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# The Biblical Theology of Geerhardus Vos

by JOHN F. JANSEN

THE biblical theology of Geerhardus Vos has not received the attention it deserves. His work represents a significant scholarly achievement within the older Reformed tradition and it offers illuminating perspectives on the course of biblical studies. His long teaching career at Princeton Seminary spanned the years from 1893 to 1932. Geerhardus Vos is part of our heritage.

Born in the Netherlands at Heerenveen in 1862, he came to the United States in 1881 after completing gymnasium studies at Amsterdam. From 1881 to 1883 he studied at the Theological School of the Christian Reformed Church (now Calvin Theological Seminary) in Grand Rapids, in which city his father had assumed a pastorate. From 1884 to 1885 he continued his theological studies at Princeton Seminary, receiving a fellowship in Hebrew in 1885. His fellowship thesis, a sizable volume entitled *The Mosaic Origin of the Pentateuchal Codes*,<sup>1</sup> was published

<sup>1</sup> *The Mosaic Origin of the Pentateuchal Codes* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1886). The introduction is by Professor W. H. Green. This early work is interesting and indicative, though lacking the preciseness of Vos's later work. One reviewer saw it as the "token of the kind of work to be expected from the younger scholars of our own day. They will prove acute and learned defenders

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the following year while the young scholar was pursuing doctoral studies at Berlin and Strassburg. His dissertation at Strassburg established the text of an Arabic work and was published at Leiden in 1888.<sup>2</sup>

Completing his doctoral work, he declined a professorship in Old Testament at the new Free University in Amsterdam (founded by Abraham Kuyper) in order to become Professor of Didactic and Exegetical Theology at the Theological School in Grand Rapids (1888-1893). Though his own field was in biblical studies he was given major responsibilities also in dogmatics—not to speak of a teaching load of twenty-five

of the faith, and hold their own against other most eminent assailants, whether of Britain or the Continent." *Presbyterian Review*, 1886. Another reviewer called it a "very creditable performance and augurs well for the author's future literary activity," but added that it was far more ambitious than a German scholar would undertake for a doctorate, pointing to its failure to cite authorities and concluding that it is not really an original investigation. *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 1886.

<sup>2</sup> *Die Kämpfe und Streitigkeiten zwischen den Banū 'Umjajja und den Banū Hāsīm von Takijj ad-din Al-Makrizijj* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1888). The work collates a Leiden and a Strassburg manuscript to establish the text. A preface indicates that Vos had planned to follow this with a translation and introduction.

hours scattered in various subjects. Two evidences of his work in dogmatics deserve mention. A rectoral address (in Dutch) of 1891 is a well documented study of the covenant idea in Reformed theology.<sup>3</sup> His class work in systematic theology found expression in three large mimeographed volumes (in Dutch) of *Dogmatiek*.<sup>4</sup> While following the traditional divisions of dogmatics this work devotes a large place to Hebrew and Greek word studies, a harbinger of things to come.

In 1892 Princeton Seminary invited him to assume a new chair in Biblical Theology. Vos declined the call,<sup>5</sup> but he accepted it when it was renewed the following year. Ordained an evangelist by New Brunswick Presbytery in April of 1894, he was installed as professor in May of that year. His published inaugural address<sup>6</sup> describes at some length the

<sup>3</sup> *De Verbondsleer in de Gereformeerde Theologie* (Grand Rapids: Democrat Drukers, 1891).

<sup>4</sup> *Dogmatiek van G. Vos* (Grand Rapids, 1910), Deel I-III.

<sup>5</sup> *The Semi-Centennial Volume* of the Theological School and Calvin College (Grand Rapids, 1926) pays high tribute to Vos's contribution. "Dr. Vos declined the call to Princeton. The School rejoiced and the church at large thanked God" (p. 29). Speaking of the following year, we read: "Although the Curatorium made all possible efforts to keep the talented and much beloved young professor, Dr. Vos did not see his way clear to stay and became a co-worker with his former professors" (p. 32). [It strikes us as curious that, during his time in Grand Rapids, some in the church lodged a protest against his alleged supralapsarianism.]

<sup>6</sup> *The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline* (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph and Co., 1894). This volume includes the charge to the new professor by Abraham Gosman of Lawrenceville. The benediction was pronounced by James McCosh, former president of the College of New Jersey.

perspectives and presuppositions that would guide his work. As the occupant of a new chair he sought "to introduce . . . this branch of theological science and to describe, in general terms at least, its nature and the manner in which I hope to teach it."<sup>7</sup> It is worthwhile to examine this address.

What is theology? Strictly speaking, "not God in and for Himself, but God in so far as He has revealed Himself is the object of Theology."<sup>8</sup> What is the relationship between biblical theology and exegesis? "Exegetical Theology deals with God under the aspect of Revealer of Himself and Author of the Scriptures."<sup>9</sup> Exegetical studies provide the basis for the central study of the biblical message. "Biblical Theology is that part of Exegetical Theology which deals with the revelation of God."<sup>10</sup> How is biblical theology distinguished from dogmatics? Biblical theology "discusses both the form and contents of revelation from the point of view of the revealing activity of God."<sup>11</sup> Systematic theology is concerned with the contents of this same revelation but as materials "for the human work of classifying and systematizing according to logical principles. Biblical Theology applies no other method of grouping and arranging these contents than is given in the divine economy of revelation itself."<sup>12</sup> This means that the biblical theologian must not arrange his data under the loci of dogmatics but must express in method the history of salvation. "The truth comes in the form of growing truth, not truth at rest." But Vos does not mean

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

to limit revelation to the acts of God because "Word and act always accompany each other."<sup>13</sup>

Since "God has not revealed Himself in a school but in the covenant," biblical theology is "that part of Exegetical Theology which deals with the revelation of God in its historical continuity."<sup>14</sup> This historical progress, however, presupposes the unity of the biblical message and "the perfection of revealed truth in all its stages." Progress in revelation "resembles the organic process, through which out of the perfect germ the perfect plant and flower and fruit are successively produced."<sup>15</sup> We see immediately that the inerrancy of scripture is fundamental to Vos's approach.

Historic progress is not the only means God uses to disclose the full contents of his Word. Biblical theology recognizes "the striking multiformity of teaching." Legal, prophetic, poetic elements in the Old Testament are clearly distinct types of revelation—as are gospels, epistles, and apocalypse in the New. Accordingly, biblical theology "must bring out what Paul calls the *much-variegated*, the manifold wisdom of God." But, he adds, though the Bible's witness is multiform and varied, all is supernatural revelation.

In his address he laments that biblical theology as a discipline was born in the enlightenment, that "her very birth took place under an evil star."<sup>16</sup> Rationalism's approach to biblical theology saw an evolution from lower to higher forms of religion. Biblical theology, as Vos understands it, is not a history of religion but an unfolding of revelation. "With

the greatest variety of historical aspects there can, nevertheless, be no inconsistencies or contradictions in the Word of God."<sup>17</sup>

He closed his address with what he viewed to be the practical purposes of the discipline. First, it shows the student of the Word its organic wholeness. Secondly, it furnishes "a most effective antidote to the destructive critical views now prevailing."<sup>18</sup> Thirdly, it should give new life and freshness to the old truth. Finally, it is of the greatest importance for systematic theology. Vos always disavowed any use of biblical theology to suggest "the allegedly un-Biblical character of Dogmatics." When properly cultivated, the latter is as truly biblical as "its younger sister."<sup>19</sup>

With this description of his task, Vos began his long teaching career at Princeton. The seminary catalogues indicate that each year he taught two required courses in Old and New Testament Theology. Mimeographed outlines of these lectures eventually found their way into the publication of his *Biblical Theology, Old and New Testaments*, in 1948.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to these required courses, his curriculum offerings most often centered on: the eighth century prophets,

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>20</sup> *Notes from Prof. Vos's Lectures on Biblical Theology: For Students' Use Only* (printed, no date) takes O.T. Theology through the Decalogue. Further notes on O.T. and N.T. Theology were brought together in mimeographed printed form by the Reformed Episcopal Seminary of Philadelphia in 1934, and by the Toronto Baptist Seminary in 1947. The published final edition, *Biblical Theology, Old and New Testaments*, was edited by his son, Prof. J. G. Vos, and published in Grand Rapids by Wm. B. Eerdmans in 1948.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.



the Epistle to the Hebrews, and Pauline studies. His published articles over the years reflect in part these same areas: seven articles on the prophets,<sup>21</sup> four on Hebrews,<sup>22</sup> six on Paul,<sup>23</sup> seven on eschatology (including Pauline eschatology).<sup>24</sup> His lectures and articles on Hebrews were brought together posthumously in 1956.<sup>25</sup> Vos himself published

<sup>21</sup> "Some Doctrinal Features of the Early Prophecies of Isaiah," *Presbyterian and Reformed Review*, July 1897; five articles on "The Modern Hypothesis and Recent Criticism of the Early Prophets," *Presb. and Ref. Rev.*, April, July, August, 1898, Jan. 1899; "Jeremiah's Plaint and Its Answer," *Princeton Theological Review*, Oct. 1928.

<sup>22</sup> Two articles on "The Priesthood of Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Princ. Theol. Rev.*, July, Oct. 1907; two articles on "Hebrews, The Epistle of the Diatheke," *Princ. Theol. Rev.*, Oct. 1915, Jan. 1916.

<sup>23</sup> "The Pauline Doctrine of Reconciliation," *Bible Student*, July 1901; two articles on "The Sacrificial Idea in Paul's Doctrine of the Atonement," *Bible Student*, Aug., Sept. 1902; "The Pauline Conception of Redemption," *Bible Student*, Jan. 1902; "The Alleged Legalism in Paul's Doctrine of Justification," *Princ. Theol. Rev.*, April 1903; "The Theology of Paul," *Bible Student*, June 1903.

<sup>24</sup> "The Pauline Eschatology and Chiliasm," *Princ. Theol. Rev.*, Jan. 1911; "The Eschatological Aspect of the Pauline Conception of the Spirit," in *Biblical and Theological Studies* by members of the Princeton faculty (New York: Scribners, 1912); an extensive article on "Eschatology of the N.T." in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, 1915; "The Eschatology of the Psalter," *Princ. Theol. Rev.*, Jan. 1920 (now included in later editions of *Pauline Eschatology*); "The Pauline Doctrine of the Resurrection," "Alleged Development in Paul's Eschatology," "Structure of Pauline Eschatology," all in *Princ. Theol. Rev.*, Jan. through July 1929. [To this list may be added a short article, "Our Lord's Doctrine of the Resurrection," *Bible Student*, April 1901.]

<sup>25</sup> *The Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. and rewritten by Johannes G. Vos (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1956).

*The Pauline Eschatology* in 1930.<sup>26</sup> Although most professors used the lecture method exclusively, students recall with appreciation Vos's readiness to engage in question and discussion.

His work in the theology of the gospels centered in two major areas: Jesus' teaching on the kingdom, and Christology. In 1903 the American Tract Society published *The Teaching of Jesus concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church*,<sup>27</sup> the most readable of his books. His overriding concern in gospel study centered on the christological question and found its fullest expression in *The Self Disclosure of Jesus* (1926).<sup>28</sup>

Throughout his productive years Vos paid far more critical attention to the works of his contemporaries than he received from them. From 1890 to 1917 he contributed about a hundred penetrating and often extended book reviews to *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* and to *The Princeton Theological Review*. He recognized at once the challenge to traditional interpretation posed by Wilhelm Wrede's *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien* (1901) and combatted this view vigorously.<sup>29</sup> He

<sup>26</sup> *The Pauline Eschatology*, published by the author (Princeton University Press, 1930), reprinted in 1952 and 1962 by Wm. B. Eerdmans.

<sup>27</sup> *The Teaching of Jesus concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church*, ed. John H. Kerr (New York: American Tract Society, 1903) and reprinted by Wm. B. Eerdmans in 1951. Cf. two earlier articles on "The Kingdom of God," *Bible Student*, May, June 1900.

<sup>28</sup> *The Self Disclosure of Jesus: The Modern Debate about the Messianic Consciousness* (New York: George H. Doran, 1926). In 1954 Wm. B. Eerdmans republished this as edited and rewritten by Johannes G. Vos.

<sup>29</sup> For example, when reviewing Hastings, *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, Vos

saw the importance of Albert Schweitzer's *Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906), appreciating it both because it was "brilliantly written" and for its critique of Wrede.<sup>30</sup> He sought to meet the challenge of Bousset's *Kyrios Christos*.<sup>31</sup> Curiously, while expressing kinship with Adolf Schlatter,<sup>32</sup> he never mentions Martin Kähler, though the latter's *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Biblical, Kerygmatic Christ* might have struck a responsive chord. All in all, Vos's book reviews provide a valuable

context for our understanding of his own work.

For some reason Vos stopped reviewing about 1917. We find a few minor reviews in 1919, but none thereafter. Apparently he took no notice of the new form criticism as this bears on New Testament christology. Nor do we find any reference to the dialectical theology that began with Barth's *Romans*. Vos's work on the Pauline eschatology contains no mention of Barth's provocative exegesis of 1 Corinthians 15 (which had appeared in German in 1924). For that matter, Vos's volume takes no notice of any biblical scholarship after the first war.

calls attention to the omission of Wrede in the bibliography of the article on "Messiah." *Princ. Theol. Rev.*, Oct. 1908. (Vos himself contributed articles on "Covenant," "Salvation," "Savior" to this Dictionary.)

<sup>30</sup> Cf. his review of Schweitzer's *Quest* in *Princ. Theol. Rev.*, Jan. 1911. (He reviewed *Paul and His Interpreters* in Jan. 1914.)

<sup>31</sup> Cf. his review of Bousset, *Die Religion des Judentums in neustamentlichen Zeitalter* (1903) in *Princ. Theol. Rev.*, Jan. 1904. His review of Bousset's *Kyrios Christos* is in *Princ. Theol. Rev.*, Oct. 1914. Appreciating how much one can learn from this book, he opposes its premise because "A Christological history without some positive account of the life and mind of Him from whom the whole Christ movement sprang, resembles a torso," p. 637.

For his articles on Gospel christology: two articles on "The Range of the Logos Title," *Princ. Theol. Rev.*, April, Oct. 1913; "The Continuity of the Kyrios Title in the N.T.," *Princ. Theol. Rev.*, April 1915; "Modern Dislike of the Messianic Consciousness of Jesus," *Biblical Review*, April 1916; "The Ubiquity of the Messiahship in the Gospels," *Bibl. Rev.*, Oct. 1916; "The Kyrios Christos Controversy," *Princ. Theol. Rev.*, Jan. 1917; "The Messiahship: Formal or Essential to the Mind of Jesus?" *Bibl. Rev.*, Oct. 1922; "'True' and 'Truth' in the Johannine Writings," *Bibl. Rev.*, 1927.

<sup>32</sup> Yet he criticizes Schlatter's *Der Zweifel an der Messianität Jesu* (1907) for not going far enough in countering Wrede. *Princ. Theol. Rev.*, April 1909.

One wonders why. It would appear that his opposition to what he always considered "the destructive critical views now prevailing" kept him from appreciating the positive contributions of modern scholarship. Having opposed earlier the form criticism of the Old Testament, he was not inclined to enter the lists again. This is to be regretted because his linguistic and exegetical abilities could have contributed to the ensuing debates.

Turning to the other side of the question, how shall we account for the rather general neglect of his work by his contemporaries? There is a near absence of critical reviews of his works. Well, his continual attack against all modern criticism doubtless led those of differing persuasion to dismiss him more quickly than might otherwise have been the case. It's useful to note a review of his first book. That review appeared in 1886 in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, certainly not a "liberal" journal. The reviewer is not unsympathetic to Vos's position but finds it necessary to say: "There is too at times something in the tone of the

book which seems to indicate a misapprehension of the aims of biblical criticism as represented by the critics of the advanced school, as if they were conspiring to overthrow the authority of the Scriptures and were unscrupulous as to the means which they used to establish their positions. . . ."<sup>33</sup>

Another reason for this neglect may lie in his literary style. His writing is exceedingly ponderous. Paragraphs run on for pages. One does not always find a clear indication of direction or a clear summary of findings. The Trustees' *Minute* on his death in the *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* notes that "His published writings were the despair of his contemporaries."<sup>34</sup>

Before completing this sketch of his career, a word should be said about Vos as a Christian and churchman. All who knew him agree that erudition was coupled with a deep and humble piety.<sup>35</sup> As one reads his volume of ser-

<sup>33</sup> *Bibl. Sacra*, 1886, p. 784. The reviewer is not identified. The following passage from *The Mosaic Origin* may illustrate what the reviewer has in mind: "It would be necessary to think that the times of Manasseh and Josiah were like the 19th century, when those initiated into the secrets of criticism do not hesitate to laugh contemptuously within the walls of their schools at the superstition of God's common people, who still cling to the antiquated notion of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch," p. 185.

<sup>34</sup> *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, Winter, 1950, p. 42.

<sup>35</sup> The Faculty Memorial *Minute* from the same issue of the *Bulletin* cited above notes: "Piety was woven into the very warp and woof of his theology. . . . The piety which had solid foundations in his thought found visible expression in his personal and family life" (p. 45). It speaks also of his "refreshing, at times almost irrepressible, sense of humor which was often whimsical and always kindly." An example of this combination may be found in the *Notes from Prof.*

mons preached in the seminary chapel<sup>36</sup> this impression is confirmed. The sermons, though ponderous and long, breathe a warmly devotional spirit. The sermon on John 20:16 closes: "Let us not linger at the tomb, but turn our faces and stretch our hands upwards into heaven, where our life is hid with Him in God, and whence He shall also come again to show Himself to us as He did to Mary, to make us speak the last great 'Rabboni' which will spring to the lips of all the redeemed, when they meet their Savior in the early dawn of that eternal Sabbath that awaits the people of God."<sup>37</sup>

He also found expression for personal reflection and devotion in several volumes of poetry (both Dutch and English).<sup>38</sup> One can appreciate their sentiments while yet asking whether his gifts lay in poetry—whether Dutch or English.

During his days at Princeton he was a member of New Brunswick Presbytery. With Warfield he was opposed to the drive toward confessional revision in the Presbyterian Church. While not as actively engaged as Warfield in the "confessional crisis" of 1903, he left no doubt as to his own position. In 1891 he translated an article by Abraham Kuy-

*Vos' Lectures* (cf. footnote 20) where we read, "Spurgeon said that he did not believe a man was really converted if his dog did not notice it" (p. 58).

<sup>36</sup> *Grace and Glory*, Sermons preached in the Chapel of Princeton Theological Seminary (Grand Rapids: Reformed Press, 1922).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>38</sup> I had access to *Spiegel der Genade*, verzen van G. Vos (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Seversma, 1922) and *Charis*, English Verses (Princeton, 1931). Other volumes not obtainable include *Spiegel der Natuur* (1927), *Spiegel des Doods* (1932), *Western Rhymes* (1933), *Zeis en Garve* (1934).

per ("Calvinism and Confessional Revision")<sup>39</sup> in which the doughty Dutch theologian expressed concern over what was going on in America. In the fall of 1901 Vos gave the opening address at the seminary which was published as "The Scriptural Doctrine of the Love of God."<sup>40</sup> Asserting that "the music of that theology [the older orthodoxy] may not always please modern ears because it seems lacking in sweetness, it ranged over a wider scale and made better harmonies than the popular strains of today." Vos reminded his hearers that all heresies contain partial truth, and that Ritschlian theology was the most serious contemporary threat. He closed "with a brief suggestion touching the bearing of what we have found on the present desire to introduce into the Confession of the Church a statement which shall authoritatively formulate the Biblical doctrine of the universal redemptive love of God." Insisting that we must distinguish between God's "general benevolence" and God's "special affection" for his own, Vos insisted that "Every formula which would efface or even tend to obscure this fundamental distinction ought to be at the outset rejected as unbiblical."<sup>41</sup> All this "ought to fill the Church of today with great humility and make her proceed with extreme caution in the task which, wisely or unwisely, she has set for herself; the more so since . . . the air is rife with extravagant, un-Calvinistic, unscriptural notions on the subject."<sup>42</sup> If he was unhappy with the Confession's added chapter on "The Love of God and Missions," we need not ask

how he would have responded to the Confession of 1967.

Here we see the shape of his churchmanship. The Westminster standards needed no revision for they fully embraced the biblical message. Just as his approach to the Bible allowed for no contradiction or error, so his commitment to Reformed orthodoxy brooked no dissent.

In his time the most celebrated heresy trial was that of Professor Charles A. Briggs of Union Seminary. Shortly after the trial Vos reviewed two of Briggs' books on messiahship, reviews that strike the modern reader as unduly harsh and totally lacking in any appreciation for Briggs' respect for the messianic witness of the Bible. The same tone is evident in other reviews.<sup>43</sup>

His later years at Princeton were clouded by the struggle over the reorganization of the seminary. Although not a controversialist like Machen, and although he did not leave the seminary

<sup>39</sup> Cf. his review of Briggs, *The Messiah of the Gospels* (1894) and *The Messiah of the Apostles* (1895) in *Presb. and Ref. Rev.*, Oct. 1896. Actually Vos criticizes Briggs more for his critical remarks on Augustinianism than for his biblical interpretation. Recalling what Vos had said in his inaugural address about the place of systematic theology, it's not surprising that he should react strongly to what he saw as a disposition to down-grade dogmatics by an appeal to biblical theology.

The same tendency is apparent in other reviews. When reviewing Stevens' *New Testament Theology* (1899) he objects that the author "makes Paul occupy essentially Arminian ground." *Presb. and Ref. Rev.*, Oct. 1900. On the other hand, in a favorable review of Drummond, *The Relation of the Apostolic Testimony to the Teaching of Jesus* (1900) he suggests that the author should have pointed out "the Calvinist affinities of our Lord's teaching." *Presb. and Ref. Rev.*, July 1902.

<sup>39</sup> In *Presb. and Ref. Rev.*, July 1891.

<sup>40</sup> In *Presb. and Ref. Rev.*, Jan. 1902.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.



when the division came, his sympathies clearly were with those who left.

He retired in 1932. He and Mrs. Vos lived in California. After her death he made his home in Grand Rapids with his daughter and son-in-law. He died on August 13, 1949 at the age of 87. The year before his death he had written the preface for his now published *Biblical Theology*.

In evaluating his work in biblical theology, we must first assess this work within the context of his own time. While his adult life spanned the years from the eighties of the last century through the years following the second war, "his time" can be narrowed to the years from the late eighties through the twenties, for these were his most productive years.

In America the liberal theology found particular expression in the Social Gospel movement. Vos does not touch on the social issues of his time, but his criticism of this theology is clear enough. He rejected every attempt to make of Jesus a religio-ethical teacher.

In America the catastrophe of the first war did not shake liberal optimism as quickly as in Europe. There Barth's commentary on Romans had sparked a vigorous theological awakening. But Barth's influence was not really felt in America until after Vos had retired. We look in vain for any review of Barth's *Romans* in the *Princeton Theological Review* (whose last issue was in 1929).

Instead, the years following the first war in America produced the modernist-fundamentalist controversies. Throughout these years Vos, as the Princeton faculty generally, offered an erudite and unyielding defense of theological orthodoxy. The authority of the

Bible could only be expressed in terms of supernaturalism and inerrancy. "Supernatural" and "infallible" are key words in Vos's writings.

Like Warfield, he was committed to the Westminster standards as the most nearly perfect theological expression of biblical truth. An interesting case in point is the "covenant of works." This has been one of the more controversial elements in the older theology.<sup>44</sup> But neither on dogmatic nor on biblical grounds did Vos question this doctrine. In his early *Dogmatiek* he defended the doctrine by appealing to Hosea 6:7 and Romans 5:12-21 (though acknowledging that the expression "covenant of works" can lead to misunderstanding). In one of his articles he even turns to pentateuchal criticism for support, asserting that (thanks to Wellhausen) the author of "P" must have counted the arrangement entered into with our first parents among the four covenants. "Thus the much ridiculed 'covenant of works' has been exegetically rehabilitated and it has been shown that the Reformed theologians were not so utterly lacking in historic sense as their critics believed."<sup>45</sup> His volume, *Biblical Theology*, has similar vindication.

<sup>44</sup> E.g., George S. Hendry, *The Westminster Confession for Today* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960), p. 88. For a more severe criticism, cf. Holmes Rolston III, *John Calvin Versus The Westminster Confession* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1972).

<sup>45</sup> Second article on "Hebrews, The Epistle of the Diatheke," p. 2. The covenant of works receives further vindication in his *Biblical Theology*, p. 32. Adam's call to advance from unconfirmed to confirmed blessedness was "an act of condescension and high favor." The revelation given unfallen man, as later to fallen man, represents the same loving and gracious goodness of God which is always the hallmark of covenant.

What were the crucial issues for Vos? We select four: the "higher criticism," the influence of comparative religion, the christological question, and eschatology.

(1) To appreciate his adamant attack on "the destructive critical theories now prevailing," it must be said that some of the criticism of his early days *was* destructive. Davie Napier, certainly far removed from Vos, has pictured such critics as "trained in the presence of so much surgery that they were, to use an inelegant phrase, scalpel happy."<sup>46</sup>

The pity is that Vos saw only this side. It led him to reject all critical scholarship as destructive. Characteristic is his review of A. B. Davidson's *Old Testament Theology*. "Where the critical theories and any solid form of supernaturalism are combined, as is the case in Dr. Davidson's book, they eventually obscure and confuse each other."<sup>47</sup>

(2) Vos took seriously the influence of the school of comparative religion. Many of his reviews give serious attention to its works.<sup>48</sup> Some of his own articles go to considerable length in describing the possible influence of extra-biblical materials.<sup>49</sup> As a linguist he was thoroughly familiar with the work of Dalman. Indeed, some of Vos's articles include the kind of word study and cultural background that we now associate with Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*.

But Vos always cautious that New

<sup>46</sup> B. Davie Napier, *From Faith To Faith* (New York: Harper, 1955), p. xiv.

<sup>47</sup> In *Princ. Theol. Rev.*, Jan. 1906.

<sup>48</sup> E.g., his review of G. Faber, *Buddhistische und Neuestamentliche Erzählungen* (1913) in *Princ. Theol. Rev.*, Jan. 1915.

<sup>49</sup> E.g., his observations on Philo, *Hermetica*, Odes of Solomon in his first article on "The Range of the Logos Title."

Testament theology must first look to the Old Testament rather than to inter-testamental or other influences. Moreover, the newness of the revelation in Christ breaks through all existing expectations and conceptions. And, most especially, biblical theology as a discipline must differentiate its approach from that of comparative religion. His inaugural address had warned against making theology "the science of religion." In his *Biblical Theology* he argued against the tendency to approach the teaching of Jesus in such fashion. "While to the science of comparative religion such a method must not be forbidden, it is not the method of Biblical Theology."<sup>50</sup>

(3) Our sketch of his career has noted his absorbing interest in the messianic question. Who is Jesus? For Vos the question was not whether the New Testament and the church were right to call Jesus the Messiah. The crucial question was "whether Jesus believed and claimed to be the Messiah."<sup>51</sup> Here was the decisive battleground for Vos. "With its decision the Christian religion stands or falls."<sup>52</sup>

Into this concern he poured a stream of articles and finally his volume on *The Self Disclosure of Jesus*. How does this work strike us today? Well, the question is still of central importance—witness a stream of recent publications, whether these be in terms of a "new quest" or in terms of the titles of Jesus. Nor has Wrede vanished from the scene. One could say that his mantle fell on Bultmann, and his *Messianic Secret* only recently has been translated and published in English (1971).

<sup>50</sup> *Biblical Theology*, p. 389.

<sup>51</sup> *Self Disclosure*, p. II.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* (preface), p. v.

To be sure, the issue today is not put in terms of "the messianic consciousness of Jesus." That phrase smacks too much of the psychological interest in "lives of Jesus" (which was not true of Vos).<sup>53</sup> Moreover, form criticism of the gospels has led even conservative scholars to deal with the words of Jesus quite differently from the way in which Vos could deal with them. Still, when all is said and done, a book like William Manson's *Jesus the Messiah*<sup>54</sup> may have more in common with Vos's essential concern than appears at first sight. And, we may add, this volume, like Vos, has not received sufficient attention among the rank and file of other scholars.

(4) We come to the question of eschatology. Vos saw this as intimately bound up with the question of messiahship. In 1930 he wrote: "Eschatology has become the large mountain of of-

<sup>53</sup> In his *Biblical Theology*, p. 375, he says "it would require a great deal of critico-historical self confidence to construct on so small a basis what has been not infrequently called 'a biography of Jesus,' or in a somewhat more modest language 'a life of Jesus.'" While referring here to the hidden years of Jesus, the statement is not inappropriate to his discussion generally.

In a review of J. M. King, *The Theology of Christ's Teaching* (1903) he comments: "We on our part have no objection to a joint presentation of the Synoptical and Johannine phases of teaching. On the contrary, we admire the courage displayed in this, the courage which takes the utterances of the Fourth Gospel at their face value as literal renderings of the words of Jesus. . . ." But he criticizes the author for not pointing up the differing orientation and historical situation represented by the Fourth Gospel. *Princ. Theol. Rev.*, Oct. 1903.

<sup>54</sup> William Manson, *Jesus The Messiah: The Synoptic Tradition of the Revelation of God in Christ with Special Reference to Form-Criticism* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1943).

fence lying across the pathway of modern unbelief. That part of it which we call Messiahship was already a piece broken from that rock in the days of Jesus. The double offence was one at bottom."<sup>55</sup>

Liberal theology had sought to de-eschatologize the New Testament message, especially Jesus' message of the kingdom. The thorough-going eschatology of Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer had posed a rude and disturbing challenge to the conception of the kingdom. Although the debate was more keenly felt in Europe than in America, Vos recognized its importance. He criticized the "ultra-eschatologists" because their view denied the reality of the kingdom's presence in Jesus. He criticized the "interim ethic" of Schweitzer as "minimizing the importance of present-world morality," and because in this view Jesus would become "a subject for psychiatric investigation."<sup>56</sup>

Nonetheless, Vos welcomed the challenge of Schweitzer. "In all points where the theory registers denials we must part ways with it. On the other hand, in regard to the points in which it and we agree, we cannot deny it a certain credit, because it has revived interest in the matter of specific eschatology as an absolutely necessary thing."<sup>57</sup>

In some respects Vos's interpretation of the kingdom reminds us of contemporary discussion. He would not have

<sup>55</sup> *Pauline Eschatology*, preface, p. vii. Much earlier, in a review of P. Wernle, *Die Reichsgotteshoffnung in den ältesten christlichen Dokumenten und bei Jesus* (1903) he had said: "The spirit of the age is not over friendly to eschatology, and on the other hand is inclined to ethicize in every direction. . . ." *Princ. Theol. Rev.*, April 1903.

<sup>56</sup> *Biblical Theology*, p. 404f.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 405.

found it difficult to agree with Joachim Jeremias that the kingdom must be seen in terms of "an eschatology that is in process of realization."<sup>58</sup>

Vos devoted his last efforts to the Pauline eschatology. Since the eschatological challenge in conservative circles was millenarian, he devoted a chapter (as an earlier article) on the question of chiliasm. Without polemic but with careful exegesis he sought to show that Paul does not support this view.

He recognizes that the only explicit evidence for Paul's belief in a resurrection of the lost is found in the speech of Acts 24:15 and not in the epistles. This does not trouble him for he viewed the speeches in Acts quite as authentically Paul's own as are the epistles. As for the question of universalism, he does not feel this needs rebuttal.

While his own presuppositions are sometimes quite evident, in other instances his exegesis exhibits considerable restraint. An example is his treatment of "the man of sin" and "the restraining power" in Second Thessalonians. This epistle, he suggests, "belongs among the many prophecies whose best and final exegete will be the eschatological fulfillment, and in regard to which it behooves the saints to exercise a peculiar kind of eschatological patience."<sup>59</sup>

He saw Paul's greatest contribution in the eschatological role of the Spirit whose presence and power link the present with the future. This keeps eschatology from speculation and vindicates it as the essential hallmark of Christian faith. Since Christian life is lived between the past and the future, Vos often turns to the Epistle to the Hebrews with

its imagery of the pilgrim people of God. What he says of the framework of this epistle illustrates why he sees eschatology to be at the very heart of biblical theology: ". . . eschatology posits an absolute goal at the end of the redemptive process corresponding to the beginning of the world in creation; for then, no longer a segment but the whole sweep of history is drawn into one great perspective and the mind is impelled to view every part in relation to the whole. . . . Thus eschatology becomes the mother of theology in the form of a philosophy of redemptive history."<sup>60</sup> That phrase, "mother of theology," reminds us of recent debate in which Ernst Käsemann, from totally different perspectives, called apocalyptic "the mother of all Christian theology."<sup>61</sup>

It goes without saying that Vos would not have accepted Barth's understanding of Pauline eschatology. But, if he had taken the newer winds blowing in Pauline study into account, could he still have maintained that his contemporaries had no appreciation for eschatology? What would he have said to Barth's comment on Romans 8 ("If Christianity be not altogether restless eschatology, there remains in it no relationship with Christ.")?<sup>62</sup>

These reflections on eschatology bring us back to Vos's insistence that biblical theology is the unfolding of God's redemptive story with his people. In Otto

<sup>60</sup> Second article on "Hebrews, The Epistle of the Diatheke," p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Käsemann's essay, "The Beginnings of Christian Theology," in *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), p. 103.

<sup>62</sup> Barth, *Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 314. This represents the 1921 German work with its successive editions.

<sup>58</sup> J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, rev. ed. (New York: Scribners, 1963), p. 230.

<sup>59</sup> *Pauline Eschatology*, p. 133.



Piper's words, "At a time when almost all scholars had adopted a purely historical method for the presentation of Biblical Theology, Dr. Vos followed the 'heilsgeschiede' method (history of Salvation, or Holy History)."<sup>63</sup>

In this respect one can compare Vos with Cullmann. Both understand biblical theology in terms of "holy history." Both vigorously combatted opposing views. The polemic that often enters Vos's writing (e.g., with reference to Wrede) is not unlike the polemic that Cullmann's *Salvation in History*<sup>64</sup> directs against Bultmann. Of course we must not press the comparison too far. Cullmann accepts methodological premises that Vos would reject. But the parallel is suggestive insofar as it reminds us that there are recurring issues differently expressed in changing circumstances.

Be that as it may, the biblical theology of Geerhardus Vos is an important contribution to the older Princeton tradition. In his person and in his work he combined evangelical commitment with painstaking scholarship. He recognized the challenge of some issues more clearly than did many in his day, although

<sup>63</sup> Otto Piper, review of *Biblical Theology* in the *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, Summer, 1949, p. 48. He adds a regret that the published volume does not include all of the New Testament data that must have been part of Vos's class work (nor is this in the mimeographed collections that preceded this publication).

<sup>64</sup> Cullmann, *Salvation in History* (New York: Harper, 1967).

we may question some of the weapons with which he sought to meet these issues. In particular, he contributed more than is often realized to the development of biblical theology as a discipline by clearly distinguishing its method from that of dogmatics in a time when this was not nearly as apparent to Reformed orthodoxy as it was to its opponents.<sup>65</sup>

We cannot return to the past but we can learn from the past. In our day biblical theology approaches its task with exegetical premises quite different from those of yesterday. Yet it must be no less responsive and faithful to the revealing Word than Geerhardus Vos sought to be in his day.

This sketch has tried to assess illustratively both the contributions and limitations of his work. It is a rewarding experience to seek his company in tracing our heritage in yesterday, a journey that can offer insight and perspective for our task today.

<sup>65</sup> An article by Jacob G. Vanden Bosch in *The Reformed Journal* (Eerdmans), November 1954, quotes Vos as saying to a former student, "In the Old Country they don't believe much in Biblical Theology, but I have taught it for thirty-five years and certainly believe in it" (p. 12).

This finds further illustration in an article by Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Geerhardus Vos and the Interpretation of Paul" in *Jerusalem and Athens* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1974) ed. E. R. Geehan, who contrasts Vos's approach to Paul with Abraham Kuyper's rejection of the concept of "biblical theology."