater appreciation of

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

²⁷⁷ *Heilsgeschiedenis*, p. 115.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 143. He expresses himself more strongly with respect to anthropology. The way in which Scripture speaks of man in his *“verschillende wijze van bestaan also ziel, geest, lichaam, vlees, ingewanden”* is sometimes almost unbearable and untranslatable in our language because the concepts are no longer shared in which the language is couched. For this reason, Bible translation is not merely a linguistic effort (*Ibid.*, p. 142). Note: this leads to the question whether one can at all speak of a Scriptural anthropology that is normative.

science. Theology does not operate in a vacuum: it participates in the culture of its practitioners. It is one of the facts of our age that every science is undergoing drastic differentiation and refinement. It is increasingly difficult for a layman in any field to speak intelligently as the complexity of reality impresses itself upon us.

Theology is no exception; it participates in this process of deepening and differentiation. Of course, the Scripture remains perspicuous to the average Christian with respect to its central concern, but the average Christian cannot read the Scripture apart from the general impact that science, not even to mention scientism, is making upon his soul. Christians, too, have generally adopted a secularized thought pattern.²⁷⁹ The result is that we are experiencing greater difficulty in understanding the Scripture for these two reasons: secular thought pattern and deeper awareness of the complexity of reality, including the Scripture. This is what Herman Ridderbos had in mind when he declares that Scripture is becoming obscure for us without philological and archeological knowledge.²⁸⁰

N.H. Ridderbos sounds a warning that has often been heard in the Reformed community. Science, he proclaims, may not decree how Scripture is to be interpreted, but it may cause us to examine our findings in Scripture and induce us to ask whether or not we must exegete the Scriptural data in some other way.²⁸¹ This is the traditional position and it has retained its adherents. Delleman, for example, approvingly quoting from Berkouwer's *Het probleem der Schriftkritiek*, voices the same principle:

It is certainly not impossible that developments in science lead to results that may stimulate us to ask new questions with respect to the meaning of any specific part of Scripture. This in no way implies a denial of the full authority of Holy Scripture.

*“Het is zeker niet onmogelijk, dat de ontwikkeling der wetenschap tot resultaten komt die voor ons ‘aanleiding’ zijn opnieuw te vragen naar de zin van een bepaald Schriftgedeelte. Hierin licht in geen enkel opzicht een miskennis van het volstreckte gezag der Heilige Schrift.”*²⁸²

279 A. Troost, *De eerste hoofdstukken van de Bijbel*, “Mededelingen van de vereniging voor Calvinistische Wijsbegeerte, June, 1965.

280 *Heilsgeschiedenis*, pp. 143-144.

281 *Is there a Conflict between Genesis 1 and Natural Science?*, trans. J. Vriend (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), pp. 20-21.

282 Th. Delleman, *Wording van mens en wereld* (Aalten: Uitgeverij De Graafschap, n.d.), p. 25.

Koole, too, objects to science's dictating exegesis. Modern opposition to miracle stories are based upon a view of natural law that inherently denies the resurrection, a view derived from modern science.²⁸³

In his earlier book, Berkouwer spoke of a relationship of *aanleiding* between science and exegesis. In *De Heilige Schrift* he retains this principle, but adds that it is not always possible to determine exactly how science has goaded theology on to further investigation.²⁸⁴ According to his judgment, the shift from a mechanical view of inspiration to an organic one cannot be understood apart from this *aanleidingsfunctie* of various extra-Biblical data uncovered by archeology. These data, discovered by *historical* research, have led to a deeper understanding of Scripture.²⁸⁵ Science has had a *correcting* influence:

In the course of a historical opening up process of human knowledge, it is highly possible this would lead to a discovery of going too far and of questioning Scripture too much, where in a previous era theologians might have called upon the principle of perspicuity of Scripture.

*“in een historisch ontsluitingsproces van menselijke kennis kan de aanleiding een reeele mogelijkheid worden tot ontdekking van grensoverschrijdingen en overvraging van de Schrift, waarvoor men vroeger een beroep op de perspicuitas had gedaan.”*²⁸⁶

This cause must not be placed in juxtaposition to exegesis, for there is a relationship of interdependence.²⁸⁷ Furthermore, it may not and does not have to lead to a growing away from the classic Reformed principle *“sui ipsious interpret.”* Often, in fact, it has meant an increased concentration on this principle. We must adhere to this principle not because we belittle science, but because science differs in character and aim from Scripture.²⁸⁸

Repeatedly we notice that very few novelties have been introduced in the Reformed tradition. There *is* a definite change of emphasis, however. Formerly, the data of science were regarded as too uncertain to be considered a serious threat to traditional exegesis. At present these data are regarded as fairly reliable and consequently enjoy greater appreciation. An example of this

283 *“Soortelijk gewicht,”* p. 95.

284 I, p. 207.

285 *Ibid.*, II, p. 301.

286 *Ibid.*, p. 302.

287 *Ibid.*, p. 324.

288 *Ibid.*, I, pp. 205-207.

is Koole's discussion of the fall of Jericho. Archeological data suggest a time for the fall that does not coincide with the data of Scripture. He suggests that perhaps the story must be understood in a symbolic sense.²⁸⁹ It must be understood, however, that this suggestion does not arise purely on basis of archeology: his treatment of literary genre also enters into this discussion. Later in this paper it will be shown that the age of man is no longer considered to be 6000 years as Kuyper, for example, held. The change is accounted for by the same combination of the data of natural science and a study of literary genre.

6. Literary genre

We have almost unnoticeably slipped into our next discussion, namely that on literary genre. The presence of various literary genres in Scripture has long been acknowledged in the Reformed tradition. It has been recognized as an important hermeneutical principle that each genre must be exegeted according to its own laws. A historical passage cannot be analysed according to the same categories applied to apocalyptic material.

Within the category of historical accounts in Scripture an "enormous deepening and refinement" has taken place recently.²⁹⁰ The one mainly responsible for this development is Koole. He asserts that the reason there is so much discussion about Old Testament historiography in Reformed circles is not that the reports are no longer considered reliable. Rather, the reason lies in the fact that *there is a more careful listening to the Scripture with all its nuances*.²⁹¹ This is a conclusion quite the opposite to that of Praamsma, who charges, in connection with Berkouwer, that the new development does injustice to the written records and that the authority of *Deus dixit* is being undermined.²⁹² Arntzen challenges Koole to demonstrate the consequences of his literary genre approach. He demands: "We have the right to know: How far are you prepared to go?" We must be careful, he cautions, with premature views that have not yet ripened and the consequences of which are not yet clear.²⁹³ This warning is definitely in order, but Arntzen would do well to exercise patience, for Koole himself admits that further reflection is required on the matter. In connection with the death of Goliath, Koole expresses his uncertainty:

289 *Verhaal en feit in het Oude Testament (Cahiers voor de gemeente; Kampen: J.H. Kok N.V., n.d.)* pp. 59-60.

290 Such is Troost's characterization of the present development. Cf. his "*De eerste hoofdstukken.*" "*enorme verdieping en verfijning.*"

291 "*Het soortelijk gewicht,*" p. 81.

292 "Progress – in Which Direction?," *CN*, XII (June 25, 1968).

293 "*De Betrouwbaarheid,*" p. 148. "*Wij hebben het recht te weten: 'Hoe ver gaat U?'*"

You will accept that I am not finished by any means with these issues, but the question of literary genres does force itself upon us.

*“U zult willen aannemen dat ik nog lang niet klaar ben met deze kwestie, maar het vraagstuk van de literaire genres dringt zich hier wel aan ons op.”*²⁹⁴

Koole is doing pioneer work with respect to the use of literary genre in Reformed theology and it is always difficult to predict where this will lead.

The key notion in Koole’s approach is that “Events can be reported in different ways.”²⁹⁵ Whereas it was previously thought that historiography was one genre, now it is thought that a number of literary genres have been employed in the historical sections of Scripture.

It is possible to make up a wide range of possibilities, from the sober, via well-considered historical tales and the simple folk stories all the way to poetic interpretation. In all these different approaches to history certain activities are reported. These are all certainly historical literary genres, but they do not all possess the same historical precision.

*Men kan een scala van mogelijkheden opstellen, van de nuchtere annale af, via de weloverwogen geschiedverhalen en de eenvoudige volkvertellingen tot aan dichterklijke vertolking to. In al deze verschillende benaderingen van het gebeuren worden bepaalde feitelijkheden weergegeven. Het zijn alle zeker historische litteratuurgenres, maar ze bezitten niet alle dezelfde historisch nauwkeurigheid.*²⁹⁶

Judges 4 and 5 can serve as example here. Both deal with the same historical event; yet there are inconsistencies. These inconsistencies can be explained in terms of literary genre: Judges 5 employs poetic freedom and is therefore not precise.²⁹⁷ It has already been noted that the Jericho account is perhaps also to be understood symbolically, partly on basis of the application of literary genre, though Koole does not mention the genre involved. Another example is the fact that we are told of two different men who killed Goliath. Asserts Koole, both stories belong to the category of folktales in which the detail as to the actual killer

294 “Soortelijk gewicht,” p. 98.

295 “Het litterair genre van Genesis 1-3,” *GTT*, LXIII (May, 1963), 91. “gebeurtenissen op verschillende wijze verteld kunnen worden.”

296 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

297 *Verhaal.*, p. 27.

would not be very important. Another characteristic of this category is that it consists of independent stories and no attempt is usually made to harmonize them.²⁹⁸

Herman Ridderbos sees the present task in the following manner:

We need to search for the categories of “salvation history” to gain clarity with respect to the character, the content and the form of the New Testament Scripture along with the nature of its authority, and then to learn to differentiate these all according to the Scripture’s own light and criteria.

*Wat ons te doen staat is de heilshistorische categorieën op te sporen, met behulp waarvan ons de aard, de inhoud en dan ook de vorm van het Nieuwtestamentisch Schriftwoord en de aard van zijn gezag duidelijk kan worden; en deze alle bij haar eigen licht en naar haar eigen maatstaven te leren onderscheiden.*²⁹⁹

The approach of Koole may, in contrast to that of Aalders *cum sui*, appear as an accommodation to modern theology. Berkouwer, for one, does not think this to be the case. Concerning Koole’s statements on Genesis 1-3, Berkouwer writes:

We can see clearly that this is not a case of a rationalistic approach to the Holy Scripture, but that the focus is on the unique nature and import of the Genesis chapters.

“we zien ... duidelijk, dat er geen sprake is van een rationalistische benadering van de Heilige Schrift, maar dat de aandacht zich concentreert op de eigen aard en strekking van de hoofdstukken uit Genesis.”

The same author, referring to N.H. Ridderbos’ explanation of Genesis 1, is of the opinion that here, too, the central point of departure is the familiar principle *Sacra Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*.³⁰⁰ Similarly, the majority report to the synod of 1967 asserts that the present approach has nothing to do with illegitimate criticism. Interpreting the Scripture requires just such a “critical attitude” but only the kind that excludes extra-Biblical norms. The difference between this approach and that of higher criticism is that the latter is based upon the principles of uniformity and the analogy of each historical event, principles that attack the uniqueness of divine revelation in history. The present-day attempts, on the other hand, are based upon subjection to Scripture and as such they do not fall under Kuyper’s anathema of his

298 “Soortelijk,” p. 87.

299 *Heilsgeschiedenis*, p. 101. Literally: salvation history, but most theologians outside of The Netherlands prefer to use the German “*heilsgeschichte*,” very close to the Dutch. It gives the impression of sophistication more than the “simple” English “salvation history.”

300 *De Heilige Schrift*, I, p. 199.

Hedendaagsche.³⁰¹ Berkouwer reminds us that Bavinck already appeared to distinguish between various kinds of historical criticism:

Bavinck is not satisfied with a mere repudiation of historical criticism; he is more nuanced as follows: "Historical criticism of Scripture is resisted by the congregation only in so far as it breaks down confidence in the divinity of Holy Scripture and through it undermines the witness to the Son of God, the hope of glory and the assurance of salvation."

*Zo volstaat Bavinck niet met een afwijzing van de historische kritiek zonder meer, maar hij nuanceert op deze wijze: "Historische kritiek der Schrift vindt daarom alleen in zoverre bij de gemeente tegenstand, als zij afbreuk doet aan deze divinitas der Heilige Schrift en daardoor het getuigenis van het kinschap Gods, de hoop der heerlijkheid, de zekerheid der zaligheid ondermijnt."*³⁰²

It seems, then, that there is the possibility of a type of historical criticism that does not need to call up resistance from the congregation. This brings us to the distinction between a valid and invalid use of the critical method.³⁰³

An oft-repeated cry is heard that this approach leaves the congregation at the mercy of theologians. There is always this danger, of course, but Berkouwer does not think this fear should prevent further development along present lines. It is necessary, according to him, to take account of the specific literary genre in order to note the great variety found in Scripture. Failure to do this on basis of a plea for the perspicuity of Scripture does not help, for,

it is not possible to operate with this perspicuity as a criterion that a specific account makes such a powerful reality-impression.

"men kan niet met deze duidelijkheid opereren door als maatstaf aan te leggen, dat een verhaal zulk een sterke werkelijkheids-indruk maakt."

There are stories and parables which appear to present us with factual history, but of which we know quite well that this is not their intention.³⁰⁴ The examples Berkouwer adduces, however, do not particularly strengthen his argument, for in each case we are told by Scripture itself that they are not designed to be historical. I would nevertheless agree, but then on basis of the fact

301 *Rapport Leeruitspraak*, p. 6. "kritische instelling."

302 *De Heilige Schrift*, II, p. 429. Bavinck's quotation from *Ger. Dog.*, I, p. 389.

303 *Ibid.* pp. 429-430.

304 *Ibid.*, p. 293.

that one's culture frequently determines whether or not a story makes a "*werkelijkheids-indruk*."³⁰⁵ The fact that the new questions shock us is related to our earlier handling of a standard that excluded nuances, which were considered impossible on basis of inspiration, concludes Berkouwer.³⁰⁶

7. Myth

In the context of a discussion on literary genre, one cannot avoid the question of myth. If, as the present theologians assert, the writers employed the normal literary categories of their time, it would seem myth would be employed also. The traditional answer to this has always been negative and this answer stands.

Myth and primitive religion are inseparable. Primitive religion is a faith in which man has *fallen from* the truth and it can therefore not be accepted as the original religion as evolutionists have held. Consequently, one would not expect to find myths in Scripture, an *a priori* expectation based on the nature of Scripture as the Word of God. There is no room for myth in Scripture, because myth is timeless, a projection into a pantheon to which man's fate is subjected.³⁰⁷

The denial of the presence of *myths* in Scripture is not to be equated with a denial of the presence of *mythological materials*. The latter denial has been characteristic of the position taken by a number of leading theologians of the previous generation. In an attempt to explain the largely negative attitude towards the question at hand, Berkouwer suggests that this hesitation is understandable in the light of earlier theories that were designed to make Israel's religion and Book totally dependent upon pagan myths.³⁰⁸ The present prevalent position is that of a recognition of mythological materials in Scripture, but not of myth itself. The *Unwelt* of Israel included a generous dose of myths. Israel was, it is clearly indicated in the Old Testament, constantly tempted to absorb more of this atmosphere than was agreeable to Yahwe; she had constantly to be warned by the prophets to preserve her distance. The Word of God, as it came to Israel in *that* situation, had to be expressed in terms that were meaningful to her and in terms that would most effectively undercut the influence of paganism. Thus the mythological material found in Scripture, according to these Dutch theologians, is designed to *undermine*

305 My brief experience in Nigeria has demonstrated this amply. A story that appears fully factual to a Westerner will often appear fanciful to the Nigerian. The reverse is also true. For "*werkelijkheids-indruk*" see above quotation.

306 *De Heilige Schrift*, II, p. 294

307 Koole, "*Het litterair genre*," p. 95. Among the latest Reformed discussions on mythology are H. Dooyeweerd, *New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, trans. D.H. Freeman and H. De Jongste (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1955), II, and T. Hard, "The Religious Aspect of Myth," *RBM*, II (July, 1966). Hard's discussion attempts to elaborate on Dooyeweerd's.

308 *De Heilige Schrift*, II, p. 321.

pagan myths, not to propagate them. A process of *demythologizing*³⁰⁹ has taken place in Scripture.

Berkouwer demonstrates that already Bavinck recognized that Scripture used mythological images, but that this did not at all involve faith in the reality of mythological powers. For this reason, he suggests, it is misleading to speak of mythological elements in the Old Testament:

Because this is not about any large mythical part of the Bible but about an intentional use of various images, which points “not only to the antimythological tendency of the Yahwe cults, but also to the absorption power of the Yahwe faith that within its own tradition of (salvation) history absorbs foreign material and uses it for its own purposes.” So, it is not about the question regarding existing or not existing or about a metaphysical faith, but, rather, about forms of expression in which Israel’s faith is cast.

*Omdat het niet gaat om een quantitatief-mythische gedeelte, maar om een doelgericht hanteren van allerlei beelden en dat wijst “nicht nur die antimythologische Tendenz des Jahwekults, sondern auch die vitale Absorptionskraft des Jahwe-glaubens, der van seiner eigenen Tradition der (Heils) geschichte aus die fremden Stoffe bewaltigt und ihr dienstbar gemacht hat.” Het gaat ons dus niet om de vraag: bestaan of niet-bestaan, om een metafysisch geloof, maar om expressievormen van Israels geloof.*³¹⁰

The conclusion is that the Old Testament does not teach the existence of chaotic powers, independent from God’s creating activity, even though the form of expression may remind us of the pagan myths which often form the background of such materials and *against* which such passages direct themselves. Israel can describe God’s creating work

in that contrast to what would make life impossible in order to indicate God’s work over against chaos and danger....

*“in die tegenstelling tot wat het leven onmogelijk maakt om zo Gods werk aan te duiden tegenover chaos en dreiging”*³¹¹

309 This term is used here in a sense different from that of Bultmann, who seeks to demythologize the *Scripture*. According to the Dutch, the Scripture itself has already done this. Furthermore, Bultmann regards as mythological any element in Scripture that does not conform to the scientific temper of our age, whereas the Dutch use the term “myth” more in the technical sense employed by students of comparative religion and as found commonly in Israel’s *Umwelt*.

310 *De Zonde (Dogmatische Studien; Kampen: J.H. Kok N.V., 1958)*, I, pp. 74-75. Cf. Bavinck, *GD*, II, p. 438f. This Dutch quotation includes a German quotation from Weiser. Unlike the Dutch part, the German part is not italicized but has quotation marks.

311 *Ibid.*, p. 78.

Descriptions such as found in Genesis 1:2 are not designed to promote the mythical view of independent powers but to reject the thought of their independent existence.

The categories of formlessness and desolation serve to point us to God's creating power.

*"De categorieen van woestheid en leegheid zijn dienstbaar aan de verwijzing naar Gods scheppingsmacht."*³¹²

Gispén admits the presence of mythological materials, especially in the *poetic* accounts of creation and the exodus,³¹³ but this has been recognized throughout the period covered in this paper. Koole also denies the presence of myth, but does acknowledge "the apparent mythological content" contained in both Genesis and prophetic literature.³¹⁴ The synod of 1967 recognizes the parallels between Israel and her neighbors, but notes that they function differently in Israel from what they did among pagans. They bring out the uniqueness of Scripture, rather than show Scripture to be a product of mythological thinking.³¹⁵

8. Historical accounts

a. Historicity

We are now in a position to examine the current attitude towards the historical accounts of Scripture. The initial question frequently asked is whether or not the new approach leaves room for the facticity of the events related in these accounts. N. H. Ridderbos denies that it is possible to either doubt or to deny the historicity of a Biblical account without touching the message of Scripture. Once one begins to doubt certain historical details, this will with innate necessity continue to cover other details as well, for there will be no principial resistance.³¹⁶ Berkouwer likewise leaves no doubt on this score. The Scripture insists strongly upon the reality behind her *kerugma*, he writes. It is not all pure projection or poetry.³¹⁷ Herman Ridderbos concurs: the *kerugma* stands or falls with the facticity of the historical events it proclaims.

³¹² *Ibid.*, p. 79.

³¹³ W.H. Gispén, *Schepping en Paradijs: verklaring van Genesis 1-3* (Kampen: J.H. Kok N.V., 1966), p. 37.

³¹⁴ "Het litterair Genre," p. 111. "het schijnbaar mythologisch gehalte."

³¹⁵ *Rapport Leeruitspraak*, p. 4.

³¹⁶ "Het Oude Testament en de geschiedenis, *GTT*, LVIII, pp. 6-7.

³¹⁷ *De Heilige Schrift*, II, p. 225.

It is precisely knowing what happened at one time...that speaks to us and compels us to a faith decision.

“Het is juist de kennis van hetgeen eenmaal geschied is ... welke ons aanspreekt en tot een geloofskeuze noopt.”

To ask the question of whether we are dealing with *kerugma* or history is to posit a false dilemma.³¹⁸ Like Ridderbos, Troost calls the question of history or non-history a false dilemma.³¹⁹ Koole, commenting on the difference between German and Anglo-Saxon theological trends, almost gives a sigh of relief when he leaves discussing the German direction which continues to think of the Old Testament as containing a history of ideas rather than of events. Turning to the Anglo-Saxon scene, he states,

It feels like such a blessed relief to see a Biblical Theology emerge in the Anglo-Saxon world that takes into account actual divine revelation in factual history.

*“Het doet weldadig aan, in de Angelsaksische wereld een Bijbelse Theologie te zien opkomen, die zich rekenschap geeft van een werkelijke Godsopenbaring in een feitelijke geschiedenis.”*³²⁰

b. Inconsistencies: harmonization and higher criticism

Having settled this matter, we go on to the next question: what of the trustworthiness or reliability of the historical accounts? There are the various inconsistencies in Scripture. How are we to account for them? The earlier approach was to account for them as copyist mistakes or to harmonize them. This approach is no longer considered possible. The problems of inconsistencies ought not to be overemphasized, but they are nevertheless too serious for us to disregard them or to solve them in the traditional way. Koole finds it difficult to deny that

a previous generation accepted the irregularities (not to say: contradictions) in Biblical history too easily and innocently.

*“een vorige generatie te argeloos de oneffenheden (om niet te zeggen: tegenstrijdigheden) in de bijbelse geschiedschrijving op de koop toe nam.”*³²¹

318 *Heilsgeschiedenis*, p. 111.

319 *“De eerste hoofdstukken.”*

320 *“Ontwikkelingen op het gebied van de Oud-Testamentische theologie,” GTT, LXVII (February, 1967), 24-25.*

321 *Verhaal*, p. 42.

The previous generation did not do justice to the various nuances abounding in Scripture. This failure has led to the demand for exactness of reporting, an exactness which is not characteristic of Scripture itself.³²²

Harmonization attempts have become the object of deep-going criticism by Reformed theologians. The driving force between harmonization and higher criticism is identified as identical: both insist on precision or exactness as a requirement of infallibility and inspiration. The higher critic and the harmonizer both assume a critical presupposition with respect to the way in which the evangelists *should* have recorded their witness.³²³ Harmonization seeks to apply criteria of historiography that are modern, not Scriptural. Though the presuppositions are identical, the conclusions drawn by higher critics and harmonizers are opposite. Higher criticism has decided the Scripture is not reliable because of its inexact historiography; harmonizers attempt to *make* the Scripture reliable through their efforts.³²⁴ The concern underlying harmonization attempts ought to be honoured: the reliability of Scripture and the certainty of the congregation, but the concern has led into a trap out of which the new theology is attempting an escape. The trap is that the reliability of Scripture was too closely tied to its historical authority,³²⁵ a trap inspired by the scientism of our age. It has been discovered that the reliability of Scripture must be seen in relation to the central concern of Scripture: salvation through Christ. It is also reliable in the sense that it recounts historical events that have actually taken place, but such recounting is not photographic in its precision. It may not be compared to, let alone identified with, modern historiography, according to Berkouwer.³²⁶ Somewhat later he adds:

When we hold up an ideal of total precision and exactness that excludes all subjective interpretation in order to report “the facts” as “objectively” as possible, we cannot but draw the conclusion that the Gospels do not live up to this ideas and thus are not trustworthy.

Wanneer men als ideaal ziet de volstreckte preciesheid en exactheid, waarbij alle interpreterende subjectiviteit is uitgesloten ten ende de “feiten” zo “objectief” mogelijk weer te geven, dan moet

322 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

323 Berkouwer, *De Heilige Schrift*, II, p. 224.

324 *Ibid.*, p. 219.

325 Baarda, “*Het gezag*,” p. 102.

326 *De Heilige Schrift*, II, p. 191.

*men wel tot de conclusie komen, dat de evangeliën niet aan dit ideaal beantwoorden en dus niet betrouwbaar zijn.*³²⁷

That is the critical conclusion harmonizers wished to avoid. It is strange that such precision should have been demanded of historical sections of Scripture, but not of the prophetic.³²⁸ Inspiration does not demand historical precision, writes Herman Ridderbos. We have already drawn attention to his warning to be careful in stating what is or is not possible under inspiration. We must honour the freedom of the Spirit and follow the path He has gone, rather than make pronouncements that are all too dogmatic. The earlier theology thought it could do away with the problems of inconsistencies by simply stating that we can expect no “*notariele precisie*,” but this term is insufficient to describe the situation.³²⁹ Baarda adds that the problem cannot be brushed aside by designating it as “minor.” There is something principal about it.³³⁰

The phenomena of Scripture that previously were thought to threaten the reliability of Scripture and which had therefore to be placed in the procrustean bed of harmony are accepted by Koole as the very indications of reliability! This fact surely indicates the completely different approach employed presently. The inconsistencies point to the fact that the final editors had too much respect for the sources they employed to harmonize them. They preferred to leave the inconsistencies side by side, for they lacked the criterion to judge. That demonstrates the faithfulness of the editors and enhances the reliability of Scripture.³³¹

We end this principal discussion with pointing to the prevailing tendency to explain many of the differences between Reformed theology of yesterday and that of today in terms of the *Sitz in Leben* of the former generation of theologians, which, in the face of the onslaught of a proud, humanistic, critical approach to Scripture, could not afford the luxury of such reflection as is presently carried on. There was the immediate emergency demanding defense of the basic orthodox position on Scripture, a demand so time-consuming that little time was left for the deepening of the orthodox position. No one, faced with an enemy seeking to destroy him, has the inclination to reflect on the enemy’s virtues: one must stick to his guns. This is not considered the *entire* explanation, but it does play a large role in defense of the present direction.

327 *Ibid.*, p. 211.

328 Among certain fundamentalist groups even the eschatological passages have been interpreted according to the canons of modern historiography. Here the modern thirst for precision has caused acceptance of the principle in all its consequences.

329 “*Speelruimte*.”

330 “*Het gezag*,” p. 102.

331 “*Soortelijk gewicht*,” pp. 85-86.

B. Genesis 1 – 11

1. Origin

a. Tradition and science

We are now prepared to go into a resume of the Dutch treatment of Genesis 1 – 11. As in previous discussions of these chapters, we will not engage in exegesis, but only point to the main lines.

We will begin with the question of the origin of these chapters. The traditional position had been that there was a sacred tradition which had preserved the story of earliest mankind. Among the pagans this tradition had been wholly corrupted into myths, but, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit it was preserved and possibly somewhat corrected in Israel.

Today, there is general agreement that there was no such holy tradition. There are two reasons advanced for this denial. The first one is based on Joshua 24, where there seems to be an implicit denial of a continuous link of faithful Yahwe-worshippers. Abraham's history is the beginning of a *new* line, not simply the continuation of that of Adam. In other words, the thesis of an unbroken holy chain of tradition is unbiblical.³³² The second reason for doubting a faithful continuation of tradition is the high age of man. Science has shown the age of man to be much higher than that apparently indicated by Scripture. Though previously the emphasis had been placed on the Biblical data regarding the age of man, today, as we have seen earlier, science is given much more credence.³³³ Even the reserved Gispén, when he finds that the data of Scripture and those of science conflict on this issue, sighs "That's why I leave it with '*non liquet*.'"³³⁴ His position may not be as positive as that of Koole *et al*, but neither is it as certain in its rejection of the high age of man. The conclusion drawn from the high age of man is that it leaves no room for a trustworthy tradition. It is very difficult to conceive of an oral tradition a million years old that is still faithful to the original.³³⁵

332 Koole, *Verhaal*, pp. 49-50 and "Het Litterair," p. 104. Cf. also *Rapport Leeruitspraak* of Synod of 1967, p. 7.

333 *Verhaal*, p. 98.

334 P. 101. "Daarom blijft het voor mij bij '*non liquet*.'"

335 Th. Delleman, *Begin en nieuw begin: korte verklaring van Genesis 1-11* (Aalten: N.V. Uitgeverij De Graafschap, 1961), p. 11.

b. Koole: inspiration

Gispén finds a conflict between the data of Scripture and those of science on this issue, but Koole suggests that there is no such conflict, for the data in Scripture may have to be understood in a non-literal way. A study of the use of numbers in Scripture has indicated that the longevity of early man as recorded in Scripture may well have to be understood symbolically. He describes the high numbers in the book of Numbers as “dizzying,” and wonders whether such details must not be understood in the light of ancient war literature. Perhaps such high numbers are characteristic of that kind of literary genre.³³⁶ The use of the number forty supports the theses of symbolic significance of numbers in Scripture.³³⁷

The longevity of early man requires further explanation, writes Koopmans, possibly on basis of Biblical historiography or on basis of systematization of numbers – essentially the same suggestion as Koole’s.³³⁸ This new thesis does away with the possibility of an oral tradition handed down through many centuries, but having only a few links. It undermines the thought that Adam could have preserved the tradition for almost a millennium.

If, then, the traditional thesis of the origin of Genesis 1 – 11 is no longer palatable, what sources did the final editor use? Koole considers this “the greatest problem with which Genesis 1-11 confronts us.”³³⁹ He agrees with the long-established Reformed position that the authors of the historical accounts have employed sources and engaged in research. To be sure, the Spirit guided them, but He did not provide them with additional *information*. In Genesis 1 – 11, however, there are no indications of sources used. The conclusion must be, then, that we have here a special divine revelation through which the writer was provided with information not available elsewhere. This, according to Koole, is peculiar to Genesis 1 – 11, for there is no parallel in other historical accounts.³⁴⁰

The peculiar origin of these chapters makes it difficult to apply the term “historical writing” in the usual sense of the word to them.³⁴¹ Discussing Genesis 1 – 3, Koole writes that, because of

336 “Soortelijk gewicht,” p. 98. “duizelingwekkend.”

337 *Verhaal*, pp. 55-56.

338 J.J. Koopmans, “Beknopt overzicht van de cultuur van het oude nabije oosten,” *GTT*, LIX, p. 26.

339 *Verhaal*, p. 49. “het grote vraagstuk waarvoor Genesis 1 -11 ons plaatst.”

340 “Het litterair genre,” pp. 105-106.

341 *Verhaal*, p. 50. “geschiedschrijving.”

the origin of the section, the usual literary genre is not applicable here. There is a unique vision of the past here that has hermeneutic consequences.³⁴²

c. **Historicity**

Koole does not mean to deny the historicity of Genesis 1 – 11, nor, for that matter, do his colleagues. We have already noted that the new theology insists on historicity, even though we are not to apply the categories of modern historiography. Koole rejects the attempts to undermine the historicity of these accounts by regarding them as basically pagan documents reworked by Israel in the light of her faith, for there is no proof for this.³⁴³ He writes,

We cannot deny that the intention of Scripture and of Genesis 1-11 is to portray actual facts.

“Men kan er niet aan onkomen dat naar de bedoeling van de Schrift en Genesis 1 – 11 werkelijke feiten ten grondslag liggen.”³⁴⁴

The majority report to the 1967 synod likewise insisted on the historicity of these chapters, for the alternative makes God’s promise to Abraham unintelligible, but it *must* be seen as unique.³⁴⁵ Delleman sees in Adam and Eve actual history.³⁴⁶ Troost insists that these accounts do definitely have

a historical meaning; it is certainly all about what actually took place in the past.

“een historische zin; het gaat zeer zeker over wat in het verleden echt gebeurd is.”³⁴⁷

d. **Relationship to prophetic literature**

The suggestion has frequently been offered that perhaps there is a relationship between Genesis 1 – 11 and prophetic literature. We have earlier described Jan Ridderbos’ discussion of this suggestion. Prophecy, especially apocalyptic prophecy, gives a view of the future that is

³⁴² “Het litterair genre,” p. 111.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

³⁴⁴ *Verhaal*, p. 52.

³⁴⁵ P. 7.

³⁴⁶ *Wording*, p. 59.

³⁴⁷ Koole, “Het soortelijk gewicht, p. 88.

entirely given by inspiration. It can in a sense be called historical, for what is prophesied will happen, though not literally. Koole recognizes many points of similarities between prophetic literature and Genesis 2 – 11, but after a listing of these points he concludes that it is of course not possible to see the Genesis chapters as genuine retrospective prophecy, for prophetic literary genre has its own forms. However,

it *can* be said that Genesis 2-11 describes past events in a manner related to prophetic literature.

“men kan echter wel zeggen dat Genesis 2 – 11 verleden gebeurtenissen beschrijft op een wijze die verwandt is aan de profetische literatuur.”

If there is such a relationship, he concludes, then one can speak of “symbolic features” in the Genesis chapters, for prophecies are often not to be interpreted literally.³⁴⁸ In prophetic accounts regarding the future there is no exact description of the future. Why then should we demand an exact description in these Genesis chapters regarding the past?³⁴⁹ Delleman also hesitates describing these chapters as prophetic, but he does recognize a prophetic aspect in them, especially with respect to their origin.³⁵⁰ N.H. Ridderbos has detected a similarity with prophetic literature that Koole failed to mention. In prophetic writing it is common “that events are telescoped, grouped, and arranged in a given manner. This phenomenon should make us hospitable toward the idea that in Genesis 1, which treats not the distant future, but the unimaginable distant past, we should encounter the same sort of thing.” With reference to Genesis 1, he concludes that “we are here dealing rather with a prophetic compendium of events which, chronologically, are far apart.”³⁵¹

Thus common agreement has it that these chapters are meant to portray history, but not in the usual sense of history in the Bible. The usual categories of Biblical historiography do not apply. We have a history *sui generis* requiring its own hermeneutic.³⁵²

2. Specific passages

Having discussed the general attitude of the Dutch theologians to Genesis 1 – 11 as a whole, we will now turn to a brief examination of their opinions concerning specific passages. In this

348 *Ibid.*, pp. 118-119. “*symbolische trekken.*”

349 *Ibid.*, p. 111,

350 *Begin*, pp. 10, 27. Also *Wording*, p. 53.

351 *Is There a Conflict?*, p. 39.

352 Koole, “*Het soortelijk gewicht,*” p. 88.

section we will also refer to a number of non-theologians who have paid much attention to some of the early chapters.

a. **Genesis 1**

i. ***Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee***³⁵³

--Lever: *Creation and Evolution*

Though the so-called fundamentalist approach to Genesis 1 was intended to resist undue encroachment of scientific influence in the exegesis of the chapter, Lever charges that, as a matter of fact, the fundamentalist view is the result “from an extreme adaptation of the interpretation of the first chapters of the Bible to the status of science of a few centuries ago.”³⁵⁴ He adds that fundamentalism mirrors outdated natural science and then canonizes it with texts from Scripture. The text of Scripture is read as if “written in the terminology of natural science, and then it turns around and considers the distorted texts as normative for science.” This is an illegitimate tying of Scripture to concepts of natural science, concepts which are products of human reflection.³⁵⁵ This approach is to be rejected as being completely oblivious of the historical development of science.

Since Lever himself is a scientist, one can understand his insistence that the data of science must be accepted, even though theories fluctuate and are soon outdated.³⁵⁶ But there are real dangers in tying Genesis 1 too closely to natural science, for the order of chapter 1 does not agree with that of modern science, or, for that matter, with that of chapter 2.³⁵⁷

The days of Genesis 1, according to Lever, are not to be formulated on a physical basis of time, for it is not permissible to carry the categories of Genesis 1 into the field of natural science.

353 “*Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee*” is the name of the philosophical tradition that arose out of this theological school that was nurtured especially by Herman Dooyeweerd. The unlikely English name for this philosophy is “*Philosophy of the Cosmonomic Idea*.” John Kraay, transl. of Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular and Christian Options*. Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1979, p. viii.

354 J. Lever, *Creation and Evolution*, trans. P.G. Berkout (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids International Publication, 1958), p. 15.

355 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

356 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

357 P. 19.

“Their meaning does not lie in the area of exact science, but in the sphere of a decidedly religious faith.”³⁵⁸ He places the same stricture on the “kind” of Genesis 1. Understanding this in the biological sense of “species” is to attribute to the writer of Scripture a concept at which biology arrived only relatively recently through mutual human consent.³⁵⁹

--Dooyeweerd: “*Schepping en evolutie*”

Commenting on Lever’s book, Dooyeweerd says that he (Lever) has broken with the

traditional theological confusion of (pretemporal) creation with the process of becoming within the temporal order.

“traditionele theologische verwarring van de schepping met het wordingprocess binnen de orde van de tijd.”

This confusion, according to Dooyeweerd, is responsible for much of the lack of insight into the true relationship between Word-revelation and scientific research. This Word-revelation does not lie in the area of science or its data, but it has

a completely central, religious meaning and is for exactly that reason related to the entire empirical temporal reality, so that we can never see that reality in the correct light without it.

*“een volstrekt centrale, religieuze zin en is juist daarom op heel de empirische werkelijkheid in de orde van de tijd betrokken, zodat wij zonder haar die werkelijkheid nimmer in het juiste licht kunnen zien.”*³⁶⁰

The Scripture – and here we meet with a familiar expression – does not speak scientifically, but in terms of naïve experience.³⁶¹

Behind Dooyeweerd’s comments lie his modal scale and his distinction between creation and form-giving. The creating act

is beyond all human understanding and all human perception, because it is/was not an event within the temporal order but the work of God “in the beginning”

358 P. 16.

359 Pp. 16-17.

360 H. Dooyeweerd, “*Schepping en Evolutie*,” PR, XXIV, p. 114.

361 *Ibid.*

“gaat alle menselijk begrip en alle menselijke voorstelling te boven, omdat zij geen tijdelijk gebeuren is, maar het werk Gods ‘in de beginne.’”

We are limited to the temporal order of existence and can approach the order of creation only in the categories of our existence, but that does not mean the creating act took place within this temporal order. The revelation of creation is not creation itself.³⁶² Genesis 2:1 indicates the completion of creation, not of the subsequent process of becoming within the temporal order. There is no continuation of creation, only a working of it out in time.³⁶³ Taking the days of Genesis in a temporal sense will end up in blasphemy with respect to God’s rest on the seventh day.³⁶⁴

-- Troost: “De eerste hoofdstukken van de Bijbel”

Troost thinks to have detected a number of falsely posited issues with respect to Genesis 1. The question as to whether the days are twenty-four hours or long periods is the result of a wrong thought pattern. Similarly, the question regarding historical or non-historical interpretation or that of a realistic or non-realistic interpretation is falsely put. The concept “reality” has undergone a reduction in our culture. It has come to mean an exclusion of God and has been limited to those aspects of reality which can function as *Gegenstand* for natural science. But reality is much greater than that. There is a divine reality and that is what Genesis 1 is pointing to in anthropomorphic fashion, which is the only way human beings can speak of God. Consequently, to relate the creation days of Genesis to our days is to reduce the width of reality. They are *God’s days*, of a divine order. We do not ask how all this can be. We must not attempt to form human images of God, but via human speech and images we rise above it all through faith. Scripture speaks of six days and one. Let us leave it at that and preach that, remembering that this is an anthropomorphic way of speaking of what God *actually* performed, even with respect to the sequence.

To a scientifically-oriented generation, this sounds very foreign, but that only demonstrates the secularity of our thought patterns and the lack of resistance we have offered to the tyranny of natural science. Genesis 1 teaches us to believe in God the Creator, to see that reality and time contain modalities other than those with which natural science is concerned. That is to say, there is a faith or pistical aspect as well.

362 *Ibid.*, pp. 116-117.

363 *Ibid.*, p. 115.

364 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

This faith or pistical aspect...is as equally a reality aspect of things...as are the scientifically observable. Only within the pistical circle of faith can we speak of things and days as "creational." In the relationship between God and humans and their relationship to revelation and faith all creatures function as pistical objects.

Deze geloofbaarheid ... is even reeel een werkelijkheidsaspect van de dingen ... als hun waarneembaarheid. Alleen in het geloof kunnen we spreken van dingen en dagen als van "schepselen." In de relatie tussen God en mens, de relatie van openbaring en geloof, fungeren alle schepselen als geloofs-objecten.

We must not lose sight of the fact that Scripture is the Word of *God*. Hence, Genesis 1 must be considered as a word about *God* primarily and to be dealing with a *divine*

origin of creation, the creation order, the creational goodness of all things and all human affairs.

scheppingsoorsprong en scheppingsorde en scheppings-goedheid van alle dingen, van alle menselijke aangelegenheden"

Of course, the author of Genesis 1 knew only our days and he wrote out of his temporal experience, but his story, his vision and stylized system

point to the supra-human reality of God's work of creation that transcends all human understanding and experience, including our experience of time.

"wijst heen naar de boven-menselijke werkelijkheid van Gods scheppingswerk, dat alle menselijk begrip en menselijke ervaring ver te boven gaat, ook onze tijdservaring."

The "very good" of Genesis 1 must be similarly understood. It is a religiously colored term, not a data of natural science. What natural science has discovered is not the whole of reality, but only certain aspects of it.

The full depth and religious meaning of suffering and death are only revealed through faith and even then always in relationship to...sin, guilt and God's judgement.

"De volle diepte en religieuze zin van lijden en dood wordt slechts openbaar voor het geloof en dan steeds in verband met ... zonde en schuld en met Gods gericht."

What appears so rough and loveless to us in the process of becoming of our cosmos may well be very good in God's eyes and, previous to the fall, it was in all ways factually good.³⁶⁵

365 "De eerste hoofdstukken."

ii. **Rejection of pagan dualism**

There is, as we have previously seen, a general agreement that there are no myths as such in Scripture. This does not preclude, as we have also seen, that the myths of the surrounding peoples were not in the background of the writer's thinking. It is commonly understood that Genesis 1 is basically meant as praise to God the Creator who has everything in His control. There is no independent substance that does not owe its origin to Him. That is to say, there is a rejection of pagan dualism in Genesis 1. Gispén posits this only as a possibility,³⁶⁶ but others are more certain of this thesis. This polemic against pagan dualism largely dictates the terms in which the chapter has been cast.³⁶⁷

Genesis 1:2 is then understood as a refutation of the pagan notion that besides the pantheon of gods there was an eternal, independent chaotic power that threatens existence. Within the community of scholars we are considering in this paper there is no one who understands this verse to actually suggest such a battle between God and these chaotic elements, but it is thought that the notion of such a battle is the background to this verse and that the author intended not so much to deny the existence of this chaos, but to demonstrate that it, too, is under the power of God. Berkouwer suggests that this approach opens the way to a further contemplation over the traditional exegesis of Genesis 1:2.

A meaningful question is whether the use of the idea of chaos does not especially point to God's power of creation.

*"De vraag is nl. zinvol, of hier niet met gebruikmaking van de chaos-idee juist Gods scheppingsmacht wordt aangeduid."*³⁶⁸

The entire treatment of the creation of luminaries, sea monsters, etc., is seen in the framework of this pagan background in which they were all deified.³⁶⁹ God has created them all; they have no independent existence and ought therefore to be neither worshipped nor feared. This is not to suggest a close relationship between Genesis 1 and extant accounts from the Babylonian-Sumerian milieu. These accounts are older than Genesis in their written form, but that does not mean dependence of Genesis upon them. They could have arisen independently or they could

366 P. 35.

367 N.H. Ridderbos, *Is There a Conflict?*, pp. 58ff.

368 *De Zonde*, I, p. 74.

369 Delleman, *Wording*, p. 41. Also Troost, *"De eerste hoofdstukken."*

have a common older source.³⁷⁰ The general attitude of the Dutch suggests they would favor a common source of a generally pagan religious climate, though they have not expressed themselves clearly on the exact relationship.

It was common among the Dutch to understand the days of Genesis 1 in terms of periods, but this is no longer acceptable. They are normal days, insists Gispén.³⁷¹ Berkouwer also emphasizes that Genesis 1 speaks of days as we know them and it is only the desire to force an agreement with natural science that led some to understand them as periods.³⁷² As to the Sabbath, it is not to be regarded as having been borrowed from pagan traditions, writes Gispén, for there is no known parallel.³⁷³ Delleman is of the opinion that the author borrowed the Sabbath concept from Israel's week,³⁷⁴ a position similar to Troost's. This is not designed to militate against the historicity of the events, but the event and the revelation of it must be distinguished. The whole is placed in the "kader" framework of N.H. Ridderbos.

The earlier generation strenuously objected to the suggestion of an ancient worldview in Scripture, but this objection has been overcome, as we noted above. It is not necessary at this point, therefore, to return to a discussion of it in connection with the three-story universe as it finds expression in Genesis 1.

iii. **Koole: relationship to Egyptian wisdom literature**

Koole has made a unique contribution in his attempt to link Genesis 1 with Egyptian wisdom literature, an attempt based on Gardiner's *Ancient Egyptian Onomastica*. I Kings 4 shows Solomon as the wisest man in the world, exceeding even the wisdom of the Egyptians. There is a classification of animals in the chapter that runs parallel to that found in Genesis 1:26.³⁷⁵ Perhaps this chapter has reference to the wisdom referred to in Gardiner's book, according to Koole. Solomon then improved on the Egyptian classification of animals.³⁷⁶ Furthermore, Psalm 104 also appears to have a connection with Egyptian wisdom literature, if compared to *Onomastica* not only, but also to the sun hymn of Echnaton. The same psalm has relationship to Genesis 1 as well, according to Koole. He observes that, with the exception of the fourth

370 Koopmans, p. 23.

371 P. 10.

372 *De Heilige Schrift*, II, p. 298.

373 P. 92

374 *Wording*, p. 43.

375 "Het litterair genre," p. 115.

376 *Ibid.*, p. 113.

strophe, the first five periscopes of the psalm reproduce the sequence of Genesis 1.³⁷⁷ Koole does not indicate the significance of this tentative thesis for the interpretation of Genesis 1. Apparently he published the article not in order to advocate a well-worked-out theory, but rather to share his initial thoughts on the matter with others and to evoke comments.

b. **Paradise account**

In our discussion on Scriptural historiography, we have seen that there is a general recognition of the fact that it differs considerably from modern historiography in that it freely re-arranges the order of events and that it departs from the modern requirement of precision. This recognition has taken the pressure off that previously was felt to give account for the dissimilarities in order of sequence between Genesis 1 and 2, not to speak of contradictions. Under the present atmosphere, there would be greater surprise if there were no such dissimilarities.

i. **1926 and 1967**

The 1926 synod was primarily concerned with the facticity of the paradise account: it was real history, it insisted, in the sense that the two trees were visible to the eye and the serpent's speech audible to the ear. That was said to be obviously the intent of the account. A denial of this would call into question the reliability of the Scripture.

The synod of 1967 revoked the binding character of Assen's pronouncements. It felt that Assen did not consider the "very special genre of historical writing" of Genesis 2 – 3 and this failure led synod to speak too quickly about the clear intention of the passage.³⁷⁸ Synod of 1967 did not proclaim Assen's pronouncement as false, but it felt the need to give greater freedom for other interpretations as equally legitimate. For this reason, the committee did not present a new interpretation to synod to replace that of Assen as the official exegesis. It points the way to other possibilities, but does not actually spell out in detail any new position.

The report states that Genesis 1 – 11 must be understood as based upon historical events, but it does not require a literal interpretation. There are anthropomorphisms which cannot be understood literally. This recognition is not new in Reformed theology except for the conclusion drawn from it. If these anthropomorphisms cannot be taken literally, why should one insist on the literal interpretation of the other elements in the story?³⁷⁹ In other words, the report by implication charges Assen with arbitrariness in its insistence on literal interpretation.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 113, 115.

³⁷⁸ *Rapport Leeruitspraak*, pp. 6,9. "zeer special genre van historiebeschrijving."

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

The report is not entirely clear, but this may well be due to the fact that it does not intend to give a new exegesis, but merely to point to a new direction. With respect to the serpent, the comment is made that the author made use of the serpent, because it was regarded throughout the ancient world as the personification of demonic powers.³⁸⁰ The question as to historicity remains. Is the historicity confined to the fact that there is a historical fall and the remainder is embellishment? The fact that this question is not answered is indicative of the searching going on. It is a new searching – at least, within the Reformed community – and time is required to iron out the unevennesses and the gaps.

ii. **Gispen: *Schepping en Paradijs***

Gispen is one of the signees of the report. He was ill at the time it was finalized, but in the introduction we are told that he would have introduced a number of changes if he had had the opportunity. In his commentary he rejects attempts to locate the garden of Eden according to scientific theories, for the writer was a child of his time and “probably thought

in terms of thoughts and images entertained by contemporary peoples and nations....” He chose story forms that everyone would understand.

“kon wel rekenen met denkbeelden van toen bestaande mensen en volken” He *“koos de vorm van een verhaal, dat altijd door ieder zou worden begrepen.”*³⁸¹

The serpent probably did not speak, but in the pre-fall situation there was a unity, a commonness of spirit that touched also the consciousness so that contact could be established.³⁸² The curse on the serpent suggests that he has not always crawled. Gispen refers to the common belief in the East that the serpent had legs at one time. He does not indicate whether he thinks that this was actually the case or whether this notion was simply utilized in the Genesis account.³⁸³ There is a vagueness throughout his book on these questions, also in regard to the cherub at the entrance to the garden. Pointing to a number of parallels in the ancient Near East, Gispen suggests that the idea of a cherub would not be foreign to Abraham and his progeny. He does not state whether there actually was a cherub at the entrance.

We do not know the origin of the account nor who inscripturated it. Gispen finds one theory particularly attractive. Abraham had been in contact with various civilizations: he had been in

380 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

381 *Schepping*, p. 100.

382 *Ibid.*, pp. 165-166.

383 *Ibid.*, p. 181.

Ur of Chaldees, lived in Haran and in Canaan, spent time in Egypt. Thus the various cultures made a deep impact upon him. He is also called a prophet (Genesis 20:7). Thus it is possible to regard Abraham as the source of the Biblical account of paradise and he would then be the point of contact for the parallels of Scripture and extra-Scriptural data.

What he received and passed will betray the traces of these influences, but it would be marked by the stamp of his prophetic status as well as by the fact that in the course of his association with God he was elevated and received direct revelation from Him. But that prophetic status also enabled him also in that what he received, whether in written or oral form, he purified and transmitted or passed on.

*Wat hij ontving en overleverde zal de sporen van deze invloeden vertonen, maar het stempel dragen van zijn profetschap, van het feit, dat hij ... in de omgang met God was opgenomen en rechtstreekse openbaring van Hem ontving. Maar dat profetschap kwam tevens daarin uit, dat hij wat hem was overgeleverd, hetzij schriftelijk hetzij mondeling, zuiverde en doorgaf.*³⁸⁴

The Israelites would have had this story in Egypt. Moses reworked it and possibly others after him.³⁸⁵

c. **Genesis 4 – 11**

Most of the discussion in The Netherlands has concentrated on Genesis 1 – 3, and even then it has tended to be a discussion on hermeneutical principles rather than actual exegesis. Less has been said about Genesis 4 – 11. It would perhaps be possible to predict, on basis of the general attitude, how the various theologians might exegete and interpret these chapters, but it is better to await the concrete exegetical results as they hopefully will emerge in the not too distant future. Nevertheless, we shall briefly indicate what has been said about these chapters.

It will be remembered that Koole does not think the high numbers of the Old Testament should be taken at their face value, i.e. according to their face value in *our* culture. He asks the question whether or not it is possible that it is characteristic of certain literary genres to exaggerate numbers. It has also been indicated that greater credence is being given to science's pronouncements on the age of man. It can be seen from Delleman's *Begin en nieuw begin* what the consequence of it all is.

i. **Numbers and genealogies**

384 *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.

385 *Ibid.*, p. 106.

First of all, on basis of these new attitudes, the genealogies in the early Genesis chapters require re-interpretation, for a literal interpretation of them does not allow for a very high age of man. In Genesis 5 we find a list of *ten* patriarchs from Adam to Noah. This list is also found in I Chronicles 1:1, succeeded by the sons of Noah and their progeny, a total of 70. A second list of *ten* names appears, containing the names of patriarchs from Shem to Abraham (I Chronicles 1:24), again followed by a list of 70 descendants. Delleman concludes with A. Noordtjiz that

in the writing of these lists holy numbers had a decisive influence.

*“bij de bouw van deze lijsten heeft dus het heilig getal een beslissend invloed gehad.”*³⁸⁶

This receives further support from extra-Biblical materials. There is a Babylonian king list of 10 kings that rule for a total of 432,000 years before flood. Contrasted to this Babylonian list, the ages given in Genesis 5 are extremely low, for they total up to a mere 1,656 years. I am not sure what conclusion Delleman draws from these facts, other than to demonstrate that these figures ought not to be understood literally.³⁸⁷

ii. **Genesis 6:1-4**

Delleman appears to be the only member of the new school to have commented on Genesis 6:1-4. Whereas the traditional understanding has been that the “sons of God” were His servants and the “daughters of men” the children of pagans, Delleman detects behind this passage a myth in which mythological beings or angels marry women and produce titanic people. It is definite, according to Delleman, that such is the background to the passage, but it has been demythologized. Unlike a myth, the Biblical account shows the punishment to fall upon *people*. Again the question forces itself upon us: what of the historicity that Delleman has several times insisted upon?³⁸⁸

iii. **Deluge**

Not much has been written about the deluge either. Delleman thinks that, in view of the several hundreds of flood accounts throughout the world, the flood appears to have been a very definite happening. The memory of it is deeply embedded in the hearts of the peoples of the

386 P. 56.

387 P. 57. I should like to venture a further step by suggesting that Genesis 5 could possibly be construed as an attempt to humanize or demythologize the great kings of the past by reducing their longevity. This could be understood as a protest against the divinity of kings (patriarchs) in line with the demythologizing trends of Genesis 1.

388 P. 59.

world.³⁸⁹ Koole also thinks of the deluge traditions as memories of the same deluge of which the Bible speaks.³⁹⁰ Here there is the re-appearance of a traditional theory regarding Biblical and extra-Biblical parallels. This is the only occasion we have met this theory in connection with present theological trends.

iv. **Delleman: *Begin en nieuw begin***

There is little to report concerning the account of the confusion of tongues. Aside from pointing out that archeological discoveries have demonstrated the cultural affinity of the account to Mesopotamian culture, Delleman presents nothing new.³⁹¹

Delleman's real contribution in his discussion of Genesis 1 – 11 lies in his attempt to relate these chapters to the New Testament. His approach is similar to that suggested by A. Noordtzij, who felt that failure to establish such a relationship has led theologians to seek accommodation with science. The Genesis account was read in isolation from the rest of Scripture, and, consequently, the force of its true Biblical impact escaped. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to reproduce Delleman's contributions on this score.

VI. Conclusion

Though my aim had originally been to withhold all judgment till this point, I have manifestly failed to adhere strictly to this policy. Throughout the preceding pages, both in the body as well as in the footnotes, numerous remarks have been interspersed, indicating approval or lack of it. To avoid this altogether would have been impossible. What remains now is simply to *briefly* indicate my personal and tentative answer to the question with which this paper began: has the new theology departed from the basic Reformed principles of Scripture?

A. Betrayal?

Those who decry the present developments as betrayal to the Reformed faith must prove their contention. The Scripture continues to be recognized as the Word of God in its entirety. There is no capitulation to the "history of Israel's religion" approach that recognizes the Old Testament as merely a human record of the development of a great nation's religious thinking. Though the factor of research on the part of the Biblical authors is fully taken into

389 Pp. 62-63.

390 *Verhaal*, p. 50.

391 *Begin*, p. 68.

consideration, the notion of direct divine revelation as a source of information is acceptable and even forms an important element in the discussion about Genesis 1 – 11. This clearly demonstrates that the new theology does not simply follow in the footsteps of modern theology that has succumbed to the empiricism of our day. The entire frame of mind accompanying the acceptance of an autonomous nature is rejected.

B. Dualism

A frequently-heard charge is that the new development is dualistic in its approach to Scripture. I do not consider this a fair charge, unless it is explained that the so-called dualism of the new theology is by no means identical to that so vigorously challenged by Kuyper and Bavinck. It is not a matter of the Scripture's being *partly* inspired. It is not a matter of separating the Word of God from the word of man in Scripture, for the entire Scripture is regarded as the Word of God and inspired as such. It is more a matter of center-periphery in Bavinck's sense, where even the periphery is seen as a faithful, reliable and integral part of the Scripture's witness to Christ.

C. Science and exegesis

No doubt, one of the most striking differences between the older and newer approaches lies in the degree of appreciation of data provided by science. The new school, as we have seen, gives much more credence to the pronouncements of science as the old was accustomed to do, though the secular philosophy into which these data are often placed has not been accepted. Science is given the positive role of prodding us on to re-evaluate accustomed methods of Bible reading. The final answer, however, is to be determined exegetically, not on basis of science – an approach identical to the traditional. Science, though highly appreciated, may not lord it over Scripture.

In some cases it appears that in spite of the stated principles, science is nevertheless given too predominant a place. A case in point is the recent treatment of the fall of Jericho. Archeology does not favor a fall of Jericho at the time in-.....

Editor's 2016 Note: *There is something very brief missing here in the manuscript that we have not been able to trace. Sorry, but it is minimal.*

D. Literary genre

Reformed theology has always recognized the hermeneutical necessity to take literary genre into serious account when exegeting Scripture. The novelty of the new approach is that it

differentiates between various sub-categories of the historical genre. The traditional approach has been to treat all historical accounts according to one set of hermeneutical laws. There is nothing inherently un-Reformed in this approach. If it appears that the introduction of such sub-categories results in arbitrariness and subjectivism, it could be argued that this is latent in any approach employing literary genre as a hermeneutical tool. The Reformed approach has no internal resistance to such differentiation. If the new approach is to be rejected because of a resultant arbitrariness, then the traditional approach must likewise be rejected, for there is no basic principial difference. Of course, it is to be hoped that these theologians will attempt to reconcile this tension as they continue to grapple with the new approach. On the other hand, some tension is often useful in preventing complacency of position.

E. Phenomena

Another difference lies in the greater emphasis the new theology places on the phenomena of Scripture. Facts that once were regarded as threats to the reliability of Scripture are now recognized as demonstrations of this reliability. There was a tendency to force the phenomena into the procrustean bed of a doctrine of infallibility; these phenomena now are forcing a re-definition of infallibility – or, perhaps, preventing definition altogether. From the formal category of infallibility the emphasis has switched to the less formal concept of reliability of Scripture in its central witness to Christ. There seems to be less of a dogmatic approach to the phenomena that abhors the largely artificial attempts at harmonization. There is greater appreciation of Scripture as it is, not as we would like it to be.

F. Continued reliance on Reformed principles

I, for one, cannot classify the new development as basically un-Reformed. The basic principles are all there; nothing *basically* new has been introduced. There are new emphases and methods, but they all fall within the basic principial framework of the Scripture as the reliably inspired Word of God pointing to Christ.

This is not to deny the problems of the new approach, especially the danger of arbitrariness and subjectivism. History becomes more of a problem, too. There is less certainty. But whatever one may think of the various conclusions drawn by the present generation of Dutch Reformed theologians, one cannot accuse them of having abandoned the basic Reformed frame of reference.

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PostScript: Letter from Professor John H. Stek (Dec. 9, 1969)

I wish to congratulate you on a very excellent piece of work. You were able to get through a large quantity of material, but, more pertinently, you manifested a judicious organization of the materials, and succeeded in condensing a great deal into manageable compass. You must have received some idea of my high evaluation of your work from the fact that Dr. Klooster requested copies for the members of his Synodical Committee. And he, too, agreed that your report was a very thorough and useful one.

May I suggest that you seek a publisher for this survey so that it might receive a wider audience, especially here on the American scene. I think that it would serve a most useful purpose. Perhaps you would want to enlarge the scope of your report a bit, but even in its present form it is worthy of a publisher's consideration.

In view of the excellence of the work, I have recorded for you an A- for the course. The minus represents only the necessary reduction of grade which school policy requires of me for late work.

Now the Lord's continued blessing on you and yours as you continue in His service in Nigeria.

Sincerely yours,

John H. Stek