

# LuxMundi 28

No 1 March 2009

Published quarterly by the Committee  
on Relations with Churches Abroad  
of the Reformed Churches in The  
Netherlands



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# Editorial

**Last week I received an invitation for a conference called ‘Closing down or starting anew?’ My own congregation is a thriving one. God is at work among the people that I have the privilege to pastor and I’m very grateful for it. But it is an undeniable fact that every week churches are closing down all over The Netherlands. Estimates say that more than a thousand will disappear in the next decade. All over Europe the total number will be very much higher. Many thousands have - of course - already ceased to exist. Secularization has had a devastating effect on the church in Europe.**



**A**ctually having to close down a church must be a very painful experience for those Christians who switch off the lights for the last time. Usually it is the end of a long process of saddening spiritual decline.

Is the Lord removing the lampstand from this part of the world? There are enough Christians here who believe so. I don’t belong to them, for there are clear signs of renewal.

In The Netherlands over the last few years a number of churches have had the courage not to close down but to start all over anew. With apparent success. Many more new churches have come into being through church planting. Church planting is hot in many denominations, including my own (the GKN(v)). In my own town I am myself involved in an international church planting project,

initiated by the GKN(v) classis in co-operation with the local CGKN church. As a result of the growing awareness of our missional calling, the Theological University in Kampen has recently decided to set up a new Master’s training course, called ‘Missional Church’ (see elsewhere in this issue for a News update on this).

As for Europe, at the European Conference of Reformed Churches in Soest 2008 the following Closing Statement was adopted: “We have agreed to combine forces for the proclamation of the gospel in Europe, with special emphasis on the major cities in areas where Reformed church life is absent or needs to be revitalized.”

All of this is very telling. There is no need yet to think of the lampstand being removed. Rather, I’m reminded to think of Easter and the power of the resurrection. After all, did not Jesus say: *I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.* (John 12:24) In Jesus’ death and resurrection there is an unlimited revitalizing and multiplying energy force that all Christians anywhere can and should tap into. The gates of hell shall not prevail, thanks to our risen Lord.

May He bless you all in serving Him. ■



*...having to close down a church must be a very painful experience...*  
(photo P.G.B. de Vries)

# The mission of a mother (1)

**Dogmatic reflection is not academic gymnastics for the brain, but is important to the life of the church. The validity of this conviction can be made clear by looking at the doctrine of the church. The subject matter for which I am asking your attention is the missional character of the church. During the past century a great deal was written and said on this issue. I merely refer to the work of J.C. Hoekendijk, who was so convinced of the fact that the church is only an instrument with respect to its calling of service to the world, that he felt the church ought to be turned inside out. The church is no more than a function of the apostolate.**



**M**otivated by a deep conviction, others have likewise asked attention for missional aspects of being church. They were convinced that established churches fell short on this point, in that mission had become or remained too much of an appendix to the church. I think of the work of men such as Hendrik Kraemer and Lesslie Newbigin who, during the last fifty years emphatically pointed out that the church must give evidence of a missional attitude in its whole being. Nevertheless, it was not until the close of the last century that orthodox Reformed churches in The Netherlands clued in to this missional aspect of being church. Church projects in which the missional way of thinking has been integrated into the existence of a congregation are of a recent date. One may point to the influences of Bill Hybels and his Willow Creek movement and to Tim Keller and his ideas developed in Redeemer Church in New York.

I note these examples for the purpose of making clear what I mean, not to give an inventory

On January 25, 2008, Dr. J. W. Maris, retired as professor of Dogmatics at the Theological University serving the Christian Reformed Churches in The Netherlands. Maris has been involved in interchurch relations, both within The Netherlands and internationally, for much of his life. His farewell lecture testifies to his experience and expertise in the field of ecclesiology.

In this first instalment of his lecture Maris explains why churches are increasingly becoming aware of their missional task. He wants to investigate whether—and if so, how—the metaphor of the church as mother impacts on the *Missio Dei*. He looks at two Biblical texts often used to fill in the idea of the church as mother, Galatians 4:26 and Psalm 87.

The farewell lecture has been published in a somewhat expanded version in Dutch in the series *Apeldoornse Studies*.

In the second instalment of his speech, to be published in the next issue of *Lux Mundi*, Maris will look at the concept of the church as mother from a historical perspective and seek to apply this notion to the missionary mandate of the church in today's secularized society.

of activities and influences or to discuss their qualities. We may be thankful that, especially in the secularized major cities of The Netherlands, the need is felt to give new form to the presence of the church, often with the aim of planting new churches, whether or not for special target groups. At the same time, the roads we follow sometimes lead through unploughed territory, so much so that church and theology should consider themselves called to join in the thought process with an open mind.

When the subject matter for this lecture was chosen, the media reported that Bill Hybels, leader of the Willow Creek Community Church, had thought deeply about the road travelled thus far. He had come to the conclusion that the care for the congregation which had been formed, or was starting a new work, had been neglected. Too much attention had gone to new contacts whose influx meant church growth.

This made me all the more aware, that reflection is required on the relationship between feeding an existing congregation and the way outreach is organized. To my mind came the biblical metaphor of the church as mother and the relationship between this quality and the calling of the church to reach out to those outside. This floated before my eyes as a subject to reflect on during this final lecture. So that is the motive behind its title: *The mission of a mother*.

At first glance, this title - when applied to the church - might lead some to think that a mother ought not work outside the home to such an extent that the children are left to themselves too much. In response to Bill Hybel's humble admission, someone from the established churches might rashly shout in triumph: "Look, we could have told you that right from the start." However, just wishing that a mother would look for work more within the home is too quick a solution for this dilemma, even when we disregard the fact that in many families the division of tasks between fathers and mothers has changed when it comes to work in and outside the home.

I want to dig a little deeper and look more closely at the metaphor of the church as mother. I want to explore its value with respect to the task of the church in the twenty-first century, including its missionary task.

# Biblical foundation

## Galatians 4:26

A direct reference to the church as mother is not to be found in the New Testament. However, many do believe there is an indirect indication. They refer to Galatians 4:26 “But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.” In this chapter Paul first refers to the city of Jerusalem where people live in slavish submission to the law, as spiritual children who live under God’s Sinaitic covenant. They are called the spiritual descendants of the slave Hagar. This Jerusalem, therefore, lives in slavery with her children (v. 25b). There is a sharp contrast with the covenant that God made with Abraham and His promise that was fulfilled in the birth of Isaac.

This covenant is allegorically illustrated by the name ‘Sarah’. She is Isaac’s mother and therefore free. The expression “Sarah, the free woman” does not fit the present Jerusalem, says Paul, but it does fit “the Jerusalem that is above”, for it has its foundations in the promise which is fulfilled in Christ. Hence, the compressed expression: “But the Jerusalem that is above is free; and she is our mother.”

The motherhood of the heavenly Jerusalem thus refers to the fact that believers may be recognized as people who know that the gospel has set them free from slavery to the law. Specific to believers is redemption from guilt, for love, in unity with Christ through his Spirit. These signs of grace mark someone as a child of this mother, the Jerusalem that is above. The mother refers to the gospel and its heavenly origin. It refers to the firmness of that gospel as guaranteed by God and Christ. This guarantee gives a firmer foundation than the Jerusalem that is below could ever offer.

Does this imply that this metaphor has no ecclesiological aspect to it?

The issue in the letter to the Galatians is the foundation of the believers’ identity. In Galatians 5 it is clear that this issue is so critical that those who expect even *the least* from keeping the law, have thereby severed themselves from Christ and placed themselves outside grace (Gal. 5:4). As for the question who their mother is, it is extremely important which care believers receive in the congregation. To refer directly to the congregation itself as mother is too quick. Indirectly, however, the relationship is there. The churches in Galatia should not squander their relationship with their mother—the Jerusalem that is above—by cherishing a message of legalism. It is the church that is

responsible for that message and how it functions. Exegetes do not always point to the ecclesiological consequences of this word. In the history of theology, however, referring to the church as mother has meant all the more. Reference is made to more bible passages. After all, there is sufficient reason found in the whole of Pauline Scripture to lay a connection between the Jerusalem that is above and Christ, in whom believers have their anchor and their identity. One may think of texts such as Colossians 3:1 (“Seek those things which are above, where Christ is”), Ephesians 2:6 (“[God] raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus”), and Philippians 3:20 (“For our citizenship is in heaven”). The motherhood of the Jerusalem that is above is realized in the concrete salvific acts of the exalted Christ in the local Christian church.

The intensity of the connections that resonate here is strengthened when we see how it is linked with the words “in Christ”. With these two words Paul makes clear how those who belong to Christ once and forever participate in the salvation procured by Christ. However, this never takes place without a relationship to the body of Christ, the church of which He is the Head. The relationship between the exalted Christ and his body on earth is at the heart of the church’s existence; it is not something platonic. In view of this, one might say that the motherhood of the “Jerusalem that is above” not only points to the origin of the church, but also to its security, its safety, and the love of its heart.

## Psalm 87

Since early days, Psalm 87 has played a role in the reflection on the church as mother. The words of verse 5a “And of Zion it will be said ‘This one and that one were born in her’” sound together with “The LORD loves the gates of Zion” (verse 2) and “I will make mention of [the peoples] as those who know Me” (verse 4). Here Zion is the mediation of the love of YHWH as it spreads to a wider circle. That is why glorious things are said of the city of God (verse 3).

Quite understandably believers, listening with ears that know the New Testament, have observed here the reality of the church, a reality which

- does not exist separate from the Lord God;
- is entirely filled with the work of Christ;
- is taught to speak of the love for God and for the church in one and the same breath.

The words of verse 5a, which speak of believers being born in Zion, seem to describe Zion as the mother of believers. This is how the Septuagint translates: “Mother Zion, this one and that one shall be considered as born in her.”

It makes sense for Old Testament reflection on Jerusalem and Zion to play a role in the theological tradition when the mother metaphor is understood in relation to the church.

When focussing on Psalm 87 and Galatians 4, it is remarkable that the mother metaphor does not only connect Jerusalem with Israel but even - somewhat emphatically - with the heathen nations. While Psalm 87 cannot be said to contain a missionary incentive, the nations do come to Israel. The missional conscience is here not centrifugal (going out) but centripetal (drawing in). The LORD is not only the God of Israel, He is the God of all nations. With respect to the words of Galatians 4, one must not forget that the background to this letter is the break-through of God’s kingdom to the heathens. This was a hindrance to Jews and Judaizing teachers within the Christian churches. Paul’s sharp polemics in this letter are focused on this issue. Where circumcized or uncircumcized have come to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, we find children of the heavenly Jerusalem, who is their mother. Heavenly motherhood includes the church as it currently exists, because God’s eyes were, in Christ, focused outwardly.

The church that has thus come into existence knows that it was born from this heavenly Zion because God was and is very missionary.

Even if the heavenly Jerusalem, as mother of the believers, is not identical to the church, the church will nevertheless reflect her nature, for she is the daughter of this mother, born from the gospel of Christ’s atoning work as the only ground for her existence. Will she not be moved by the same concern which causes the Triune God to reach out to a lost world?

### **Provisional conclusions**

Although the relationship between the heavenly Jerusalem and the church is indirect, the motif is powerful.

In the light of this ‘mother motif’ three aspects can be discerned with respect to the church.

1. It is strongly focused on God and dependent on his salvation. It does not have this focus by itself, but, through the Holy Spirit, it knows Christ, its Head in heaven. Its heavenly Jerusalem coincides with the knowledge of the Father, in the Son, through the Holy Spirit.

The Word that testifies to Him is a present to the church; it receives heavenly assurance of its power. The indirect relationship between the heavenly Jerusalem (thus the designation ‘mother’) and the church strengthens the idea that the church does not own such an attribute.

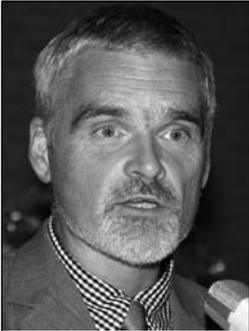
2. At the same time, the church is focused on those who belong to the church and for whom it bears pastoral responsibility. The motherly characteristics of the heavenly Jerusalem become clear in how the church acts. Here one may think of the offices, which—together with properly functioning charismata—are given to the congregation so that it may thrive in all aspects and share in the riches of the heavenly Jerusalem. Also when it comes to responsibilities, of the congregation as a whole or of the office bearers, the church should not draw on its own supplies, but on the gospel-based, heavenly and motherly supplies in heaven and in Christ.
3. It goes without saying that, given the missionary movement which characterizes the whole New Testament, there is also a focus on those who are (yet) outside the circle of the people who feed on God’s love in Christ. The Book of Acts shows that God is unstoppable in spreading His Kingdom to the ends of the earth and is able to move peoples’ hearts to pursue the same goal. Likewise, this missional drive is characteristic of the church of Christ. Given the nature of the relationship between the Lord and his church, it is unthinkable that the church would not share this missional attitude with its Head. The fact that this missional attitude is - to a great extent - eschatologically determined, is something I merely mention here but will not underpin any further.

It is important to point out that these three aspects—theological, pastoral, and missional—are inextricably bound up with one another. They belong to that one perspective which is essential to the church, but relates to its being characterized by the heavenly Jerusalem. The references to the church as mother church are essentially indirect. I will have to return to this later. ■

# Ethics and Spirituality

Chairman, honoured delegates, brothers and sisters,

For at least one reason it is a good thing that you have appointed me professor of ethics and spirituality. Now I can finally make up for something in the past.



In a special meeting on Friday 26th October, two lecturers from the University of Kampen were received by the general synod Zwolle-Zuid of the Gereformeerde Kerken. One of them was Dr. Ad (A.L.Th.) de Bruijne, up until now a lecturer at Kampen Theological University and now appointed professor by this same synod. On this occasion De Bruijne held the following speech.

**T**welve years ago I addressed the synod of Berkel and Rodenrijs. I had been appointed as university lecturer as successor to Professor Douma. It came unexpected, for I was not specifically at home in ethics. And we felt very at home in our manse in Rotterdam. Hence it was not without some inner struggle that I accepted this appointment, and this was noticeable in my speech. Moving to Kampen felt like retreating from the front of the forces in order to join the provision troops. Furthermore, I greatly admired and looked up to my teacher Douma: what was there left for me to do? Could there be ethics after Douma? I took pains to put myself in perspective as an ethicist in the bud and even went so far as to indulge in self-mockery. I took this so far that several delegates, it is true, burst out laughing, but at the same time I am sure they asked themselves whether they had appointed the right person.

Today is very different. I still consider Douma to be of great stature. More often than in my early years, I realise that, be it along different routes, I usually end up very much on the same lines as he. However, I have also discovered that there truly is more ethics before, beyond and after Douma. And I have become sufficiently opinionated to be part of this with pleasure.

I am still aware of how little I know of ethics. The more you scout around in the land, the broader the horizon becomes. Nevertheless I trample around in it on a daily basis and have even found a path that led me to a receiving my Ph.D.

The congregational work in the city still forms the front, but it has become clear to me that provision troops too stand at front in the very same battle. Above all, God has confirmed my calling and it is in that light especially that I experience this appointment. There is no substantial change:

my work remains the same. Even the start of surprise one feels when someone addresses you as “professor” is not new to me. Some elders have the habit of referring to all Kampen’s lecturers as “professor” in church council announcements. Luckily, when doing this, they can at the same time keep you humble. Recently I was announced “professor” by an elder who had given some thought to the manner in which my initials were to be tackled. “This morning the service will be led by professor A.L.Th.tje de Bruijne.”<sup>1</sup>

Much therefore will remain as it was. Nevertheless I do receive your appointment as a confirmation of God’s calling. Unlike that time in Berkel, I now wish to openly acknowledge that it gives me great pleasure and that I accept it heartily and with no trace of reserve. I hope to apply myself to this task with all the energy given to me by God.

I will proceed by firstly explaining in what manner I go about teaching my subjects. After that I will look for the connection with my predecessor, professor Douma, and comment on my own position in the midst of the churches.

## Ethics today

What is the position of ethics today? On a worldwide basis, the subject is in the lift. Life is becoming more and more complicated. Developments take place faster than reflection. Therefore the need for orientation and sense of meaning grows. Ethics seems to contribute to this, as does spirituality. Business companies employ ethicists and courses reinstall ethics as a key subject. The world is producing a continuous stream of ethical publications in every area of life. In the Anglo-Saxon world in particular, there is appreciation for the melody of the theological side to ethics.

Not so in The Netherlands. True, ethics is booming here too, even though our Minister for Education (Mr. Plasterk), when he was still a columnist, wrote that he believed ethicists to be a ‘rather superfluous species’. But theologians do not count anymore. For years I have been participating in the national task-force “theological ethics”, a sub-division of the ethics school of research. Even though the theologians themselves regularly draw attention to the subject, it is at the same time palpable that others look upon philosophical ethics as the

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Dr J. Douma (l) and dr  
A.L.Th. de Bruijne (r)  
(photo: P.G.B. de Vries)

only true ethics. The number of chairs devoted to theological ethics is diminishing, and this is not only due to the merging of educational institutions, as is the case with the formation of the Protestant Theological University. Theological ethics is under pressure. In the column to which I referred earlier, Plasterk states that the times in which “black-robed” ethicists interpret the Bible for us, lie behind us. On the one hand this seems to express some appreciation of theological ethics. If you consult the Bible for your choices between right and wrong, ethics apparently does serve some purpose. However, on the other hand the remark illustrates that many believe that the times of the Bible and theological ethics are well behind us. In this light, this synod is rowing against the stream by filling this vacant chair of ethics in Kampen. Those who have warm feelings for Bible and theology, can only applaud this. The dimensions of good and evil and how they permeate the whole of life so that they draw such broad attention today, can only be properly understood if we listen closely to the Bible and if the discussion fully includes a high level of theological digestion of the Bible. The same may be said for the terrain of spirituality. Today a hoard of demons is breaking into and occupying the empty dwelling of western human hearts. In that context, it is imperative that Christians let themselves be filled by the Spirit of God. The service of theology is very welcome in instructing us on how to live with God ourselves but also to lead the way in our searching environment.

### Three key points

This context also explains the accents I have placed in ethics up until now. They have my personal interest, but this interest in turn is formed by secularization and new religious context of today. When working out my subjects I maintain three key points:

#### 1. *Our calling in society*

*The first key point* lies with questions concerning

the calling of Christians in society. Because of my work in Rotterdam I am strongly aware that it makes a great difference whether you realize that you are living in a society that is no longer Christian and is not likely to become Christian again, or whether you still think and live from within a past that no longer exists.

Therefore you have to rethink the questions of whether you should or should not, as a Christian, take on political and social responsibilities, and if so, toward what aim and what ideals, how, and within which boundaries. It is on these subjects that I have published most. Sometimes people wish me to work more on all sorts of practical ethical themes. I do endeavour to do this, but it always becomes clear that it is this background question that makes the difference in most themes: from the Sabbath discussion via cohabitation to embryo-selection. Others wish me to tackle more internal church issues, but I am of the opinion that the church’s calling outside is as urgent today and that this can put all kinds of internal discussions into a proper perspective.

Furthermore, that ‘no longer Christian’ context also casts its shadow on internal Christian ethics. That our morality is under pressure, from money spending to the forming of homosexual relations, and from divorce to career-planning, has in my opinion to do with the falling away of a Christianity coloured social ‘matter of course.’ Unconsciously we had been leaning on that.

Therefore the church could not set out a clear profile as an authentic society in itself, on its way to the kingdom, in which we, by trial and error, learn to begin to live in the style of that kingdom.

#### 2. *Spiritual embedding*

With this I have arrived at *the second key point* when preparing my courses: the spiritual embedding of Christian ethics. The pressure on the Christian lifestyle in a ‘no longer Christian’ society cannot be relieved. Many Christians consider ethics to be the distillation of biblical rules for behaviour, which you proceed to continually point out to each other. As long as you ponder those rules, you will make the right decisions. But it does not work that way in practice. Most of the ethical choices we make do not sprout from such rules at all: rules to which you have mentally agreed and then accepted by will. What directs your lifestyle are matters like: your life history, your upbringing, the community which formed you, traditions and especially the condition of your heart.

That is why I sympathise with the so-called

congregational ethics. A Christian lifestyle in a non-Christian environment can only be achieved if we, in the church, form a recognizable society in which we support each other along the road, following Jesus. This explains why I like to concentrate on what goes on in the heart of man. Only if God conquers that heart and Jesus lives in it and the Spirit deeply influences it, can a Christian lifestyle begin to exist. Only then can you even *think* in a fruitful way about lifestyle. This is why I have some reserve about tackling and solving church matters like divorce, cohabitation and homosexuality from the outside inward, as it were. Only embedded in a spiritual renewal in the whole church, will it be possible to reclaim conviction and dedication concerning such themes, and to ascend beyond a moralistic urge to control and a happy-go-lucky non-commitment. Naturally, maintaining relations with God is in the first place a valuable practice in itself. At the same time, however, the connection between ethics and spirituality is urgent in our times, not only for the sake of ethics, but also of spirituality. Devotional practice does not have my own spiritual well-being as a goal, but my re-creation into the image of Christ. By the way, when using the term 'devotion' or 'pietas', our forefathers since the Reformation meant both practicing relations with God *and* life style at the same time.

### **3. Hermeneutic questions**

A *third key point* for my ethical work lies with the hermeneutic questions around the Bible. These also cannot be seen apart from our changed context. With hindsight we can say we were prone to read the Bible from a more-or-less self-evident Christian context. But in the context of a 'no longer Christian' society, all self-evidences concerning the explanation and application of the Bible collapse. In the pastoral practice of the nineties I walked up against the inadequacy of many Christians to draw convincing directive, ethical conclusions from the Bible. "You might be right, but you could also see it this way". "Should so-called Biblical norms not be seen as norms laid down by the different culture of those former days?", someone will say. Then a far-reaching kind of relativism takes over, not only among youngsters, but maybe even more among the forty- and fifty-year olds. Others try to turn the tide with a simplistic use of Bible texts. In doing so they inadvertently stimulate such relativism. Walking away from these questions would be to bury your head in the sand. Non-theologians in the church have been posing these questions for a long time and find their own

answers. All my adventures on the path of ethic hermeneutics originate from an effort to take these questions seriously, not by putting my own penny's worth into the bag of relativism but, on the contrary, by, with renewed conviction, living and thinking in the light of the Bible. That sometimes entails skating on thin ice and I do not wish to deny having slipped and fallen once in a while. But all those who love to skate will be ready to confirm: he who dares and practises, will keep his balance....

### **On Douma's shoulders**

I am learning to see these three key points more and more in connection with my predecessor and teacher, professor Jochem Douma. A down-to-earth attitude concerning the character of present society and the Christian calling therein, was already present in Douma's work. Douma was one of the first to draw renewed attention to spirituality in Reformed (liberated) circles in articles in *De Reformatie* and in a plea for the classic subject 'ascetics'. Douma already broke a lance for congregational ethics and that is what he is, in fact, doing in his book '*Christelijke Levenstijl*'. Furthermore, since 1990, he took new steps in calling on Scripture within ethics. Especially his attention to the work of the Holy Spirit in this process, I now consider to be one of the starting points for my later reflections. It is not from an exaggerated kindness that I say that I found my appointment as professor almost just as wonderful for professor Douma as for myself. It was regrettable that there was no direct successor at hand in 1997, and that my promotion made but slow progress. It is good that the line is now continued. I have the honour of occupying the chair to which Douma gave such allure. Twelve years ago I stood somewhat intimidated in the shadow of my predecessor. Now I feel stimulated to set forth in this chair the deep intentions of his work.

### **Position in the churches**

In conclusion, I would like to say a word on my position in the churches. Unlike in Berkel, I now reckon with the possibility of an appointment. Nevertheless, I was not sure of it. The synod also had to deal with some objections against me. Would enough people have faith in me? In that light, your appointment encourages me. In spite of everything, the churches express their faith in me. Not that I would use that as self-justification. I have underestimated the fact that where a function in Kampen is concerned, faith is not a matter of course. As a minister you can work on the basis of personal communications with just about anybody.

Close relationships then grow and these are able to endure some hardship. With 130 000 church members that route is out of the question for a Kampen lecturer. I realised too late what that means to one who enjoys taking up challenges, walking new paths, and spontaneously trying out new things.

Furthermore, all criticism should bring a man to test himself before the face of God. Who truly knows himself? Even the best intentions and ambitions work according to the structure of the father's word in Mark 9: "I believe; help me overcome my unbelief!".

"I think this is what I had to write, but was I perhaps trying to score, be original, flirt with the contemporary or shelter in the familiar?"

"I want to give myself to You and your church.,, or did I mean myself too?"

"I find it a real problem... or am I creating smoke-screens around a simple matter of obedience?"

As theologians we apply ourselves to knowing God. But no one can know God if he does not know himself. That is a classic experience within Christian spirituality. Augustine says it, Bernard van Clairvaux rediscovers it, Luther lives it, Calvin's Institution

grows from this starting point, later the reformed and puritans analyse this mystery. You cannot know yourself if you do not know God. You cannot know God if you do not know yourself.

That forces itself on you in all theology, but especially in this learning chair. So I am now not so much confronted by my inexperience or reservation, as I was 12 years ago in Berkel, but by the awareness that these subjects in particular cannot exist outside oneself. Whoever wishes to teach ethics and spirituality, must also live spirituality and ethics. I can only seek shelter in Christ. Only if He continues to look for me and live in me, can I learn to know God and myself and in this way serve church and society. ■

#### Note

1. Tr. It is common in Dutch to use as initials all the consonants before the first vowel in a name. The first consonant is capitalized, further consonants are in lowercase letter. The suffix 'tje' is a diminutive that can be used to indicate a lower case letter. Hence "A L T h-tje de Bruijne" for "A.L.Th. de Bruijne".

W.H. Rose

## Adapa and Abraham\*

### The World of the Old Testament

The Assyriologist Jean Bottéro (d. December 15, 2007) described the religiosity of the Mesopotamian peoples as *a prehistoric religion without holy scriptures, religious authorities, dogmas, orthodoxy, orthopraxy, or fanaticism, and it evolved sporadically, depending upon the culture of which it was only the reflection and on the time and events. (Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia, 6.)*



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Although the deities had different names, what is said here of the religious world of Mesopotamia is just as true for that of Canaan: no religious authorities, no dogmas and no orthopraxy – an ideal religion for post-modern people too. It was right in the middle of this that Israel lived, that special people, with its one God and its exclusive pretensions. The religious activities of the neighbouring peoples continually exerted a powerful attraction.

It is a fascinating world, also for people studying it in completely different times and in a completely different culture. In the Akkadian course which was completed last year after (on urgent request) a year's prolongation, I was privileged to have a classics graduate participating. This student found it to be a captivating and revealing experience to discover that the Greeks and Romans had not invented everything themselves.

In The Netherlands the study of Akkadian seems to be declining. My impression is that in the rest of the world things look a little rosier. What has been published during the last decades is without a doubt very impressive. Important to specialists are the editions of texts which had not been published previously, new editions of known texts (e.g. the Epic of Gilgamesh), and further signlists, dictionaries, and grammars.

For people outside the profession, including theologians, the volumes of up-to-date translations are of special importance, like *The Context of Scripture*

(COS), that replaces *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (ANET). When ANET was first published everything fitted into one volume. COS requires three. And to top it all, a number of items from this list is available digitally, sometimes at a small cost, sometimes even free of charge. An honourable mention should be made of the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, to be downloaded without cost from the website of The Chicago Oriental Institute. Not only does this save almost a metre of space on the shelf and lighten one's budget, being digital means unlimited possibilities for searching in this dictionary.

### Fascinating world

A fascinating world and yet at the same time so different from what we know of the people of Israel. For the moment I position myself behind the words so different. So different, but how different? A little bit different or completely different? That is the exciting question that has kept us occupied for more than a hundred years. The answers tend to vary considerably.

Personal starting points, convictions and presuppositions appear to play a major role. They direct the way in which you look at the given data. They can sharpen the perception but can also cloud the perception. Everybody is at risk of being hindered by their starting points, convictions, and presuppositions.

That is true for people who consider the Old Testament to be part of God's revelation and therefore the redeeming word and the first and last word in their lives. It is just as true for people who have little or no personal and/or religious affinity with the Old Testament. It is apparently not so easy to read texts from another culture and from other times with an open mind. This can be well illustrated by means of a short text, the Tale of Adapa. It is dated back to the second millennium before Christ. The most important manuscript originates from the fourteenth century Amarna in Egypt (which tells us something about the distribution of this text).

### Tale

The tale is quickly told. While at sea, Adapa, a faithful priest of the god Ea in the temple of Eridu, is caught off guard by the South Wind and his boat is overturned. He utters a curse that breaks the South Wind's wing. Anu, the supreme god of the sky, is furious and summons Adapa to appear before him. Before *appearing in heaven before the sky god, Adapa receives detailed instructions from Ea, which should guarantee a favourable resolution.*

Anu is so impressed by Adapa's defense that he decides to welcome him as a god. Adapa, however, obeying Ea's instructions, denies the bread and water of life which Anu offers him. For Adapa assumes, based on Ea's instructions, that this is the bread and water of death. Anu laughs meaningfully and sends Adapa back to earth. He has missed out on the chance of immortality.

William Hallo, renowned for contemplating the methods of text comparison from the Bible and from the Ancient Near East, concludes the brief introduction preceding the translation in COS with the words: *This myth provides an aetiology of death and thus a parallel to the story of Adam in the Bible.* (COS, 1:129.)

Hallo defines an etiology as "the explanation of a presently observed condition by appeal to an imaginary one-time event in the past" (*Scriptura*, 87(2004):267.)

In my opinion Hallo reads the Adapa story too much from the starting point of Genesis 3. If the Adapa story is read on its own, Hallo's characterization "etiology of death" is questionable. Adapa is an inhabitant of the city of Eridu. In other words: he is not someone standing at the origin of the history of mankind. Furthermore, there are little or no indications that what happened to Adapa is decisive for the whole of mankind.

The portrayal of an individual being granted immortality, with no consequences for mankind as a whole, is well-known in Akkadian literature. This is exactly what happened to Atrachasis, the man who survives the great flood and who, together with his wife, becomes immortal, yet no-one else.

The parallel with Adam also does not hold water. The similarity, it is argued, is to be sought in the themes of food and immortality. Superficially it is possible to point out these themes, but as soon as you dig deeper, the differences become apparent. The most important one regards obedience. Adam misses out on immortality because of his disobedience. Adapa ruins his chance of immortality because of his obedience.

### Questions

*At the same time the tale raises questions as to the position of the gods who play such an important part in it. Why does it end so unfortunately for Adapa? Is Anu too clever for Ea, and what does that do to Ea's reputation as the god of wisdom? Or did Ea mislead his pupil Adapa so that he would not lose his priest to the world of the gods? And what*

does that say about the friendliness of the gods? If I understand the story correctly, the conclusion would seem inevitable that the god Ea knew very well what would happen during the meeting with Anu. Thus he gave Adapa a wrong impression of the matter, causing Adapa to miss the chance of immortality and promotion to the world of the gods. Without compromising my respect for Hallo, I would have to conclude, as others do, that the characterization of the Adapa story as an etiology of death is unconvincing, and that speaking of a parallel with Adam is taking it too far. Overall we can conclude that in Ancient Near Eastern literature still no convincing parallel has been found for the story which Christian theology calls “the fall into sin”. The words from more than 20 years ago by the aforementioned Bottéro, still ring true: *“To this day, no one has convincingly shown the least trace of a comparable account, even in the inexhaustible treasures of ancient Mesopotamia, by which the Yahwist author or his predecessors could have been inspired—even in the way the authors of the exordium to the Priestly Document borrowed something, no matter how indirectly, from the Babylonian cosmogonies [...]”* (The Birth of God, 175)

### Hebrew

*That Ancient Near Eastern world, so different and at the same time so fascinating, remains well worth studying. But the principal part of my work at the University is of course teaching the Hebrew language. I am happy with strategic choices made by the Theological University on the terrain of languages: Languages for Theology. I see it as my mission to prepare students for a professional and respectful manner of reading the Bible. Even after thirteen years - to my own surprise - it is still exciting to make a fresh start each year with a new group of students and teaching them to read and write Hebrew from scratch. Presuppositions and convictions can be an impediment in the study of Hebrew grammar too, just as they can with reading and comparing texts. Once in a while I even catch myself doing it. For years I was somewhat surprised by a remark in the Hebrew Grammar of Joüon–Muraoka, that the word group *mal’ak Yhwh* probably also could mean “an angel of the Lord” (JM §139c).*

It seemed to me superfluous to seriously consider this possibility. That changed when I dived into the material and made some interesting discoveries (which others had already done long before me):

1. Comparison and descriptions of identical stories in different Bible books make it clear that *the angel of the Lord* can just as well refer to a normal angel. The angel called “the angel of the Lord” in II Kings 19:35 is simply “an angel” in the same story in II Chron.32:21. “The angel of the Lord” that appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Ex.3:2) is called just “an angel” by Stephen in Acts 7:30.
2. The practice of translation in the Septuagint, the oldest Greek translation of the Old Testament, corresponds with this. In a new episode the Hebrew phrase is first presented as “an angel of the Lord” and thereafter as “the angel of the Lord”. The NBV (New Bible Translation in Dutch) follows this translation practice. A similar pattern can be found in the narrative parts in the Greek texts of the New Testament (e.g. Matthew 1:20, with the indefinite article, and 1:24, with the definite article).

We are hereby confronted by a well-known phenomenon from Hebrew Grammar: a character is grammatically determined the very first time he appears in an episode (JM §137n). In other languages, including Dutch and Greek, such a new character is first grammatically undetermined and subsequently determined.

In other words, careful reading of the Bible text makes it clear that it is incorrect to presume that the phrase “the angel of the Lord” refers to a specific angel, or that it refers to the same angel repeatedly. The identity of this messenger must be determined in the specific case on the grounds of the context of the text.

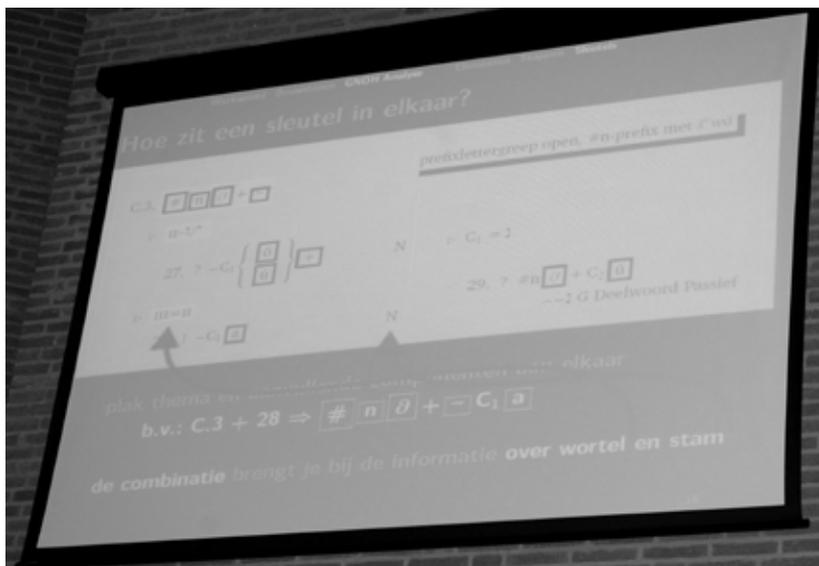
### Five years

For more than five years I have now occupied myself with the development of a new teaching method, which I hope will introduce the students to principles of the Hebrew language in a contemporary and attractive manner. In most cases students who now start the course have a very different education background than those of thirty years ago. Being a lecturer, I cannot ignore this problem.

The goals I have set myself in this teaching method are the following:

1. to arrange the process of becoming familiar with the Hebrew language in such a way that students can read texts from their Hebrew Bible at an early stage (every year I am again lightly euphoric when we are able to read the first verses of the Bible after some five weeks or so, “in the wild”- not tamed by the artificial world of a textbook);

2. that the students learn to see the verb forms in such a way that the building blocks of the form divulge their information about root, stem, form, etc. bit by bit;
3. the removal of terminology that does not belong in a Hebrew textbook, including terms and notions from the grammar of languages unrelated to Hebrew.



...The greatest challenge was formed by the verbal forms...

(photo P.G.B. de Vries)

It is a textbook, which in no means the same as a grammar. While writing it I constantly had to repress the urge to make exhausting enumerations. I had to teach myself to put myself in the student's place: the student who has a text in front of him and has to know what tools to use in order to dissect the information into forms and structures. Many a time this transition into the student role resulted in my throwing a concept into the bin, and having to start all over again.

The greatest challenge was formed by the verbal forms. I had been trying out an approach for a few years that turned out to be far from ideal. Then I was placed before the challenge at the theological seminary of Kiev of teaching the Hebrew verb in only two weeks. (Can you imagine it? The lecturer teaches in English, which is translated simultaneously into Russian and we are talking about Hebrew...) I seized that challenge to start completely anew one more time.

The chosen approach turned out to be effective. I am now busy ironing out the last wrinkles in this approach. Students are more than happy to assist. For every mistake a student discovers, a euro goes into a jar, for a worthy cause at the bakery once the course is completed.

## Second year students

With the second year students we are at this moment reading Joshua 24. I chose that chapter for a specific reason. In modern research, major parts of the history of the people of Israel are dismissed to the realms of fiction. David and Solomon are pruned, the Exodus as a historic event dangles in the air, and Abraham is a legendary figure.

What I noticed when reading Joshua 24 is how God relates the earliest moments of the history of his people in the first person: "I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the River", "I sent Moses and Aaron...", "I brought your fathers out of Egypt." The Lord, the God of Israel, is the director of these events and associates his credibility to the history that He made with His people. You dismiss that if you declare these events to be non-historical, and in this way you also lose that this God saves and sets free. It is always worthwhile to look closely at the way in which a history is told, and that is true also in this chapter. Small details are often telling, but they can easily escape your notice. "Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshiped other gods. But I took your father Abraham from the land [...]"

## Abraham idolater

Abraham was an idolater, as was his father and his brother. He grew up in that world "without holy scriptures, religious authorities, dogmas, orthodoxy, orthopraxy, or fanaticism".

An irresistible urge exists to improve the biblical image of Abraham. That urge of all ages. The Book of Jubilees (dating to the second half of the second century BC) tells the book of Genesis and the first book of Exodus all over again.

Concerning Abraham the story is then told as follows: the young Abraham is but a teenager when he distances himself from his father as far as the worship of idols is concerned (11:16). Some fifteen years later he again questions his father critically on the futility of idolatry and calls on him to worship the God of heaven (12:1-8). When Abraham is sixty he, without anyone noticing, sets fire to the temple of the idols (12:12-14). The Book of Jubilees leaves no doubt about it: Abraham was the first reformer. No wonder God's choice fell upon Abraham.

Abraham was an idolater when God came to fetch him. That is history. "Abraham as a reformer since childhood": that is another way to turn Abraham into a legendary figure. However, history teaches us that it is and remains an inexplicable miracle that

God plucks idolaters out of their surroundings and gives them a new life.

We have a beautiful word for this: grace. Maybe we should learn to speak respectfully, just as the apostle Paul did: the issue here is “the glory of the grace of God” (cf. Eph.1:6). If we humans are asked to reproduce the story of Abraham in our own words, then it can suddenly become a story in which Abraham steals the show. If we let God speak, we see that it is He who shines and we are impressed by His grace.

Grammar, grace and glory are, as far as I am concerned, the words that will continue to govern my work at the university. I would like to thank you, the synod, and the University Board for the trust you have placed in me. ■

*\* Speech held at the meeting of the General Synod of the Gereformeerde Kerken on Friday 26th October 2008*

T. de Reus

## More than a Redeemer

**The church is all about Christ, right? I wish it were, says the Rev. Hans Burger. “The person of Christ as someone with whom you have a relationship as believer, has disappeared from view.” This minsiter from Franeker, The Netherlands, recently received a Ph.D. for his book *Being in Christ*.**



**T**he relationship people have with the principal person of the Christian faith is going through a tough time. The liberated reformed minister Hans Burger (b. 1974) is not the only one to realise that. Many churchgoers seem aware that something is amiss. Without qualms we used to sing “Safe in Jesus’ arms”. Today we have our doubts. What does Jesus actually mean for us, who is he? A recent symposium in Amsterdam with the title “God is in, Jesus is out” makes clear how relevant the issue is.

However, another wind blows too. Recently the Remonstrant Dr. E. P. Meijering called upon the Dutch churches to return to the clear confession of Jesus Christ as *the* revelation of God, in whom people receive forgiveness. Meijering does not stand alone in his plea. From all corners calls are heard for a renewed concentration on Christ. Hans Burger approves. In his opinion the conclusion is justified that believing in Christ has become problematic in large parts of the Dutch churches. He considers it obvious that something needs to happen.

*Following is a translation of an interview with Hans Burger on account of his dissertation *Being in Christ*. The article has been written by Tjerk de Reus and was first published in CV-Koers, a non church-affiliated opinion magazine for Bible-believing Christians.*

### Karl Barth

“Our current problem with respect to Jesus has a history,” Burger explains. “The influence of the theologian Karl Barth in the twentieth century was widespread. He concentrated everything in theology on Christ, doing so in a very absolute way. Following Barth this was considered to strict and too one-sided. New ideas regarding the character of faith arose. Faith was considered to be a matter of mutual ministry or of a critical involvement of the church in society. Sermons on political issues became very popular, the Sermon on the Mount was used as a weapon against apartheid and military dictatorships. In the course of time attention for personal spirituality and mysticism were added. In the mean time the right flank of the ecclesiastical spectrum<sup>1</sup> concentrated itself increasing on ‘vicarious atonement’. This was considered to be the main substance of faith in Christ.”

“What at any rate is clear, is this: that the person of Christ is someone with whom you as believer have a real relationship, has disappeared from view. Jesus as my Lord and Saviour with whom I daily walk has become a theme for the evangelical movement. I am generalizing, all sorts of nuances could be made here. However, I do not think you can escape the conclusion that many churchgoers are unclear as to what it means to be ‘in Christ’.”

### New Identity

It is obvious that Hans Burger regrets these development but also sees new perspectives. This is clear from the subject of his doctoral dissertation. It concerns itself with “being in Christ”. Burger’s main

## Burger's Framework

Hans Burger devised a framework to be able to describe "being in Christ" theologically. This framework consists of four concepts, which he works out in his study:

**Substitution:** Christ does something for us which we cannot do

**Representation:** Christ identifies himself with us in the course of his life.

**Unity:** Through faith we live in communion with Christ.

**Participation:** We share in the story of Christ.

question is: what does this exactly mean? How has this been seen in the Christian tradition of faith. What did, for example, the Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck make of it? What does the Bible say about it, for example, John or Paul? Burger's research has produced a new framework in which the meaning of "being in Christ" becomes clear. This framework consists of four concepts, each of which brings to expression part of the reality of being in Christ. The common denominator is, all turns on the new identity which you receive as believer. Believing in Christ is in the words of Burger "sharing in the life-story of Jesus Christ". To put it another way: a believer shares in Christ's cross and resurrection and looks forward to definite redemption. He also speaks of the Biblical image of "indwelling": through the Spirit Christ dwells in the believers.

The framework which Burger develops in his dissertation allows him to see the interconnect- edness of all sorts of biblical and theological lines. Burger notes: "Due in part to the evangelical movement, there is within tradition churches much attention for a renewed, more intense and personal relationship with God. My dissertation has sought to supply a theological and biblical consideration, which hopefully will bring us further in this." Upon being asked where "further" will take us Burger responds, "in the way of faith: growing in Christ."

"Growing in Christ" sounds comfortable but often does not feel comfortable. Is real growth and progress a well-known issue? For many church people believing is a matter of maintaining that Jesus has died for your sins. It is considered quite something if one does not doubt this. Burger considers this a misconception. "According to the New Testament our lives are renewed. We are being recreated according to the image of Christ. This is more than simply in true belief maintaining the knowledge that Jesus has died for your sins on the cross. His person, his history, in short, he himself, should have a much greater impact on the life of a believer."

## Glory and Suffering

With this remark Burger touches one of the theological hinges in his dissertation. Classical Reformed theology focuses especially on justification through faith. "This is understood as follows: God accepts me on the grounds of Jesus' sacrifice. The fact that this has further consequences is often not seen. Does that fact that God accepts me as his child truly change my life? I think we should dare to respond with a 'yes' to that question and we should pay attention to this in preaching, in Bible study, in catechetical instruction. The sacrifice of Jesus must affect our lives."

Burger does not believe that this makes him an optimist. "In my book I have explained that as believer you share in the life story of Jesus Christ. This story has moments of glory and victory. It also has moments of suffering and death. The framework I have formulated makes clear that some charismatic groups are one-sided in their emphasis on victory. These hold that all is said and done for the believer. To this I say, no, for there are also other moments in the life of Jesus. These moments also mean something for "being in Christ". I argue for attention for the wholesome affect of Christ in our lives, but note at the same time that it is temporary. The definitive breakthrough of God's Kingdom is yet to come. That too, is a reality."

## Ideals

Hans Burger is young and driven. Even though his is calm and analysing in responding to questions, at times his responses blaze with the passion of someone wanting to improve the world. Or should that be church? Burger has ideals, that is obvious. He has spent some six years in his study thinking on the subject matter of his dissertation. "I am glad I chose this subject. It has affected my thinking and faith in a substantial way. I have come to realize that "being in Christ" affects all aspects of my ministry. I have discovered a new centre for faith. I have discovered for myself a new centre for believing, living, being a congregation and practising theology."

Nevertheless, Burger does not give the impression of being worldly-wise. He admits that he has much to learn. "The study is a place of the practice of abstract thinking. As theologian you have to step into real life. This is quite demanding. You pastor all sorts of people in all sorts of difficult situations. From a spiritual point of view I'm at the start of a



Dr Hans Burger

new course of learning. To name just one thing: the most important part of my work as minister is to bring people to Christ. But how do I do that? When you ask this question, all sorts of questions pop up, questions relating to pastoral care, psychological, biblical theology, what have you. In theology we refer to this set of questions as *mystagogics*: leading people into the mysteries of the faith. However, I have not been educated in this. *Kampen*<sup>2</sup> is not this far yet. I do hope more attention will be paid to this, we need to make up for lost ground.”

### Subjectivism

You might consider this strange. Why are ministers not educated to actually guide people on the way to Christ? Has the academic climate had such an influence that everything has become abstract? Or are there other causes. When Hans Burger looks around in his own church environment, the *Gereformeerde Kerken*, he observes a hesitancy with respect to faith experience. He is not alone in this observation. “There used to be, and sometimes still is, a fear for what is called ‘subjectivism’. What it is? At its worst having attention only for what I feel, what I enjoy, what I personally experience. This is a tendency found in evangelical groups and Pentecostal churches. This is rejected, because it blocks out

the objective side to faith: a faith standardized by Scripture, bound to the Word of God.”

Where does Burger stand in this field of tension? “I would like to see more attention in my church circle for the personal dimension of faith. Man with his experiences is often not in view. This is a deficiency, for it is my firm conviction that the “indwelling of Christ” is a concrete reality. Christ truly lives in the believers. This is not a nice story, this is reality. The apostle John speaks of the “indwelling” of the Spirit. If this is so, we must speak about this and preach on this.”

Burger opines that the theology which lies at the bottom of the preaching in orthodox churches of suffers from a biographical deficiency. “The personal life-story hardly plays a role. It seems to be all about general, sometimes abstract, views on faith. Noble notions and often well-argued, but does it touch my life? What am I to do with this? A rift can easily form between the Gospel and one’s personal life. Understand me well, it would be absolutely wrong to take your starting-point in your own experience. Certain criticisms of subjective preaching make sense to me. However, Jesus enters your life, how you experience life. The Spirit is renewing you in your concrete existence. When in a sermon or pastoral visit you say to people that they may surrender themselves to God, you also have to explain *how* they this is possible. This is not simple, but it is the challenge before which we stand.” ■

■ Hans Burger, *Being in Christ; A Biblical and Systematic Investigation in a Reformed Perspective*.

Eugene OR: Wipf&Stock, 2008.

Previously published in *CV-Koers*, January 2009: 56-59.

### Notes:

1. Tr.: A common way for the Dutch to refer to the orthodox Calvinists and hyper-Calvinists.
2. Tr.: The Theological University of the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (vrijgemaakt)*.

# A new perspective on Arminius (1)

It is fully understandable that the name of Arminius provokes some resistance, also within our Christian Reformed Churches. Does his name not stand for a theological vision that awards a decisive role to man's free will in the appropriation of salvation, at the cost of God's sovereign grace? On 27th June 2008 I defended my dissertation on the theology of Arminius at the Theological University of Apeldoorn. The editors of *De Wekker* asked me to summarize my dissertation for the benefit of the readers.



**M**y dissertation gave cause to some discussion and raised some questions in various newspapers and church magazines. In some cases the impression was wrongly given that it was my intention to rehabilitate Arminius or to put unreformed opinions in a positive light. During my research I discovered that surprisingly little research had been done on Arminius' theology. Many books present a false portrayal of Arminius, information that is subsequently copied by others without reading Arminius himself. Everybody has a right to a fair judgement. That is why convictions should receive a true representation and motives should be traced. In my opinion, the important question of what exactly were Arminius' theological motives to deviate from Reformed theology, had not yet been answered satisfactorily. In my dissertation I have tried to do Arminius justice by answering that question. It is indeed true that in this way a new perspective is gained on Arminius, a better understanding through which current images have to be corrected or nuanced. But that is not the same as agreeing with all Arminius has to say. I will come back to that point in part three of this article. Also, none of this in itself has any bearing on the Canons of Dort which refute the Remonstrants in five articles. After all, while it is true that the Remonstrants refer to Arminius, research – mine as well as others' – has showed that a clear distinction should be made between Arminius and the Remonstrants. Condemnation of erroneous Remonstrant doctrine does not automatically result in a condemnation of (all of) Arminius' views.

## Arminius up till 1603

Jacob Arminius was born in 1579 in Oudewater.

His father died around that time and he lost his mother, sister and older brother(s) in the Spanish massacre of Oudewater in 1575. Arminius escaped a similar fate because he was studying at Marburg at the time. In 1582 Arminius enrolled at the University of Leiden; in 1582 at the University of Geneva, where Theodore Beza swayed the scepter. Besides Geneva, Arminius also studied for short periods in Basel, Zurich and Padua, before returning to Amsterdam in 1587, where he was ordained for the ministry in the following year.

One can deduce from various facts that around 1590 Arminius started to doubt the correctness of Beza's influential supralapsarian doctrine of predestination ('supralapsarianism' means that God's predestination applies to man *before* the fall). A certain Dirk Volckertsz Coornhert had criticized Beza's predestination doctrine with the objection, amongst others, that it would warrant the conclusion that God is unjust. Two ministers from Delft who wanted to take the sting out of Coornhert's criticism, defended an infralapsarian doctrine of predestination ('infralapsarian' means that God's predestination applies to man *after* the fall). Arminius agreed with Coornhert's criticism of Beza, but not with the alternative doctrine. In his view, infralapsarianism does not present a satisfactory solution either. The problem with the relationship between God's justice on the one hand and predestination on the other, is so intriguing to Arminius that he spends the rest of his life pondering it.

Others, such as his colleague minister Petrus Plancius, noticed that on some points Arminius took a somewhat different view than what they were used to, for example in his sermons on Romans 7 and 9. Arminius defended his view on these chapters in two short papers that were not published until after his death. In his explanation of Romans 9, for example, Arminius claims that the text "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" should be interpreted to mean that Jacob is a role model of those people who want to be justified through faith in Jesus Christ, while Esau is typical of those who reject the Gospel and try to gain salvation through their own works. According to Arminius, it is the 'Jacobs' who are elected to salvation by God, while the 'Esaus' are rejected.

### About the author:

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In a correspondence with a Leiden University professor, Franciscus Junius (1545-1602), Arminius discusses the 'object of predestination'. Simply stated, how does God view man at the 'moment' of predestination? Does He view him as still to be created, as created, or as created and fallen into sin? Arminius opts for the last possibility, because otherwise God would be the cause of the fall. He is convinced that if God were to elect or reject men who are not yet fallen, the fall would necessarily result from this predestination. In that case, God, and not man, would be responsible for sin, which would mean that God is unjust.

### God's justice

God's justice increasingly becomes the centre and foundation of Arminius' theology. God's goodness and justice are unquestionable certainties for Arminius and every thought that tends to deviate from that is contradicted and attacked by him with great spirit. I will try to explain why.

God is just in his very essence; his justice is so fundamental that it is characteristic of all of God's will and actions. God's will, for example, is completely free (God is sovereign), but according to Arminius this can never result in God willing something that is unjust. Of course, this starting point has consequences for the way in which God created the world and man, as well as for the way in which He rules and maintains his creation (providence). God has equipped man with a free will – which is the essence of human nature – and made an agreement with man in the covenant of works that - on condition of total obedience - he would receive the joy of total reunion with God. God gave man all he needed in order to stay obedient, but

completely voluntarily man chose to break the covenant with God (the fall).

On those grounds God had the right to give man what he deserved: damnation. His justice also demands it. Nevertheless, God wanted to show mercy to fallen man. The only way to do this without compromising God's justice was through the substitutional suffering and death of God's Son as Mediator. Jesus Christ had to appease God's justice in our place in order to make the redemption of sinful men possible. For Arminius therefore the accomplished work of Christ is the absolute condition and foundation of the Gospel.

### Faith and means of grace

According to Arminius, the Gospel consists firstly of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to satisfy God's justice. Secondly, God determined that only people who are connected to Christ could be saved. Through faith, Christ's righteousness would be applied to them, so that there would be no hindrance for God to accept man. That is also the reason why faith, as means and condition for the imputation of Christ's righteousness, plays such an important role in Arminius' theology. I already mentioned above that Arminius saw created and fallen man as the 'object of predestination'. Because of the importance of faith for the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the sinner, Arminius in his view adds faith to the object of election: God elects believing sinners. He rejects unbelieving sinners.

According to Arminius, the new or Gospel covenant that God made with man after the fall includes, besides the gift of Christ and this condition concerning faith, also the gift of all the means of grace that man, fallen into sin, needs in order to believe in Christ, to repent and to be saved. For Arminius this, too, was linked directly to God's justice: God did not exclude anyone when He made the new covenant. God demands faith in Christ from all people and it would therefore be unjust if God, together with the demand, did not also grant the grace necessary to meet it.

An objection that might be raised is that before the fall man had the power to believe, so that God is not obliged to grant that power again after the voluntary fall. God would have every right to demand faith from fallen man, even if it is impossible for him to meet this demand without grace. Arminius, however, answered that man before the fall did not have any power to believe

in Christ. Before the fall there was no sin, and therefore no Christ as Mediator in whom man could or should believe. God's demand of faith and conversion is based on the new situation of the new covenant after the fall. Moreover, God determined that those who do not believe in Christ should be punished eternally. Arminius was convinced that it would be unjust if God punished man for the omission of something of which he would never have been capable.

From Arminius's point of view, in which it is above all doubt that the guilt of unbelief can only be blamed on man himself (because he sticks to his unbelief in spite of the Gospel and all the grace he receives), it is understandable that he teaches that God's grace does not work irresistibly. If God's grace works irresistibly, certain people who receive this grace, would necessarily be saved, while the rest would necessarily be lost, because they apparently did not receive (enough of) this irresistible grace. Arminius cannot harmonize grace working like that with God's general offer of salvation. Arminius' view of the non-irresistible nature of God's grace, granted to everyone sufficiently, is directly linked with his view of God as the one who is just and acts justly. ■

■ This dissertation, *Duplex amor Dei. Contextuele karakteristiek van de theologie van Jacobus Arminius (1559-1609)* (Instituut voor Reformatieonderzoek: Apeldoorn 2008), ISBN 978-90-75847-21-5, is available for €25 at the TUA (e-mail: bestellen@tua.nl). An English edition will be published later this year by Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, in the series *Reformed Historical Theology* (Ed. Herman J. Selderhuis).

First published in: *De Wekker*, 117e jaargang, nrs 39, 40 en 41 (August - September 2008).

## Stefan Paas lecturer

On 14 november 2008 the Theological University of the *Gereformeerde Kerken* in The Netherlands in Kampen announced that it has appointed dr Stefan Paas as lecturer. Stefan Paas, known for his publications in the field of missiology, is currently active as church planter in Amsterdam. He also teaches at the Christelijke Hogeschool Ede.

Paas will become the supervisor of a 'Missional Church' training course, a new component of the one-year Master course. This new course, which will be launched in September 2009, is aimed at developing new forms of missional church in Western Europe. According to the university, which mainly educates men for the ministry in the GKV, the training course is open to students from different denominations.

## Gunnar Begerau on Elijah

In September 2008 the Theological University in Apeldoorn had the defence of a dissertation in the field of the Old Testament, under the guidance of prof. Eric Peels. The German student Gunnar Begerau wrote a dissertation with the title '*Elia vom Krit zum Jordan: Eine Untersuchung zur literarischen Makrostruktur und theologischen Intention der Elia-Ahab-Erzählung (1Kön.16,29 bis 2Kön.2,25)*'.

Dr. Begerau did his research on the macro-structure of the story of Elijah and Ahab and aimed at the formulation of the theological intention of these chapters. The question is put how the several stories together can be considered to be literary unity. Ans what is the function of the chapters 1 Kings 20 and 22 in which no mention of Elia his made? The work shows that this complete section of the books of Kings is built according to a chiasmic structure, and as a larges story contributes in an theologically important measure to the book of Kings. This structure shows the theologican intention of the polemic against the worship of Baal, it characterizes Elijah as a prophet of Jahwe, it clarifies the relation between king and prophet and finally it makes clear how there is continuity from Elijah to Elishah. These elements are used again in the story of Jehu and Hasael, in 2 Kings 8,7 to 13,25. There the judgment of Omri's dynasty is executed that was announced in the very centre of the Elijah-Ahab-story (1 Kings 21).

■ Gunnar Begerau, *Elia vom Krit zum Jordan: Eine Untersuchung zur literarischen Makrostruktur und theologischen Intention der Elia-Ahab-Erzählung (1Kön.16,29 bis 2Kön.2,25)*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang 2008, 305 p.

# Nicea: Jacob and Esau Come of Age

**Like Jacob and Esau, the Church and the Synagogue had a life-or-death struggle for the rights of inheritance. At first, Christians were persecuted. From Nicea on, it was the Jews who suffered.**



**T**he Jewish opposition to Jesus already starts when He reminds them that God can show favor to Gentiles. The examples He gives them of the widow in Zarephath and Naaman, the Syrian, give rise to murder plans (Luke 4:24-30). When Paul speaks to the people of Jerusalem in Hebrew, the crowd is all ears. Until he explains that Jesus Himself commissioned him to go to the Gentiles, the people far from Jerusalem (Acts 22:22-23). Even the Jewish Christians had trouble accepting Gentiles, non-Jews, as brothers, because they were from other nations (see Romans and Galatians).

Having rejected Jesus nationally, the Jews turn on His followers, as Jesus had predicted (John 15:20). The fact that Rabbi Saul issued “threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1), confirms this. After the Temple is destroyed, the tide turns. The Christian Faith gains a foothold in the Roman empire and outgrows its Jewish parent. Christianity is challenged in the “idea marketplace.” Greeks find Christianity illogical, mainly due to the Trinity and the Resurrection. For Jews, the inheritance is the problem: who is the Covenant’s rightful heir? Christians believe all the Old Testament promises had been accomplished in the Son; only “in Him” can you be saved. By rejecting Jesus, the Jews declare themselves to be the promised heirs. The battle lines were drawn.

It’s worth noting that the theological hostility begins on the Jewish side. But Christians will more than make up for that.

## **Atonement without sacrificial blood?**

The Jews steadfastly insist that Jesus is not the Messiah, even after the Temple is destroyed in A.D. 70, exactly as Jesus had prophesied. But how

can Judaism now survive? God had emphasized that atonement is only through blood (Lev. 17:11), and sacrificial blood can only be offered at the Temple (Deut. 12:13-14). What a dilemma! Judaism is suddenly without atonement. What can they do?

They make a choice. They follow the teacher Johanan ben Zakkai. He declares, based on Hos. 6:6, Prov. 16:6 and Ps. 84:3, that works of benevolence have atoning powers as great as those of sacrifice. This view, however, does not solve the problem. Hence a large number of Jews accepts the Christian faith in the Atonement by the Blood ‘shed for many for the remission of sins’ (Math. 26:28, Heb. 10:12, Col. 1:20), in Jesus as the ‘Lamb of God’ (John 1:29, Rev. 7:14 etc.)

This forces the Rabbis to reconsider their atonement idea. Not an easy thing after rejecting God’s own provided atonement!. They come up with the doctrine that atonement is granted on the basis of God’s Fatherly love and human repentance, prayer and good deeds. Israel thus steps away from Biblical Judaism into Rabbinic Judaism. A theological shift such as this, of course, makes Jesus superfluous: there is salvation without an atoning Savior, who atoned for sin through His sacrificial death.

And yet, what does Rabbi Nachman relate, in accordance with the Jewish tradition? In the old Temple times a scarlet thread was fastened to the Temple’s door. If the scarlet thread turned white on the Day of Atonement after the priest completed his ritual, the people would rejoice: it was a sign their sins had been forgiven. If it didn’t, they would mourn. Then we read: “It has further been taught that for forty years before the destruction of the temple the thread of scarlet never turned white, but it remained red.” Forty years before AD 70 brings us to the crucifixion! The implication is stunning: no ritual sacrifice was effective after the atoning death of the Lamb of God. Judaism had truly been cast aside.

After the resurrection of Jesus, two religions diverged. It is fascinating to see how Judaism and Christianity each follow their own course with an eye on the other. For example, Jews at an early

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From the Amidah (“Standing”), also called the Shemoneh Esrei (“The Eighteen”), the central prayer in the Jewish liturgy. The twelfth prayer reads as follows:

*And let there be no hope for the blasphemer,  
and may all evil-doers perish in the twinkling of an eye  
and all be quickly cut off.*

*And the presumptuous, rip them out, break them,  
cast them down and bring them to fall, soon, in our days.*

*Blessed Thou, Adonai. Who breaks enemies and brings presumptuous to fall.*

*In the school of the authority Rabbi Hillel (shortly after Jerusalem’s fall in AD 70) this prayer was reformulated, so that people of other religions could not join in this prayer. The “test-prayer” then read:*

*May there be no hope for the apostate;  
and may Thou exterminate the shameless government in our time,  
and may [the Nazarenes and] the minim (heretics) perish in an instant,  
wiped out of the Book of Life,  
and not written down with the righteous.*

*Praised be Thou, Adonai, who brings the shameless to their knees.*

stage add an item to their formal prayers, intending to exclude Jewish Christians from the Synagogue. Jews also relinquish kneeling (with one annual exception!) because Christians also kneel....

### **Nicea: cut loose from the Mother-faith**

Though born of Old Testament soil and organizationally nourished by the synagogue, Christianity too seeks to distinguish itself from Judaism. When Jacob tricked the blessing from Isaac, Esau saw red. When God moves the promises from Israel to His Son, the Old Israel first breathes out threats. However, the New Israel eventually also shows its worse side. The Christians claim to have the sole right to the Salvation, to the Old Testament, the sole right to speak for God. For, they reason, we strive towards the salvation of the world.

The Church has a problem accounting for the Jews’ existence. If God had accomplished in Christ all He had intended for the Jews, why were there still Jews? The Church would soon find an answer to that question: the Jewish people are a living proof that God punishes unfaithfulness.

At Nicea, the Church makes it clear that it wishes to sever all bonds with her “mother”. She begins an official program of distancing herself from the Jewish Faith, in form as well as in creed. At the Council of Nicea this effort received the backing of

the power of the Roman Empire.

The Council of Nicea addresses threats to her identity from all over the world! According to Paul, humanity is composed of Jews, Gentiles, and the Church of God (1Cor.10:32). At Nicea, the Church has to defend herself to a) Jews, who claim to be the only rightful heirs to the covenant ; b) Gentiles, who claim wisdom as theirs alone; and c) even to members of the Church of God, principally the Arians, who deny that Jesus is Gods Son.

Though decisions made in that Council have rightly been called “the bedrock of our faith,” there is today widespread ignorance concerning this first great assembly of the Church (not counting Acts 15). Take, for example, the suggestion that the Trinity was invented at Nicea. This is a misunderstanding. The doctrine of the Trinity was defended at Nicea, not invented.

### **The Lord’s Day and Passover**

The same kind of misunderstanding exists regarding observance of the Lord’s Day as opposed to the Jewish Sabbath. Lord’s Day observance begins with the resurrection. The Apostle John emphasizes that Jesus revealed Himself to His disciples on the first day of the week (John 20:19), and next appeared on the following Lord’s Day (John 20:26). The Spirit poured down from heaven at Pentecost, that year on a Lord’s Day. The New Testament implies that disciples of Christ continued to gather for worship on the first day of the week (compare Acts 20:7; 1Cor. 16:2, Rev. 1:10). This impression is unanimously confirmed by early Christian literature.

Theologically, the shift from the seventh to the first day is very beautiful: the Lord of the Sabbath took the old with Him into the grave, rose as victor over sin and death, and began the New Creation. Nothing could seem more natural than the continuation of apostolic example in gathering for worship on the Day of Resurrection.

What then should Christians do about Passover (the Jewish Easter Feast)? First, Christ clearly was the Paschal Lamb of God. Second, there is no question that generations of Christians commemorated Christ’s death on the same date as Jews observed Passover: the fourteenth of the Jewish month Nisan. Before the third century, however, a growing number of Christians, particularly in the West, insist the Church devise a different method of calculating days for commemorating Jesus’ death and resurrection. They think that His death ought always to be observed on a Friday, and His resurrection on a Sunday.

At the time of the Nicean Council, the Western (i.e. the Roman) practice had become dominant. In the fifth-century, someone reports that the Council officially asserted “all the brethren in the East who have heretofore kept this festival at the same time as the Jews, will henceforth conform to the Romans and to us...” This illustrates how eager the Church leaders were to distinguish themselves from the Jews. In 300 years the Church had gone from being a Jewish sect to an anti-Jewish, state-approved religion. It is important to stress this last clause, for the real difference marked at Nicea was less a matter of Church practice than of civil enforcement. Heretofore Christians might indeed have worshiped on the Lord’s Day, but after Nicea, civil government legalized the Lord’s Day, and to an extent, enforced its observance.

### **Necessary distinction and unnecessary distance**

It seems inevitable that Christianity should distance itself from the tradition out of which it was born. The Christian Faith evolves to independency. But it is then no longer Judaism, least of all is it Rabbinical Judaism. The Council of Nicea may be seen as a marked moment of ‘the parting of the ways.’ The Church officially separates herself from Judaism. This becomes politically significant when separation of Jews from Christians, and the subordinate status of Jews, is translated into legislation by the Roman and Byzantine Christian Emperors.

From that point on the Jewish roots of the Christian faith gradually, and often deliberately, disappear to the background. The consequence is not only that Jews suffered terribly and needlessly, but also that Christians sold themselves short by lack of appreciation of their Biblical heritage. The fullness of Christ’s work has been hidden because it is only found in the heritage of the “Jewish” Scriptures. Also, the very character of Scripture as a narrative has been sanitized into systematic boxes suitable to people who have learned to think in the Greek (Hellenic) tradition.

The Old Testament can illuminate our faith. The Passover, for example, required three elements: bitter herbs, the Passover lamb, and unleavened bread (Numbers 9:11). Amazingly, these are powerful symbols of the very things which our Catechism insists are necessary to enter into the joy of our “comfort.” The bitter herbs show me “how great my sin and misery is.” The Passover Lamb tells me “how I am to escape such sin and misery”. And the unleavened bread stands for the life of

thanksgiving for His great salvation (cf. 1Cor. 5:7-8). The Bible is richer than we can imagine. Nicea was inevitable - the Church had to express her own identity, had to seek out the Greek terms which alone could fully express Jewish Messianism while satisfying Greek intellectualism. Yet it was not inevitable to cut off the Jews from legitimacy in history. Especially after Paul’s stern warning against that very form of arrogance (Rom 11:19-21): You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.” Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

### **Back to the whole Word**

This warning was addressed to Gentile believers. Did Nicea mark the beginning of the Gentile Church’s “hearing difficulty” of the Old Testament? If we listen more closely to the whole Word we could gain a deeper appreciation for the Old Testament.

We could increase our understanding of the Old Testament Calendar of Feasts, and how Christ fulfills all these. We could more consciously celebrate Christ as our Passover sacrifice. We could marvel at the link between the first Pentecost (at Pentecost the Jews commemorate the giving of the Law!) where 3000 Israelites were killed, and the new, full Pentecost, where 3,000 were saved (compare Ex 32:28 with Acts 2:41).

Our renewed appreciation for Israel’s Feasts could reinforce the truth that Passover was “applied to” Pentecost, and Pentecost was “applied to” Sukkoth. Then we could keep the image of Sukkoth vividly before us as the goal of our service in the Kingdom. We have not arrived. God and man dwelling together in peace in the New Heavens and the New Earth is our destination. And we must not rest until we have said to the Jews, “Thank you for showing us the Way. We cannot be fulfilled unless you come along with us.” ■

■ This article was originally published in Dutch translation in *Wegwijs*, a publication of the Reformed Bible Study Association 59 (2005) 107-110.

## Gijsbert Schaap on Franciscus Ridderus

**In November 2008, the Rev. G. Schaap, minister in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, earned his doctor's degree with a dissertation on Franciscus Ridderus (1620-1683). Een onderzoek naar zijn theologie, bronnen en plaats in de Nadere Reformatie. His research was performed under the guidance of Prof. Herman J. Selderhuis.**

In his book dr. Schaap gives an analysis of the theological work of this well-known theologian belonging to the 'Nadere Reformatie' in the Netherlands.

He points out that the notion of communion with Christ is of fundamental significance in Ridderus' theology. It is the Holy Spirit who brings believers into an organic pneumatic living relationship with Christ. Ridderus describes this reality of faith in the affectionate and metaphoric language, taken from the Song of Solomon, with many quotations from the Works of Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), also using the example of Christ's suffering and death and the pattern of the martyrs.

The practice of piety does not only consist in the sanctification of the inner being of the believers, but also in their appearance and habits. This *praxis pietatis* must become visible in wealth and in poverty, in times of prosperity and in adversity, in life and in death. If someone would not recognize God's governing majesty by showing oneself off with expensive clothes, furniture, a luxurious house, lavish meals and feasts etc., he can expect God's punishments. A scrupulous searching of one's conscience is characteristic for this practice, by which no single detail of the Christian life may be left to private judgment.

Ridderus' work as an exegete, as an apologist of the orthodox-reformed doctrine of Scripture, as a historian of dogma and a trainer of ministers and Christians must be seen as a stimulus to the advancement in practical piety, that reaches a climax in the Christian way of entering death.

To a certain extent Ridderus breathes in the spirit of the late Middle-Ages. This is shown in his conviction that worldly laughing is improper for a Christian. He draws this conclusion from the observation that nowhere in Scripture it is ever mentioned that Jesus laughed; furthermore from his thoughts on the art of dying and finally from the interpretation of comets as signs of imminent disaster. As far as baptism is concerned, its basis must not be found in the regenerated Christian, as other ministers would say, but in the covenant of grace. The importance of celebrating the Holy Supper is not to be related to human preparation and worthiness, but to the institution of Christ. Not our feeling, but the obedience of faith will give the full reward of being at the Holy Supper.

It is interesting that Ridderus had a pastoral-psychological knowledge and practice at his disposal with which he served many that were in serious trouble. Those who were vexed by sinful desires, by doubts, by despair etc. were effectively guided to the faithful promises of the Word of God.

It is typical that in Ridderus' works we find all the points that were

characteristic for the program of the 'Nadere Reformatie'. The theocratic message towards family, church and government is present in many pages, and much of this is painted in puritan colours. Apart from several Dutch writers that he used, he also regularly quoted the father of puritanism William Perkins (1558–1602).

■ Dr G. Schaap, *Franciscus Ridderus (1620-1683). Een onderzoek naar zijn theologie, bronnen en plaats in de Nadere Reformatie*. Gouda: Vereniging voor Ned. Kerkgeschiedenis 2008, 308 p.

## Jacob Gopalswamy on The Motif of Stranger

**Dr. Jacob, born in a Hindu family in India, and working as a minister and teacher in the Reformed Churches in India, took his doctor's degree in Apeldoorn in the month of October 2008 on the basis of his dissertation on *The Motif of Stranger in Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*. He did his research in the field of church history with prof. Herman J. Selderhuis.**

His book shows that Calvin, himself a stranger, derives the notion of 'stranger' in the Old Testament from four Hebrew terms: *rg*, *rkn*, *bftw*, and *rz*. He narrows down the whole concept of stranger into two main groups. The term *rg* always renders a notion of non-belongingness, of being an outsider or even an enemy. The terms *rkn* and *bftw*, on the other hand, are translated with different meanings. Both Abraham and David are referred to as *bftw*, but in all other instances the noun is used for uncircumcised foreigners who live among the Israelites. In his commentaries on the Psalms and the prophets, Calvin translates the term *rkn* in such a way as to reflect that this group had a positive relationship with the Israelites, while in his Harmony of the Law commentary the *rkn* is outside the Israelite congregation. However, the two terms *rkn* and *bftw* do not render a meaning that includes a notion of enmity as does the term *rz* when used for non-Israelites. The term *rg*, on the other hand, is always translated so as to refer to one who came from outside of the Israelite community, but became part of it by embracing the Israelite faith as witnessed to in circumcision.

Dr. Jacob also deals with the question to what extent Calvin's personal experience influenced his exegesis. He demonstrates from the sources that biography and theology also for Calvin are closely bound together and sometimes even intertwined.

■ Gopalswamy Jacob, *The Motif of Stranger in Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*. Apeldoorn: Instituut voor Reformatieonderzoek 2008, 166 p.



**Jesus said, "I am  
the light of the world."**  
John 8:12