The Practice of Philology in the Nineteenth-Century Netherlands

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6. Biblical Philology and Theology

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Abstract
The 19th century saw the emancipation of biblical philology from theology in the form of historical and literary criticism. Against the background of a dominant epistemology that posited human rational intelligence as the sole source of reliable knowledge (to the exclusion of, e.g., divine revelation), historical criticism of the Bible became a powerful instrument in the hands of theological reformers who wished to argue that much of traditional Christian doctrine should be renounced. However, the historical criticism of the Bible is not to be exclusively associated with this radical theological current. Moderate thinkers accepted the secular standard as normative, confident that it could be reconciled with the truthfulness of the Christian heritage.

For two thousand years or more, biblical literature has been studied from two perspectives: that of theology and that of philology (in particular textual criticism and linguistics). For most of that time, philology served as a handmaid for the ‘queen of sciences’, theology, clarifying how the Bible demonstrated the truthfulness and reliability of the Church’s teachings. In the Reformation period, this vocation acquired a special acuteness, when differences within the Western European Church occasioned one party (the Protestants) to give overriding authority to the Bible, as opposed to the dogmatic tradition of the Church. Protestant theologians were confident that their objections to the Catholic tradition were supported by the biblical record, but were slow to recognize that the doctrinal systems developed by them were no less vulnerable to run contrary to the piecemeal and confused information of their allegedly infallible source. In contrast, even protestant philologists began to sense, as early as the sixteenth century, that the Bible could not live up to the expectations fostered by their theological colleagues. In the nineteenth century, the rise of theological modernism (particularly strong in the Netherlands) brought their misgivings to culmination. Once again, a reform movement took up the Bible as a weapon against traditional theology, but now against the very protestant theology that had given it its exclusive status as a source of authority. In the wake of secularization,
biblical philologists attempted to seize power over systematic theology, trying to demonstrate its shortcomings, even its impossibility. This contribution attempts to sketch some outlines of these developments and their backgrounds, with a brief look forward to their provisional outcome in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

Schematically speaking, the philological approach of the Bible focuses on the text and its grammatical (lexical, syntactical) meaning, while theology by its nature is more interested in the Bible’s potential contribution to making religious sense of life in the interpreter’s own time. Obviously, the answers resulting from these two approaches differ because of the varying nature of the questions they pose. Again schematically speaking, one could say that the biblical philologist’s questions require answers taken from the text’s historical and linguistic context, whereas the questions posed by the theologian go beyond that, and seek actually relevant meaning and doctrinal coherence.

For example, if it is said in the first line of the Bible that God created heaven and earth ‘in the beginning’, then both the philologist and the theologian want to know more about the function and meaning of the phrase ‘in the beginning’.

The philologist will stumble over the fact that the word ‘beginning’ lacks a complement in Hebrew, and (if I am not mistaken) in English and Dutch as well: it cannot stand on its own, and needs an indication of that what was begun; in other words, the phrase ‘in the beginning’ invites the reader to ask: ‘the beginning of what?’

The theologian is no less interested in this beginning. He will want to know what happened before that beginning: whether God existed before things began, and, if so, what he did before the beginning, why did he not choose another initial moment to create, or even: why did he start to create at all. Eventually, the theologian’s main question is: what does it mean that people are God’s creatures and to what end was all of this done.

For most of the church’s history, the philologist and the theologian cooperated with ease and pleasure — if only because many theologians were also excellent philologists, so in practice, the distinction between philology and theology was artificial, because these disciplines were often united in one person. Even if they were not, they worked efficiently together.

Philology provided theology with the material that it needed, and was satisfied with that subordinate role. On the one hand, linguistic meaning does not go beyond the surface of a text, and for some reason most people feel that deeper meanings than those found at the surface are more important. On the other hand, the philologist can ignore the theologian’s work, whereas the
theologian cannot bypass philological results.' The self-assurance of the philologist is nicely illustrated by an early seventeenth-century professor of Hebrew at Franecker University. When a theologian suspected him of heresy, the accused confessed to know nothing of theology. He considered himself to be a mere *Grammaticus*, and added that, if there is heresy in grammar, he would gladly confess to the crime.²

This scholar of Hebrew, Johannes Drusius (1550-1616), also pleaded for a separation of offices: for each professor of Old Testament exegesis in the theological faculty, there should also be a professor of Hebrew in the faculty of arts. His plea was answered – an issue to which I shall return at the end of this contribution.

In the meantime, the theologian is mostly quite immune to new insights from linguistics. If, for instance, philologists were to decide that the first line of the Bible should not be translated as ‘In the beginning, God created heaven and earth’, but as ‘When God started to create heaven and earth’ (as many do), this changes nothing in the questions (and therefore the answers) of the theologian. As already stated, theological questions go beyond the details of linguistic meaning and ask for a deeper meaning; since these questions often cohere only formally with the biblical material, the answers do not strictly depend upon it.³

In the course of the nineteenth century, philological and theological approaches to the Bible were supplemented by a third: the historical approach. To be sure, some scholars had for some time been interested in the historical context of the origin of biblical literature since the seventeenth century. The names of Hugo Grotius and Baruch Spinoza are often, and justifiably, mentioned.⁴ However, the final decades of the eighteenth century witnessed a growing scepticism regarding the historical reliability of biblical literature that theologians could no longer ignore. Authors such as Joseph

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1 This is certainly not to deny that philology has often been regarded with suspicion by theologians, especially in the heyday of early modern biblical criticism; cf. the sensational case of the *Comma johanneum* as discussed by McDonald, *Raising the Ghost of Arius*; see also Dunkelgrün, *The Multiplicity of Scripture*; but also in the official Roman Catholic reaction to Modernism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; cf. Montagnes, *Marie-Joseph Lagrange*.


4 E.g. Kraus, *Geschichte*, pp. 50-53, 61-65; De Vries, *Bible and Theology*, p. 9;
Priestley in England⁵ and Hermannus Samuel Reimarus in Germany⁶ maintained that the Bible, both the Old and the New Testament, was a huge repository of lies and deception. Miracles in particular were unmasked as magical tricks performed by devious figures, such as Moses and even Jesus himself, to dupe their followers into believing in supra-natural nonsense so they would be regarded and revered as agents of the divine.

This attack on traditional Christianity was partly motivated by Deism, a philosophic-theological current that gave new life to the ancient concepts of God’s immutability and impassibility, precluding the possibility that the Deity would actively intervene in the effects of the natural law it had itself established.⁷

In addition, there had been, among scholars and intellectuals of all philosophical inclinations since the Renaissance, an ever growing awareness that problems did not necessarily have to be solved by the authoritative arguments of tradition, but could also be, and were often better, investigated by using one’s own senses and reason. In the historical department, scholars gradually discovered what may be called the criterion of intrinsic probability (or improbability) of events reported in ancient sources.⁸

Initially, theology was much less immune to these objections than to those of the textual critic or linguist. If it is discovered that a certain biblical passage can no longer be used to underpin some particular doctrinal assertion, there may always be another passage that can do so. However, if it is stated that the history as told by the biblical sources cannot be true, the theological problem is much more substantial. It is characteristic of Christianity that it has no mythology, but is based on an account of events that it holds to have actually happened. The Christian doctrine of salvation depends upon historical facts such as the incarnation of God’s Son, and his victory over death. When the historical reality of such matters is questioned,

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⁵ In biblical criticism, other British scholars were intellectually more important than Joseph Priestley (1733-1804); however, I single him out, because of the effect of his *An History of the Corruption of Christianity* (1782). The translation of this work into Dutch (published in 1784) occasioned the foundation of a ‘Society for the defence of the Christian religion’ (Het Haagsch Genootschap tot verdediging van de voornaamste waarheden van den Christelijken Godsdienst tegen hedendaegsche bestrijders’), which put up prizes and medals for those treatises that best refuted his impious ideas. Within decades, this society was transformed into a stronghold of Modernist theology. See Heering et al., *Op de bres*.


traditional theology cannot simply point to other facts to create a similar doctrine on their basis. The first task for theologians, then, was to refute the massive accusation of deception. The most successful answer had already been devised in the early nineteenth century, but the price was high.

Ever since antiquity, there had been awareness that human agents must have been instrumental in the origin of biblical literature. For instance, copyists were held responsible for errors that had slipped into the text during its transmission; but the biblical authors themselves were also excused for having made minor mistakes when producing their writings; such as a misquotation from the Old Testament in the Gospels.\textsuperscript{9} Also, theologians argued liberally on the basis of the theory of \textit{accommodatio}, already known in antiquity, which explained theologically impossible statements in the Bible as the necessary adaptation of revelation to the limited human capacity of grasping divine truths. A fine example of this is that it is repeatedly stated in the Old Testament that God repented of having done something, which is of course impossible. This should be understood to mean that God sometimes acts in a particular way that may resemble human reactions to a great extent, but is actually motivated by different, although by definition inscrutable reasons.\textsuperscript{10}

The human factor, then, was now employed to exculpate Moses, Jesus, and their pupils.\textsuperscript{11} It was argued that the accounts in the biblical literature did not stand in a one-to-one relationship to historical reality, but were the result of human authors’ reports on events they knew from oral tradition. Thus, such occurrences were accommodated as misunderstanding, exaggeration, or other forms of interpretation of events reported, even before they were put into writing. Miracles were not the machinations of evil deceivers, but the result of eyewitnesses’ accounts of happenings which had impressed them to such an extent that they exaggerated certain details in order to convey the great importance they attached to these experiences.

The price that had to be paid for this solution may not have been the loss of the possibility of miracles. For many theologians, even some of the more traditionalist ones, the elimination of the miracle problem may have been quite a relief.\textsuperscript{12} The price to be paid was much higher: the share allotted to the human factor became so large, that hardly any room was left for the concept of the Bible as revelatory literature. What was lost was the

\textsuperscript{9} Ibidem, pp. 16-18.
\textsuperscript{10} This example was taken from Calvin, \textit{Institutio I 17:13}, ed. Baum et al., cols 165-166.
\textsuperscript{11} On the apologetic tendency of early literary criticism, see De Lang, \textit{De opkomst}, pp. 271-288.
absolute reliability of the biblical history, a concept cherished in particular by protestant theologians.\textsuperscript{13}

This does not mean that all theologians took a defensive stance. On the contrary, it could be said that in the second half of the nineteenth century, the greatest opponents of traditionalist Christianity were the theologians themselves, in particular the representatives of the so-called Modernist movement. Impressed and encouraged by the advance of new views of humanity, the world and God, they had broken with traditional Christianity and became active fighters against what they saw as obsolete ideas and concepts. They abandoned notions which had once been central, such as incarnation and redemption, as well as miracles and revelation, altogether. They esteemed biblical literature on a par with other ancient literature, and as witness to religious forms that were archaic, past, naïve, and underdeveloped, not to say primitive.

In the Modernist struggle against supra-naturalism a strong appeal was sometimes made to the wish of the traditionalists to have their views regarded as intellectually respectable. A good example of this is provided by Abraham Kuenen’s important essay of 1880 on ‘Critical Method’.\textsuperscript{14}

Abraham Kuenen (1828-1891), professor of Old Testament exegesis at the theological faculty of Leiden University, has without doubt been the most important representative of Dutch Old Testament scholarship.\textsuperscript{15} His insights have had great influence in this domain, both in the Anglo-Saxon and the German-speaking world. Karl Budde, who published Kuenen’s collected essays in a German translation in 1894, declared that being able to read Kuenen’s work was sufficient reason to want to learn the Dutch language.\textsuperscript{16} Apart from being a biblical scholar, Kuenen was also a leading figure in the Dutch Modernist movement and the liberal current within Dutch Protestantism.

In ‘Critical Method’, Kuenen poses a question about miracles to his traditionalist readers. First, he notes that miracles play an important role in all religious traditions: they are as important in the work of Herodotus and in the Qur’an as they are in the Bible. However, no sensible person regards them as veracious or valuable in any other sense – except, that is, in the case of ancient Israel and early Christianity. Kuenen then states:

\textsuperscript{13} Cf. Kraus, \textit{Geschichte}, pp. 133-151.
\textsuperscript{15} On Kuenen, see the collection of essays edited by Dirksen & Van der Kooij, \textit{Abraham Kuenen}.
\textsuperscript{16} Kuenen, \textit{Gesammelte Abhandlungen}, p. vi.
The assertion that this exception in favour of the Biblical miracles is justified by the greater weight of evidence in their favour is so notoriously contrary to the facts as to deserve no serious refutation.17

If biblical miracles might be true, then miracles reported by Herodotus might also be true. Conversely, if people regard Herodotus's miracles as childish fiction, then they should not be measuring the biblical miracles by different standards. The recognition of the veracity of biblical miracles, Kuenen continues to argue, coheres with people's own religious convictions, and cannot be based on arguments of a historical nature. It follows that historical arguments cannot ever decide the debate on the possibility of miracles. He then asks himself whether those who believe in miracles, and those who do not, will ever be able to converse with each other in a reasonable manner, and concludes that they can, on the basis of one shared presupposition and an honest answer to one question. The presupposition is this:

Without for a moment concealing my own conviction that there is not one single miracle on record which we can accept as a fact, I would, nevertheless, place in the forefront of historical criticism the principle that miracles are possible.18

Kuenen does not believe in the possibility of miracles, but is prepared to acknowledge that, as a historian, he cannot disprove it. Having ceded this, he requires an honest answer to a question to be posed for every report of a miraculous event:

Which is more probable, that a veritable miracle lies at the basis of the miraculous story, or that it has grown up under the action of this or that well-known cause without any foundation in miraculous fact?19

Kuenen is convinced that on this basis even the most tenacious believers in miracles will have to agree that his own approach is sound. By stating that miracles might be possible from a historical point of view (as the historical discipline has no means to disprove it), he invites the super-naturalists to be as open-minded as he is himself. Then he asks them whether it is

17 Kuenen, 'Critical Method', p. 484.
18 Ibidem, p. 485.
19 Ibidem.
more reasonable to assume that stories about miracles reflect miraculous events, or whether they can be explained on more mundane grounds, such as fantasy, exaggeration or naïveté. If they grant the latter, they should be prepared to accept this explanation for all miracles, including those of the Bible.

Meanwhile, Kuenen's conciliatory tone in this essay should not deceive us. In 1882, he wrote (in Dutch!) to his British colleague and friend W. Robertson Smith:

I cannot acknowledge God's special revelation to Israel; neither can I pass it over in silence. I cannot but controvert it; not on any theological or philosophical grounds, but for the sake of history, which – in my view – precludes it, and by the same token fully accounts for the origin and propagation of the belief in its reality.20

Kuenen refuses to acknowledge that Israel has received a special kind of revelation that would render the Bible exceptional among all other ancient literature, and leave room for the acceptance of biblical miracles as historical, in contradistinction to their parallels in, for instance, Herodotus. However, there are no historical reasons for granting this exceptional status to the Bible, only reasons of a religious nature. Whereas Kuenen seemed to be prepared to grant the possibility of miracles on historical grounds in his 1880 essay, in his 1882 letter to his friend Smith, he wrote that the study of history as a scholarly discipline excludes it.

A noticeable feature of Kuenen’s assertions is that his struggle against the traditional concept of revelation was not inspired by theological or philosophical motivations, but by historical arguments alone. In Kuenen's view, the historical discipline is epistemologically privileged over religious ideas and convictions, and he is confident that in maintaining this view, he is less biased and less prejudiced than his opponents. His opponents, however, even today, are not likely to accede to that automatically. They are likely to point to Kuenen’s position as a liberal theologian, and object that

his demand for biblical literature to be subjected to the ordinary criteria used for secular history betrays a philosophical *a priori*.

This brings us to the question of how theological Modernism and the historical-critical study of the Bible are related to each other.

First of all, it is clear that those who can do without the notion of revelation (i.e. special revelation or revelation altogether), will have no problems with a historical approach of the Bible. In this sense, liberal theology and historical criticism are easily seen as natural allies in the struggle against Christian traditionalism. Secondly, Modernist theology can be regarded as a representative, or at least a product, of the very Enlightenment that questioned the notion of revelation in the first place. Viewed in this way, Modernism and biblical criticism are two sides of one coin.

However, it would be facile to stamp all those who apply the historical method to biblical literature as Modernist theologians on that account. If it is true that modernist theologians practised biblical criticism in order to attack supra-naturalism and prove their points of view as opposed to the traditionalists, we must also acknowledge that many of those opponents accepted the challenge, and also engaged in biblical criticism, intending to demonstrate that history and revelation are not mutually exclusive.

In the Netherlands, a fine example of this category was Gerrit Wildeboer (1855-1911), professor of Old Testament studies in Groningen, and a representative of the so-called ethical current within Protestantism around 1900.21 The ethicists wanted to have an open mind for the cultural and scientific achievements of the nineteenth century, but also wanted to remain faithful to those traditional values that they considered conducive to a healthy religious condition. Wildeboer, who had been a pupil of Kuenen’s, embraced the historical approach and, as a scholar, actively contributed to Old Testament criticism. History was important for him, because, in his view, God had made himself known within history. He welcomed the historical method, because it clarified history, and thus the ways in which God had revealed himself. One may note the shift in Wildeboer’s concept of revelation: the Bible as such was no longer identical to God’s revelation, but it became a witness to God’s revelation within history. Wildeboer, then, accepted the historical-critical approach, but saw no conflict with revelation, even if the latter concept had to be modified. In 1893, he wrote:

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And yet one will have to acknowledge that, in the end, a proper historical understanding of the Bible is of crucial importance for our knowledge of what God really prepared for us in and through Israel.22

Historical criticism, sometimes employed as a weapon against traditionalism, is here transformed into an instrument to better understand God’s revelation. Wildeboer adds that criticism is an ancillary discipline, ‘no commander’.23

Here, the historical discipline has obtained the same comfortable position with regard to theology as textual criticism and linguistics had earlier assumed: formally subordinate to theology, but independent of its requirements, whereas theology itself is unable to renounce the results of the philological, including historical, study of what it regards as its fundament: the Bible.

Let me conclude with a piece of historical irony. After his death in 1891, Kuenen was briefly succeeded by W.H. Kosters, and then by B.D. Eerdmans.24 In Modernist views and ecclesiastical as well as political leadership, Eerdmans was as prominent as Kuenen (although in theological terms Eerdmans later became somewhat more moderate than Kuenen). His appointment secured the Old Testament chair at Leiden University in liberal hands. In 1907, Wildeboer was also called to Leiden – as the new professor for Hebrew in the Faculty of Arts. As a result, theology at Leiden University was served by an anti-traditionalist Old Testament scholar, and philology by a moderate traditionalist theologian. One way or the other, it seems that biblical philology and theology will never be completely separate. To philology it makes no difference; to theology, it is a great advantage.

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22 Wildeboer, De letterkunde des Ouden Verbonds, p. vi: ‘En men zal toch moeten erkennen, dat ten leste het juiste historisch verstand des Bijbels de grootste beteekenis heeft voor de kennis van wat God werkelijk in en door Israël voor ons bereid heeft’ (my translation).
23 Ibidem: ‘Kritiek is een dienende wetenschap, geen heerscheres’.
24 On Eerdmans, see De Vries, Bible and Theology, pp. 107-121; Van Driel, Dienaar van twee heren.


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