

KLAAS SCHILDER
ON CREATION AND FLOOD (2)*

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The days of creation

We continue with Schilder's defence of the Reformed theologians who had been accused of wrongly interpreting the creation account. The accusation, as we saw in the previous article, was made by supporters of Dr. J. G. Geelkerken, the man whose views on Genesis 2 and 3 had been condemned by the Synod of Assen of 1926. One of Geelkerken's champions, the Rev. J. L. Jaspers, responded to the Synod's decision by means of an anonymous pamphlet. Herein he argued that various members of the Synod (people he referred to as "the men of Assen") lacked the moral authority to judge Geelkerken, since they themselves departed from the literal teaching of Scripture. He based his accusation on the fact that according to these theologians the days of creation may not have been 24 hours in length.

Schilder introduced this particular controversy as follows (see pp. 39-46 of his brochure): Jaspers knows that there are people who do not consider the days of Genesis 1 to have lasted 24 hours, or who at least dare not state with absolute certainty that the author of Genesis 1 intended that meaning, and who therefore in principle admit the possibility of those days having been periods of unknown length. This leads him (Jaspers) to the following conclusion: Assen says that Geelkerken must read literally what the Bible states. Anyone, however, who does not interpret the word "day" in Genesis 1 as a 24-hour period (not a second more, not a second less), does not read literally. And therefore, those among the "men of Assen" who hold that position are guilty of placing a burden on Dr. Geelkerken which they themselves refuse to touch. Nor is that all. Assen's verdict in the Geelkerken case implies that such men are themselves assailants of the authority of Scripture.

In his reply, Schilder challenges Jaspers' statement that Synod Assen has spoken of "*the* normal literal interpretation of Holy Scripture," pointing out that Assen did not and could not have done so. In fact, it admitted that there are statements in Scripture, also in the paradise account, that one cannot take "literally." Anthropomorphisms (such as descriptions of God's actions in human terms) can serve as an example. The issue between Assen and Geelkerken, Schilder says, was not between "literal" and "non-literal" in this sense. It was about the interpretation of events that the Bible (in Genesis 2 and 3) clearly describes as historical and factual, as having occurred in the time and space of our common reality, but that Geelkerken believes can be interpreted as non-historical and non-factual, as allegorical or symbolic representations of a "higher reality."

And that, Schilder says, is different from what is at issue in the dispute regarding the days of Genesis 1. For none of the "men of Assen" promoted a non-historical or non-factual interpretation of these days. All agreed that creation took place *in time and space*; that the days, whether or not they lasted 24 hours, were periods of real time (p. 40). "A day of 24 hours or of 25 hours, of 240 hours or of 2400 hours, and so on," he says, such as day is still a period of time and of our normal, real world; it is by no means a matter of a "higher reality." On the other hand, when Geelkerken says that "that tree...is not to be understood as a tree, and that 'eating' was perhaps no eating at all, and so on, then we have an altogether different situation from the one wherein one says: the six days were periods, measurable in time; we differ on the question whether they were periods as we measure them now or whether they were of a different measurement. But they certainly were periods in time, fragments of time" (pp. 42f.). This interpretation, he adds, cannot be compared with that of Geelkerken, which treats of historical events as non-real (*oneigenlijk*) and non-factual.

Another point Schilder raises is that of biblical warrant for one's interpretation. Jaspers complained in his brochure that Geelkerken was told that Scripture must provide the grounds and justification for his exegesis, but that the men who held the disputed view on the days of creation did not themselves base their conclusions on Scripture. Schilder challenges this statement. The exegesis of these men, he says, may well have been incorrect, but that is not at issue here. What counts is that they *tried* to prove that their viewpoint was warranted by Scripture, something Geelkerken did not do with his teaching of a "higher reality" (p. 43). Schilder tells his readers, as he has done before, that in the matter of the days he does not take sides and that, in any event, his own position is irrelevant. For even the most determined opponent of the view that the days were not 24 hours in length will agree with him, he says, that in principle justice is done to Scripture if in our exegesis we meet the following three conditions:

1. that not a single notion is allowed to enter our believing thought unless we truly believe that we may derive it from Scripture or can reconcile it with Scripture;
2. that extra-biblical scholarly research may never be the norm or standard (*bindende maatstaf*) for our believing thought (it always can and may and indeed must be occasion [*aanleiding*] for a further testing of our insight, since we can be mistaken in saying: thus speaks Scripture;¹ but it may never be the norm or standard; so that, when it is certain that Scripture teaches such and such a thing, no science may ever exalt itself as the judge of Scripture);
3. that the reality whereof one speaks remains the reality of the time wherein we live here on earth with all creatures, and of the space wherein God placed the world (p. 44).

And these conditions, he says, the "men of Assen" met in their speaking about Genesis 1.

In view of the foregoing it is irrelevant, Schilder believes, whether in the "incidental case" of the days Jaspers and Geelkerken and their supporters are right and someone else is wrong. The question is and remains *how* the exegete is reasoning, what his position is with respect to the concept of revelation (*openbaringsbegrip*) of Holy Scripture, and whether he is willing or not to bow before Scripture once its express meaning has been clearly established (p. 45). When interpreters do submit to Scripture, they may disagree on certain matters, but their differences remain within the realm of exegesis.

Schilder concludes his remarks on the controversy of the days by asking Jaspers to consider whether it is really all that foolish to accept the possibility that our rest- and workweek of seven 24-hour periods is a reflection of the seven divine periods in God's week of creation and Sabbath rest. But then always, he adds, God's week of working *in time and space* (p. 45).

Fear of evolutionism

One of the reasons why many Christians cling to the belief that Genesis 1 speaks of ordinary, 24-hour days is the fear that any other interpretation will lead to the acceptance of the theory of evolution. Jaspers also had used this argument. He stated in his pamphlet that the danger of the evolutionary theory infiltrating the Reformed churches was immanent; that in fact the "men of Assen" opened the door to it (p. 47).

Schilder takes issue with Jasper's view of evolution, which he says is too limited. It is superficial to say that the theory concerns only, or even primarily, the origin and development of the earth and of the species inhabiting it. Evolutionary theories do not stop with geology and biology and other sciences but infiltrate every sphere of life and thought and belief – including the sphere of religion. Especially today, now that the Reformed concept of revelation is at the centre of the spiritual warfare, the most important question is whether the content of Scripture is a revelation which came from above, from God, or whether it derives, in part or in whole, from the milieu wherein the authors lived – specifically the milieu of the

ancient oriental world. The question is, therefore, whether Israel's religion, the biblical doctrine of monotheism, the exalted concept of God, the messages in the first chapters of Genesis regarding man's original righteousness, his sin, and his redemption in Jesus Christ – whether all this is the fruit of human development OR the work of God, a work that he revealed to us. For that reason, he adds, if the question of evolution must be raised, Jaspers should look not only at the “men of Assen” but also at Geelkerken, who, after all, spoke of “oriental light” and an “oriental kind of narrative” in defending his position regarding Genesis 2 and 3 (p. 47).

Schilder does not say that Geelkerken favoured evolution, but neither does he agree that the “men of Assen” promoted it. In connection with this accusation he once again addresses the question as to *how* the interpreter arrives at his exegesis. He answers (as Kuyper and Bavinck did before him) that much depends on one's presuppositions. Someone who accepts evolution but also wants to retain the Bible will, he says, naturally try to interpret the days as ages, preferably spanning millions of years. But such a person is not led to his acceptance of evolution as a result of his biblical exegesis. The opposite is true: his belief in evolution has led him to his exegesis. It is conceivable that in such a case someone else, who also holds to a day-age interpretation but on altogether different grounds, will be among those who must judge the former. In short, what looks to be the same is not necessarily the same. The one may have come to his conclusion by denying the authority of Scripture, the other by honestly attempting to uphold it (pp. 48f.).

As to the specific threat of evolutionism, Schilder writes:

So long as the “men of Assen” cling to the concept of “creation,” and to the transcendental meaning of “God said,” and to the difference between the first and the second creation, and to the doctrine of the *Logos* [the divine Word], and to the absolute “in the beginning,” and so on – so long as all this is the case, so long will there be a dam that will stop any fundamental turn to the doctrine of evolution (p. 49).²

The Flood

We must look yet at Schilder's defence of Abraham Kuyper's exegesis of the flood. Kuyper, we saw, had considered the possibility that the flood had not covered the entire earth. Jaspers attacked Kuyper's position, insisting that the Bible does not allow for his interpretation, since we read in Genesis 7:19 that “all the high mountains under the entire heavens were covered.” Kuyper's exegesis, Jaspers said, implied the possible survival not only of wild animals but even of human beings. This would mean that the human race did not necessarily come from Noah alone, and that God's covenant with Noah lost its validity.

Schilder took the controversy seriously, as is evident from the fact that he devoted more space to this topic than to any of the other ones (pp. 15-27). He began by declaring that Jaspers had overstated his case. Kuyper's dilemma had been: either the entire earth was covered, or only the *inhabited* part, which obviously meant the part where the entire human family lived. The part of the earth that perhaps had not been covered was located on the other side of the earth from Noah, namely the area of the Americas and so on, which Kuyper apparently believed were still uninhabited in Noah's days – that is, before the dispersion of mankind at Babel. In any event, he taught expressly that with the exception of Noah and his family all of Adam's living descendents had perished in the flood. Humanity was also according to Kuyper descended from Noah and from him alone (p. 16).

Another problem with Jaspers' account, Schilder noted, was that Jaspers ignored the arguments that can be marshalled in support of Kuyper's position. Kuyper had mentioned that there are other places where the Bible speaks of “the entire earth” when only a part is meant, for example in John 21:25 and Lamentations 4:12. Apparently such hyperbolic speaking was Hebrew usage. Schilder added other

examples, such as Acts 2:5, which states that at Pentecost there were Jews in Jerusalem “from every nation under heaven,” Deuteronomy 2:25, where Moses is told that “this very day” God would put the fear of Israel “on all the nations under heaven,” and Judges 6:40, where we read (in the Dutch *Statenvertaling*) that Gideon’s fleece was dry but the entire earth (*de gansche aarde*) was covered with dew (pp. 17f., 21).

Schilder further points out that the Hebrew word used in Gen. 6:7 for “earth” often means not the earth as a whole but only the part that can be or has already been brought under cultivation. He admits that the biblical account creates the impression that the destruction wreaked by the flood was universal, but maintains that for the biblical author “the world” referred to the part of the earth that was inhabited, had a history, and was known to the people of the time. For that reason, to ask whether the earth is meant here as a geographic or a cultural-historical entity is not, he says, an assault upon the authority of Scripture, but simply an attempt to do justice to all the data (pp. 18f.). Nor was Kuyper the first to consider choosing the second alternative. Schilder mentions that ancient Jewish theologians, as well as Christian thinkers of past and present, have held an opinion similar to Kuyper’s. He further tells us that the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) leaves out the adjective “entire” in Genesis 7:19. The theologians of the Synod of Dort who wrote the notes (*Kanttekeningen*) for the Dutch Bible translation, the *Statenvertaling*, did not take sides in this particular issue, but were sufficiently cautious to refrain from commenting on Genesis 7:19. This is remarkable, he says, because in other places they do tend to explain this kind of expression. In any event, it can’t be said that Kuyper was an innovator (pp. 18-24).

Schilder shows that Kuyper considered the possibility of a limited flood because he thought that the context required it. Specifically, as we will see, he believed that some animals must have survived the flood. But was Jaspers not right in complaining that such a view directly contradicts the information we receive in the account of the flood? Don’t we read in Gen. 6:13 (*Statenvertaling*): “The end of all flesh has come before my face...” (RSV: “I have determined to make an end of all flesh...”) ? Dealing with this complaint, Schilder answers that Genesis 6:13 does not necessarily say what Jaspers thinks it says. To do justice to the text, he says, one has to begin by determining what is meant by the word “end” and the word “flesh.” The first word can mean death, but it can also mean (as the Septuagint appears to interpret it) the (remaining) time allotted to all flesh. And the term “flesh” can be translated in a variety of ways. There are places in the Bible where it indeed means all creatures, but elsewhere it refers to human beings alone, or to all *sorts* of human beings, or to the number of people living in a specific area, or to the animals as opposed to human beings, and so on (pp. 22f.). The meaning, in short, is not as clear as it seems to be at first sight.

This, Schilder adds, applies also to other texts, such as Genesis 7:14, where we read that “every wild animal according to its kind,” “all livestock according to their kinds,” etcetera, went into the ark. Referring once again to the *Statenvertaling*, Schilder shows that already according to the *Kanttekeningen* the words “every” and “all” in this text and in similar ones often mean “all sorts of” [*allerlei*]. The same explanation is given of the word “every” in “every kind of food that is to be eaten” in Gen. 6:21 (p. 24). Schilder suggests that one of the reasons why the writers of the *Kanttekeningen* came to their conclusion was the question how there could have been room in the ark for representatives of all the world’s animals. In any event, he adds, if the seventeenth-century theologians who wrote the *Kanttekeningen* were allowed to attempt connecting the various biblical data while bowing before the authority of Scripture, Kuyper should not be condemned for attempting to do the same (p. 25).

For Kuyper also chose among the possibilities which he believed the Bible allowed. Specifically, he thought that Gen. 9:5 (the ordinance protecting man against animals) demanded an exegesis allowing for the survival of wild animals in non-cultivated parts of the world. Schilder does not agree that Genesis 9:5 makes Kuyper’s exegesis of a limited flood necessary. But he also points out that Kuyper was not dogmatic about it. He spoke only of the *possibility* of a limited flood, and stated that certain parts of

Scripture do not *force* us to accept one interpretation over another. And he certainly did not deny the historicity of the flood, the ark, and so on, or the truly catastrophic nature of the event; Jaspers was therefore mistaken in stating that Kuyper gave a “non-factual” exegesis. Nor did Kuyper come to his exegesis for extra-biblical reasons, even though he believed that in retrospect (*achteraf*) his position was confirmed by extra-biblical data – fossils, height of the mountains, construction of the narrative, and so on (pp.19, 25-7).³

Kuyper’s exegesis may well have been erroneous, Schilder says, but the question is not whether Kuyper (or anyone else) has made mistakes in attempting to interpret Scripture, but

whether one places oneself above the Bible...and allows one’s own insight to dictate what the Bible CAN and MAY say – or whether one submits to the Bible itself, and makes one’s own insight captive to it – and in all cases where one does not know what the Bible means, honestly admits: I don’t know, but I prefer to reserve my conclusion, if necessary until after my death, rather than say in my haste that what I read in a certain passage cannot be true, and that therefore I will interpret it according to my own opinion (p. 26).

Summary and conclusion

So much for Schilder’s arguments. To summarize the main points of the foregoing:

1. It was not Schilder’s purpose to solve the question regarding the nature and length of the days of creation. His goal was to refute the claim that Geelkerken’s symbolic explanation of Genesis 2 and 3 was of the same nature as the exegesis suggested by the “men of Assen” regarding the days of Genesis 1. It was in attempting to demolish that claim that he was forced to deal with the matter of the duration of the days, and that issue, as we have seen, he described as peripheral, incidental. He even refused to give his own opinion on it. That refusal notwithstanding, his statements on the interpretation of the days are extensive and at times explicit. They give us a pretty clear idea of his view on the disputed issue. More importantly, they tell us about the manner in which he believed the controversy on the issue should be resolved.

2. As to his own view on the matter, his defence of the “men of Assen” shows that Schilder was sympathetic toward their exegesis, even if he did not openly endorse it. It does not appear, moreover, that later he came back on that view. His periodical *De Reformatie*, Rogland tells us, had still in the 1930s “an outspoken ‘extraordinary days’ position.”⁴

3. It is equally clear, however, that in his opinion Scripture does not make evident beyond doubt how the days should be interpreted. Therefore neither Jaspers’ interpretation nor that of the “men of Assen” was to be condemned, unheard, as a violation of scriptural authority. It so happened that the offenders were the people of the ordinary, 24-hour days, but if the tables had been turned and the offenders had been the accused, it is more than likely that Schilder would have come to their defence. (The same may well have been true with respect to the exegesis of the flood.) This suggests that for Schilder the matter as such was neither a life-and-death issue nor *the* touchstone of a person’s orthodoxy; that it belonged, rather, to the category of “indifferent things.”

4. Worthy of note is that Schilder does not allow the theory of evolution to influence his exegesis one way or another. He does not attempt to accommodate the Bible to the evolutionary theory, but neither does he try to protect Scripture by looking for arguments by which to refute the theory. It is clear that for him the Bible does not need that protection. (By implication, neither does the believer. As article 5 of the Belgic Confession teaches us, the Christian’s faith in the authority of Scripture rests on better foundations.)⁵

5. The all-important thing for Schilder was one’s attitude toward Scripture as God’s revealed Word. For him not science, but the Bible provides the guidelines for biblical exegesis. At the same time he tells the

exegete neither to ignore the findings of science nor to underestimate them. Whether they are believers or not, scientists come with insights that can, as history has shown, truly help our understanding of the Bible.

6. Schilder by no means provides answers to all the many questions that surround the relationship between Genesis 1 and the conclusions of science. It is only fair to say, however, that he never promised to do so. He would be the last person to claim, for example, that a mere “stretching” of the days of creation would resolve the “conflicts” between faith and science in this particular instance. As the above makes clear, his goal was a different and more limited one. It was to reduce the disagreements regarding the days of creation to exegetical differences and so remove a source of conflict among believers. It is this goal especially that makes it worth our while, I believe, to pay attention to his work. An additional benefit is that by following his lead we can cease looking at Genesis 1 as a source of endless controversy and receive it for what it is, namely God’s Word to us, his Word of salvation.

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NOTES

¹ And therefore, Schilder writes, Geelkerken was not condemned for asking whether as a result of further research, biblical interpreters may not some day have to ask themselves, “Have we perhaps said too quickly that this or that is definitely the teaching of Scripture?” (p. 46).

² As for Schilder’s own conservative exegetical approach, see his recent biographer J.J.C. Dee, *K.S. Zijn leven en werk*, I (Kampen, 1990), p. 159, as well as P. Veldhuizen, *God en mens onderweg. Hoofdmomenten uit de theologisch geschiedbeschouwing van Klaas Schilder* (Leiden, 1995), p. 54.

³ For a brief and lucid treatment of the age-old question regarding the extent of the flood, see Carol A. Hill, “The Noachian Flood: Universal or Local?” in *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*, September 2002, pp. 170-83.

⁴ Rogland, p. 232.

⁵ Which is of course not to say that the exegete should not examine and attempt to refute explanations which are contrary to the meaning of Scripture. But that’s a different matter.