

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The following essays about biblical and religious psychology first appeared in the organ of the Reformed School Association and are now, by popular demand, published separately. They make no pretense to being exhaustive, but they deal with topics that are relevant for the knowledge about the person and especially of the child.

—Herman Bavinck,
Amsterdam, March 1920

PART 1
**BIBLICAL
PSYCHOLOGY**

Chapter 1

THE CHARACTER AND SIGNIFICANCE OF BIBLICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Certainly there need be no fear entertained that people in our circles should find the discussion of certain subjects that belong to the area of so-called biblical psychology unnecessary and superfluous. In the books that narrate the history of psychology, the psychology [*zielkunde*]¹ that is in the Bible is either entirely passed over or treated very scantily. There are not many definite works concerning biblical psychology, at least not in our language, and they are sometimes not suitable for use by teachers.

There is something surprising in this neglect of biblical psychology [*zielkunde*]. The ideas of men who have exercised little or no influence on the history of psychology are amply set forth; but the psychology [*zielkunde*] of the Bible, which even from a historical viewpoint alone has certainly acquired an extraordinary significance, is unwittingly or intentionally omitted. And then people complain that the youth know nothing anymore of the Bible, and therefore no longer understand a large part of our literature and art!

Nevertheless, our Christian teachers ought to go in another direction and acquaint themselves with what the Scriptures teach them concerning man, his nature, his faculties, and abilities.

1 *Zielkunde*, “the art of caring for souls,” may be translated as psychology, but it has strong Christian overtones. J. H. Bavinck (1895–1964), Herman’s nephew, later authored *Inleiding in de zielkunde* (Kampen: Kok, 1926). The work (*Introduction to Psychology*) relates the theology and psychology of Augustine’s *Confessions* to the insights of modern psychology.

But as soon as we begin to think of that subject that bears the name of biblical psychology, we face a great difficulty, a difficulty that is repeatedly felt and discussed and that has given rise to different opinions. The question is asked whether such a subject actually exists and can lay claim to the right of existence. There are those who without hesitation give an affirmative answer to this question and marvel somewhat concerning the question itself. How would the Bible—which from beginning to end deals not only with God, but also with man, his origin, fall, redemption, and destiny—not also contain all the information necessary for the construction of a psychology? Therefore, they assert that the Scriptures present to us all the material for a complete and systematic psychology; that this psychology, when built upon the Scriptures, is far preferable to that scientific [*wetenschappelijke*]² psychology that is constructed by man himself from the investigation of human nature by itself and with others.

But this opinion has not gone unchallenged. For, as others argue, the Bible was not given to us for the purpose of deriving from it a complete psychology. As it is the book of the revelation of God, and more specifically, of redemption in Christ, we must use it for that end and not for all sorts of scientific tinkering [*wetenschappelijk geknutsel*]. It is authoritative for us only in those truths that lie in the religious-ethical realm and that concern the relationship between God and man, but it cannot be regarded as a source of knowledge for all sciences [*wetenschap*]. If the Bible gave us a scientific psychology, one could with equal right assert that a scientific cosmology, geography, astronomy, physics, general history, logic, philosophy, etc., ought to be constructed from the Bible, and where then would be the independence and freedom of

2 *Wetenschap* and *wetenschappelijke* will be consistently translated throughout the work as “science” and “scientific” unless otherwise noted. The word is the Dutch cognate to the German word *Wissenschaft*, which signifies serious scholarly inquiry including both the humanities and natural sciences. See Ximian Xu, *Theology as the Science of God: Herman Bavinck’s Wetenschappelijke Theology for the Modern World* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022), 37, 64; see also Bavinck, *Christelijke wetenschap* (Kampen: Kok, 1904); English translation: *Christianity and Science*, trans. and eds. James Eglinton, Cory Brock, Nathaniel Gray Sutanto (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023).

THE CHARACTER AND SIGNIFICANCE OF BIBLICAL PSYCHOLOGY

all these sciences [*wetenschappen*]? We would return to those times in which theology, and in particular dogmatics, presumed itself to be the one and only absolute science and knew how to give an answer to all possible and impossible questions. Just as then, so also now all science would be swallowed up by theology or at least would be deprived of the right of independence and free research. For what purpose, for example, would we still investigate nature and humanity, heaven and earth, if the Bible gave us infallible and sufficient information on all these matters? For science, we would have nothing else to do but study the Scriptures; they would be the *principium*, the sufficient source of all our wisdom, and make all further study unnecessary.

One feels the weight of this reasoning. It is not really without foundation, because now and then one still encounters such a view in the church. Is not Scripture a lamp before the feet and a light on our path [Ps. 119:105]? What do we have to do with all that worldly wisdom that is nothing else than vain philosophy [Col. 2:8]? What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens, the Christian with the philosopher, the disciple of heaven with the scholar of Greece? In this way Tertullian already spoke in his time,³ and many after him, until the present. But at the same time it demonstrates that the question—whether there exists a subject as biblical psychology—is of greater general relevance, and it really raises the whole question of the relation between theology and science [*wetenschap*], between revelation and nature.

3 Bavinck refers to Tertullian of Carthage (155–c. 220) and the seventh chapter of his *The Prescription Against Heretics*: “He had been at Athens, and had in his interviews (with its philosophers) become acquainted with that human wisdom which pretends to know the truth, whilst it only corrupts it, and is itself divided into its own manifold heresies, by the variety of its mutually repugnant sects. What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? what between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from ‘the porch of Solomon,’ who had himself taught that ‘the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart.’ Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief. For this is our palmary faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides.” *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Vol. 3: Latin Christianity, Its Founder: Tertullian*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 246.

BIBLICAL AND RELIGIOUS PSYCHOLOGY

The question whether there exists such a subject as biblical psychology may be reduced to a principle of very general application. Applied in different forms and to other subjects, it comes to our attention again and again both in the practice of life as well as in the realm of thought. When we define this principle in the abstract, it comes down to the question of the relation of Scripture to nature, the particular to general revelation, of the person of Christ to the works of his Father in creation and providence.

Does special revelation swallow everything that lies before us in nature and history, such that, in order to know everything about it (nature and history), we need to do nothing other than to investigate the Scriptures? There are indeed those who theoretically reason this way, but at the same time they contradict the practice in their own life. After all, they go to school, receive instruction in the subjects that they need for life, and permit themselves to receive training for that trade or calling which they wish someday to practice in society. Agriculture, animal husbandry, business, industry, etc.—they are all learned from nature in school and in life. This instruction, too, comes to them from God, but they do not receive this instruction from Scripture, but from nature. God instructs them in the way they must act through the nature of things; and this also comes from the Lord of hosts who is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in working (Isa. 28:23–29).

But on the other side, are the Scriptures so detached from nature that they never in any way concern themselves with, never speak of, and shed absolutely no light on it? Is Scripture alone a light on the path to heaven, and is it in no respect a lamp for our feet as we walk in the paths of this earth [Ps. 119:105]? This is equally contrary to reality, because Scripture by no means limits itself only to purely religious-ethical and heavenly things; but each moment it also deals with those matters that concern earthly life. As you know, it tells of the creation of heaven and earth, the origin of man, of man's sin and misery in this life. In its first chapters, Scripture takes the whole of humanity into consideration; it lets special revelation flow forth through the prophets and in Christ to the whole of humanity, and it ends with the prediction that one day there will come a new heaven, but also a new earth in which righteousness dwells [2 Pet. 3:13]. And in the unfolding of this rich and

THE CHARACTER AND SIGNIFICANCE OF BIBLICAL PSYCHOLOGY

broad history, it descends again and again to all kinds of particulars, to phenomena in nature, to events in general history, to chronologies and genealogies, to definite expressions about the nature of man, about his soul [*ziel*], his spirit [*geest*], and his heart [*hart*]. On all sides, special revelation penetrates deep into the natural life of humanity.

No one can deny these facts, for they lie clearly before us on each page of holy Scripture. But when Scripture does this and sets its feet on the terrain of natural life, does it still remain for us *holy* Scripture, the word of God that endures forever and from which no jot or tittle passes away except it be fulfilled [Matt. 5:18]?

It appears that one cannot permit himself to give a fixed answer to this in any easy way and without further explanation. There is, as you know, much in holy Scripture that has passed away and no longer applies to us in these days. In the first two centuries of Christianity a fierce battle was fought against the Christians from the Jews who wanted to maintain the law of Moses also in the new dispensation, and wanted to insist on circumcision, especially for the Christians from the Gentiles. The apostle Paul especially defended himself against that kind of Judaism, and even expressed it so sharply as that Christ would be of no benefit to the believers from the Gentiles if they let themselves be circumcised (Gal. 5:2), because in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision had any power, but faith working through love (Gal. 5:6). And the Christian church has walked in his footsteps and has pronounced the civil and ceremonial laws of Israel as invalid for the Christian church.

In Reformed theology, therefore, a distinction was made from of old between the so-called *auctoritas historiae* and the *auctoritas normae* in holy Scripture.⁴ By the first was understood the authority of those words and deeds that were narrated in Scripture indeed as

4 For example, see Petrus van Mastricht: “We must properly distinguish between historical authority, which expresses the bare truth of history or fact (and thus to that extent applies to all the holy narrations), and a norming authority, which in addition directs our faith and life.” *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Todd M. Rester, vol. 1, *Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids, MI: (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2018), 126–127; see also Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 2, *God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 484.

history, but must not be considered a rule of faith and life for us; and under the second were comprehended those utterances and events that were reported not simply as bare history but that also serve us yet today to govern our faith and life.

There occur in Scripture not only words and deeds of God, of angels and of pious men, but also of devils and wicked men; and it speaks for itself that these last must not be a rule and an example for us. This is so obvious that it needs no further argument. But there are also mentioned in the Bible expressions and deeds of pious people that are certainly not intended for imitation but rather for admonition. One need think only of the insincerity of Abraham [Gen. 12:10–20; 20:2–7], the deceit of Jacob [Gen. 27:1–40], the disobedience of Moses [Num. 20:10–11], the adultery of David [2 Sam. 11–12], the self-cursing of Job and Jeremiah [Job 3:1; Jer. 20:14], the denial of Peter [Luke 22:54–62], etc. To judge all these words and deeds rightly, it is not enough that we simply and faithfully take them as historically faithful, but we ought also to test them by that law that God himself has set forth elsewhere as the rule for the life of his people. Besides, just as we noticed above in connection with the many elements in the law of Moses, there are also many words in Scripture that God spoke to a particular person in peculiar circumstances that are not directed to us and therefore we should not follow. For example, he commanded Abraham to offer his son [Gen. 22], Phinehas to kill the adulterous man and woman [Num. 25], Saul to kill Agag [1 Sam. 15]; and Jesus even commanded the rich young man to sell everything he had and to give it to the poor [Luke 18:22]. Human society would be in a strange state if Christians had to follow this example literally and had to apply this in their surroundings. Yet a few have indeed tried this and have displayed by this their wrong interpretation of Scripture. The Anabaptists and their related sects use this in support of their position; and in our day a man like Leo Tolstoy concludes from the command of Jesus in Matthew 5:39 (“I say to you that you do not resist evil”) the obligation of complete defenselessness.⁵

5 Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy (1828–1910), often referred to in English as Leo Tolstoy, discusses this in *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* (1894).

THE CHARACTER AND SIGNIFICANCE OF BIBLICAL PSYCHOLOGY

In general, we are sufficiently sensible to avoid these extremes. We sense well enough, even though we cannot give ourselves a definite account of it, that the Scriptures must be read with discernment and explained historically. But we are, with this rule, by no means free of every difficulty and find ourselves quite often in a state of considerable uncertainty.

That we often labor in great uncertainty with respect to the question whether some examples and precepts in the Bible are still binding for us today became evident in a striking manner just a few years ago in a special case. And because the question that occupies us is so important, I allow myself to revisit this case with a few words.

In the years 1902 and 1903 there was a rather brisk discussion in the Christian magazines concerning the freedom of the laboring class and, following from this, the relations of employees to employers.

It was then asserted by one of the parties that the condition of the laborers since the French Revolution was changed so radically that the admonition given to servants by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:20–21, Ephesians 6:5, Colossians 3:22, 1 Timothy 6:1, Titus 2:9, and 1 Peter 2:18, to be obedient to masters in all things, was in no way applicable to present-day workers. After all, the servants to whom the apostle directed his admonitions were *slaves* who belonged to their masters with body and soul and were subject to them in the fullest sense. But slavery and bondage have been totally abolished in our society. The workers at present and in present-day society are no slaves nor even servants anymore. They are, at least with respect to rights, completely free. They can enter into a contract with a boss concerning work to be produced by them and concerning wages that are to be received by them; but, just like the boss, they do this completely freely and independently and are bound only by contract. Of course, both parties must abide by the contract and in this be mutually faithful to one another (or keep it faithfully). But the contract binds both equally and is from a formal point of view completely the same as the agreement that is entered into between anyone who wants to have a house built and an architect, between an architect and a builder, between buyers and suppliers of goods, etc.

Therefore, no authority on the side of the boss and no obedience on the part of the employee is applicable. Both these matters are

relevant in different areas: in the household, in the state, in the relation of man and wife, parents and children, magistrates and subjects. But in a free society, employers and employees simply stand as contractors alongside and opposite one another and are mutually obliged to nothing other than to keep the agreement. The admonitions of the apostle aimed at masters and servants have no longer the least force or significance for present-day employers and employees. From a practical point of view, they have expired just like the civil and ceremonial laws in the Old Testament, because conditions in society have become entirely different.

Many, however, had difficulty with this idea. It was almost too simple for them. It was indeed readily acknowledged on their side that society, especially in the last century, had undergone vast changes and that particularly the working class had received a freedom of movement that it formerly had not enjoyed. But they maintained that these alterations, even though important, were not such as to render the apostles' admonitions inapplicable and powerless. The form has indeed changed, even as households, schools, the state, etc., took a part in these changes, but in their core message they remained the same. The employees remain obliged to obedience, just as the employers for their part remain called and obliged to treat their servants rightly and equally, knowing that they both have one Lord in the heavens.

The discussion about this question that was carried on in those years in magazines and brochures was of considerable importance, but it finally degenerated, as so frequently happens, into trivialities, and it led to no conclusion. This is not the place to take up the discussion again and, if possible, bring it to a better conclusion. The case was referenced only as a striking example of the difficulty that life can present to us if we are serious in our wish to conform to the rule of holy Scripture.

At the same time, this can serve to show us the direction in which the solution must be sought. One of two things is true. First, in spite of the difference in names and forms, there is, between the relation of masters and servants in Paul's time and that of employers and employees in our day, such an essential similarity that the admonitions of Scripture are still essentially applicable. Or, second, the relation between employers and employees in our society is so principally and radically

THE CHARACTER AND SIGNIFICANCE OF BIBLICAL PSYCHOLOGY

changed that those admonitions have lost once and for all their validity and force. In the first case, Scripture keeps its authority and speaks a word that still retains its validity. In the second case, with regard to the relation between bosses and workers, we have socially outgrown it, and on this point we are dismissed from Scripture's authority.

Here everything hinges, as one feels, on one's view of the laboring class. If the laboring class, as we at present know it, is a completely new class that received its existence only through and after the French Revolution, then there is some reason for the assertion that the above-mentioned admonitions of holy Scripture are not to be reckoned applicable to it. But if this laboring class always and everywhere exists in the present world, albeit in greatly different forms, then the words of Scripture keep their force and still have meaning for our time. For then the essence of the laboring class lies in this, that there have always been and there always will be men who only through the expenditure of their labor can provide for the necessities of life and who therefore naturally are compelled to live in a relation of servants to others and to submit their own will to the guiding will of a master or patron.

The return from this digression to our starting point is not difficult. For when Scripture speaks of man in the language of its time it speaks concerning the same man who still lives now and who, in the midst of all kinds of cultural changes, really remains the same. His knowledge, art, and civilization may advance, but it is the same heart that beats in his bosom today as it has for centuries.

The significance of biblical psychology for our study of humanity appears in the first place from this: that Scripture speaks of the same man who still exists, lives, thinks, feels, wills, and acts.⁶ It is actually Scripture itself that makes this important truth known to us, for it deliberately teaches the common origin of the whole human race and the unity and immutability of human nature. It testifies that man, in spite of difference in sex, language, nation, culture, notwithstanding the fact that he has become a sinner, and also when he has been delivered and renewed from sin, remains always the same in his being, with the same soul, the same needs, the same inspirations and aspirations.

6 Dutch: "die nu nog bestaat, leeft en denkt, gevoelt, wil en handelt."

BIBLICAL AND RELIGIOUS PSYCHOLOGY

We thank holy Scripture for this insight. The Gentiles did not know this unity. Greeks and Romans looked down on other nations as barbarians and repeatedly ascribed a different origin to them. And when science in the former century adopted the idea of evolution, it more than once returned to the same viewpoint, that man had come, in many different places, from different animal ancestors and perhaps in the future or in the hereafter would develop into another, higher being. It is worthy of note, however, that many in recent times, even though they remain adherents of evolutionism, have again taken up the idea of the unity of the human race and of human nature, except that for them nature took precedence over doctrine; ethnology and the history of religions led them back to belief in such a unity.

Although this unity is now of essential importance for religion and morality, for psychology and pedagogy, and is the basis for the value that biblical psychology can have for us, the *way* that the holy Scripture deals with man is of even greater importance. How it does so can be deduced from a general principle derived from the center of the special revelation, from the person of Christ himself.⁷

On the one hand, it is firmly established that this person of Christ has not come forth from and is not to be explained by a natural and gradual development of the human race. He is not a product of Israel, but a miracle in the full sense. He has, according to his own word, descended from above. He has come to us in the way of supernatural conception. He is the Word that was in the beginning with God and became flesh in the fulness of time [John 1:1, 14; Gal. 4:4–5; Eph. 4:10].

And yet, as far as the flesh is concerned, he is from the fathers. He did not bring his human nature along from heaven, nor did he bring it into being by a new creation, but he took it out of the proper flesh and blood of Mary. He is a true and perfect man, equal to us in all things, except sin, an Israelite without deception, who was brought up in Nazareth, who spoke the language of his nation, and who did not

7 On the centrality of Christ to revelation in Bavinck's conception of theology see Cameron Clausung, *Theology and History in the Methodology of Herman Bavinck: Revelation, Confession, and Christian Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 129–131.

THE CHARACTER AND SIGNIFICANCE OF BIBLICAL PSYCHOLOGY

speak his wisdom in the philosophical manner of the Greeks but in proverbs and parables.

This principle of the incarnation governs the whole of special revelation. This incarnation is always from above and yet is organically united with the world and humanity and makes itself an ineradicable part of cosmic life. It is from this standpoint that judgment can be made concerning what the Scriptures say of heaven and earth, the kingdoms of plants and animals, and the world of people, of parents and children, men and women, masters and servants, magistrates and subjects. It always brings a word of God to us, but always through the words of man, and therefore it always has a human, historical, local, temporal character. This holds true even for the highest truths in the religious and moral sphere, which we therefore do not learn to repeat word for word or literally in confession and doctrine; but after having received them in our consciousness and after having thoughtfully appropriated them, we reproduce them freely and independently in the language of our time.⁸

It would carry us too far if we worked out this principle in its particulars and in its concrete application. We only point out with a few words what follows from this with respect to biblical psychology. In this area also special revelation unites itself to man who exists by virtue of creation and providence and who, though remaining the same in essence, is still the object of our investigation. But [special revelation] unites itself to [man] only insofar as is necessary for its own purpose. Therefore, [special revelation] furnishes us with no popular or scientific psychology any more than it hands us an outline of history, geography, astronomy, husbandry, etc. To this extent it is completely true to say that the Bible does not teach us how the stars move through heaven, but how we ascend to heaven.

Also, even if one tried, it would be impossible to draw from the Bible a psychology that could meet all our needs. For not only would it be impossible to make a complete whole out of the various data,

8 See Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 1, *Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 435–439; see also Bavinck, “Reading, Thinking, Speaking,” ed. Gregory Parker Jr., *Modern Reformation* 30, no. 1 (2021): 13–16.

but the words that Scripture uses, such as “spirit” [*geest*], “soul” [*ziel*], “heart” [*hart*], “mind” [*gemoed*], etc., are derived from the Jewish vernacular of the time, usually have a different content than we associate with them, and are by no means always used in the same broad or narrow sense. Holy Scripture never makes use of abstract philosophical concepts but always speaks the rich language of life. Therefore, there is a need for good exegesis to understand its true meaning and to convey it in the words of our time. It is not suitable for, nor intended to be, a textbook or a scientific handbook.

But if we investigate it according to its own principle and nature, it yields a threefold benefit for us for our psychology. In the first place, it teaches us to know man as he is and as he will always remain in his origin, essence, and destiny.⁹ This is already of great importance, for psychology [*zielkunde*], no matter how empirically studied, always remains a philosophical science. The difference is only whether we borrow our view of man from Plato, Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Johann Friedrich Herbart, Wilhelm Wundt, etc., or from the prophets and apostles. But it follows, in the second place, that the study of holy Scripture introduces us to man’s soul-life in a way that no other book does or can do. After all, it describes for us what changes in that man, who remains the same according to his essence, are produced through sin and grace. It follows that man through these changes to the deepest hiding places of his heart, brings to light what happens in secret, and manifests itself also in this sense to be a word of God that is living and powerful and penetrates to the dividing of soul and spirit [Heb. 4:12]. And finally, it never does all this in abstract conceptions, but it makes us see everything in the full reality of life. It brings before us persons, each of whom is worthy of studying in his own right and who together form a gallery that cannot be seen anywhere else. And among them, or rather, high above them, Christ stands, the only one among men, full of grace and truth.

9 This is very a common way for Bavinck to discuss humanity. See Herman Bavinck, “Origin, Essence, and Destiny of Mankind,” in *Guidebook for Instruction in the Christian Religion*, trans. Gregory Parker Jr. and Cameron Clousing (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2022), 81–85.