

SCHOLIA

NOTES AND COMMENTS FOR THE MINISTER

HERMAN BAVINCK ON SCRIPTURE AND SCIENCE

translated by AL WOLTERS

The question of the relationship of the Scriptures to science continues to be much debated. From a Reformed point of view, which rejects both a biblicistic and a dualistic view of this relationship,¹ the challenge is to define in positive terms the normative bearing of Scripture on the various scientific disciplines, including specifically the physical sciences and history. In meeting this challenge, a useful point of departure is the work of the Dutch neo-Calvinist theologian Herman Bavinck (1854-1921), who consistently emphasized both the unique religious focus of Scripture and its normative relevance for the scientific enterprise. The following excerpt from the first volume of his *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Vierde druk; Kampen: Kok, 1928; pp. 416-20) sketches the contours of a view that seeks to honor both the authority of Scripture over science and the unique mode of discourse proper to each. The translation was done as part of a larger research project sponsored by the Pascal Center of Redeemer College on aspects of the faith-science relationship.

1. See S. Greidanus, "The Use of the Bible in Christian Scholarship," *Christian Scholar's Review* 11 (1982) 138.

(THE TRANSLATION)

Scripture is the book for the Christian religion and for Christian theology. For that purpose it was given, for that goal it is fitted, and for that reason it is the Word of God, given to us by the Holy Spirit.

Finally, it is this point of view that clarifies the relationship of the Scriptures to the other sciences. The saying of Baronius that the Scriptures do not tell us how the heavens go but how we go to heaven, has been much abused. It is precisely as book of the knowledge of God that the Scriptures have a good deal to say also for the other sciences. The Scriptures are a light unto the path and a lamp unto the feet also of science and art. They lay claim to authority over every area of life. Christ has all authority in heaven and on earth. Objectively, the restriction of inspiration to the religious and ethical part of Scripture is untenable, and subjectively the separation between the religious life of man and the rest of his life cannot be maintained. Inspiration extends to all parts of Scripture, and religion is an affair of the whole person. A great deal of the content of Scripture is of fundamental [*principieële*] significance for the other sciences as well. The Creation and Fall of man, the unity of the human race, the Flood, the rise of nations and languages, and so on, are facts that are also of the highest import for the other sciences. Science and art come into contact with Scripture at every moment; the principles [*principia*] for all of life are given in Scripture. This is a point that must be fully honored.

Yet, on the other hand there is also a great truth in the saying of Cardinal Baronius. It is true of all those facts as well that they are not communicated to us in and of themselves but with a theological purpose: that we might know God unto our salvation. Scripture never concerns itself with science as such. Christ himself, although he was free of all error and sin, was never active, strictly speaking, in the domain of science and art, commerce and industry, jurisprudence and politics. His greatness was of another kind, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. But it is precisely for that reason that he has been a blessing also for science and art, for society and the state. Jesus is the Savior — only that, but that entirely. He did not come only to restore the religious and ethical life of man and to leave all the rest untouched as though that were not corrupted by sin and not in need of restoration. No, the grace of Christ extends as far as sin does.

And so it is with Scripture. It, too, is religious through and through, the Word of God unto salvation, but for that very reason also the Word for the family and society, for science and art. Scripture is a book for all of humanity, in all its ranks and classes, in all its generations and nations. But

that is also why it is not a scientific book in the strict sense. It is wisdom, not erudition that we find there. It does not speak the exact language of science and the academy but that of perception and daily life. It does not evaluate and describe things according to the results of scientific inquiry but according to intuition, according to the first, vivid impression that phenomena make on a person. That is why it speaks of the land drawing near, of the rising and the standing still of the sun, of blood as the soul of the animal, of the kidneys as the seat of the affections, as the heart as the source of thinking, and is completely unconcerned in all of this about the scientifically exact language of astronomy, physiology, psychology, and so on. It speaks of the earth as the center of God's creation, and does not choose between the Ptolemaic and the Copernican world-picture. It does not decide between Neptunism and Plutonism, nor yet between allopathy and homeopathy. The authors of the Holy Scriptures probably had no greater knowledge of all these sciences — geology, zoology, physiology, medicine, etc. — than had all their contemporaries. Nor was that necessary, for the Scriptures use the language of daily experience, which is always true. If Scripture had used instead the language of the academy, and had spoken with scientific exactitude, it would have been a hindrance to its own authority. If it had decided in favor of the Ptolemaic world-picture, it would have lacked credibility in an age that accepted the Copernican system. Nor could it have been a book for ordinary life, for humanity at large. But as it is, it speaks in the language of common discourse, understandable to the simplest folk, clear for the educated and the uneducated alike. It uses the language of perception, which will always continue to have its place alongside that of science and the academy.

A similar idea has recently been defended by many Roman Catholic theologians with respect to the historiography of the Scriptures. In order to harmonize the doctrine of inspiration with the results of recent biblical criticism, they have made a distinction between absolute and relative truth, between *veritas rei citatae* [truth of the matter cited] and *veritas citationis* [truth of citation], between a narrative that is true as to its content, and a narrative that was simply taken over by the Bible writers for one reason or another, from other sources or popular tradition, without vouching (or intending to vouch) for the objective truth of its content. On this view, the authors of the books of the Bible, in narrating history, as in speaking of natural phenomena, often did not write in accordance with objective reality but in accordance with subjective appearance, *secundum apparentiam*. However, this conception cannot be admitted in the present context, in speaking of historiography, for when the prophets and apostles speak, with respect to nature, of the rising of

the sun, of the land drawing near, and so on, then they cannot create in us a false impression, since they deal with phenomena that we still observe daily, and that we refer to in the same way as they did. But if they write *secundum apparentiam* [according to appearance] about historical matters, then surely that must mean in this context that they do not write in accordance with what objectively happened but in accordance with what subjectively was believed by many in their day. In that case they are creating a false impression, and their authority and truthworthiness are undermined.

If this principle were to be consistently applied, then not only the first chapters of Genesis (as is already the case for many Roman Catholic theologians) but the entire history of Israel and of earliest Christianity could be dissolved into myths and legends. If Scripture clearly intends to present a narrative as history, then the exegete has no right to make it a myth in order to accommodate historical critics. Nevertheless, it is true that the historiography of Scripture has a character all its own. It is not concerned to tell us precisely what happened in times past with the human race and Israel, but it relates to us the history of God's revelation, mentions only matters related to that, and intends with its history to give us a knowledge of God as he seeks out and come to humanity. Biblical history is a *historia religiosa*. Judged by the point of view and according to the standards of a profane history, it is often incomplete, full of gaps, and certainly not written according to the rules of contemporary historical criticism. From this it does not follow at all that the historiography of Scripture is untrue and unreliable, for just as a person of normal intelligence is quite capable of arguing logically without ever having studied logic, so someone making a report is perfectly capable of giving a correct account of what has happened, without having acquainted himself beforehand with the rules of historical criticism. If historical criticism fails to appreciate this fact of life, it degenerates into hypercriticism and destroys the object that it ought to treat.

Nevertheless, all historiography in the Scriptures bears witness that it follows a direction and aspires to a goal that is unique to itself. In the fixing of place and time, in the sequence of events, and in the grouping of circumstances it does not give the kind of precision that we would often like to have. The accounts of the most important events, for example, of the time of Jesus' birth, of the duration of his public ministry, of the words that he spoke at the institution of the Lord's Supper, of his Resurrection, and so forth, are far from identical and allow room for different interpretations. Furthermore, it is also entirely true that there is a distinction between *auctoritas historiae* [historical authority] and

auctoritas normae [normative authority]; not everything that is included and cited is thereby itself true as to its content; the *veritas citationis* is not identical with the *veritas rei citatae*. After all, we also find in Scripture literal quotations of Satan, of false prophets, and of the ungodly, which are, no doubt, accurate citations of the persons concerned but that do not on that account contain objective truth (Gen. 3:1; Ps. 14:2; Jer. 28:2f.). In some cases it is even difficult to say whether a quotation is intended; or whether the authority of Scripture covers not only the accuracy of the quotation as such, but also the content of the quotation; or whether a certain portion of Scripture has only an *auctoritas historiae*, or also an *auctoritas normae*. The doctrine of Scripture is far from being complete on these points, and still leaves room for all kinds of special investigations.

Finally, we should add the point that the Scripture are indeed true in all things, but that this truth is by no means of the same kind in all its component parts. As was remarked above, *theopneustia* [the God-breathed character of Scripture] has made every genre of literature subservient to its aims; it has incorporated into itself poetry and prose, history and prophecy, parable and fable. It goes without saying that in all these parts of Scripture truth has in each case a different character. The truth of a parable or fable differs from that of a historical narrative, and the latter, in its turn, differs from that of *chokma* [wisdom], prophecy, and psalmody. Whether the rich man and the poor Lazarus are fictitious or historical persons is an open question. And likewise there may be difference of opinion as to whether and to what extent it is history or historical form [*inkleeding*] that we find in the books of Job, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. This is even clearer in the case of prophecy; the Old Testament prophets depict the future in pigments and colors that were borrowed from their own milieu and constantly confront us with the question whether what they describe is meant to be taken realistically or symbolically. Even in historical reports there is sometimes a distinction between the factual event that occurred and the form in which it is presented. The marginal notes of the Dutch *Statenvertaling* comment on Gen. 1:3 that God's speech is his will, his command, and deed, and on Gen. 11:5 that this is a human way of speaking about the infinite and omniscient God. This last comment actually applies to the Scriptures as a whole. They always speak in a human way about the highest and holiest matters, about the eternal and invisible things. Like Christ, Scripture considers nothing human alien to itself. But that is why it is a book for all humanity and endures to the end of the age. It is old, without ever aging; it always remains young and fresh; it is the language of life. *Verbum Dei manet in aeternum* [The Word of God endures forever].