

Prolegomena van Bijbelsche Godgeleerdheid
Dr. E.H. van Leeuwen
The Presbyterian and Reformed Review 4:143-145. [1893]

In the Preface the author gives his reasons for considering the study of Biblical Theology of supreme importance in the present crisis of theology. The Bible, "that strange book, of which our age, notwithstanding all its efforts, cannot rid itself," being subjected to the most searching criticism and to ever-repeated applications of the anatomical knife, it devolves upon the Churches of the Reformation to let the Scriptures speak for themselves, and "to take their composition and their contents for a moment, not as we should like them to be, but as they really are." The truth of these statements will appear to everybody who is at all aware of the destructive influences at work around us. There is an urgent need in all branches pertaining to Biblical study, and not the least in Biblical Theology, to replace the distorted and disrupted fragments into which the Scriptures have been torn, by the organic unity of both form and matter as it is given in the Bible itself. Biblical Theology in particular should derive its strength, not from any tacit or even outspoken opposition to the Church doctrine, but should rather, in close alliance with the latter, attempt to show how the Church, being guided by the Spirit, in its historical development of the truth has remained in closer contact with the Word than the critical theories of the present day.

The book has other features that please us. The objective character of revelation is maintained in a very positive manner. The temptation to weaken this may become especially strong in Biblical Theology. It would seem as if the idea of a progressive, living revelation, that gradually unfolds the perfect doctrines from their perfect germs, no longer suffices to satisfy the prevailing demand for so-called historical, or, more accurately speaking, evolutionistic treatment of sacred things. Hence many, in an altogether subjective manner, make the *religion* of Israel the object of Old Testament Theology, either minimizing with Herman Schultz the revelation lying back of it to some undefined, immanent process, or limiting it with Bernhard Weiss to a series of divine acts, then making Biblical Theology the description of the views and conceptions in which these acts were appropriated and interpreted. In either case Biblical Theology will have for its object something relative and human, and will be free to exhibit it as passing through the stages of a human and imperfect development. Prof. van Leeuwen's book is almost entirely free from this serious error. It states the object of the science to be "the doctrinal contents of the Bible." These doctrinal contents, including both dogmatic and ethic elements, are the product of revelation, and revelation is a speaking of God. It is to be regretted that there are some statements not fully in line with this excellent position; e.g., the following: "The doctrine contained in the Bible is not distinguished from a formal point of view from the historical character of the Biblical contents in general. . . .being as it were woven into the historical narrative." And again: "What the Bible places before us is neither a doctrinal system nor a system of duties, . . .but it is history," etc. This is only true in part. Certainly books like Proverbs and the Epistle to the Romans do not present to us their dogmatic and ethical contents interwoven with an historical narrative. We fear that the author here allows himself to be influenced by a theory of revelation which, in the abstract, he would perhaps not accept as his own. Divine acts are no doubt an integral part of revelation, but they derive their revealing power only from the *divine words* preceding, accompanying and following them, by which they are placed in their proper light. The highest form for man to communicate his thoughts in is speech, and in this respect also man was made after God's image. Far more objectionable, however, than the above is a statement like

the following: that Biblical history is “the unfolding and development of the work and *life of God in humanity*, as it finds its most glorious manifestation and its highest perfection in and through Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate.” According to this formula, revelation is not merely encased in history, but history also ceases to have for its chief aim the communication to us of God’s revealed truth, and becomes instead the description of a mystical process of imparting divine life to humanity. We hasten to say, however, that such a view would not be in accordance with the whole tenor of the book.

The author follows the traditions of the Utrecht school in placing little stress on inspiration. This topic is almost entirely ignored. The seventeenth paragraph, to be sure, bears the heading “Inspiration;” but a perusal shows that the term is here used to denote one of the several forms of revelation, and not in its technical sense. Inspiration is defined as “an inward revelation wrought in man by the Spirit of God,” and is distinguished from visions, dreams, etc., as “immediate revelation.” It is afterwards characterized as being in particular “the form of prophecy.” There are serious objections to this use of terms. Notwithstanding the caution appended, confusion will arise. Inspiration, according to well-established usage, means one thing and revelation another. Together with the name, some of the characteristics of the former are likely to be transferred to the latter, and the result is obvious. It is further in accordance with this neglect of the doctrine of inspiration, that we find the Scriptures characterized as “documents of God’s revelation,” without any further information as to the nature of these documents.

The critical problems, in their bearing upon Biblical Theology, are lightly disposed of with the remark of Oehler that the science of introduction is as much dependent on the results of Biblical Theology as the latter on the former. The question of canonicity is met with the simple statement that the author, teaching theology for the Reformed Church in the Netherlands, takes the Bible not in its Lutheran or Roman sense, but “as it really exists among us.” This is hardly satisfactory from a scientific point of view. It may not be obligatory upon Biblical Theology to *establish* a definite view concerning the Bible, but we do not see how it can escape the duty of *having* and *expressing* such a view in unambiguous and scientific terms. On our estimate of the Scriptures, and more particularly on our estimate of their inspiration, the right of Biblical Theology to form a separate science depends.

The opening sections, defining the scope and limits of Biblical Theology, suffer from a lack of scientific definiteness. Biblical Theology is said “comprehensively to convert the doctrinal contents of the Bible into a scientifically arranged whole.” We are not told, however, whereby this treatment of the Biblical data is distinguished from that applied in Dogmatics. Without further definition, the term Theology is vaguely given a middle sense between that in which it denotes the *Locus de Deo* in dogmatics, and that in which it covers the whole field of sacred studies. The name, Biblical Dogmatics, is disapproved of on the ground that dogma means “an ecclesiastical decretum or statutum.” Apart from the questionable accuracy of this last statement, we are not enlightened thereby as to the specific difference between Dogmatics and Biblical Theology. On the whole, our book is weakest on its encyclopedic side, a defect all the more serious in a work exclusively devoted to Prolegomena.

There are four chapters. The first discusses the introductory problems. The second, following Heb. 1:1, treats of the manifold character of revelation. The third, under the title “Revelation in its Manifoldness,” successively speaks of Dreams, Visions, Theophanies, The Voice of God, Miracles,

Inspiration, Prophecy, and the Revelation to Moses. The concluding section gives a very brief and summary treatment of the completed revelation in Christ.

Another volume, containing the *pars materialis* of Biblical Theology, may be expected to follow, though it is not definitely promised.