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“All the More Reason to Exercise Caution while Discussing Genesis”: Gerrit Berkouwer on Scripture and Science

Gijsbert van den Brink

1 Introduction

In the preceding chapter Abraham Flipse sketched the main contours of the development of neo-Calvinist and Roman Catholic views of science in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. One of the things his analysis brings to light is the special role played by leading neo-Calvinist theologians during and after the interbellum. His chapter shows how these theologians opted for a conservative line by integrating two aspects of neo-Calvinism that until then had largely remained separate: the ideal of developing a “Christian science” on the one hand, and a literal-historical reading of the Bible, especially with regard to the first chapters of Genesis, on the other. Young earth creationism, as it had emerged in the USA several decades before, came to their aid as the perfect bridge to connect these two strands in their thinking.¹ As a result, neo-Calvinist attempts to come to terms with contemporary science came to a standstill, and neo-Calvinist academics who were involved in the natural sciences had a hard time. The road towards taking the methods and results of mainstream science seriously was blocked. Whenever these results deviated from a so-called literal understanding of the Bible, as was particularly the case with regard to the questions of origin, biblical exegesis overruled the search for the most adequate scientific theory.

How did this situation change? Following on Flipse’s observations, this chapter will explore more closely the next stage of neo-Calvinist thinking on the relations between science and religion: the late 1950s and 1960s. During this period, the way in which the natural sciences were conceived of in relation to biblical interpretation and theological doctrine underwent significant change, and set a course for even more drastic shifts. In particular, this contribution will probe the role played in this regard by Gerrit Cornelis Berkouwer (1903–1996), professor of systematic theology at the Vrije Universiteit from 1940–1973. At the peak of his

¹ Abraham C. Flipse, “Shared Principles, Diverging Paths. Neo-Calvinism, Neo-Thomism and the Natural Sciences, 1880–1960,” in this volume; cf. A.C. Flipse, “The Origins of Creationism in the Netherlands: The Evolution Debate Among Twentieth-Century Dutch neo-Calvinists,” *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture* 81 (2012), 104–147.

powers, Berkouwer became representative for the outlook and image of the VU to such an extent that both insiders and outsiders could refer to him with a smile as “Mr. VU”.²

This focus on Berkouwer rests on three reasons. First, it is generally agreed upon that Berkouwer was a highly influential theologian in neo-Calvinist circles, whose national and international stature and radiance almost equalled that of his famous predecessors at the Vrije Universiteit (‘the Free’), Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. In fact, Berkouwer may have been the last Dutch neo-Calvinist theologian whose publications largely determined the course of an entire church. In comparison, later neo-Calvinist theologians found themselves in a much more fragmented landscape, at best speaking to particular factions within their churches. Second, Berkouwer was a very accurate observer of developments that took place in contemporary Roman Catholic theology, and became deeply involved in inter-confessional dialogue with Roman Catholicism.³ As such, the connections and differences he perceived between these traditions with regard to the natural sciences are important in our understanding of the relationship between them. Third, Berkouwer was very circumspect about making unequivocal statements with regard to ‘hot issues’, such as how to assess evolutionary theory in relation to theological doctrine. Still, as will be seen, he did not shy away from sensitive debates, as has sometimes been suggested. The fact that Berkouwer played a pivotal role in neo-Calvinism’s transition from fundamentalism towards a more open-minded attitude makes him an intriguing and rewarding figure to study.⁴ In that light, this chapter will discuss his views, and the extent of their influence on subsequent generations of neo-Calvinist thinkers and scientists.

To do so, it will first provisionally explore the way in which Berkouwer typically discussed the theme of faith and science – and in particular the topic of creation and evolution – by close-reading a popular newspaper review he published in the mid-1950s. Second, it will examine how he elaborated his approach to these

² On Berkouwer’s stature, see Arie Theodorus van Deursen, *The Distinctive Character of the Free University in Amsterdam, 1880–2005* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 163, 254 (“His importance ... for the Free University in general must be judged very high.”)

³ Cf. G.C. Berkouwer, *The Conflict with Rome* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1958; Dutch original 1949); *Recent Developments in Roman Catholic Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958); *The Second Vatican Council and the New Catholicism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965); and at least three other titles that appeared in Dutch only. In 1963, Berkouwer had attended the Second Vatican Council as an ‘observer’ at the personal invitation of Pope John XXIII. For a large-scale analysis of Berkouwer’s assessment of Roman Catholic theology, see Eduardo Echeverria, *Berkouwer and Catholicism: Disputed Questions* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

⁴ For a more succinct rendering of Berkouwer’s views on evolution, in comparison to those of Hodge, Warfield, Kuyper, Bavinck and Hendrikus Berkhof, see Gijsbert van den Brink and Harry Cook, “A Variety of Voices: Reformed Theologians on the Theory of Evolution,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 55 no. 2 (2021): 265–92.

issues in his *Studies in Dogmatics*, initially in his theological anthropology (1957) and subsequently in his volumes on Holy Scripture (1966/1967). Following this, it will focus on the parallels drawn by Berkouwer regarding the way in which the same problems were dealt with in contemporaneous Roman Catholic theology.

2 Berkouwer on “Creation and Evolution” (1956)

In 1956 Jan Lever, professor of zoology at the newly established biology department (1950) of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, published a landmark book that was to become a watershed in the Dutch Calvinist reception of evolutionary theory: *Creatie en evolutie*.⁵ Following up on comments he had made in his inaugural lecture (1952), Lever explained to his neo-Calvinist readership why, in his view, evolutionary theory should be accepted. He also attempted to reconcile such acceptance with an adequate interpretation of the first chapters of the book of Genesis, rejecting so-called literal readings of it as being informed by outdated science. His own views on the questions of origin came close to what later came to be called ‘theistic evolutionism’, but which Lever himself somewhat confusingly referred to as ‘creationism’. In his account, this entailed that after having created the world, God has guided the process of evolution in accordance with his predetermined plan, the workings of which can only be known by the practice of science.⁶

In *Trouw*, the daily newspaper that served the neo-Calvinist “pillar” in the Netherlands at the time, Berkouwer published one of the first reviews of Lever’s book. Its entirely positive tone was very much appreciated by Lever (and presumably came to some extent as a relief to him, given the extent of Berkouwer’s influence at that time).⁷ There, Berkouwer first connects Lever’s book to earlier publications on the same topic by Bavinck and Kuyper, but also to more recent neo-Calvinist theologians such as N.H. Ridderbos. In this way, Berkouwer showed his readers that Lever’s ideas did not come out of the blue. In fact, he even suggests that some of the questions Lever addressed had lingered in

⁵ J. Lever, *Creatie en evolutie* (Wageningen: Zomer & Keuning, 1956). The book sold well. A second edition appeared in 1958, as did an English translation: *Creation and Evolution* (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids International Publications, 1958).

⁶ Cf. Rob P.W. Visser, “Dutch Calvinists and Darwinism, 1900–1960,” in Jitse M. van der Meer and Scott Mandelbrote (eds.), *Nature and Scripture in the Abrahamic Religions: 1700–Present*, Vol.2 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 310. See also my paper on Lever’s treatment of the questions of origin in Ab Flipse (ed.), *Jan Lever – Honderd. Terugblikken op leven en werk van VU-bioloog Jan Lever (1922–2010)* (Amsterdam: HCD Centre for Religious History, 2022), 39–58.

⁷ Kruijswijk mentions an interview with Lever in 2005 (Lever passed away in 2010), in which Lever acknowledged that Berkouwer’s positive tone in this review had indeed come as a relief to him; cf. Hittjo Kruijswijk, *Baas in eigen Boek? Evolutietheorie en Schriftgezag bij de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (1881–1981)* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2011), 226.

contemporary neo-Calvinism for quite some time without being answered, and that as such, Lever's book had come as a natural sequel to earlier debates. Berkouwer then praises the "honesty" with which Lever revisited these questions in his book, and shows respect for his scholarship. Lever rightly saw that the word of God (i.e. the Bible) enlightens the Christian scientist, but does not make his scientific research superfluous.⁸

Next, Berkouwer proceeds in a rather remarkable way. Instead of assessing Lever's theological proposals and solutions to the creation-evolution conundrum from his perspective as a systematic theologian, he places himself in the position of prospective critical readers who might read Lever's work from a more conservative perspective, pre-empting the objections such readers might be willing to raise. In that guise, he argues that Lever did not pose limits to the word of God, but rather, he addressed the question of how to interpret the book of Genesis in an appropriate way. In this connection, Berkouwer notes that Lever rejected a reading according to which Genesis offers us "scientifically exact knowledge", because such "fundamentalism" unwittingly favored the state of the art in the natural sciences of some centuries ago over against modern science, canonizing the former by means of biblical texts. Berkouwer does not make explicit whether he agrees with Lever here, but the reader is given a firm impression in that direction: he extols Lever's virtues, describing his book as "stamped by the seriousness and honesty of a Christian who wants to be a man of science with a good conscience".

What follows is a passage characteristic of Berkouwer's cautious way of proceeding at this stage in life:

I can imagine that someone asks: but what is his [Lever's] solution with regard to creation or evolution? It is definitely not my purpose to answer this question in a couple of compact sentences. That is not even possible, since one needs to read the entire book in order to understand the questions and answers.⁹

Thus, Berkouwer does not even tell his readers – let alone evaluate – what Lever actually proposes in his book! Notably, even later in his career he would hardly begin to assess Lever's "solution" to the questions raised by evolutionary theory, even when space limits did not prevent him from doing so. In this review article, Berkouwer goes on to emphasize the continuity between Lever's views and some insights put forward by Abraham Kuyper,¹⁰ in order to admit, then, that "of

⁸ G.C. Berkouwer, "Creatie en evolutie," *Trouw* (15 December 1956), 5; all quotes in this section are from this review article.

⁹ Berkouwer, "Creatie en evolutie," 5.

¹⁰ Drawing on Lever, Berkouwer refers in particular to Kuyper's famous rectorial address on

course questions also arise from this book". In fairly general terms, Berkouwer indicates these as "questions with regard to the *goal* of revelation, the scientific realm and the religiously decisive realm of faith". The most concrete reference here is to questions "on the religious meaning of the paradise narrative according to Acts 17 and Romans 5, which strongly suggests that it is essential that only two humans inhabited the garden of Eden".¹¹ However, Berkouwer does not explain how Lever interprets these critical passages. Instead, he ends his review by stipulating that these and other questions that might be raised by Lever's book should be asked in the same spirit of seriousness in which the book was written, and thus attempts at warding off any possible dismissive responses.

This particular (and short) review is worth highlighting because the way in which its argument proceeds is typical of Berkouwer's approach more generally. Throughout his vast oeuvre,¹² Berkouwer steered clear of addressing the questions of (human) origins in any straightforward way. This may have been due to his wish to prevent new ecclesial divisions from taking place. Berkouwer's Reformed church had gone through a tragic split over the interpretation of Genesis 2–3 as recently as in 1926, one year before Berkouwer was ordained and became one of its ministers. This split had been occasioned by the decisions of the Synod of Assen (1926), especially by its claim that the serpent in paradise (Genesis 3) had spoken in an empirically observable way, and by its prohibition of advocating any exegesis that obscures this clear meaning of Scripture.¹³ Berkouwer may have been wary of rekindling the unhappy debates that preceded this decision, perhaps fearing once again dire consequences. Alternatively, the reason for his silence on the 'real' issues may have been that he was simply unsure of how to deal with them adequately. In any case, as will be seen in the next section, he was very much aware of the fact that from a theological point of view the issues were critical, having the potential to affect some of the basic tenets of Reformed theology.

evolution: *Evolutie* (Amsterdam: Höveker & Wormser, 1899) [English: Abraham Kuyper, "Evolution," *Calvin Theological Journal* 31 (1996), 11–50]. According to Lever, unlike many of his followers, Kuyper himself had drawn a distinction between evolution as a 'dogma' or ideology, which he vehemently rejected, and evolution as a scientific theory, which in his view could be accepted. Cf. Gijsbert van den Brink, "Evolution as a Bone of Contention between Church and Academy: How Abraham Kuyper Can Help Us Bridge the Gap," *Kuyper Center Review* 5 (2015), 92–103.

¹¹ Berkouwer, "Creatie en evolutie," 5. The references here are to Acts 17:26 and Rom. 5:12, 18–19.

¹² Cf. Dirk van Keulen, *Bibliografie/Bibliography G.C. Berkouwer* (Kampen: Kok, 2000).

¹³ For the broader context of the split, see, for example, J. Veenhof, "A History of Theology and Spirituality of the Dutch Reformed Churches (Gereformeerde Kerken), 1892–1992," *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993), 266–297; and George Harinck (ed.), *De kwestie-Geelkerken. Een terugblik na 75 jaar* (Barneveld: de Vuurbaak, 2001).

3 Berkouwer's Theological Anthropology (1957) and Doctrine of Scripture (1967)

When the topics handled in Berkouwer's impressive eighteen volume "Studies in Dogmatics" (1949–1972) are examined, some customary themes are conspicuous by their absence. For example, although Berkouwer devoted separate volumes to specific works and decrees of God (in particular God's providence and election), he provided no study on the doctrine of God as such. Neither did he include a volume on the prolegomena (in which he could have explained his theological method). A volume on the doctrine of creation is also missing.¹⁴ It is precisely in such volumes that an in-depth engagement with the relationship of God and creation and the theological relevance (or irrelevance) of scientific inquiry could be expected.

Similarly, Berkouwer might have entered the debate in a straightforward way in his volume on anthropology. Indeed, in his *Man: The Image of God*, Berkouwer acknowledges that throughout the centuries "the Church and theology have been interested in the origin of man".¹⁵ He admits that Bavinck had even addressed "the problems of the 'ancestry' of man, and Darwinism and evolution" at length.¹⁶ This was in a different setting, however, since Bavinck did so in his doctrine of creation. In writing a theological anthropology, Berkouwer is more interested in the traditional debate on the origin of the human *soul*: namely, is each individual soul directly created by God (creatianism), or do souls come into being through procreation (traducianism)? While this dilemma may now strike us as fairly obsolete, for Berkouwer it was apparently more pressing than the questions raised by the sciences of human origin. (Alternatively, of course, one may wonder whether it was simply a safer question?) In any case: "We do not plan to take up the problems regarding the creation of man and of the human race, since these problems would involve us in a discussion of the meaning of creation and of the unity of the human race, and also of the fall of man".¹⁷ One wonders what would

¹⁴ Interestingly, volumes on prolegomena and the doctrine of creation were part of Berkouwer's original overall plan for the Studies in Dogmatics. See Dirk van Keulen, *Bijbel en dogmatiek. Schriftbeschuwing en Schriftgebruik in het dogmatisch werk van A. Kuyper, H. Bavinck en G.C. Berkouwer* (Kampen: Kok, 2003), 359–365. Van Keulen concludes that, although various suggestions circulate in the secondary literature, we can only speculate about the reasons why Berkouwer deviated from his original plan (363).

¹⁵ G.C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 279; the Dutch original is from 1957, which means that this book would have offered him a perfect opportunity to pursue some of the questions to which he had alluded in his review of Lever's *Creatie en Evolutie* one year before.

¹⁶ Berkouwer, *Man*, 279; cf. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics II* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), §36.

¹⁷ Berkouwer, *Man*, 279.

be wrong with that, but it seems Berkouwer felt that it would lead him too far away from his actual goals. Therefore, he restricts himself to pointing out a parallel discussion on human origins in contemporary Roman Catholic theology (to which we will return in section 4).

Ten years later, however, in the penultimate volumes of his *Studies in Dogmatics*, Berkouwer becomes a bit more explicit. These volumes are devoted to the doctrine of Scripture. Here, finally, Berkouwer had to give some account of his theological method, and especially of the role of the Bible in his thinking.¹⁸ He felt the need to do so all the more keenly as in the preceding volumes, on eschatology, he had occasionally employed the Bible in an unusual way, applying figurative methods of interpretation at places where this had not been customary in his circles thus far.¹⁹ It is in the volumes on Holy Scripture that Berkouwer further accounts for this hermeneutics, and in the process also discusses the way in which scientific claims can be allowed to influence our readings of the Bible. In particular, he does so in an extensive chapter on one of the properties that Protestant theology had traditionally ascribed to the Bible, namely *clarity* or *perspicuity*. This chapter is placed in between chapters on Scripture's reliability and sufficiency – two other properties ascribed to the Bible in orthodox Protestant theology.²⁰ The chapter on Scripture's clarity is much larger than those on its reliability and sufficiency, though, which can be explained by the fact that the appeal to Scripture's clarity (or "clear sense") had played a pivotal role in the decisions of the 1926 Synod of Assen.

Berkouwer starts this chapter by asking the obvious question of whether the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture "leaves any room for the need of interpretation".²¹ If Scripture is clear in and of its own, why do we need

¹⁸ Two volumes appeared in Dutch: *De Heilige Schrift I* (Kampen: Kok, 1966) and *De Heilige Schrift II* (Kampen: Kok, 1967), the first volume clearing the ground for a discussion of more fundamental issues in the second. An English edition was provided by Jack B. Rogers in one volume: G.C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975). Rogers' translation left out approximately one-third of the original material, especially "interactions with people holding other viewpoints" (*Holy Scripture*, 7).

¹⁹ Van Keulen, *Bijbel en dogmatiek*, 364; "Promise and Expectation. The Use of Scripture in the Eschatology of G.C. Berkouwer," in A. van Egmond & D. van Keulen (eds.), *Christian Hope in Context*, Vol.1 (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2001), esp. 220.

²⁰ The *locus* on Scripture in Heinrich Heppé's compendium of orthodox Reformed theology, *Reformed Dogmatics. Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, rev. and ed. by Ernst Bizer (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), has sections on the authority of the Bible (22–28), its perfection or sufficiency (28–31), its necessity (31–32) and its clarity (32–36). All these properties (and more, 21–22) were taken by Protestant theologians from the doctrine of God and applied to Scripture as the Word of God. For a more recent discussion of their meaning and functions see Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 295–370.

²¹ G.C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, 267; in this section, page numbers in the body of the text will refer to this volume.

interpreters and interpretations in order to understand it? Is not Holy Scripture “its own interpreter” (267)? Berkouwer then points out that the Reformers never took this maxim as implying that biblical exegesis is superfluous, noting that such Reformers as Luther and Calvin were intensely occupied with scriptural interpretation themselves (268). Obviously, the clarity of Scripture does not mean that the Bible is immediately accessible to us like a newspaper report (270). What it does mean can only be retrieved by examining the historical circumstances in which the doctrine arose, namely as part of the Reformation’s controversy with Rome (271). It then turns out that the Reformers were not primarily opposed to the special role of ecclesial office in interpreting Scripture, but wanted to uphold that Scripture as the Word of God is a light on *everyone’s* path.²² It is from this perspective that we can appreciate the confession of the clarity of Scripture: when reading the Bible, its message of salvation is indeed conveyed, and the reader need not be in doubt about its meaning. Thus, it was from the context of the biblical message of salvation that the confession of Scripture’s clarity emerged. It was only at a later stage that post-Reformation theologians came to apply it to the very *words* of Scripture. Though the message of salvation is of course conveyed to us in words and language, the Reformers never isolated these words from the message.

Berkouwer’s exposition acquires a more personal flavour when he laments the fact that the confession of Scripture’s clarity “does not automatically lead to a total uniformity of perception, disposing of any problems”, calling this one of its “most moving and difficult aspects” (286).²³ We cannot escape “from the anxiety of divergences” in interpretation, however, by retreating to some “preconceived technique”. Rather, we have to hear the call “to receptive attention, research, respect, and expectation, to faith and prayer” (287). It is in this context that Berkouwer raises the sensitive issue of the critical ‘scientific’ study of Scripture – a topic that had concerned him from the very beginning of his career.²⁴ Many people think, he argues, that this study will only sharpen the “fatal division of minds” concerning the meaning of Scripture, and they sometimes retreat to “the

²² Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, 272; I have added the italics from the Dutch original (*Heilige Schrift* 2, 255).

²³ Berkouwer’s strong engagement with the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture also transpires from the fact that he had a gifted South African student who wrote a doctoral thesis on this topic: H.W. Rossouw, *Klaarheid en interpretasie. Enkele probleemhistoriese gesigspunte in verband met die leer van die duidelikheid van die Heilige Skrif* (Amsterdam: Jacob van Campen, 1963).

²⁴ Cf. G.C. Berkouwer, *Het probleem der Schriftkritiek* [The problem of biblical criticism] (Kampen: Kok, 1938); I use ‘scientific’ within quotation marks to indicate that the Dutch original in Berkouwer’s oeuvre (*wetenschappelijk*) does not just refer to the natural sciences but to historical scholarship as well.

arbitrariness of private understanding” (287). Berkouwer, however, ponders the more optimistic possibility that “the fascinating process of continued biblical research” may bring to light “converging lines in the understanding of Scripture” (287).²⁵ In fact, if we really believe in the clarity of Scripture we should eagerly long for such convergence, and expect it. In the next section, we will see that in his own lifetime, Berkouwer did indeed observe a number of important converging lines between Protestant and Roman Catholic theology.

Although Berkouwer closely connected the notion of the clarity of Scripture to its message or ‘scope’ – a notion that gradually came to occupy the centre-stage in his doctrine of Scripture²⁶ – this did not mean that the *verba* or literal words of Scripture became unimportant to him. On the contrary: “Without giving the words of Scripture full attention, it is wholly impossible to confess the perspicuity of Scripture” (290). Attention to the exact words of Scripture, however, does “not in the least warrant a simplistic exegesis” (290). Using the generally acknowledged difficulties in the interpretation of the Book of Revelation as an example, Berkouwer argues that the appeal to the clarity of Scripture cannot be naively used as an excuse for ignoring “[t]he peculiar imagery and figures of speech of apocalypticism” (290). Rather, like other parts of Scripture, apocalyptic texts can only be understood if we take into account, “the specific literary form in which the words appear and the great variety of ways in which Scripture speaks to us” (291). Now, why is this generally accepted with regard to apocalypticism and eschatology (the last things) while it is much more disputed in the realm of protology? Why is it so sensitive to observe that the literary style of the first chapters of Genesis cannot simply be identified with history/historiography? That is, Berkouwer surmises, because in the case of protology alongside the question of its literary style, consideration of the findings of *science* has come into play (292–293). On this occasion, Berkouwer does not shy away from the tough and complex issues that arise here, but explicitly addresses them from the specific angle of the *claritas Scripturae*:

In our time these questions have become more and more relevant, particularly with respect to the problems of ‘origin’ in the first three chapters of Genesis. It is not within the scope of this study to elaborate on the question of the creation and man’s fall from God’s hand in guilt and alienation. But I do wish to discuss in some detail the very important aspect of the clarity and self-evidence of Scripture concerning creation and the

²⁵ The Dutch original has “boeiend” for “fascinating” (*Heilige Schrift* 2, 286), which is perhaps better translated by the slightly more distanced term “interesting”.

²⁶ Cf. Van Keulen, *Bijbel en dogmatiek*, 513–514, 526–531.

fall.²⁷

Berkouwer starts his reflections with the more general question of whether “certain results of science, be it natural science or historical research, can provide the ‘occasion’ for understanding various aspects of Scripture in a different way than before” (133). He argues that as soon as one adopts an organic understanding of the inspiration of Scripture, which takes its human form with full seriousness, this question can only be answered affirmatively. As such, Bavinck had already spoken of the “excellent service” which geology can offer us “when explaining the creation story”, of the Copernican system that “forced” theology to a better interpretation of Joshua 10, and of the “precious contributions” of Assyriology and Egyptology to scriptural exegesis.²⁸ Berkouwer observes, however, that almost nobody is still worried about the changed exegesis of Joshua 10 in the wake of the Galileo-trial, but that the problems with regard to Genesis 1–3 are much more fundamental since they are inextricably bound to our understanding of Scripture as a whole in its witness on creation, fall and redemption.²⁹ Moreover, allowing certain scientific results to influence our exegesis cannot mean that we retroject these results into Scripture, as if they had been present there all the time. Given the nature of Scripture, he posits, we should not expect it to anticipate later scientific research (300).³⁰ Therefore, Berkouwer unambiguously rejects all “concordism”, meaning by this all attempts to harmonize Scripture with the newest findings of the natural sciences. In particular, he criticizes the so-called day-age view of Genesis 1 in this connection as “an untenable construction”.³¹

However, the results of scientific research can legitimately influence our use of Scripture in another way, namely by correcting an approach which, after all, may not have been in agreement with the meaning and goal of Scripture all along. In this way, one does not allow science to dominate or even dictate one’s understanding of Scripture (and by consequence, one’s faith), but science can still contribute to a better understanding of its unique message.³² With respect to the

²⁷ Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, 292. (I have slightly adapted Roger’s translation).

²⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 496.

²⁹ Berkouwer, *Heilige Schrift 2*, 303; this is a part of a long section in the Dutch original (296–320) which has not been included in the English translation, apparently because Berkouwer engages extensively here with arguments that played a role around and after the decisions of the 1926 Synod of Assen.

³⁰ Berkouwer, *Heilige Schrift 2*, 300.

³¹ On this day-age view as a variety of old earth creationism, see, for example, Gerald Rau, *Mapping the Origins Debate. Six Models of the Beginning of Everything* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 48–50 and passim.

³² Berkouwer, *Heilige Schrift 2*, 301.

first chapters of Genesis, for example, scientific research has opened our eyes to the role of human activity, reflection and composition in the creation stories that emerged in Israel and that cannot be isolated from Israel's belief in God. This is not to turn the stories into subjective human projections, but to acknowledge the way in which God apparently worked when revealing himself and inspiring the biblical writers. Rather than assuming that God provided some unique information to them about "how it all begun", we have to see the creation stories (esp. Genesis 1) as Israel's faith-driven polemical response to the mythical theogonies and cosmogonies which dominated its ancient near eastern *Umwelt*. "For God's revelation does not exclude human thought and historical confrontation, but adopts them" (293). Once we see this, the notion of the clarity of Scripture starts to shift: the 'clear sense' of Scripture no longer coincides with what we *intuitively think* to be the meaning upon reading the text, but can only be established when we take these historical conditions into account.³³

What then *is* the meaning of Genesis 1–3? Berkouwer is not ambivalent here, but answers this crucial question in a clear way. The Genesis story does not convey human fictions or projections, timeless general ideas or psychological truths, but rather,

(...) a *reality* of the creation of heaven and earth (...), of the gap that arose between God and humanity, a gap of guilt and alienation that became deeper and deeper, and of the divine initiative towards salvation and light in this utter darkness.³⁴

The sequence is absolutely key here to Berkouwer: the relationship between creation and sin in this story is "really irreversible", as Genesis 1 precedes Genesis 3.³⁵ Thus, in these chapters we are not dealing with myth, since the stories are relating a real act of creation and the equally real event of the rise of human guilt and alienation, in a way that excludes any confusion of creation and fall which would leave us humans excused. Thus, the stories are not naïve, but reflective, and highly radical at that: they reject a tragic view of life in which God or fate are considered to be the origin of evil, and instead they holds us humans accountable – though not without the promise of God's salvation. In this way, Berkouwer continued to uphold the basic structure of classical Reformed theology in his

³³ Berkouwer clearly believed that the biblical texts *had* a meaning and that in principle it is possible to grasp it; not being a postmodern thinker, his was not the view that the text has a plurality of meanings depending on the situatedness (or wishes) of its readers.

³⁴ Berkouwer, *Heilige Schrift* 2, 313. (Translation original).

³⁵ Berkouwer, *Heilige Schrift* 2, 316; this is fully in line with Berkouwer's treatment of the problem of evil in his *The Providence of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), ch. VIII.

reading of Genesis 1–3. At the same time, however, he observed that this profound revelation of human guilt over against divine generosity is couched in these chapters in human culturally-situated imagery. In fact, Berkouwer ponders, we could already have considered the possibility of this interpretation by closely examining the stories themselves, in their peculiar contours and typically human characteristics. Science came in as the coincidental *occasion* that pressed us to do this more seriously than before.³⁶ After all, the traditional exegesis had its problems all along, and therefore “(...) there is all the more reason to exercise caution while discussing Genesis. One must above all be on guard for the false dilemma of *reality* or *fiction* when choosing between the traditional exegesis or a different one” (294–295).

To conclude, the direction in which Berkouwer looked in addressing the tensions between science and faith with respect to the questions of human origins was in no way unclear. He rejected (both young earth and old earth) creationist readings of the first chapters of Genesis on the one hand, and phenomenological interpretations of these chapters (as if they merely offered some wise lessons on the human condition) on the other. The Genesis story belongs to the prologue of the book, and its author had a keen interest in what happened “in the beginning”.³⁷ At the same time, the chapters describe the reality of God’s good creation and the human fall in vivid contemporary imagery.³⁸

But can such a view be sustained in the light of contemporary scientific evidence on human evolution? And if so, how should we envisage what exactly happened at the dawn of human history? Here we reach territory that Berkouwer did not enter – and perhaps wisely so, since any way forward he might have taken would most probably have led to controversy, and to a parting of the ways in his

³⁶ Kruijswijk, *Baas in eigen Boek?*, 245–246, criticizes Berkouwer for only allowing science the role of an “outside” occasion to re-examine traditional interpretations: “we hear nothing on the legitimacy of science as such, apart from this function” (246); this criticism is unfair, given the fact that Berkouwer’s topic is the interpretation of Scripture (not the *raison d’être* of science), and moreover it is hard to see how Berkouwer could consider science as illegitimate given the role he assigns to it with regard to biblical interpretation. Berkouwer rightly argued, however, that in this context science can only function as an occasion to reconsider traditional understandings that previously had gone unchallenged, since obviously contemporary science should not be ‘read in’ into the biblical texts.

³⁷ Berkouwer, *Heilige Schrift* 2, 315.

³⁸ In today’s jargon, it seems that Berkouwer’s vision could best be described as a variety of ‘theistic evolutionism’. He would probably have been quite sympathetic to, for example, Denis Alexander’s elaboration of this view in his *Creation or Evolution: Do We Have to Choose?* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2008; 2nd ed. 2014), 177–388. Berkouwer’s insistence on the sequential order of creation and fall as decisive for the interpretation of Genesis 2–3 is reflected in several essays in William Cavanaugh and James K.A. Smith (eds.), *Evolution and the Fall* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017).

Reformed community.³⁹ Berkouwer may very well have sensed how far he could go without losing support. Van Deursen's (otherwise critical) portrayal of Berkouwer is pertinent here: "Berkouwer succeeded in winning the majority of the *gereformeerde* church people for himself (...). He did what Bavinck had never dared to do: publishing altered, new insights to the world outside, and he was rewarded for it. He gained the support of the people because they continued to trust him".⁴⁰ By letting his students think for themselves he enabled them to move on gradually where he himself had stopped – although they sometimes went far beyond the boundaries he had delineated (e.g. by abandoning the "irreversible" order of creation and fall). Meanwhile, in contemporary research on the interface of science and religion, attempts have been made to re-contextualize the notion of a primordial human fall from God's intentions within an evolutionary worldview.⁴¹

4 The Catholic Connection

When investigating Berkouwer's relationship to Roman Catholicism it seems natural to consult his various treatises on contemporary Roman Catholic thought.⁴² In these publications, however, Berkouwer's method is mostly descriptive, and his personal views remain even more implicit than is famously the case in his dogmatic work.⁴³ Moreover, since in these treatises Berkouwer mostly focuses on the traditional doctrinal differences between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism rather than on shared contemporary challenges, the issue of Scripture and science is not at the forefront. Interestingly, however, in each of the three pieces analyzed above, Berkouwer draws a parallel to contemporary Roman Catholic discussions on the questions of origin. Therefore, this section will focus on the relevant parts of these pieces.

In his one-page review of Lever's *Creatie en Evolutie*, Berkouwer refers to "certain pronouncements" of the Roman Catholic Biblical Commission in 1909. These statements delineated what had to be accepted as the established result of

³⁹ That Berkouwer was well aware of the fact that his work in this area was unfinished, is clear from his comment that these issues "should of course be discussed more extensively in a 'locus de creatione'"; *Heilige Schrift* 2, 322.

⁴⁰ Van Deursen, *The Distinctive Character of the Free University in Amsterdam, 1880–2005*, 254. In this connection, a rhetorical analysis of Berkouwer's writing style might be revealing.

⁴¹ Cf. Gijsbert van den Brink, *Reformed Theology and Evolutionary Theory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 180–195.

⁴² See footnote 3.

⁴³ Cf. Van Keulen, *Bijbel en dogmatiek*, 463–464; Echeverria, *Berkouwer and Catholicism*, 3–4.

the exegesis of the Genesis story.⁴⁴ Berkouwer points out that these pronouncements had engendered much discussion, and though “we” Protestants do not have Biblical commissions, we do have our own questions on this theme and want to deal with them in a responsible way (as Lever had done). The reference to contemporary Roman Catholicism seems mainly intended to make clear that “we Protestants” are not the only ones who have some work to do in this area.

In *Man: The Image of God*, Berkouwer only refers to Lever’s book once, pointing out that the questions that concerned Lever, especially the question of the unity of the human race in Adam, have become more urgent in recent times as a result of “developments in the biological sciences”.⁴⁵ Though the questions are common to Protestants and Catholics, Berkouwer observes with some surprise that thus far they have been “most actual” in Roman Catholic theology. In this connection he not only refers once more to the statement of 1909, but also to the papal encyclical *Humani Generis* of 1950. Here, the question of human origins was taken up in connection with the theory of evolution. Berkouwer carefully renders the solution which *Humani Generis* stipulated: the church allows a treatment of evolution that, as far as humans are concerned, is restricted to the human body.⁴⁶ While the human body may be regarded as having evolved from other living beings, it should be upheld that the human soul is directly created by God. Berkouwer notes that in this way, the results of modern science are cautiously accommodated, but within clearly defined limits. These limits are determined by the doctrine of original sin: it is because of this doctrine that the human soul has to be seen as created by a special act of God and that polygenism (the idea that not all contemporary humans descend from Adam and Eve because of the existence of more people and clans in primordial times) has to be rejected.

After having mentioned the internal Roman Catholic debates on the interpretation of *Humani Generis*, Berkouwer makes clear that as a Protestant he

⁴⁴ Cf. Heinrich Denzinger and Peter Hünermann (eds.), *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum / Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, Latin-English, 43rd Edition (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 705–707 (nos. 3512–3519). The declaration stipulates that, though metaphorical or anthropomorphical elements may be involved in the text (707), Genesis 1–3 should in any case be regarded as historical, since these chapters inform the fundamentals of the Christian religion.

⁴⁵ Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 280; Berkouwer does not specify the nature of these developments.

⁴⁶ Berkouwer, *Man*, 281; this is one of the few times that the word ‘evolution’ occurs in Berkouwer’s *oeuvre* (interestingly, the Dutch original has “the so-called theory of evolution”). M.P. van der Marel, *Registers op de dogmatische studiën van Dr G.C. Berkouwer* (Kampen: Kok, 1988), 37, notes one place in the eighteen Studies in Dogmatics where Berkouwer uses “evolution”, another one where he has “evolutionism”, and two places where he writes “evolutionary theory” (*evolutieleer*).

has two problems with its stipulations. First, he is surprised by the fact that making such a sharp distinction between soul and body as *Humani Generis* does “is not at all experienced as dualistic”.⁴⁷ Berkouwer himself opines that the background to this distinction is an unwarranted dichotomy between soul and body. Second, Berkouwer laments the fact that Scriptural arguments do not play a decisive role in *Humani Generis*. Rather, it is led by doctrinal considerations (especially “the infallible dogma of original sin”) that largely function in isolation from biblical exegesis. This goes back to “a very different view of the relation between dogma and Scripture”, and as a result of this “far-reaching methodological difference in approach,” it is hard to imagine that Protestants could adopt *Humani Generis*’ line of reasoning on this issue.⁴⁸

Turning to Protestant thought, however, Berkouwer warns that here as well, “dogmatic presuppositions – though they be within another view of the relation between dogma and Scripture – may influence and dominate the portrayal of man”.⁴⁹ Unfortunately he does not explain this intriguing remark. Rather, at this point he shifts his focus to the actual theme of his chapter: a discussion of various speculative theories on the origin of human souls. In any case, the way in which *Humani Generis* had dealt with evolutionary theory did not particularly entice Berkouwer to follow suit.⁵⁰

Finally, in his dogmatic study on *Holy Scripture*, Berkouwer starts on a much more positive note when examining contemporary Roman Catholic theology. In a passage that has been skipped in the English version of the book, Berkouwer observes that both in Roman Catholic and in Protestant theology, the transition had been made from a so-called mechanical, towards a more organic understanding of the inspiration of Scripture, that is: an understanding that takes seriously the involvement of concrete human beings in the formation of the Bible.⁵¹ At the same time, the Bible had received a more central place in recent Roman Catholic theology. Noting this, Berkouwer suggests that this change in both the place of the Bible and the understanding of its inspiration had led to a number of remarkable theological *convergences* between recent Roman Catholic

⁴⁷ I have re-translated the Dutch here (“... blijkbaar allerminst als dualistisch wordt aanvoeld”); the English edition more ambiguously renders this as “felt to be not at all dualistic” (282).

⁴⁸ Berkouwer, *Man*, 283.

⁴⁹ Berkouwer, *Man*, 283.

⁵⁰ In his *Recent Developments in Roman Catholic Thought* (1958; Dutch original 1957), Berkouwer devotes an entire chapter to *Humani Generis* (44–54), but does not address the way in which it discusses the question of human origin in relation to evolutionary theory.

⁵¹ Cf. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, 155; and more broadly Berkouwer, *Second Vatican Council*, Ch.3.

and Protestant theology. In particular, he points to the doctrines of grace and justification, and even to certain motives in the doctrine of the eucharist.⁵² Although it is unclear how these developments will work out, especially because substantial divergences will also continue to play a role, Berkouwer pushed back against sceptics by hailing the convergences as a clear sign of what the perspicuity of Scripture implies: if we really believe in the clarity of Scripture, such convergence is exactly what may be expected.⁵³

As we have seen above, the transition to an organic understanding of the inspiration of Scripture also led to the question of the extent to which scientific developments might legitimately be used in biblical exegesis.⁵⁴ Berkouwer is highly interested in the Roman Catholic response to this question, as Roman Catholicism had a longstanding tradition of protecting the true understanding of Scripture by infallible church dogma. Today, however, it had become more and more clear according to Berkouwer that this protection was unable to deal adequately with the questions that had newly emerged. Clearly, church dogma was formulated in times in which the new problems caused by science lay beyond the horizon of the church.⁵⁵ How, then, does the Roman Catholic Church come to terms with these problems? In this connection, Berkouwer now points in a more positive way to *Humani Generis*: though the encyclical's dualistic tendency hampered its reception, by taking evolutionary theory seriously "it wanted to make room for honest and unprejudiced consideration of the new questions, acknowledging that these cannot be answered aprioristically from the perspective of church doctrine".⁵⁶

Still, Berkouwer perceives a "remarkable difference" between Roman Catholic theology and Reformation thought on this point, in that from its very beginning the latter had allowed more space to a critical testing of human interpretations of Scripture as they emerged in the faith tradition of the church.⁵⁷ In particular, the

⁵² Berkouwer, *Heilige Schrift 2*, 286–290.

⁵³ Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, 288.

⁵⁴ Berkouwer, *Heilige Schrift 2*, 302. In fact, as Berkouwer makes clear, this transition itself cannot be explained without taking into account the result of scientific discoveries, for example, concerning the *Unwelt* of Old Testament Israel (301).

⁵⁵ Berkouwer, *Heilige Schrift 2*, 326.

⁵⁶ Berkouwer, *Heilige Schrift 2*, 327. Indeed, the acceptance of (large parts of) evolutionary theory in *Humani Generis* was quite remarkable in light of earlier rejections of evolution. For the history of the reception of evolutionary theory in Roman Catholicism, see, for example, Gijsbert van den Brink, "Meer dan een hypothese: Patronen in de rooms-katholieke receptie van de evolutietheorie," *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 58 (2018), 135–152.

⁵⁷ Berkouwer, *Heilige Schrift 2*, 327; presumably, Berkouwer has in mind here that patristic interpretations of the Bible were not taken for granted (or harmonized with each other) in the Reformed tradition.

Reformation did not recognize an infallible magisterium or an infallible dogma, which Berkouwer thinks almost automatically led to a stronger concentration on the soteriological scope of Scripture, and which in turn largely prevented the Reformation from taking Scripture as a source of science. Whereas in Roman Catholicism, retracting from earlier ecclesial statements often continued to be a problem, Protestantism's concentration on the clarity of Scripture's salvific message helped it not to demand too much of Scripture, or to take its clarity at face value.⁵⁸

One can wonder, however, whether Berkouwer was not jumping to conclusions here. At the very least we must say that his optimism regarding the relative flexibility of Protestantism (due to its soteriological concentration) with regard to matters of science has not been confirmed by later developments. As a matter of fact, whereas the Roman Catholic Church had already radically qualified its former rejection of evolutionary theory in 1950, many Protestant churches continue to have difficulties in coming to terms with evolutionary theory into the present day.⁵⁹ As is clear from a typically Protestant phenomenon like young earth creationism, one important reason for these difficulties is the attachment of many Protestants to a literalistic reading of the first chapters of Genesis. As a result, whereas Galileo has been a source of Roman Catholic trauma for many centuries, half a century after Berkouwer's *Holy Scripture*, Darwin is still to a large extent a cause of Protestant trauma.

5 Conclusion

It belongs to the standard perception of Berkouwer that he dodged the most pressing issues raised by modern science in relation to Scripture and theology, either because of his irenic persona, or because he did not know how to deal with them. Both conclusions are sometimes drawn, for example, from the fact that he dropped his original plan to include a volume on the doctrine of creation in his *Studies in Dogmatics*. It also belongs to the standard perception of Berkouwer that as a neo-Calvinist he went to great lengths to understand, appreciate, and do full justice to recent theological developments within Roman Catholicism. The above analysis, however, gives us reason to nuance and qualify both aspects of this standard view of Berkouwer's theological attitude slightly.

First, it is true that Berkouwer never discussed the questions raised by modern science with regard to biblical interpretation in a straightforward way. Indeed, he

⁵⁸ Berkouwer, *Heilige Schrift* 2, 327–328.

⁵⁹ See Norman C. Nevin (ed.), *Should Christians Embrace Evolution?* (Nottingham: IVP, 2009); Matthew Barrett and Ardel D. Caneday (eds.), *Four Views on the Historical Adam* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013); J.P. Moreland et al. (eds.), *Theistic Evolution. A Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Critique* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), to mention only a few recent titles.

saw “reason to exercise caution” when discussing the first chapters of Genesis. If we carefully reconstruct his approach, however, especially as it was elaborated in his thoroughgoing discussion in *Holy Scripture*, it becomes clear that he made some crucial steps which clearly delineate the range of options available to Reformed Christians who want to take science seriously. Berkouwer advocated a reading of Genesis 1–3 that does full justice to its embeddedness in Ancient Near Eastern culture. He therefore rejected “a simplistic exegesis that glories in the literal understanding of everything”⁶⁰ and forcefully argued against a naïve approach to the Bible that ignored the specific literary form and genre of its texts (thus implicitly discarding young earth creationism). He also opposed all attempts to read the results of modern science back into the text of Genesis, singling out for criticism in this connection the so-called day-age view and other ‘concordist’ solutions. On the other hand, Berkouwer also repudiated the well-known ‘everyman’ interpretation of Genesis 2–3, according to which the narrative highlights some existential characteristics of the human condition. In his view, the structural and temporal distinction between creation and fall is key to the message conveyed by the text. The good creation of Genesis 1 and 2 is contrasted with the story of human sin and guilt in Genesis 3, and unlike all that happens in extra-biblical cosmogonies, the reality of human guilt is not evaporated. By reading the narratives in this way, Berkouwer is able to endorse the results of modern (evolutionary) science tacitly while at the same time upholding the most essential Reformed theological intuitions that are at stake: the sovereignty and goodness of God as creator, and the seriousness of human sin.⁶¹ In this way, the first chapters of the Bible set the stage for the ensuing history of salvation.

Second, it is true that Berkouwer gives notable attention to parallel developments in Roman Catholic theology, appreciating what he sees as ‘convergences’ (but in fact describing these as Roman Catholic *rapprochements* of classical Protestant points of view). As is well-known, his rendering of Roman Catholic theological developments and discussions is particularly well-informed and instructive. In his assessment of these developments and discussions, however, it is clear that on at least one occasion Berkouwer is unduly critical, while being far too optimistic about the possibilities of his own Protestant tradition to cope adequately with the challenges of modern science. In this respect as well, it seems that the standard picture of Berkouwer’s theological profile stands in need of a bit more nuance.

In the meantime, Berkouwer’s cautious navigating of the complex and potentially divisive questions of origin was typical for the way in which Dutch neo-Calvinism in his days started to abandon its fierce opposition towards critical parts of mainstream science and gradually adopted a more constructive attitude in this

⁶⁰ Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, 290.

⁶¹ For an overall survey of how typically Reformed theological tenets could be upheld within an evolutionary framework, see van den Brink, *Reformed Theology and Evolutionary Theory*.

regard.

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