

# The Dichotomy between Religion and Science from the Perspective of Bible and Exegesis

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## Introduction

I would like to start this article with an anecdote. Some time ago, I spoke with representatives of a famous Dutch publishing house for bibles in the Dutch language. And one of them told me about the so-called Red-Letter-Bible. This Bible edition was very important to him, because, in the Old Testament, all the words spoken by God were printed in red, while everything else was printed in black. Your eye immediately falls upon which words are spoken by God. But I replied to him: well, this is actually a good way to immediately see the direct speeches spoken by the *character* God, and only the direct speeches (not the indirect speeches for example). Unfortunately, my conversation partner had no idea of what I was talking about. He showed me an advertisement on the Internet: *God's personal comments jump off the page in stunning fashion.*<sup>1</sup> He really thought that, with these red letters, he had direct access to the *verba impissima Dei* – God's very own words.

This anecdote illustrates the prominent place of the dichotomy between empirical and non-empirical reasoning in popular thinking and with the (sometimes disastrous) influence of empirical reasoning, based on this wide-spread dichotomy, on doing theology, in this case exegesis.

In fact, the rise of empirical approaches in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century has led, on the one hand, to a dichotomy between empirical and non-empirical thinking, and, on the other hand, to a use of empirical methods for non-empirical questions (and sometimes the other way around). In this article, I wish to address both aspects related to theology, and to Bible and exegesis in particular.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.wnd.com/2012/07/finally-red-letters-in-the-old-testament/](http://www.wnd.com/2012/07/finally-red-letters-in-the-old-testament/) [accessed December 20, 2021].

## The dichotomy caused by the reception of the empirical approach

The idea behind empirical approaches is the idea, that if you want to know something, you have to measure it, to count it, to quantify it. That is not a bad idea at all. Measuring, counting and quantifying the object of your analysis leads to scientific results. However, only in the case of an object that can be measured, counted and quantified.<sup>2</sup>

For example: if a guy gives a bouquet of flowers to his girl-friend (in the Netherlands a bouquet usually consists of ten flowers) and his girl-friend starts counting the flowers, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, the girl-friend is correct about the number of flowers in the bouquet, but I guess the number 10 is not the meaning, the truth of the bouquet. If the question were 'how many flowers are in the bouquet?', her answer would be perfectly correct. But if the question is 'do you love me?', her answer of 10 flowers does not make sense.

At least in popular thought (which is unfortunately present among academic scholars as well), the rise of the empirical approach has led to a dichotomy of intellect and emotions. Intellect and emotions have become two different realms. Science belongs to the realm of the intellect. And, consequently, religion and faith are part of the realm of emotions and feelings. Many theologians regrettably went along with this. In their view: having faith is something you do not do by using your brains, but with your emotions. After all, faith cannot be grasped using empirical approaches.<sup>3</sup>

From this (in fact incorrect) perspective that faith only belongs to the realm of emotions and feelings, we see that faith becomes especially connected to phenomena that break the laws of nature. If we are dealing with phenomena that cannot be explained by using empirical science, or even more, which contradict (or at least seem to contradict) the empirical order, it is exactly these phenomena that, in their view, require faith. As a consequence, faith is situated in miracles, stigmata or whatever other paranormal experiences.<sup>4</sup>

The impact of these ideas is enormous, also in doing theology. On the one hand, theologians are now focussing on the realm of feelings and emotions due to the division into two realms that has occurred. For instance, in current pastoral internships. The main question asked again and again in supervision sessions is the question 'how do you feel?'

<sup>2</sup> On empirical method and theology see e.g. Stefan Höschele, "Sola Experientia Facit Theologum?: The Role of Empirical Study in Systematic Theology," *Spes Christiana* 20 (2009): 141-152; Mark J. Cartledge, "Public Theology and Empirical Research: Developing an Agenda," *International Journal of Public Theology* 10 (2016) 145-166; Alexander Unser, "On Theology in Empirical Research: A Proposal Concerning the Role of Theoretical Terms," in: Ulrich Riegel (ed.), *Understanding religion: Empirical Perspectives in Practical Theology: Essays in Honour of Hans-Georg Ziebertz* (Research on religious and spiritual education 13; Münster: Waxmann, 2019), 27-41.

<sup>3</sup> On theology and emotions see e.g. Chris Hermans, Theo van der Zee, and Cor Aarnoutse, "The Influence of Feelings on Cognitive Achievement in Religious Education," *Journal of Empirical Theology* 20 (2007) 21-51; Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "Coming to Our Senses: Feeling and Knowledge in Theology and Ministry," *Pastoral Psychology* 63 (2014) 689-704. See also John Corrigan (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> On believe in miracles see also Editorial, "Are Miracles Essential to Religious Faith?," *The Biblical World* 32 (1908) 227-231; William Lane Craig, "The Problem of Miracles: A Historical and Philosophical Perspective," in David Wenham and Craig L. Blomberg (eds.), *The Miracles of Jesus* (Gospel Perspectives 6; Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 9-48; Jakub Pawlikowski, Michał Wiechetek, Jarosław Sak, and Marek Jarosz, "Beliefs in Miraculous Healings, Religiosity and Meaning in Life," *Religions* 6 (2015) 1113-1124.

In the western world, the idea that we should be in touch with our feelings and emotions is omnipresent. And of course, someone who works in pastoral care should be a well-balanced person. However, not only well-balanced regarding his feelings and emotions, but regarding his intellect and brains as well. In my view, our emphasis on feeling and emotions has resulted in the loss of how to be in touch with your other human capacities, like your intellect.

On the other hand, nowadays even theologians are in search of ‘hard material’, as is used in science, which can be researched with empirical approaches. We do not have a unit of measurement for having faith. Of course, we can count how many times someone attends church, how many minutes a day someone prays, how many times a week someone says ‘OMG’. And I believe we should indeed measure all these kinds of things, because they are important to know, as long as we realize that when we count church attendance, we are only counting how many times someone is attending church and we are not, in doing so, measuring their faith.

Adopting this to my own discipline of Old Testament exegesis: the question how often someone reads the Bible is a sociological question (which is worth being asked),<sup>5</sup> but does not give information about the biblical texts, neither regarding their synchronic meaning nor their diachronic development through history. The question as to what actual people do feel when reading a biblical narrative, is a psychological question (which is worth being asked), but does not give information about the biblical texts, neither regarding their synchronic meaning nor their diachronic development.

The anecdote about the Red-Letter-Bible demonstrates the desire to point at hard, empirical data regarding the Bible. Using red letters, you can get the false impression that you can see the real, so to say ‘empirical’, words of God. However, this is not the case, as I will explain further on in this article.

## Textual fundamentalism and revelation theology

This brings me to a core question in theology, that arises against the background of the dichotomy caused by empirical thinking: what is the relationship between revelation and text?<sup>6</sup> By equating revelation and text, the revelation becomes ‘hard material’ like the text, and as a consequence also accessible by using empirical approaches. However, this is not a proper way to deal with the differences between empirical and non-empirical phenomena. On the contrary, it is a fundamentalist way of doing things. From the perspective of biblical exegesis, fundamentalism can be defined as follows: a 1-on-1-relationship between the world in the text and the world outside the text. In religious terms: a 1-on-1-relationship between the world in sacred scripture and the world outside sacred scripture. In other words: the book, i.e. the text, and the revelation coincide.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Elizabeth A. Klonoff and Hope Landrine, “How Often do You Read the Bible?,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 23 (1999) 393-398; Leslie Francis, “The Relationship Between Bible Reading and Purpose in Life Among 13–15-Year-Olds,” *Mental Health Religion & Culture* 3(2000) 27-36.

<sup>6</sup> Archibald L.H.M. van Wieringen, “Openbaring – Traditie – Schrift: Een katholieke reactie op Cees Houtmans *De Schrift wordt geschreven*,” *Nederlands theologisch tijdschrift* 64 (2010) 218-237. See also Joseph A Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission’s Document The interpretation of the Bible in the Church: Text and Commentary* (Subsidia biblica 18; Roma: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1995).

In fact, a fundamentalist view on a text is not reserved to religious texts only. In the USA, someone complained about a dessert, strawberry yogurt, or something like that. A strawberry was depicted on the carton. A very big strawberry. He claimed that a strawberry as depicted could not be found in the yoghurt. Nowadays, underneath this type of image on cartons, a text is therefore displayed reading: ‘not in actual size’ or ‘enlarged to show texture’.

The American consumer claimed to have been misled, because the image was, in his view, incorrect, which means the world of the image of the strawberry did not match the world of the strawberries in the yoghurt. In other words: the consumer assumed that there would be a 1-on-1-relationship between the world in the text (in this case the image of a strawberry) and the world outside the text (in this case the empiric strawberries in the yoghurt). This implies, however, that this American consumer was not able to read the picture. In his view, the only possible interpretation of an *image* of a 30-centimetre strawberry is a strawberry of 30 centimetres in the empirical world outside the image. The relation between the two worlds of the image and of the yoghurt is empirical. That the image of such a huge strawberry on a yoghurt carton could mean that the yoghurt is full of strawberries and that it is therefore the most delicious strawberry yoghurt in the world, was beyond this consumer’s comprehension.

The fact that the world in the text and outside the text do not coincide is very relevant for Christian revelation theology. In both Judaism and Christianity, the sacred book is not the same as the divine revelation. What does God reveal? Not a message, a system, a doctrine, a text, a set of moral rules, or something like these. God reveals himself. It is God himself who becomes visible. The content of the revelation is God. The sacred writings are a testimony of this revelation, not the revelation itself.

A very important biblical example of this view on writings as being the testimony of the revelation is Deuteronomy 31:24-26:

*And it came to pass, when Moses had finished writing the words of this law in a book, that Moses commanded the Levites, who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord: ‘Take this book of the law, and put it in the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, that it may be there for a testimony against you.’*

In this text, it is Moses who writes the book, which is placed in the ark of the covenant. The ark of the covenant is like an empty throne for the Lord God. In the same way the ark as a throne does not contain God, the book does not contain God’s revelation; but in the same way the empty throne refers to God, the book testifies to God’s self-revelation.<sup>7</sup>

Because the book, i.e. the text, is not the revelation, but a testimony of it, we have to read the text, to interpret it, in order to understand the testimonial function of the text. Our relationship to the biblical texts always has a hermeneutic character: without reading, which means without interpreting, we cannot do anything with the text.

<sup>7</sup> From an exegetical point of view see also Edgar W. Conrad, “Heard But Not Seen: The Representation of ‘Books’ in the Old Testament,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 54 (1992) 45-59; Archibald L.H.M. van Wieringen, “Writing and (not) reading the Torah (and contrasting texts) in the Book of Isaiah,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 44 (2019) 43-53.

Another example from the Bible is Luke 10:25-30:

*Just then a scribe stood up to test Jesus: 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him: 'What is written in the law? How do you read it?' He answered: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' And he said to him: 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.' But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus: 'And who is my neighbour?' Jesus replied: 'Once a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho...'*

Jesus asks the scribe two questions. The first one is about what is written. The scribe is easily able to give the correct answer. His answer is a combination of Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. However, the problem is not solved by quoting the proper texts. The second question is still to be answered: how do you read it? In other words: how do you interpret these quoted texts so that it is you who can use them to inherit eternal life? And this question is much more complex. The scribe does not know the answer, but Jesus is willing to help him find the answer by telling a parable.<sup>8</sup>

In Judaism and Christianity, the text is a testimony of the self-revealing God, not the revelation itself. In this manner, the sacred texts are present in the *Symbolum Constantino-politanum* (often called the 'Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed'). Although we have various versions of this Creed, the Scriptures are always mentioned in them in the same way:<sup>9</sup>

Σταυρωθέντα τε ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν ἐπὶ Ποντίου Πιλάτου, καὶ παθόντα καὶ ταφέντα, καὶ ἀναστάντα τῇ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ κατὰ τὰς Γραφάς.

Crucifixus etiam pro nobis sub Pontio Pilato; passus et sepultus est, et resurrexit tertia die, secundum Scripturas.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

The Creed makes a clear allusion to 1 Corinthians 15:3-4:

*For I handed on to you as of first importance what was handed on (to me): that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.*

Paul mentions both aspects of Jesus' Pascha, his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead, in relation to what has been written down: they are according to the Scriptures. What you can read in the Scriptures, testifies to the self-revealing God in Jesus the Christ.

The Nicene Creed, therefore, says that what we believe regarding Jesus is in accordance with the Scriptures. The Creed does not say that we believe in the Bible. We do not. We believe in God, Father, Son and holy Spirit; but what we believe regarding God, Father, Son and holy Spirit, is in accordance with the Scriptures. You have to read them, to interpret them, in order to believe.

Within the liturgical setting we can see a similar view on the sacred texts as a testimony of the self-revealing God. In the Latin (or Roman) rite, a reading from the Scriptures is

<sup>8</sup> François Bovon, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas* (Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 3/2; Zürich: Benziger, 1996), 85-86.

<sup>9</sup> Denzinger/Schönmetzer #150.

concluded with the formula: *Verbum Domini*.<sup>10</sup> The text which has just been read in a liturgical celebration, is characterised as *verbum*, *word*, not as text or book. This word is further characterised by the genitive of *Dominus*, which means *Lord*. A genitive only indicates that two words belong together, but how they belong together is open. The (liturgical) expression *Verbum Domini* can mean both the *Word of the Lord* (a so-called *genetivus subiectivus*) and the *Word about the Lord* (a so-called *genetivus obiectivus*). Because, in patristic times, a separate word *Dominus* always means the risen Lord, I think the formula *Verbum Domini* means *Word about the (risen) Lord*. Whatever reading from the Scriptures is read, they all testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. This in no way means that God is the historical author of the biblical words being read in the liturgy, as if *Verbum Dei* were used, containing a *genetivus subiectivus* indicating the historical author.

Therefore, Christianity cannot be characterised as a religion of the book. Christianity is the religion of the Word (and the Word became flesh). The indication of Christianity being a religion of the book derives from standard Islamic theologies, as if there were three religions of the book: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Although in standard Islamic theology, Judaism and Christianity are presented as deliberately having handed down the sacred book in a false form, and that the authentic book can be found in Islam, I have met many Christian theologians who, incorrectly, have taken over the idea of Christianity as a religion of the book. Instead of being a religion of the Word, Islam characterises itself as being a religion of the book, with all the dangerous consequences related to this.<sup>11</sup>

For example from the Hadith Bukhari, book 8, section 56,829:

*The Jews came to Allah's Apostle and told him that a man and a woman from amongst them had committed illegal sexual intercourse. Allah's Apostle said to them: 'What do you find in the Torah about the legal punishment of Ar-Rajm?' They replied: '(But) we announce their crime and lash them.' Abdullah bin Salam said: 'You are telling a lie; Torah contains the order of Rajm.' They brought and opened the Torah and one of them solaced his hand on the Verse of Rajm and read the verses preceding and following it. Abdullah bin Salam said to him: 'Lift your hand.' When he lifted his hand, the Verse of Rajm was written there. They said: 'Muhammad has told the truth; the Torah has the Verse of Rajm.' The Prophet then gave the order that both of them should be stoned to death. (Abdullah bin 'Umar said: 'I saw the man leaning over the woman to shelter her from the stones.')'*

For the Jews the problem is not whether the text regarding the death penalty by stoning is in their sacred book of the Torah, but how this text should be interpreted, whereas for Mohammed the world of the text and the world outside the text should totally coincide.

The Hadith Bukhari does not mention which text of the Torah contains the death penalty by stoning for adultery, but it probably is Leviticus 20:10.<sup>12</sup> In the Red-Letter-Old-Testament, this biblical text looks like this:

<sup>10</sup> Edward Foley (ed.), *A Commentary on the Order of Mass of the Roman Missal: A New English Translation Developed under the Auspices of the Catholic Academy of Liturgy* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011), 182 discusses an interesting dynamic-equivalent translation of *Verbum Domini*.

<sup>11</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #108. Pace e.g. Matthew Dimmock and Andrew Hadfield (eds.), *The Religions of the Book: Christian Perceptions, 1400–1660* (Early Modern Literature in History; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Hieke, *Leviticus 16-27* (Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament; Freiburg: Herder, 2014), 793-795.

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ‘... If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbour, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death ...’

Are these red letters *God’s personal comment jumping off the page*? I do not think so. The red text does not give the *verba ipsissima Dei*; but it belongs to a biblical book, part of a collection of books, now called ‘the canon’, which testifies to the self-revealing God, and which can only be understood by reading and interpreting it.

In terms of textual analysis, the red letters are not spoken by God, but by the character God. From a textual point of view, the world of the text never coincides with the world outside the text. We have to distinguish between the senders and receivers at the various textual levels: the characters communicating with each other, the communication between text-immanent author and the text-immanent reader, and the historical author and historical reader. The first two levels are text-immanent, the last one exists outside the text. Only by interpreting the text, can the relation between the communication between the characters, in this case about the death penalty by stoning for adultery, and the communication between the text-immanent author and reader, as well as the historical author and reader become clear.<sup>13</sup>

## The literary perspective of the genres

From a literary perspective the genres are also important. Different texts reflect different genres. Sometimes, it seems that in the western world, which focusses on empirical phenomena, only one single genre exists: the scientific report. But if you do not distinguish between the different genres, a great deal of miscommunication will arise.<sup>14</sup>

We can especially see this problem regarding Genesis 1:1-2:3, the so-called creation narrative. For many people in the western world the choice is either science, let’s say Darwinism, evolution theory, or Genesis, let’s say creationism. However, by contrasting ‘science’ with ‘Genesis’, the difference in genre between a scientific theory and a literary text is not taken into account.

Genesis 1:1-2:3 cannot be considered as being a scientific report. It has a literary form totally different from the literary form of a scientific report. For example, the text of Genesis 1:1-2:3 is ordered by making use of the repetition of formulae, such as: *Then it was evening and morning: the first day, the second day, the third day*, etc. In view of this formulaic sentence, the text of Genesis 1:1-2:3 can be divided into 7 units, each unit describing a single day. This is not expressing that God created the entire world or cosmos in just 7 days; it describes that the character God orders the world (in fact only the earth, the decor space meant for the characters human beings), in 7 days, of which the seventh day is the resting day, the day of the Sabbath. The character God has to order the earth, as the text says: *the earth was empty and void and darkness was upon the abyss* (verse 2).

<sup>13</sup> Archibald L.H.M. van Wieringen, “Methodological developments in biblical exegesis. Author – Text – Reader,” *Analecta of the Ukraine Catholic University* 7 (2020) 27-46. See also Frank G. Bosman and Archibald L.H.M. van Wieringen, *Gaming As Art: Perspectives on the Relationship between Art and Digital Gaming* (Vid-eo Games and the Humanities; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2022 [forthcoming]).

<sup>14</sup> Still very readable: Gerhard Lohfink, *The Bible: Now I Get It!: Form-Criticism Handbook* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1979).

This does not go for heaven, the other part in the biblical decor, the dwelling place of the character God. This ordering of the earth is a preparation in order that it can be inhabited by the characters human beings. Moreover, the creation itself is not in focus, since the first verse tells about creation before the narrative starts: *After God had created the heaven and the earth in the beginning...*

By using this formula counting the days, the text-immanent author creates an open ending of his narrative for the text-immanent reader. The seventh time the formula is missing. The seventh day is not completed. Regarding the seventh day, the character God does not say that it is good and the text-immanent author does not tell that it was evening and morning again, with an eighth day starting. This is one of the text-immanent reader-oriented techniques in literature: it is the text-immanent reader who is challenged to complete the content of the text beyond the text itself. It is a text-immanent reader-oriented technique that is used quite often in biblical texts and even for entire biblical books (like the book of Isaiah<sup>15</sup>).

The same goes for the formula *And God saw that it was good*, which forms a climax on the sixth day with: *God saw all he had made, and, yes, it was very good* (1:31). The semantics of 'good' does not belong to the genre of a scientific report, for it does not express an idea that can be empirically tested. It belongs namely to a different word-field than the semantics of empirical reasoning. It does not express something measurable, but a valuation. From God's perspective, creation is *good*, and, as soon as human being has been created, even *very good*.<sup>16</sup>

Also, through the use of this formula denoting the creation as being good, the text-immanent reader is involved in the text in a similar way as with the formula regarding the counting of days. The *good*-formula is absent for the seventh day. Now human beings have been installed as a kind of co-ruler over the creation since the day of their own creation, the sixth day. Humans are created co-responsible for whether God will be able to say *good* at the end of the seventh day. Again, it is the text-immanent reader who is challenged to complete the content of the text beyond the text itself.

The tendency to read Genesis 1:1-2:3 over and over again as a scientific report is present in many modern translations. The story of Genesis 1:1-2:3 tells that all that lives is made *according to its sort*. That is told time and again. Fruit trees that bear fruit *according to their sorts*. Vegetation that yields seed *according to its sort*. Trees bearing fruit *according to their sorts*. All sea animals *according to their sorts* and all winged animals *according to their sorts*. The wild animal *according to its sort* and the cattle *according to its sort*. Everything that crawls *according to its sort*. However, when human being is created, it is not according to its sort. Human being is not created according to his or her sort, but: *God created human being according to his image: according to God's image he created him, male and female, he created them*. In other words, human being is not immanent (species-oriented), but transcendent (God-oriented): he is created according to God's image. God is visible in the face of human being.

<sup>15</sup> Archibald L.H.M. van Wieringen, *The Reader-Oriented Unity of the Book Isaiah* (Amsterdamse Cahiers voor de Exegese van de Bijbel en zijn Tradities Supplement Series 6; Vught: Skandalon, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> Benno Jacob, *Das erste Buch der Tora Genesis* (Berlin: Schocken, 1934) [reprint: New York: Ktav, s.a.], 32.

Many modern Bible translations, however, sometimes translate the expression *according to its sort* with: *one sort after the other*.<sup>17</sup> *One sort after the other* means that God first created the poodles and then the Rottweilers and then the Labradors. Those who translate like that, read a theological text biologically, empirically. In fact, almost fundamentalistically. As if somewhere a scientific report is hidden in this text. In my view, by not recognizing the genre of the text, the text is misunderstood, actually even abused.

Regarding the so-called miracle-stories in the Gospels, we see a similar tendency to focus on Jesus breaking the laws of nature, because breaking the laws of nature were a sign of divine presence. There is even literature using this aspect of miracles to emphasize Jesus' divine nature over his human nature (which is actually an incorrect theology: in a proper systematic theology you cannot play out the two natures of Jesus against each other).<sup>18</sup>

For example, chapter 9 of the Gospel according to John. If you want to explain that Jesus is the light of the world, would you let him heal a lame or blind person? The author of John 9 chose the latter option. Which, in my eyes, makes sense. In fact, the author makes use of a super-blind character: a person blind from birth. It appears that just this blind man is the only one in the narrative who sees that Jesus is the Messiah, whereas all the other people, although not being blind, are not able to see this.

Does John 9 belong to the genre of miracle-stories?<sup>19</sup> According to the text, my answer is: no, it does not. Not only is the word 'miracle' not used anywhere in the text, but a word for healing is also not used. In the text no-one asks the man who was born blind: who *healed* your eyes? The question is always: who *opened* your eyes? The text is not about healing, but about seeing.

And what is the genre of John 9? If it does not belong to the genre of miracle-stories, it might belong to the genre of unjust lawsuit-stories. After all, the Gospel according to John can be considered as a chain of unjust lawsuits. The first lawsuit is against a woman accused of adultery in 8:1-11. Jesus liberates the woman from this unjust lawsuit. The second one is against the man born blind in chapter 9. In a four-phased lawsuit, described in the verses 10-34, the man who was once blind is condemned and excommunicated, thrown out of the synagogue. It is there, outside the synagogue, that Jesus finds the, once again marginalised, man and reveals himself to him as the Messiah. The third unjust lawsuit is regarding Lazarus, after Jesus resurrected him from the dead, as is told in 12:10-11. The text of chapter 12 does not tell whether Jesus is able to save Lazarus; however, 20:2, using the expression *beloved disciple*, which is only used for Lazarus in chapter 11, suggests that the risen Lazarus is present in the empty tomb of Jesus. The lawsuit against Jesus in the chapters 18-19 forms the climax of these four unjust lawsuits. Jesus' life seems to end in a disaster.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> See especially the Dutch *De Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling*, 2004. Cf. also e.g. the translation of *Contemporary English Version*, 2000: *God made every one of them*.

<sup>18</sup> E.g. Simon J. Kistemaker, *The Miracles: Exploring the Mystery of Jesus's Divine Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> See also Barhatulirwa Vincent Muderhwa, *A Comprehensive Reading of John 9: A Socio-Rhetorical Perspective of Discipleship in the Gospel of John* (s.l.: University of South Africa, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Sjef van Tilborg, *Johannes* (belichting van het bijbelboek; Boxtel: Katholieke Bijbelstichting, 1988), 103-118.

We also see the confusion about science and faith in the way we usually name biblical stories. For example, we read many stories in the Gospels about Jesus sharing bread. In many European languages, including my Dutch language, these stories are popularly called *the stories about the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves of bread*. These stories, however, do not distinguish themselves as miracles. They do not concern the fact that only a few loaves of bread become a lot of loaves of bread. They concern the fact that everyone can eat and that no one has to starve. The English tradition calling these stories *the stories about Jesus feeding the crowd* is much better. Focussing on the multiplication of the loaves of bread is focussing on Jesus breaking the laws of nature; focussing on Jesus feeding the crowd is focussing on salvation history in favour of the people around Jesus.

In the Johannine version of Jesus feeding the crowd, 6:14 explicitly says that the people recognize Jesus' act of salvation as a σημεῖον, as a *sign*. However, many Bible translations translate this word with *miracle*, suggesting that the text is about Jesus performing miracles, instead of Jesus sharing bread and feeding the crowd as a sign of the salvation he personifies.<sup>21</sup>

### Biblical theology of creation

For the discussion on science and religion, it is valuable to dwell a bit more on a creation theology based on the story in Genesis 1:1-2:3. After having created heaven and earth, God orders the earth into a place that human beings can inhabit. The dwelling-place of human beings is not a chaos, not *הָרֵקָו וְהַתֵּהוֹמָה empty and void*. It is a reliable order God has created. When the people of God are returning from the exile, the book of Isaiah says in 45:18:

*For thus said the LORD who himself created heaven, God who himself formed the earth and made it, while he established it and created it not in vain, who formed it to be inhabited: 'I am the LORD'.*

Because God is a reliable God –he is the Lord–, the order of the earth is reliable. Return from the exile is a kind of restoration of the order which had been endangered by God's people.<sup>22</sup>

Because God is reliable, the order of the earth is reliable; and, therefore, because the order of the earth is reliable, God is reliable. God takes his responsibility for the creation of the earth. In biblical words: God maintains the basic order of heaven and earth. In early Christianity God was therefore described as *omnitenens*, as the one who holds (*tenere*) the all (*omnes*). In the second century the word *omnitenens* was replaced by the word *omnipotens*: God is powerful regarding the all. Maybe this change from *omnitenens* to *omnipotens* was necessary to avoid God seeming to be like a kind of mythological Atlas. Anyhow, it

<sup>21</sup> E.g. the *King James Version*, 1611: *the miracle*; *Amplified Bible*, 1964: *the sign (attesting miracle)*; the *New Living Translation*, 1996: *this miraculous sign*; *Contemporary English Version*, 2000: *this miracle*. See also: Archibald L.H.M. van Wieringen, *The Seven Sacraments of the Catholic Church: A Fresh Biblical Perspective* (Tilburg Theological Studies/Tilburger Theologische Studien 9; Zürich: Lit, 2022).

<sup>22</sup> Ulrich Berges, *Jesaja 40-48* (Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament; Freiburg: Herder, 2008), 428-429.

is this word *omnipotens* that made it into the Latin text of the Creed, and not the word *omnitenens* (whereas the Greek text uses the word Παντοκράτορα, the *all-creator*).<sup>23</sup>

The idea of *omnipotens* was not meant as an expression of almightiness as such. God is almighty, not because he is able to do everything, but because it is he, and he alone, who has the power to maintain heaven and earth he created. In western discussion meaningless questions have arisen, such as whether God is able to draw a square circle. And to answer this meaningless question: he is not. If he were able to do so, he would not be the reliable creator of heaven and earth; he would not be God, our God.

These kinds of questions are known as the Omnipotence Paradox.<sup>24</sup> Although we can see some traces of this paradox already in Saint Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*, the paradox itself goes back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, it is a philosophical issue, not a theological one.

As is made clear in Genesis 1:1-2:3, the biblical decor consists of two spaces: heaven and earth. Heaven above is the dwelling place of God; the earth below is the dwelling place for human beings. What is striking is that the Bible does not pay attention to God's dwelling place. Every description of it is missing. Heaven is just not interesting; or at least not interesting for humans. After heaven and earth were created by God in the beginning, the text mentions a problem with regard to the earth: the earth was desolate and empty and dark. There are no comments about heaven, except indirectly: the earth was chaos and therefore needed to be ordered; heaven apparently not. Attention must be directed toward the earth, not toward heaven. As the abode of God, heaven will certainly be in order. Heaven is not the problem, but the earth is.

In order to prevent man looking up to heaven, God's dwelling place, God made a kind of plate with which he closed off the bottom of heaven. This is usually referred to as *firmament* in Bible translations. So, if you want to look into heaven, then that is no longer possible. At the most you will see this closing plate. It does not look nice, but a few days later, God decorates it with a large lamp and a small lamp and also with stars. Nicer to see. Yes, the Bible has its own funny way of representing which gods are found everywhere else in Israel's *Umwelt*.<sup>25</sup>

This Biblical naughtiness is still important for us as well. Theology calls what the Bible does in the creation narrative of Genesis, demythologization. Precisely because the sun and the moon are not gods, but part of a God-ordered setting, they can be studied. God has made an orderly world. That means that this world order is reliable, since God is reliable. The laws of nature also confirm this. In fact, theology should say that, since demythologization has taken place, we can use all science, including the natural sciences, to unravel the processes of human life and nature. A neo-mythologization, as is sometimes taking place in the modern debate on climate change (with expressions such as 'Mother nature' and 'the planet is suffering'<sup>26</sup>), is theologically neither necessary nor desirable.

<sup>23</sup> Pieter Smulders, Belijdenis en leer, in Marinus Pranger (eds.), *Saecula saeculorum: Opstellen aangeboden aan C.W. Mönnich* (Amsterdam: Athenaeum-Polak, 1982), 231-241.

<sup>24</sup> E.g. Douglas Walton, "The Omnipotence Paradox," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 4 (1975)705-715.

<sup>25</sup> Georg Fischer, *Genesis 1-11* (Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament; Freiburg: Herder, 2018), 141-142.

<sup>26</sup> E.g. the Pope Francis's video message to participants at the UN climate action summit 2019 [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2019/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190923\\_vid-eomessaggio-climate-action-summit.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2019/documents/papa-francesco_20190923_vid-eomessaggio-climate-action-summit.html) [accessed December 20, 2021].

### Concluding remark

I hope to have made clear that faith is not in contrast to science, faith is even not complementary to science. There is no dichotomy, as is often thought. Science can be part of a faithful word without any problem and, the other way round, faith can be part of a world in which empirical approaches have their own appropriate place.<sup>27</sup>

### Дихотомія між релігією та наукою з перспективи Біблії та екзегези

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