

## Farming According to General Revelation? The Meaning of Isaiah 28:22–29

Right in the middle of Isaiah’s prophecies about Israel’s position among the nations there is a passage about a farmer. In style and character, this section strikes one as being out of place. Although it is part of the prophetic literature, the introductory sentence—“Listen and hear my voice; pay attention and hear what I say” (28:23)—gives the impression that a wisdom proverb will follow. The passage itself deals with a farmer who plows, sows, and threshes according to God’s instruction. It is usually explained as a parable.

This remarkable section of Isaiah’s prophecies has recently played a role in discussions about faith and science. It is then not seen as a parable but is understood in a literal sense. The instruction God gives the farmer is understood as general revelation. This is then applied to science: scientific results are in fact (general) revelation from God. In light of this recent use, we would like to research the meaning of Isaiah 28:23–29.

### The New Application

A. Wolters discusses this text in his exposition of creational revelation. He even calls Isaiah 28 the clearest text in the Bible about the revelation of God in creation. The farmer is not instructed by the revelation of Moses and the prophets but by the revelation of creation: the soil, the seed, and the implements of his daily experience.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A. Wolters, *Creation Regained* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1985) 28.

What is revealed in this general revelation of which Isaiah 28 supposedly speaks? Wolters uses several expressions: “the creation order in family life, farming, commerce and administration”; “the normative creation order”; “creational norms for the aesthetic life”; “a normative structure for the school, for the state, for the business enterprise”; “creational law”; and “creational norms.”<sup>2</sup> Because God reveals these norms, they are in principle knowable, and science can discover them: “This fundamental knowability of the creation order is the basis of all human understanding, both in science and in everyday life.”<sup>3</sup> Thus Isaiah 28 becomes an important text for a general revelation of God’s norms for creation.

We find the same text used in a report of the Committee on Creation and Science, presented to the 1991 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church. This synod had to deal with unrest in the churches resulting from publications by three professors at Calvin College in Grand Rapids. The synod appointed a committee to study the relationship between general and special revelation, namely, the implications for the interpretation of the Bible and the study of God’s creation.<sup>4</sup>

The committee writes in its report (Report 28) to synod in connection with Isaiah 28:

God instructs the farmer not directly from the Scriptures, for that is not their purpose, but through the wisdom of God embedded in the creation itself. God has placed the human race on earth and has instructed us to be earthkeepers. He does not reveal to us by special revelation the means, the methods, the techniques by which to do this. All of that must be learned. Yet in learning how to do this, we are not left without guidance from the Lord, for the guidance, knowledge, and wisdom that are necessary are embedded in the creation itself.<sup>5</sup>

It is clear that the “wisdom” of God does not refer to an attribute of God—the fact that he is wise—but to the wisdom as embedded in the world. This “wisdom” is the same as that which Wolters called creational revelation.

The pericope from Isaiah 28 is seen as evidence for this general revelation. That is apparent from two facts. In the first place, Isaiah 28 is cited by

<sup>2</sup> Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 27–29. These expressions show affinity with the Philosophy of Cosmogenic Idea.

<sup>3</sup> Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 28–29.

<sup>4</sup> *Acts of Synod 1988* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church in North America) 598.

<sup>5</sup> *Agenda for Synod 1991* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church in North America) 375.

the report in the section on “general revelation and science.”<sup>6</sup> Secondly, Isaiah 28 is presented as a characteristic example of the biblical instruction about general revelation as manifestation of God’s wisdom.<sup>7</sup>

A third example of this use of Isaiah 28 is found in an article by Goheen. He posits that the doctrine of creational revelation is underdeveloped. Development of this theme is important in order to link the instruction of Scripture with scientific work.<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 28 is the most important basis for his argumentation. This text teaches that there are many regularities in creation which the farmer must discern in order to do his work well. But Isaiah does not say that the farmer himself has discovered these regularities; he emphasizes that God has instructed the farmer.<sup>9</sup> Like Wolters, Goheen links this with the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. Biblical wisdom would involve the discernment of the created order together with the human activity that corresponds to it.<sup>10</sup>

The creational revelation consists of two different parts. Firstly, God reveals himself in creation. Secondly, God reveals creation to man. Here science receives a legitimate place. After all, the understanding of creation also takes place by scientific and rational thought.<sup>11</sup> The study of nature is one of the ways in which God gives general revelation about nature. Isaiah 28 functions in this argumentation as the most important proof text. We must not fail to realize that this application of Isaiah 28 has three far-reaching consequences.<sup>12</sup>

1. If Isaiah 28 is correctly linked with creational revelation, then correct results of the natural sciences must be treated as revelatory truths.
2. This general revelation then becomes not only an ongoing revelation but also a still continuously expanding revelation.
3. Discoveries of the natural sciences come to stand on par with scriptural data as general revelation beside special revelation.

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<sup>6</sup> *Agenda for Synod 1991*, 373.

<sup>7</sup> *Agenda for Synod 1991*, 374.

<sup>8</sup> M. Goheen, “Creational Revelation, Scriptural Revelation and Science.” Unpublished paper presented at the Pascal Center International Conference on Science and Belief (Redeemer College, Ancaster, Ontario, 1992) 5.

<sup>9</sup> Goheen, “Creational Revelation,” 11.

<sup>10</sup> Goheen, “Creational Revelation,” 12.

<sup>11</sup> Goheen, “Creational Revelation,” 16.

<sup>12</sup> See N. H. Gootjes, “What does God Reveal in the Grand Canyon?” *Clarion* 42 (1993) 155–157, 178–181, 203–205, 335 [published as chapter 1 in this volume, ed.].

## Origin in Reformed Dogmatics?

We want to investigate briefly the origin of this use of Isaiah 28. Goheen<sup>13</sup> blames theology for having neglected creational revelation and has given no attention to Isaiah 28. For that reason, general revelation is reduced to the knowledge of God and the moral dimension of life. God's law for society, emotional life, and for biological, chemical, and physical life is not discussed. Goheen then criticizes two theologians who have written about general revelation—Berkouwer and Demarest—for not even having mentioned Isaiah 28. He agrees with the judgement of Diehl: "It is because of an underdevelopment in their doctrine of general revelation that evangelicals have trouble relating theology and science."<sup>14</sup>

But there is an exception: H. Bavinck. Goheen offers a quotation in which Bavinck uses Isaiah 28 in connection with general revelation. Is it true that Reformed theology has not spoken about Isaiah 28 and the structures of creation when dealing with general revelation, and does Bavinck take up an exceptional position in this matter?

To start with the sixteenth century, Calvin busied himself extensively with general revelation in the first book of his *Institutes*. There we encounter a carefully formulated argumentation. God has implanted knowledge of himself in man (1.3). This knowledge is not utilized and does not lead to the right service of God (1.4). In addition, God makes himself known in his works (1.5). Here Calvin also points to scientific discoveries (1.5.2). All this should lead to admiration of God. But also this revelation is misunderstood and does not lead to the service of God (1.5.4). In the course of this argumentation Calvin refers to many texts, more than are ordinarily used in the discussion of general revelation. But Isaiah 28 is not among them, and there is no talk of the revelation of structures of creation.

A century later, Turretin defends natural theology against the Socinians. He discusses the conscience in connection with Romans 2:14–15, and natural knowledge of God with reference to Psalm 19:1, Acts 14:15–17, 17:23, and Romans 1:19–20. He also gives information about the religion of "Americans and Brazilians." But also here Isaiah 28 is not mentioned.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Goheen, "Creational Revelation," 4.

<sup>14</sup> Goheen, "Creational Revelation," 5.

<sup>15</sup> F. Turretinus, *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae* (New York: Carter and Pittsburg, 1847) 1.8–9; Q. 3,5.6.8. English translation: Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (3 vols.; ed. J. T. Dennison, Jr.; trans. G. M. Giger; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992) 1.7–8.

As an example from the eighteenth century, we use De Moor. His *Commentarius* is sometimes called the mausoleum of Reformed theology, but the one for whom Reformed theology is still not completely dead can use this book as a handy, albeit very expansive, introduction to the discussions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Like Turretin, he deals with general revelation in the chapter about theology. He discusses the innate knowledge of God and then deals with Romans 1:19–20 and 2:14–15; thereupon he discusses the acquired knowledge of God and deals with Acts 14:17, 17:25–27, and Romans 1:20.<sup>16</sup>

Of the three great Reformed dogmaticians of the nineteenth century—Hodge, Kuyper and Bavinck—only the last one pays special attention to general revelation.<sup>17</sup> Bavinck gives the following definition of general revelation, to be found at the end of his treatment of special revelation:

General revelation is that conscious and free act of God by which, by means of nature and history (in the broadest sense, hence including one's own personal life experience), he makes himself known—specifically in his attributes of omnipotence and wisdom, wrath and goodness—to fallen human beings in order that they should turn to him and keep his law or, in the absence of such repentance, be inexcusable.<sup>18</sup>

Here all the emphasis is on the fact that God reveals himself. The view that in general revelation God reveals the structure of creation does not accord well with this definition. Neither do we find Isaiah 28 mentioned in the discussion of general revelation in briefer dogmatics of the twentieth century: Honig,<sup>19</sup> Berkhof<sup>20</sup> and Van Genderen.<sup>21</sup> In any case, therefore, Goheen is correct in so far that Reformed theology did not speak on the basis of Isaiah 28 about (general) revelation of structures of creation. This also applies to Bavinck, as appears from his definition of general revelation. How can Go-

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<sup>16</sup> B. De Moor, *Commentarius Perpetuus in Johannis Marckii Compendium* (7 vols.; Lugduni Batavorum: J. Hasebroek, 1761) 1.41–47.

<sup>17</sup> H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek* (4 vols.; 4<sup>th</sup> ed.; Kampen: Kok, 1928) 1.272–294. English translation: *Reformed Dogmatics* (4 vols.; ed. J. Bolt; trans. J. Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–2008) 1.301–322.

<sup>18</sup> Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1.323 (ET 1.350).

<sup>19</sup> A. G. Honig, *Handboek van de Gereformeerde dogmatiek* (Kampen: Kok, 1938) 69.

<sup>20</sup> L. Berkhof, *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 129–131.

<sup>21</sup> J. Van Genderen and W. H. Velema, *Beknopte Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Kampen: Kok, 1992) 54–55. English translation: *Concise Reformed Dogmatics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008) 42–43.

been call Bavinck an exception? To which quotation does he appeal?

Bavinck wrote the following:

In a sense we can say that also all knowledge of nature and history as we acquire and apply it in our occupation and business, in commerce and industry, in the arts and sciences, is due to the revelation of God. For all these elements of culture exist only because God has implanted in his creation thoughts and forces that human beings gradually learn to understand under his guidance. Scripture itself testifies of this when it says that it is God who teaches the farmer about the way he has to work the fields (Isa. 28:24–29).<sup>22</sup>

This quotation constitutes a part of an argumentation in which Bavinck connects the content of general revelation with God:

If God is the author of revelation, it naturally follows that he is also the content of it. All divine revelation is, in the nature of the case, self-revelation....<sup>23</sup>

The quotation in which Isaiah 28 is mentioned functions in Bavinck's argumentation as an objection against the rule that general revelation is about God. That is also apparent from the reserved tone at the beginning of the quotation: "In a sense...."

Bavinck responds to this objection first with the comment:

But since the creation's existence is distinct from God, and nature and history can also be studied by themselves and for their own sake, knowledge of God and knowledge of his creatures do not coincide, and in the latter case we usually do not speak of revelation as the source of knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

Bavinck does not want to speak here of revelation because this knowledge of creation does not lead to knowledge of God.

This is followed by the argument:

But the moment creatures are related to God and considered *sub specie aeternitatis* (under the aspect of eternity), they assume the character of a revelation to us and to some greater or lesser degree make God known to us.<sup>25</sup>

This is the reversal of the first argument: something only becomes revelation when it points beyond itself to God.

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<sup>22</sup> Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1.313 (ET 1.341).

<sup>23</sup> Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1.313 (ET 1.341).

<sup>24</sup> Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1.313 (ET 1.341).

<sup>25</sup> Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1.313 (ET 1.341).

And thus Bavinck comes to his conclusion:

The concept of revelation, therefore, is a religious concept; it belongs in the domain of religion. In revelation God becomes knowable.<sup>26</sup>

Goheen has misunderstood Bavinck. Bavinck does not pave the way for the use of Isaiah 28 in the doctrine of general revelation. It is precisely the opposite; Bavinck only mentions this text in order to subsequently block the use of this text in connection with general revelation.

It must be noted, however, that Bavinck's arguments are not strong. He bases his rejection on the general thesis that revelation always has God as content. But that point is now contested on the basis of Isaiah 28. Therefore we will have to go to the text itself with the question of whether this text proves that God gives (general) revelation about nature.

### Is Isaiah 28:23–29 a Parable?

The usual exegesis of this passage does not support the view that the issue at stake here is the revelation of structures of creation. The reason is that the text is understood as a parable. If that is true, then the expression that God instructs the farmer belongs to the imagery and therefore cannot be applied separately.

Generally speaking, there are two ways in which the passage is explained as a parable. The older exegesis saw the farmer's way of acting with the field and the produce as imagery of God's way of acting with his people. The plowing by the farmer refers to God punishing Israel. Just as the farmer does not merely plow, likewise God will not continue to punish. As plowing is followed by sowing, God will also bless. That the farmer does not crush with the threshing means that God will not destroy his people.<sup>27</sup>

This explanation cannot do justice to the text because a number of facts are neglected. The following elements can be pointed out:

1. Verse 25 speaks about the fact that different seeds are sown in different places. This element cannot receive a place in an explanation which

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<sup>26</sup> Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1.313 (ET 1.341–342).

<sup>27</sup> F. Delitzsch, *Biblischer Commentar über den Propheten Jesaja* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Leipzig: Dorffling und Franke, 1869) 325. See also J. Ridderbos, *De Profeet Jesaja* (2 vols.; Korte Verklaring; 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; Kampen: Kok, 1940) 1.178–179; English translation: *Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985 [1950–51]) 229–230; E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 2.297

concentrates on God's judgement and grace.

2. Threshing is seen as a sign of God's judgement. But the fact that the farmer uses various forms of threshing so as not to crush the grain (v. 27) cannot play a role in this explanation.

3. The concluding verses 26 and 29 emphasize that the knowledge of the farmer is the result of God's instruction. But this element of instruction does not fit in this explanation because God and the farmer are identified with one another.

4. This explanation is at a loss to place the passage about the farmer in this chapter.<sup>28</sup>

The newer exegesis follows Fohrer. The text is still a parable, but now the farmer is seen as an image of the prophet.<sup>29</sup> Isaiah's opponents reproach him because in his prophesying he says this on one occasion, then that on another. For example, Isaiah sees Assyria on one occasion as an adversary of God, then on another occasion as an instrument in God's hand. The parable of the farmer shows how that is. Just as the farmer time and again acts differently in different situations, so Isaiah speaks in another manner in new situations.<sup>30</sup>

In favour of this explanation is that justice is done to the differences in the farmer's method of working which are emphasized in the text. It is also correct that God is not equated with the farmer, because Isaiah depicts God as the farmer's teacher. Yet, also this explanation does not fit with the text.

1. The pivot on which everything turns in this explanation is the similarity between the farmer and the prophet. But these two cannot be placed on par with each other. The farmer is the pupil of God and acts according to his instruction. But Isaiah does not speak as a pupil; neither is he the executor of God's instruction, such as the farmer is. He is aware of himself as the messenger of God (Isa. 6:9–10; 8:1; 13:1, etc.). Isaiah speaks in the Name of God, also in this chapter (vv. 14, 16, 22). And he wants the people with their leaders to act in accordance with God's instruction.

2. This explanation is given against the background of the reproach that Isaiah time and again prophesies something else. But such a reproach

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<sup>28</sup> This especially in Ridderbos, *De Profeet Jesaja*, 1.177 (ET 228).

<sup>29</sup> G. Fohrer, "Wandlungen Jesajas," in *Festschrift für Wilhelm Eilers* (Wiesbaden: Garrassowitz, 1967) 61.

<sup>30</sup> L. A. Snijders, *Jesaja* (Prediking Oude Testament; Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1969) 288. See also A. Schoors, *Jesaja* (De Boeken van het Oude Testament; Roermond: Romen, 1972) 170.



does not appear in this section at all. The “mocking” by the rulers of Jerusalem (vv. 14, 22) is a mocking of the political inanity of Isaiah’s prophecy, not of the inconsistency of his prophesying.

The newer explanation of the parable of the farmer also does not fit with its content. In my opinion, the difficulties in the explanation are caused by the fact that one wants to understand this section as a parable. Nothing in the text, however, requires that Isaiah’s words be taken in a figurative sense. The passage does not begin with a formula such as “The work of the prophet is like...” And the ending is also not “Thus it is also with the work of God; he metes out according to the circumstances.” It is natural to accept that the passage deals with the farmer’s work in the literal sense of the word. And the emphasis is placed on the fact that God instructs the farmer.

### **The Literal Meaning of Isaiah 28:23–29**

With this, we have returned to the new use of Isaiah 28 which we pointed out at the beginning of this article. We can establish that here the passage is correctly taken in a literal sense. Can we therefore use Isaiah 28 as a proof text for a new sort of general revelation, with the result that science must be accorded the honour of bringing new revelations to light? On further reflection, this application also does not do justice to the text. We would like to point to three problems:

1. What is the content of God’s instruction? According to this application, it is the structures of creation which science discovers. We quote: “...when a scientist discovers DNA...we may say with Isaiah, ‘...his God teaches him, this also comes from the LORD of hosts; he is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in wisdom.’”<sup>31</sup> Isaiah speaks differently. The farmer of Isaiah 28 does not discover scientific facts but practical methods of operation. He knows how long he must plow, where he must sow which seed and with which implement he must thresh each grain. He learns the practical wisdom of farming from God. Isaiah 28 cannot be applied to “structures of creation.”

2. In this explanation, the direction of the passage is changed. All the emphasis is placed on the scientific discoveries as results of God’s revelation. But the account about the farmer places all the emphasis on God. Isaiah begins with the fact that the farmer appears to have knowledge about the different aspects of agriculture. Twice he relates this to God. God instructed

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<sup>31</sup> *Agenda for Synod 1991*, 375.

the farmer. This leads to the conclusion that God is wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom. It appears that for Isaiah ultimately the point at issue is not the instruction that God gives the farmer but the conclusion that, as the farmer's teacher, God indeed must be exceptionally wise.

3. The place of this passage in the prophecy of Isaiah is neglected also in this new application. One cannot make clear why in his prophecy to the political leaders in Jerusalem (28:14) Isaiah suddenly speaks about the discoveries of the farmer (and the scientist).

We must explain this passage literally in the historical situation. Isaiah's prophecy begins with the undeniable fact that in plowing, sowing, and harvesting the farmer knows what he is doing. He traces this practical wisdom back to God. God has instructed the farmer in farming (vv. 26, 29a). The argumentation leads to the conclusion not that the farmer is wise but that God is wise (v. 29). From the wisdom of the pupil is known the eminent wisdom of the teacher. With the example of the farmer, Isaiah aims to bring his hearers to the acknowledgement that God is wise in earthly matters.

That acknowledgement is desperately needed in the situation in which God's people find themselves. It is in the time that this small kingdom is threatened by the rod of Assyria. The leaders of Judah think that they have allayed the danger by entering into a covenant with "death"—Egypt—instead of trusting in God (v. 15). A covenant with Egypt seems to be smart politics; the one superpower is played off against the other. For that reason the leaders of the people mock Isaiah, who says that one must trust in the Lord (vv. 14, 22). In that context is found the lesson of wisdom about the farmer who is instructed by God. Herein God shows that he is wise in worldly matters, and whoever lets himself be taught by God acts well.

In his *Een Woord Gesproken op Zijn Tijd*, Ohmann gives a level-headed explanation of the first half of Isaiah's prophecies. Also the passage about the farmer he explains in its historical context:

And Isaiah—who has spoken also this word with a view to his time—directs the attention of his hearers to their God and Father. Would he who instructs the farmer to go to work with forethought, not be wise himself in his dealings with his people?<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> H. M. Ohmann, *Een Woord Gesproken op Zijn Tijd* (Franeker: Van Wijnen, 1988) 100. However, he does give the impression of still wanting to compare between plowing and punishing, sowing and peace. Is this the consequence of his calling the section a parable?