

Okke Jager: *Het eeuwige leven, met name in verband met de verhouding van tijd en eeuwigheid*. Kampen: J. H. Kok. 1962. 599. Fl. 19.75.

When this work of Dr. Jager first appeared as an academic “proefschrift” under the direction of Professor G. C. Berkouwer, at the Free University of Amsterdam, it caused a small storm in the Netherlands. The book deals with the problem of the relation of time and eternity, especially as it is connected with the church’s growing awareness of the meaning of the phrase in her creeds, “the life everlasting”. It leaves none of the many problems concerning time and eternity untouched in the places where these problems are treated in the various loci of Systematic Theology. This book could also be described as a history of the development of what Geerhardus Vos called “semi-eschatology”. Beside treating the subject in almost all the great theologians and philosophers, the author includes many minor philosophical figures, poets, and writers, and brings all this material to a climactic positive treatment in the final part of the book.

This work of almost six hundred pages (21 pages of bibliography listing 800 works, and 3769 footnotes), has received a great number of reviews which were either quite adverse or of high praise. There was also a great deal of discussion of the fact that the author did not receive his degree *cum laude*. The controversy was stimulated by the size, erudition, and scope of this work, which in itself certainly pointed to the *cum laude* recognition. One of the main criticisms was that the author, who treats many figures and often deals with them in a concise page, paragraph or even sentence, was bound to be superficial. It was thought by many that such a treatment detracted from the scientific character of the work, since a so-called truly scientific work, especially on this difficult subject, would have dealt with fewer individuals and would have treated them more thoroughly. In my opinion these criticisms fail to take into consideration the fact that Jager carefully specifies the various criteria for his selection of material for inclusion in his work. The criticism should not have been that it was superficial, but that it was too concentrated and compact and that it could have easily been extended to a three-volume work. Because of its size and the difficulty of the subject matter it is difficult to read and comprehend, and adverse reviews and loose talk have prevented many people from reading it. Yet this volume can not be praised too highly. It is not only one of the most needed works of Reformed theology to appear in the last fifty years, but it is also well-written and penetrating.

The book has this structure: “Introduction”; I. “I believe in the life everlasting”, which deals with the life everlasting in the Apostolic symbols; II. “Reflection and interpretation in the course of the centuries”, which is subdivided into seven parts; III. “The light of the Bible concerning the life everlasting”.

Within these chapters the author discusses many men, among whom are Augustine, Boethius, Aquinas, Duns Scotus, Dante, Joachim van Floris, Luther, Calvin, Kant, Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Kierkegaard, Bergson, Scheler, Driesch, Spengler, Volkert, Kuyper, Bavinck, Grosheide, Schilder, Dooyeweerd, Popma, Barth, Brunner, Cullmann, Bultmann, Berkouwer, Kuitert, Rothuizen, Bakker, Van Ruler, Schooneberg, Schmaus, Rahner. These are just some of the figures that parade before the reader’s view. The men he treats at greater length are Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Barth, Cullmann, Bultmann, Popma, and Schilder. One reviewer has described this book as a running commentary on the work of K. J. Popma. To this I would add that it is also a commentary on the work of Berkouwer. In an amazing way the author blends the work of these two men into a critique of Schilder, while sometimes defending

Schilder's position against them, and then blends all three into a critique of neo-orthodox theologians. The procedure of the author in dealing with a given man is to take key statements and assemble them into a summary. He then brings to bear on these key statements, which often are controversial, several commentators. By playing the opinions of the commentators against one another, and even, at times, engaging in a critique of the commentator, Jager arrives at a balanced view of the man originally under investigation. As an example: when discussing Boethius on aevum, he begins with the importance of this idea in Schilder, then brings in the various commentators on Schilder, criticizes the commentators, and finally works back to Boethius. The result of the "immanent critique", so characteristic of continental scholars, is that Dr. Jager acquaints the reader with many opinions on the subject in general and with various commentators and individual men as they relate to his particular topic. This makes the work a source book on the subject of time and eternity, and also renders it suggestive of various avenues of consideration on any given point.

In the midst of a rich variety of commentators, individuals, and summaries, there is an amazing unity of theme, purpose and progression. Although the first two-thirds of the book is historical survey, there is an immediate indication of the direction the author intends to take. He slowly unveils his own position, so that the reader is anxious for the full positive development which appears at the end. In contrast to the complexity of the book, the theme or idea which unites it and leads it on is simple and concise. Positively stated, it is that temporality (with its implied succession, duration, change and development) is always a coordinate of creaturehood: consequently it does not cease at the second coming of Christ but is endless, implying a succession of movements, duration, development and change. This must be distinguished from "corruptibility" which is closely associated with time but which is the result of the historic fall. This view is in contrast to that of most of the men reviewed who (according to the author's findings) think that time ends, and then generally place the end of time at the *parousia* of Christ.

This faulty, unbiblical idea, which the author has thoroughly exposed, is correlated and dialectically related to an equally unbiblical, speculative idea of God's eternity, an "eternal now", *nunc stans*, where past, present, and future are conceived of as all at once for God, in contrast to the fleeting succession of moments for man. It is in the attempt to relate these two poles that men have fallen into a dilemma which the author labels "the eternalizing or historicizing problem". In contrast to this view of the eternity of God, which brings about all kinds of dualistic ideas between the created eternity in man and his temporality, Dr. Jager maintains that the eternity of God can not be defined or approximated by either speaking of a succession in God, or by speaking of God's eternity in terms of past, present, and future all at once in an eternal present. He also seeks to unlock some of the various and rich ways in which God's eternity is revealed in the Scriptures. In contrast to Luther, Kuyper, Schilder, Bavinck, and to other Reformed theologians who have borrowed the classic pagan definition of Boethius, he presents a treatment of the problem in the light of biblical data. He shows that the faulty conceptions of time and eternity of such opposed thinkers as Schilder and Barth, Bavinck and Bultmann, Dooyeweerd and Kant bring them into an embarrassing, dangerously close relationship to one another on these points.

Jager points out how these unbiblical ideas of time and eternity have crept, often unawares, into the writings of classic Reformed theologians. Although all Reformed theologians were jealous to maintain the Creator-creature relationship, they often fell into the pagan conception of describing individual death as a passing into eternity and

a leaving temporality behind. Some of these theologians, trying to do justice to the eternity of God's acts, fell into an "eternalizing" of God's acts, where the reality of the act and event was conceived of outside the temporal or historical. An example of this type of thinking would be Kuyper's idea of justification from eternity in which there is hardly left a "real" transition from wrath to grace in calendar time. In many cases this unbiblical thinking about the cessation of time and God's "eternal now" forced Reformed theologians to lose the distinction of Creator and creature after the second coming of Christ, because they lost sight of the new historic temporal unfoldment following the second coming. For many theologians, man would become eternal as over against the temporal which they conceive of as ceasing at the *parousia*. As a consequence of this, in order to distinguish the eternity of the Creator and creature, they would speak of eternity according to the creaturely mode, which would have no succession or development, but rather would be a participating in the eternal "present" of God, described as "a duration without succession", or a static, fixedness over against change, development and succession.

In crucial ways these views worked into eschatology. The problem of the nearness and delay of the *parousia* was supposed to be solved by saying that the *parousia* was near from the perspective of God's "eternal now", in which man shares, but distant from the point of view of man's successive temporality. Many Reformed theologians, including Kuyper, thought this problem would be solved by accepting the so-called "point of view of God". In respect to the distinction between the two ages and worlds, the one was thought to be eternal and the other temporal. All kinds of dialectical acrobatics were used to correlate them. A still more serious problem was the way in which many Reformed theologians dealt with the contrast between the "once for all" or forensic character of the "objective" events of redemption as over against the "progressive, transforming, subjective" events. This "once for all" character of the act or event of God received its definitiveness from the "eternal now" character of God's presence in which eternity breaks into temporality, bracketing man and granting man an eternalized completion or definitiveness.

In contrast to this, the progressive, transforming "subjective" events necessarily relativized this "eternal completed status" to a fictive "as if" status, which then needed to be progressively actualized in the course of time. This unbiblical notion of God's eternity (with a correlatively misconceived idea of God's unchangeability) had serious consequences for the question of the reality of God's self-disclosure to the creature in the scriptures. Certain biblical statements about God's affections and attitudes, such as "the repentance of God", "God's wrath", were selected and labeled "anthropomorphic" in contrast to other biblical statements about God's spirituality, eternity, unchangeability, which were thought to be nonanthropomorphic.

In this way the biblical revelation of God's repentance and the like was depreciated to so-called anthropomorphisms, "as if", "as it were" statements, where the creature in fact must realize that God's "so-called" unchangeability and eternity were the real truth, and these "anthropomorphic" statements only accommodated to his creatureliness. Furthermore, in eschatology, the aspect of present fulfillment was over-emphasized, because of this notion of the "eternal now" of God's "present" (God's now, history or time) with the believer, and the aspect of the future realization suffered. On the other hand, there was an over-emphasis placed on the future aspect in terms of absorption of the creature in the "eternal now" of God's "present" after the *parousia*, with the result that the present fulfillment was depreciated. Perhaps some of the worst effects of this unbiblical thinking about time and eternity can be seen in the various conceptions concerning the final restoration and renewal of the heavens and

earth. Dr. Jager, in contrast to these faulty conceptions, contends that all the biblical statements on this point presuppose the continuance or the continuity of time (including a continued historical task for the new humanity) with its endless succession, duration of movements and change. For example, drinking the new wine, after the *parousia* on the new earth in the kingdom with Christ, he maintains, is not just meant to be a spiritual picture but is intended to be literal reality. On still another point in eschatology, Reformed thinkers, in seeking to describe the continuity of creation with the “recreated” or renewed heaven and earth, have accepted scholastic terminology and formulations, such as substance, accident, essence, existence, and have also described in similar terminology the continuity of the resurrection body with that of the body before the resurrection.

One of the most important features of this book is its treatment of many neo-orthodox theologians. On the whole, Jager’s description of their positions is very keen and penetrating, but his evaluation of their positions in relation to the Christian position is sometimes weak. He deals quite thoroughly with Barth and gives interesting comments on the *Geschichte-Historie* problem in Barth’s thinking, clearly relating Barth’s ideas to the speculation in Germanic post-Kantian Idealism on time and eternity. He also shows that most of the neo-orthodox theologians, in typical post-Kantian fashion, depreciate, and often deny, the historical reality of the redemption, creation, and eschatology. He shows how Bultmann, Brunner, Cullmann, and Barth all work to varying degrees with this unbiblical conception of God’s eternal “present” or “eternal now”, in which man is taken up into God’s *Geschichte* on God’s time, and God’s time becomes time for man. Even Cullmann, who is often thought to stand opposed to other neo-orthodox theologians on the point of time and eternity, is shown to have a speculative, scholastic conception. Dr. Jager’s treatment of the eternity-time problem is a thorough vindication of C. Van Til’s analysis and evaluation of modern theology in regard to the problem of *Geschichte-Historie*. He also shows that, as long as, and to the extent that, Reformed theologians and thinkers are entangled in speculative and scholastic conceptions of eternity and time, they stand helpless over against this fatal post-Kantian speculation, and cannot present a challenge nor set themselves off from these neo-orthodox thinkers.

One disappointment to me was that Jager failed to discuss Geerhardus Vos’ *Pauline Eschatology*, or even to mention it in his bibliography. (He does, however, use Dr. Vos’ small but important treatment on the doctrine of the covenant in Reformed theology.) It is unfortunate that this book is passed over since it has anticipated many of Dr. Jager’s own insights. On the other hand, it would have been interesting to see how he would have handled the speculation of Vos on these points.

Perhaps the greatest weakness of the book is that the author is not sufficiently conscious of the deadly character of post-Kantian, activist thinking. In my opinion he is too easy with a man such as Cullmann. It is quite typical for him to point away from the extremes and to be weaker about mediating positions. On page 317, after speaking about the distinction of *Geschichte* and *Historie* in Bultmann, he points out the fruitlessness of the separation of *Geschichte* and *Historie*, as if the combination of these two ideas, *e. g.*, in Cullmann, would be more biblical. After, then, indicating vaguely his own meaning for these terms, he jumps from Bultmann to himself, as if there were not even a possibility of a difference between a Christian and non-Christian signification to these terms, or, as if the terms themselves were not problematic. It is typical of Dr. Jager, as well as of his promoter, Dr. Berkouwer, in the interest of showing the historical continuity of recent misconceptions with older scholastic misconceptions, to relativize the tremendous difference between post-

Kantian and pre-Kantian thought, or, in considering the speculation of recent Reformed theologians such as Schilder, to treat them on one line with neo-orthodox theologians. There does not seem to be sufficient realization that the crisis theologians (Barth, Brunner, Cullmann, and others), in trying to transcend Idealism, are in no real way consciously overthrowing the humanistic, anti-Christian presuppositions of the science ideal, with its intention of wiping out the possibility of the revelation of God in history. Schilder, however, set himself on this point clearly over against Barth and this tendency. Although he did not escape being influenced by Barth, there still remains all the difference in the world between the meaning and intention of the two men. At the same time this critical naiveté and lack of awareness of the insidious character of post-Kantian theology dulls the heart, so that it becomes very easy to accommodate oneself to more subtle forms of post-Kantian thinking, for instance, the historicistic and existentialistic types. This is, in my opinion, part of the reason why Dr. Jager is unable to produce a penetrating critique of Dr. H. M. Kuitert's thesis, *De Mensvormigheid Gods*, with which he deals at some length (pp. 523 fl.). Anyone familiar with existentialism, who has read Kuitert's thesis, will be able to detect existentialist influences. A good example of such influence is shown in Kuitert's statement, "the essence of God is to be a covenant partner to man" (pp. 267, 265). The fact that Dr. Jager is unable to penetrate Kuitert's real depth indicates to me that Jager also is under the influence of modern activism. This possibility is hinted at in what appears to be Jager's statement about God, "The relatedness to time belongs to the essence of his eternity, but the exaltedness above time as well" (p. 525). It is clear to me that both this statement and the one previously quoted from Kuitert, as they stand, depreciate the biblical revelation of the aseity and freedom of the triune God and if carried through to their conclusions would wipe it out altogether.

This kind of naiveté towards the existentialistic, historicistic type of post-Kantian theology makes it possible for one to imbibe the poison of existentialistic thinking, and helps explain the enthusiasm in the Gereformeerde Kerken for joining the World Council of Churches, in which an existentialistic kind of theology is being proclaimed by almost all its leaders.

This book is a good reminder of the crisis in Reformed theology, especially in systematic theology. Reformed systematic theologians must pay much more attention to the influence of non-Christian philosophy upon its development. It is a confirmation of the necessity of the exegetic-biblical theological emphasis which John Murray, under the influence of the great Princeton theologians, Vos and Warfield, has brought to the foreground at Westminster Theological Seminary.

This book must be translated into English. It is as Herman Ridderbos has said, "a kind of encyclopedia on the subject of eternity and time". Dr. Jager, a great poet, writer, preacher has also shown himself to be a penetrating systematic theologian. The variety of style in the book makes it a spiritual and literary adventure for the reader.

Peter J. Steen
Amsterdam, The Netherlands