

# Herman Ridderbos's Redemptive-historical Exegesis of the New Testament

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On November 13, 1936, Herman Nicolaas Ridderbos obtained his doctorate (with distinction) at the Free University at Amsterdam under Professor Frederik Willem Grosheide. His dissertation entitled "The tenor of the Sermon on the Mount according to Matthew" demonstrated that Ridderbos was a skilful exegete.<sup>2</sup> He was 27 years old at the time, and had been the minister of the Reformed (*Gereformeerd*) Church in Eefde-Gorsstel (the Netherlands) since 1934.<sup>3</sup> He became minister in Rotterdam-Charlois in 1939, where in 1941 he finished the first part of his commentary "The Gospel according to Matthew".<sup>4</sup> On January 21, 1943, during a period of great national difficulties, he succeeded Seakle Greijdanus as New Testament professor at Kampen Theological Seminary.<sup>5</sup> In this function he produced an impressive amount of publications, the most important of which were also published in English. Aside from his numerous articles and a few brochures, Ridderbos wrote the books listed below.<sup>6</sup>

In 1946 the second part of "The Gospel according to Matthew" was published<sup>7</sup>. In the same year he published a treatise based on his rectorial address "Self-revelation and self-concealment: The historical character of Jesus' Messianic self-revelation according to the Synoptic Gospels".<sup>8</sup> In 1950, his voluminous work *The Coming of the Kingdom* appeared in Dutch.<sup>9</sup> Ridderbos then widened his area of

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<sup>2</sup> *De strekking der Bergrede naar Mattheüs* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1936). Titles of Ridderbos's books that have not been translated into English will be given in quotation marks. Books that have been translated will be referred to according to the title of the English translation (in italics).

<sup>3</sup> Herman Ridderbos was born on February 13, 1909 in Oosterend (Friesland), the Netherlands.

<sup>4</sup> *Het Evangelie naar Mattheüs I* (Korte Verklaring der Heilige Schrift; Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1941).

<sup>5</sup> For more church historical and biographical data, see Evert Overeem, *Prof. Herman Ridderbos en het Gereformeerd Weekblad [1945-1982]* (Kampen: Uitgeverij Kok, 1998); B. Jan Aalbers and Heinrich Baarlink, *Herman Ridderbos. Nuchter en bewogen* (Kamper Miniaturen 8; Kampen: Vereniging van Oud-Studenten van de Theologische Universiteit Kampen, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> G. van der Veere gives an overview of Ridderbos's main publications dating from 1934 to 1978, in a festschrift presented to Ridderbos, *De knechtsgestalte van Christus* (ed. H. H. Grosheide *e.a.*; Kampen: Uitgeverij Kok, 1978), 256-305.

<sup>7</sup> *Het Evangelie naar Mattheüs II* (Korte Verklaring der Heilige Schrift; Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1946).

<sup>8</sup> *Zelfopenbaring en zelfverberging. Het historisch karakter van Jezus' messiaansche zelfopenbaring volgens de synoptische evangeliën* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1946).

<sup>9</sup> *De komst van het Koninkrijk. Jezus' prediking volgens de synoptische evangeliën* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1950). English translation: *The Coming of the Kingdom* (ed. Raymond O. Zorn, transl. H. de Jongste; Philadelphia Pa: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1962).

research and in 1952 he published *Paul and Jesus: Origin and General Character of Paul's Preaching of Christ*<sup>10</sup> (in Dutch), a book he characterized as "an introduction to Paul".<sup>11</sup> In 1953 his research into this apostle took shape in yet another work on Paul, a commentary in English entitled *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia*.<sup>12</sup> In 1955 he published a paper "Israel in the New Testament, especially according to Rom. 9-11".<sup>13</sup> During the same year, he published *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures* (in Dutch).<sup>14</sup> This was followed by a book in English which was based on earlier works and was published in 1957 under the title *When the Time had Fully Come: Studies in New Testament Theology*.<sup>15</sup> In 1958 he published a modest book in English about a theme with which he was well acquainted, *Matthew's Witness to Jesus Christ: The King and the Kingdom*.<sup>16</sup> During those years he must have devoted most of his time to preparations for his thoroughly written commentary on Paul's Epistle "To the Romans", which was published in 1959.<sup>17</sup> Only a year later he completed his commentary "To the Colossians".<sup>18</sup> Ridderbos's next book did not appear until 1966, but this was the most voluminous work he ever published: *Paul: An Outline of his Theology* (in Dutch).<sup>19</sup> A year later his commentary "The Pastoral Epistles" was published.<sup>20</sup> During the celebrations of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his professorship in 1968, his colleagues presented him with a collection of a number of his articles and lectures, entitled "The Word, The Kingdom, and our Embarrassment".<sup>21</sup> In 1972 he became involved in the controversy about Herman Wiersinga's dissertation "Reconciliation in the theological discussion".<sup>22</sup> Ridderbos's response is entitled "Are We on the Wrong Way? A Biblical

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<sup>10</sup> *Paulus en Jezus. Oorsprong en algemeen karakter van Paulus' Christus-prediking* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1952). English Translation: *Paul and Jesus: Origin and General Character of Paul's Preaching of Christ* (transl. D. H. Freeman; Philadelphia Pa: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1958).

<sup>11</sup> Only in the Dutch edition, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> In *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953.

<sup>13</sup> "Israël in het Nieuwe Testament, in het bijzonder volgens Rom. 9-11" in G. Ch. Aalders and H. Ridderbos, *Israël* (Exegetica. Oud- en nieuw-testamentische studiën II, 2; Den Haag: Van Keulen, 1955), 23-73.

<sup>14</sup> *Heilsgeschiedenis en Heilige Schrift van het Nieuwe Testament. Het gezag van het Nieuwe Testament* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1955). English translation: *The Authority of the New Testament Scriptures* (transl. H. de Jongste; Philadelphia Pa: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1963; revision: *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures* (revision R. B. Gaffin, Jr.; Phillipsburg, N.J.: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1968; 2<sup>nd</sup> revised ed., 1988).

<sup>15</sup> Grand Rapids Mi: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957.

<sup>16</sup> World Christian Books 23; London: United Society for Christian Literature Lutterworth Press, 1958. This book was published in Dutch in the same year: *Het verborgen Koninkrijk. Handleiding tot het Evangelie van Mattheüs* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1958).

<sup>17</sup> *Aan de Romeinen* (Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament; Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1959).

<sup>18</sup> This commentary came out in one volume with F. W. Grosheide's commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians: *Aan de Efeziërs. Aan de Colossenzen* (Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament; Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1960)

<sup>19</sup> *Paulus. Ontwerp van zijn theologie* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1966). English translation: *Paul: An Outline of his Theology* (transl. J. R. De Witt; Grand Rapids Mi: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975).

<sup>20</sup> *De Pastorale brieven* (Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament; Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1967).

<sup>21</sup> *Het Woord, het Rijk en onze verlegenheid* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1968).

<sup>22</sup> *De verzoening in de theologische discussie* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1971).

Study of Reconciliation”.<sup>23</sup> After this, it was a number of years before another work of his was published. Ridderbos officially retired in 1975, but he kept his chair until 1978. In this year a collection of six papers was published in English entitled *Studies in Scripture and its Authority*.<sup>24</sup> During those years, he devoted his research to the Gospel of John.<sup>25</sup> His valedictory lecture was published in 1979, entitled “The Word Became Flesh: Reflections on the Unique Character of the Gospel of John”.<sup>26</sup> In 1987 he finished the first volume of *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (in Dutch). The second volume followed in 1992, completing Ridderbos’s theological body of work.<sup>27</sup> In 1999 he wrote his last booklet, a biography of his father, who had been Old Testament professor at Kampen from 1913 until 1950.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to these, the reprints of several of his works deserve to be mentioned, as do the translations of his works into German, Spanish, Portuguese, Danish, Korean and Indonesian. If we add to these the 1750 or so opinion articles he wrote in *Gereformeerd Weekblad* (“Reformed Weekly”) between 1945 and 1982, as well as his many other articles that were included in other periodicals and collections in the Netherlands and abroad, it is clear that Ridderbos was a very productive and versatile writer, whose authority was, and still is, recognized in many countries.

This article is devoted to one particular aspect of Ridderbos’s work that appears in nearly all his books and is characteristic of his theology. He regularly pointed out that the New Testament should be interpreted “redemptive-historically” (or: “salvation-historically”). The terms “redemptive-historical” and “redemptive history” or “salvation history” are less prevalent in theological works of the beginning of the twenty-first century than in Ridderbos’s body of work, and where they are being used they do not always carry the same meaning as they do in his publications. We will therefore look at what Ridderbos meant with the term “redemptive-historical exegesis” and from which he wished to distinguish his own approach.

In order to place his view on redemptive-historical exegesis in its context, we will first consider the origin of the term “redemptive history”, and describe how it functioned in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands during the first few decades of the twentieth century.

### Redemptive history as a theological theme

The source of the term “redemptive history” is supposed to be the theologian J. C. K. von Hofmann, who taught in Erlangen (Germany). Around the middle of the

<sup>23</sup> *Zijn wij op de verkeerde weg? Een bijbelse studie over de verzoening* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1972).

<sup>24</sup> Grand Rapids Mi: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978.

<sup>25</sup> He had expressed his scientific interest for this Gospel earlier in his speech of December 8, 1965, “Opbouw en strekking van de proloog van het evangelie van Johannes”, included in *Het Woord, het Rijk en onze verlegenheid*, 37-57, and published under the title “The structure and scope of the Prologue to the Gospel of John” in *Placita Pleiadia*. Opstellen aangeboden aan Prof. Dr. G. Sevenster (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966) = *Novum Testamentum* 8 (1966): 180-201.

<sup>26</sup> *Het Woord is vlees geworden. Beschouwingen over het eigen karakter van het Evangelie van Johannes* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1979).

<sup>27</sup> *Het Evangelie naar Johannes. Proeve van een theologische exegese I-II* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1987, 1992). English translation: *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (transl. John Vriend; Grand Rapids Mi / Cambridge U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997).

<sup>28</sup> *Jan Ridderbos. Mens* (Kamper Miniaturen 4; Kampen: Vereniging van Oud-Studenten van de Theologische Universiteit Kampen, 1999).

nineteenth century he endeavored to demonstrate from the Scriptures the steady historical development of God's communion with humankind. He expounded the Scriptures on the basis of the scheme *Weissagung und Erfüllung* ("Prophecy and Fulfillment"), which was the title of his two volumes from 1841-1844,<sup>29</sup> and he viewed Christ as the center of history and the beginning of its completion. The Christian partakes in this redemptive history (*Heilsgeschichte*) by being born again. Hofmann opposed his "redemptive-historical" (*heilsgeschichtlich*) exposition to the dogmatic use of Scriptures, which implied that the Bible serves as a collection of proof texts for Christian doctrine.<sup>30</sup>

Hofmann was not the first to pay attention to the historical character of God's plan of redemption that unfolds from Creation to the End of times. In fact, Irenaeus of Lyons designed a redemption-historical theology around the year 180.<sup>31</sup> Hofmann's attempt to free the Bible from its one-sided dogmatic usage is similar to J. P. Gabler's proposal in 1787 to develop a "Biblical theology" as opposed to "Dogmatic theology".<sup>32</sup>

Abraham Kuyper, however, rejected Gabler's term "Biblical theology", partly because it appeared to suggest that the Bible writers had a theology and worked as theologians, whereas they were first and foremost inspired by the Holy Spirit.<sup>33</sup> Kuyper therefore suggested that that which Gabler refers to should be called *historia revelationis* (history of revelation).

A similarly negative judgement concerning the "redemptive-historical method" as proposed by Hofmann was formulated by F. W. Grosheide.<sup>34</sup> He felt it contains some good elements, but because Hofmann did not view the Scriptures as historically completely accurate and also found "the work of man" in it, Grosheide dismissed his approach.

As a result of this, the subject *historia revelationis* was taught at the theological faculty of the Free University at Amsterdam and also at Kampen Theological Seminary. At Kampen the subject was taught by Old Testament professor Jan Ridderbos. Herman Ridderbos stated in 1994 that what is now called Biblical theology was then called *historia revelationis*.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Weissagung und Erfüllung im alten und im neuen Testamente. Ein Theologischer Versuch I-II* (Nördlingen: C. H. Beck'sche Buchhandlung, 1841, 1844).

<sup>30</sup> See Gustav Weth, *Die Heilsgeschichte. Ihr universeller und ihr individueller Sinn in der offenbarungsgeschichtlichen Theologie des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Kaiser, 1931), 81-94; K. G. Steck, *Die Idee der Heilsgeschichte. Hofmann – Schlatter – Cullmann* (Zollikon: Evangelischer Verlag, 1959), 19-35.

<sup>31</sup> See P. L. Wansink, *Irenaeus en het Oude Testament. Gnostische en heilshistorische exegese in de tweede eeuw* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2000).

<sup>32</sup> For this see Hendrikus Boers, *What is New Testament Theology? The Rise of Criticism and the Problem of a Theology of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 23-38, and Ed Noort, "Tussen geschiedenis en theologie. Over valkuilen en mogelijkheden in de bijbelse theologie" *Kerk en Theologie* 53 (2002): 202-23, esp. 203-7.

<sup>33</sup> *Encyclopaedie der heilige Godgeleerdheid III* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1909, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), 166-80.

<sup>34</sup> *Hermeneutiek ten dienste van de bestudeering van het Nieuwe Testament* (Amsterdam: Van Bottenburg, 1929), 120-1.

<sup>35</sup> In Gerrit Douma, "Een theologische gemeenschap ten dienste van de kerk. Een gesprek over de school met prof. dr. Herman Ridderbos" *Communiqué* 11, 2 (1994): 4-16, esp. 7; also in Herman Ridderbos, *Jan Ridderbos. Mens*, 10.

However, not all Reformed theologians shared Grosheide's rejection of the redemptive-historical interpretation of Scriptures. Tjeerd Hoekstra, Practical Theology professor at Kampen, candidly spoke of "the redemptive history of the Old Testament" when discussing the *historia revelationis* in his "Reformed Homiletics".<sup>36</sup> A very important figure in this respect is Klaas Schilder, who in 1934 became Dogmatics and Ethics professor at Kampen. Even as a minister of religion he had started around the year 1930 to criticize the "exemplary sermons" on the historical texts in the Bible. In this style of preaching Biblical figures were used as examples for the hearers, but Schilder felt that this meant that the role these people played in redemptive history was not sufficiently recognized.<sup>37</sup> He compared redemptive history from Creation until Christ's return to the alphabet that runs from A to Z, and also with a clock indicating in which part of time a particular event takes place. Schilder felt that in order to accurately exposit a biblical passage one would need to know its position in redemptive history. He not only contrasted redemptive-historical preaching with exemplary preaching, but also with the one-sided attention for the subjective experience of faith as taught in the pietistic tradition of the Dutch "Further Reformation", and also by the Darbists and in the Pentecostal movement.<sup>38</sup> Against the individualistic and psychological interpretation of redemptive history, which taught that what matters most is not Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, but Christ's birth in our hearts, Schilder pointed to the historical redemptive facts. He also contrasted this accent with ethical and dialectic theology.

#### Early works (1936-1946)

We will now return to Herman Ridderbos and see how he wrote about redemptive history in these and related terms.

In his doctoral dissertation "The Tenor of the Sermon on the Mount according to Matthew" (1936) he refers as early as on p. 4 to the discussions that took place at the time. Ridderbos points to the great interest in, and authority of, the Sermon on the Mount, but also states that its importance should not be made absolute, because revelation passes through history, which did not finish with the Sermon on the Mount. In mentioning the "history of revelation" he adopts Kuyper's terminology. In the first chapter he argues that the Sermon on the Mount gives a picture of the first stage of Jesus' ministry. It is interesting that this view barely surfaces in the remainder of the dissertation. Ridderbos discusses the consequently immanent and the consequently eschatological views on the Kingdom of God that were defended at the time in relation to the Sermon on the Mount, and also the interpretations in between those two extremes (70-182). He distances himself from the "Sermon on the Mount Christianity" as advocated by Mennonites, religious socialists and pacifists (199-204). Ridderbos disputes the view that each commandment from the Sermon on the Mount has unlimited validity, and argues that the commandments given in the Sermon on the Mount are illustrations of the command-

<sup>36</sup> *Gereformeerde homiletiek* (Wageningen: Zomer en Keuning, 1926), 221.

<sup>37</sup> See Klaas Runia, *Het hoge woord in de lage landen* (Kampen: Uitgeverij Kok, 1985), 116-24. He describes Schilder as "the father of redemptive-historical teaching".

<sup>38</sup> C. Trimp, *Heilsgeschiedenis en prediking. Hervatting van een onvoltooid gesprek* (Kampen: Uitgeverij Van den Berg, 1986), 57-65, even distinguishes eleven aspects of Schilder's view on redemptive-historical teaching.

ment to love. He believes that the sometimes paradoxical mode of expression must be judged on its character and that exceptions to Jesus' commandments are not impossible (242-7). However, he does not offer any explicit indications of where the Sermon on the Mount fits into redemptive history. Instead, he states that the fundamentals of the Sermon on the Mount must be traced in the light of continued revelation (251); with this he means "the development of revelation" throughout Jesus' life.<sup>39</sup> Even though he rejects "unscriptural radicalism", he recognizes that social and international justice flow from the tenor of the Sermon on the Mount (251) and that the kingdom proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount desires to be revealed everywhere (255-6).

The reason that Ridderbos did not yet use the terms "redemptive history" and "redemptive-historical" when writing his dissertation, may be that his tutor Grosheide was dismissive of them. But even apart from these terms, it is clear that at this time he did not yet have a detailed view on redemptive-historical exegesis.

In the first part of his exposition of the Gospel of Matthew (1941) he does use these terms, but in an inconspicuous way. For instance, he states with Matthew 1:1 "that in the birth of Jesus Christ, the overall redemptive-historical line is continued and that this birth is therefore fully in accordance with the prophecy and expectation of the Jewish nation regarding the coming Messiah".<sup>40</sup>

In his paper "Self-revelation and self-concealment" (1946) he discusses why, according to the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus refused to be called the Messiah during his lifetime. According to William Wrede, Jesus never believed he was the Messiah, and according to Albert Schweitzer Jesus' Messiahship lay in the future. Ridderbos rejects both interpretations and states that "it is the task of exegesis and of *historia revelationis* to understand the preaching of Christ in the Gospel in its own character and tenor" (26-7). He recognizes that the Gospels are "historical tendentious writings, not produced in the first place with the aims of a historian but with those of an evangelist" (29). Thus the Christological perspective sometimes displaces the historical one (32). However, Ridderbos believes that "it cannot be denied that the picture which the Gospels give us of Jesus' revelation of himself as the Christ *was determined by the history of Jesus' life on earth*", which means that there is no room for "an antedated picture of the exalted Christ" (39-40; italics H. N. R.). At the same time, he recognizes that Jesus "nowhere acts among the people claiming to be the Christ" (41). He even finds the theme of Jesus' self-concealment in the Gospel of John, even though John's Christ-*kerygma* considerably differs from that of the Synoptics in other respects (66-9). Ridderbos believes that the command of secrecy flows from the character of Jesus' Messiahship, since the Gospels always link it to his suffering and death (77). He points to the Old Testament background of the Suffering Servant (79) and remarks that even in his suffering and death, Jesus was, and needed to be, the hidden Christ, until the very end (83). Eventually he starts discussing the "redemptive-historical meaning and effect" of Jesus' suffering and death. With this he means to say that irrespective of what people understand about Jesus' suffering and death, it has "an objective and forensic meaning". "After all, what is taking place is unknown until *after* it has taken place. It lies behind that

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<sup>39</sup> This can be deduced from his exposition in *Het Evangelie naar Mattheüs I*, 83.

<sup>40</sup> *Het Evangelie naar Mattheüs I*, 19. See also p. 217 (with Mt. 11:12) and p. 290 (with Mt. 16:2-3).

which a human being can distinguish in it. And therefore that which takes place between Jesus and *the Father*, between the Messiah and *his God*, is what determines the meaning and character of his suffering and death.” (84; italics H. N. R.). He continues by pointing to Mark 10:45 and 14:24 as texts that deal with Jesus’ vicarious death, in which “lies the meaning of his hidden Messianic passion” (84).

This is the first time that Ridderbos explicitly speaks of the “redemptive-historical” meaning of Jesus’ suffering and death. From this moment onward, the term will take a central place in his work.

#### *The Coming of the Kingdom* (1950 in Dutch)

In his book *The Coming of the Kingdom* Ridderbos repeatedly uses the term “redemptive-historical”. In the introduction he explains why. In earlier books he responded to the nineteenth and early twentieth century liberal views of Jesus. He valued some elements of these views, for instance Albert Schweitzer’s renewed emphasis on the eschatological character of Jesus’ teaching. Ridderbos felt, however, that Schweitzer had swung too much toward the other extreme. Neither did he feel comfortable with Karl Barth’s and Rudolf Bultmann’s existentialistic interpretations, again in spite of a partial appreciation of these. Ridderbos found a kindred spirit in Oscar Cullmann, who taught in Strasburg, Paris, and Basel, and who strongly inspired him. Cullmann argues in his book *Christus und die Zeit. Die Urchristliche Zeit- und Geschichtsauffassung*, published in 1946,<sup>41</sup> that the linear view of time is a characteristic of Biblical eschatology and soteriology.<sup>42</sup> He regards redemptive history as the core of New Testament preaching and is of the opinion that whoever denies this, opposes himself to the teachings of Christianity. Cullmann rejects the reconstructions of exegetes such as Schweitzer and Bultmann, because redemption as proclaimed in the Gospel of Christ is linked to a continuous event spanning past, present, and future. “It was as if I had been waiting for this”, Ridderbos later commented.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, it became clear during this time that other exegetes were also of the view that the kingdom that Jesus preached was both present and future, and had therefore not merely arrived either immanently or eschatologically. Ridderbos mentions the names of J. Jeremias, E. Stauffer, H. M. Matter and W. G. Kümmel, amongst others (xxviii).

This development forms the background to his book *The Coming of the Kingdom*, in which Ridderbos states: “That which Jesus preaches is not a timeless truth, and what he brings is not only a new spirituality, a new disposition. No more is it a new form of society (in the sense of the social gospel) or an action carried on by men and slowly developing to its consummation. The coming of the kingdom of God is most certainly to be looked upon as the realization of the great drama of the history of salvation in the sense of the Old Testament and of the Jewish apocalypses. This realization is not merely a matter of the future, however. It has started. The

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<sup>41</sup> Zürich-Zollikon: Evangelischer Verlag, 1946. English translation: *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History* (transl. Floyd V. Filson; London: S. C. M. Press, 1951; 3<sup>rd</sup> rev. ed. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975).

<sup>42</sup> See also Cullmann’s paper *Le retour du Christ. Espérance selon le Nouveau Testament* (Neuchâtel / Paris: Delachaux et Niestle, 1945, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), mentioned by Ridderbos.

<sup>43</sup> In a conversation with the author on January 13, 2004.

great change of the aeons has taken place. The center of history is in Christ's coming, in his victory over the demons, in his death and resurrection" (xxviii).

After two chapters on the Old Testament, Judaism, and John the Baptist, Ridderbos describes in chapters 3 to 7 in what sense the kingdom of heavens had arrived with Jesus' coming according to the Synoptic Gospels. The titles of some of his paragraphs are: The Wicked One Overcome, Jesus' Power to Work Miracles, Speaking in Parables, The Delay of the Judgment, The Servant of the Lord, The Kingdom and the Cross, The Gospel of the Poor, Remission of Sins, The Fatherhood of God, The Fulfillment of the Law, The Application of the Demand of Love. Ridderbos not only speaks of fulfillment here, but also of its provisional character. To him, "[t]he kingdom has come, and yet the fulfillment is in abeyance" (106).

Chapter 8 is devoted to the coming of the kingdom and the church. In contrast to liberal exegetes, Ridderbos assumes that Jesus' sayings about the church in Matthew 16:18-19 and 18:15-17 are authentic (334-42). He rejects the idea that Jesus expected the imminent full arrival of God's kingdom and that the first Christians were disappointed about its delay. We see, therefore, that Ridderbos's redemptive-historical view leaves room for the church as intended by Jesus.

In chapter 9, which discusses the coming of the kingdom and the Lord's Supper, he argues that "the specific redemptive-historical significance of this Supper is not to be sought primarily in the eschatological perspective disclosed by Jesus, but much rather, in connection with Jesus' expiatory death" (416). He does not regard the Lord's Supper as a resurrection meal, but as a sacrificial expiatory meal of which Good Friday is the focal point (431-2).

Finally, in chapter 10 he gives a detailed discussion of the *Naherwartung* (i.e., the imminence of the Kingdom) as observed in the New Testament. Ridderbos recognizes that the Synoptic Gospels contain "direct eschatological pronouncements" by Jesus that seem to suggest the imminent coming of the kingdom (e.g. Matthew 10:23; Mark 9:1; 13:30). Exegetes such as Schweitzer have taken those texts seriously and deduced from them that Jesus was mistaken as regards the imminent general arrival of God's kingdom. To Ridderbos, the idea that Jesus could have been mistaken is out of the question. With reference to Cullmann and others he emphasizes that Christ's death and resurrection have brought the preliminary fulfillment of the coming of the Kingdom of heavens, followed by a "time of grace" which will last until the *parousia*. His conclusion is that Jesus did not try to give the impression that he would come back soon, but that a longer term was possible, or at least that he did not indicate a specific time (514-6; 523).

It is clear from Ridderbos's reflections on this issue that he found it difficult to do justice to the passages that seem to suggest an imminent end. The term "redemptive-historical" is conspicuously absent from the final chapter.

With hindsight it can be maintained that he gave a reliable picture of the theology of the Synoptic Gospels as regards their view of the future. To Ridderbos, however, the theology of the Synoptics largely matches Jesus' own preaching. Ridderbos was aware of the view that when Jesus' preaching was committed to writing the experiences of the early Christian church were incorporated, but he rejected it.



*Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures* (1955 in Dutch)

In *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures* Ridderbos shows what the implications are of his view on redemptive history for the origin and the authority of the New Testament canon. He argues that the history of the canon is part of church history and not of redemptive history (12; 16).<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, he argues that the authority of the New Testament canon is rooted in redemptive history, i.e. in Christ. In his view, “Christ established *a formal authority structure to be the source and standard for all future preaching of the gospel*” (13; italics H. N. R.). This implies that Christ wished his apostles to pass on – orally and in writing – that which took place in the fullness of time (Galatians 4:4). Ridderbos therefore speaks of “continuing revelation” (15). The writings of the apostles include the written record of the oral tradition, which is borne by the exalted Christ (15-22). Ridderbos also refers to inspiration by the Holy Spirit (14; 29-30). He defends the intended closed character of the canon (25-30). He maintains that not all New Testament writings need to be written by apostles, but that the important thing is that they contain the apostolic tradition (32). He argues that the canon in its redemptive-historical meaning is not the product of the Christian community, but rather that the Christian community is destined to be the product of this canon (25). Thus the canon has produced the church (40).

In setting out his arguments, he appeals to Cullmann several times.<sup>45</sup> It is clear that Ridderbos’s view that the establishment of the canon was intended by Christ correlates with his view that Christ did not intend to give the impression that He would come back soon. In this view there is therefore a time for the church, and Christ did not only leave his Spirit, but also the New Testament canon.

After arguing the place the New Testament canon takes in redemptive history and thereby in Christ’s will of intention, Ridderbos discusses the character of the authority of the New Testament. On the one hand he states that the one thing that will make or break the authority of the New Testament message is the factuality of the historical events which it proclaims (55). On the other hand he sees that the gospel writers wrote with relative freedom in presenting the witness they had received and in their use of each other’s writings (66). He qualifies the authority of the New Testament scriptures as follows: “The New Testament is not a book of revelation in the sense that all of its pronouncements intend, directly or indirectly, to give answers to the questions with which life confronts us” (57). The New Testament’s teaching “is certainly not intended to provide us with all sorts of theoretical and practical teaching or insight, which as such do not proceed from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ” (74). Ridderbos then points at the redemptive-historical character of the knowledge that the New Testament imparts (75). It becomes apparent that the term “redemptive-historical” here obtains a restrictive meaning as regards the fundamentalist interpretation of Scriptures, according to which not only

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<sup>44</sup> The references are given to the pages in the second revised translation (cf. n. 14).

<sup>45</sup> Yet Cullmann also places accents that differ from Ridderbos. For instance, in *La Tradition. Problème exégétique, historique et théologique* (Neuchâtel / Paris: Delachaux et Niestle, 1953), 43, he states: “Nous sommes absolument d’accord avec la théologie catholique lorsqu’elle insiste sur le fait que l’Eglise elle-même a fait le Canon” (“We absolutely agree with Catholic theology where it insists that the *Church itself* made the Canon.”) (italics O. C.).

the redemptive facts, but also many other details should be accepted as historical facts.

Works on the apostle Paul (1952-1966)

In Ridderbos's interpretation of the Pauline Epistles we see a different aspect of the term "redemptive-historical" becoming apparent. In his work *Paul and Jesus* (1952 in Dutch) he remarks: "Under the influence of the basic theme of the Reformation, justification by faith was for a long time viewed as the actual content of Paul's gospel, around which all the other elements of his epistles were grouped" (63). Ridderbos recognizes that justification by faith is part of the core of Paul's preaching and is not a secondary "polemic" directed against the Jews (as taught by Wrede), or a "side-issue within the main stream of the mystical doctrine of redemption of 'being in Christ'" (as taught by Schweitzer). Yet Ridderbos observes that "by approaching Paul's doctrine exclusively from the standpoint of justification by faith there is a danger of depriving Paul's preaching of its redemptive historical dynamic and of making it into a timeless treatment of the vital question: how is one justified before God?" (63). After all, whoever attempts to understand Paul from the perspective of this personal question, loses sight of the fact that Paul knew himself to be the herald of the "fullness of time" and of the new things that had arrived in the framework of time through Christ (63-4).

This emphasis on redemptive history is a regular feature in his commentaries on the Pauline epistles. Ridderbos points out that Paul wrote about the history of God's involvement with Israel and humankind, starting with Adam, Abraham, Moses and the prophets and culminating in the salvation that appeared in Christ.<sup>46</sup> This implies that when Paul writes about baptism, he does not in the first place talk about a mystical or ethical renewal of man, but about a renewal in the redemptive-historical and eschatological sense. This means that the person who is being baptized is being incorporated into something that has taken place in Christ once and for all. Ridderbos uses the term "corporate" (*Aan de Romeinen*, 114, 125) to describe this; he means by this that the believer is part of a collective that was first ruled by sin and later saved by Christ. In doing this he attempts to shift the focus away from a mystical interpretation of Paul that is concerned with the spiritual development of the individual. According to Ridderbos, the apostle was not concerned with the spiritual or mystical experience of the individual in baptism, or with a scheme for spiritual progress and the determination of growth in moral conduct. In his view, Paul places the emphasis on that which the believer has received in Christ, without explicitly being concerned with the believer's personal experiences. Or, in Ridderbos's own words: "The corporate, redemptive-historical viewpoint explains both the forensic and the ethical salvation from sin" (*Aan de Romeinen*, 125). His emphasis on the redemptive-historical interpretation of Paul is so strong that in discussing the "strong" and the "weak" in Romans 14, he remarks that there Paul does not write from a redemptive-historical viewpoint but from a pastoral one (*Aan de Romeinen*, 302).<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> For instance, *The Churches of Galatia*, 129, 135, 137, 147-8; *Aan de Romeinen*, 20, 81, 98, 112, 124, 125, 128, 129, 134, 135, 203, 251, 261; *Aan de Kolossenzen*, 181, 203, 205-6.

<sup>47</sup> In *Paul*, 321, he makes a similar remark about Paul's admonition regarding the authorities in Romans 13.

In his monumental book *Paul* (1966 in Dutch) Ridderbos confirms that his redemptive-historical interpretation, which he links with Luther and Calvin, is opposed to the emphasis on what he here calls the “order of salvation” (or: “redemptive order”), whereby he has pietism, mysticism and moralism in mind. In the “redemptive order” interpretation of Paul, “the emphasis shifted to the process of individual appropriation of the salvation given in Christ and to its mystical and moral effect in the life of believers” (14). With approval he quotes two sentences from Wrede’s conclusions: “That which is peculiar to Paul and also new in him is this, that he made redemptive facts – the incarnation, the death, and the resurrection of Christ – the foundation of religion. Redemptive history is the backbone of Pauline Christianity” (21).<sup>48</sup>

This redemptive-historical view on Paul is Ridderbos’s instrument by which he distinguishes himself from the *religionsgeschichtlich* (history of religions) approach and also from Schweitzer’s mystical interpretation. Against Bultmann’s demythologizing interpretation of eschatology and his existentialistic reading of Paul he argues that such a vision leaves no room for “an eschatological redemptive history in the sense of a train of events advancing toward the consummation which have already taken place and are still to be anticipated in Christ” (42). In Ridderbos’s view, this emphasis on the redemptive-historical and corporate as against the individual and mystical does not find its determinative point of departure in the new creature but in the new creation. For instance, he interprets 2 Corinthians 5:17 as follows: “If any man is in Christ, he is [belongs to] the new creation. The old things have passed away, behold! New things have come”. According to Ridderbos this does not in the first place concern the individual regeneration, the individual past and the personal renewal (206). Similarly, “being in the Spirit” denotes not a subjective state of consciousness, but an “objective” mode of being (221).

As in earlier works, Ridderbos stresses in his interpretation of Paul that God’s promises have been fulfilled: “Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2). In this he distinguishes between the “already” and the “not yet” (487). He does however recognize that Paul did not make allowance for a centuries-long continuing development of the present world order (489).<sup>49</sup> He points out that on the one hand the apostle writes, “the time is short” (1 Corinthians 7:29), and on the other hand he warns against an over-excited *Naherwartung* in 2 Thessalonians 2 (489, 511). In contrast to many historical-critical exegetes, Ridderbos recognizes 2 Thessalonians as a genuine epistle of Paul.<sup>50</sup>

Ridderbos’s view that Paul must be interpreted redemptive-historically and not according to the “order of salvation” seems strikingly similar to Klaas Schilder’s. We can also distinguish an affinity with Karl Barth, who had little sympathy for the emphasis on the religious experiences of the pious person. However, by Ridderbos’s own admission he was mainly inspired by Cullmann in

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<sup>48</sup> Ridderbos borrows this from W. Wrede, *Paulus* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1907, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), 103-4; English translation *Paul* (transl. E. Lummis; London: Philip Green, 1907).

<sup>49</sup> Also Cullmann, *Le retour du Christ*, 25, 28.

<sup>50</sup> However, several historical-critical exegetes do regard 2 Thessalonians as an authentic epistle of Paul; thus James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids Mi: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997).

this respect. The renewed emergence of the Pentecostal Movement in the 1960s was to strengthen him in this view. In a radio speech which was subsequently published,<sup>51</sup> he discusses the view which originated in Pentecostal circles that if someone believes and trusts Christ, he or she is not therefore necessarily baptized with the Holy Spirit. He opposes this view by quoting Paul, who says that “we all” who are baptized, have been incorporated in the church and have been baptized in the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13). He received much criticism on this radio broadcast and this article, from people who accused him of writing about something he did not understand because he did not give room to the work of the Spirit. Their main objection was that he linked faith in Christ and being baptized with the Spirit too closely, and that by contrast faith is a first stage on the road to baptism with the Holy Spirit. Ridderbos then points to the redemptive-historical character of the outpourings of the Spirit as described in the book of Acts.<sup>52</sup> He writes that he does not propose that such manifestations of the Spirit do not occur today, but that the Bible teaches that the Spirit is given to all who have been baptized in Christ and who in faith sit at His table. He points to the richness of faith in Christ, which he describes as “a living, struggling, praying principle inside”. He denies the view attributed to him that whoever believes will therefore also automatically have the Spirit and he recognizes that “if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12). However, he maintains his objection to those who distinguish between “having Christ” and “having the Spirit”.

#### *The Gospel of John* (1987-1992 in Dutch)

Remarkably, the subtitle of Ridderbos’s commentary on the fourth Gospel is: *A Theological Commentary*.<sup>53</sup> He explains his emphasis on theological exegesis by saying that he is mainly interested in the significance of the gospel message that the Evangelist had in view as he wrote (xiii). Even though the terms “redemptive-historical” and “salvation-historical” occur more than once in this book,<sup>54</sup> their use is not very specific and is even absent from the introductory paragraph “History and revelation” (12-4). Ridderbos emphasizes that the meaning of history as such is not pushed back in this Gospel, but admits that the chronological viewpoint has only marginal significance (13, 114). It would, however, be wrong to believe he intended to practice “theological exegesis” in the sense that this Gospel is only concerned with the message or theology and not with the historical reliability of the events it describes (680-3).

#### The tenor of Ridderbos’s redemptive-historical exegesis

We can now draw several conclusions. We saw that Ridderbos contrasts the terms “redemptive history”, “salvation history”, and “redemptive-historical” with various other views. His view that the New Testament must be understood in a redemptive-historical framework entails that God has promised the coming of His kingdom within the framework of the concrete history of humankind. In the coming of Christ this promise was provisionally fulfilled. However, Christ did not announce that

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<sup>51</sup> Broadcast on June 13, 1965; published in *Gereformeerd Weekblad* 20 (June 18, 1965): 370-1.

<sup>52</sup> *Gereformeerd Weekblad* 21 (July 16, 1965): 10-11.

<sup>53</sup> In Dutch: *Proeve van een theologische exegese*.

<sup>54</sup> For instance, *The Gospel of John*, 3, 51, 109, 169, 321, 328, 335, 416, 430, 465, 651.

history would end soon after his resurrection, as if the kingdom would soon come in all its fullness. The time of the church would come first, sharing in the provisional fulfillment of the promise of the kingdom. With this view Ridderbos distinguishes himself in the first place from those exegetes who regard the coming of the kingdom as one-sidedly imminent, implying that it has come to earth through Christ's coming. Secondly he distinguishes himself from those, including Schweitzer, who shift all focus to the eschatological character of Jesus' preaching of God's kingdom. After all, this view leaves no room for the fulfillment of God's promises at the time of Christ's ministry on earth. Thirdly, Ridderbos distinguishes himself from Bultmann in as far as the latter places all emphasis on the choice for Christ that man needs to make irrespective of any concrete development of history.

Ridderbos not only contrasts his view on redemptive-historical exegesis with those of liberal exegetes. In as far as the traditional Reformed interpretation of Scripture emphasizes the "order of salvation", i.e., is focussed on the spiritual development and experiences of the believer, Ridderbos – and this is our fourth point – opposes this by saying that Scripture is not concerned with this. According to Ridderbos, the Bible places all emphasis on what has been done for man "objectively" and "forensically" in Christ. This means that whoever believes in Christ and has been baptized, should not focus on his or her own pious inner self, but on Christ in whom God gives his promises.

Fifthly, Ridderbos contrasts his view on redemptive-historical exegesis with the naive fundamentalist interpretation of the Scriptures, which believes that even all those matters that are not directly linked to the redemptive facts need to be interpreted as historical facts. This view is apparent in his argument that Christ intended the creation of the New Testament canon, so that this too is founded in redemptive history.

#### The influence of Ridderbos

Finally, we will now briefly look at the question to what extent Ridderbos's work is still influential today.

All over the world his books are being used by Orthodox Reformed and Evangelical theologians. They appreciate the way he maintains the historicity of the redemptive facts and does not consider any New Testament epistles as pseudepigraphic. But even outside those circles he is still well-respected. For instance, Dunn's *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* dating from 1997 contains numerous references to Ridderbos's book on Paul.<sup>55</sup>

In his native country it is mainly his commentaries on the Pauline Epistles, his book on Paul and his commentary on the Gospel of John that are being used, but this does not mean that his specific view of salvation-historical exegesis as opposed to exegesis on the basis of the "order of salvation" is still widely accepted today. On the contrary, there is a general call for the experience of faith and spirituality. The view that whoever is baptized has been objectively and corporately incorporated in Christ and has no need to consider his subjective experience of faith is shared by only a few now that Barthian teaching has also lost much of its influence. However, with regard to Ridderbos's influence one needs to remember that two of his most

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<sup>55</sup> See n. 50.

voluminous works, *The Coming of the Kingdom* and *Paul: An Outline of his Theology* can be categorized as Biblical theology<sup>56</sup> and that this subject is still intensively taught at Kampen and elsewhere.

For many decades after the Second World War, Ridderbos was of great importance for the education of many students, preachers and members of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and elsewhere. He had a clear view of the Gospel of Christ and did not swim with the tide. He was open to new developments, but also knew how to keep his distance. In comparison to Kuyper, Greijdanus, and Grosheide he showed more openness for the critical questions about the historicity and the authority of Scriptures. Inevitably the positions have shifted since then. It is characteristic of his greatness that he can appreciate this.

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<sup>56</sup> See also H. N. Ridderbos, “De theologie van het Nieuwe Testament”, in *Inleiding tot de studie van het Nieuwe Testament* (ed. A. F. J. Klijn; Kampen: Uitgeverij Kok, 1982), 173-90.