

# Creation and covenant in a via media position: The example of J.J.P. Valeton Jr

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**Note:**  
This article is dedicated to Prof. Dr James Alfred Loader. Prof. Bob Becking is participating as research fellow with Prof. Dr Andries G. van Aarde, Honorary Professor in the Faculty of Theology and Senior Research Fellow of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor's Unit for Advanced Studies at the University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa.

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The year 2012 marked the centenary of the death of the Utrecht Old Testament scholar J.J.P. Valeton Jr (1848–1912). He was a representative of the 'via media' approach of Dutch theology, which aimed at joining critical scholarship and piety, by avoiding the pitfalls of modernism as well as orthodoxy. Valeton accepted the critical analysis of Graf, Kuenen, and Wellhausen, but meanwhile remained a pious person. This article will discuss Valeton's contributions to critical scholarship of Genesis 1–3 as well as his profound ideas on 'covenant' as an expression of 'friendship'. Loader's distinction between 'knowledge open to faith' and 'knowledge open for scientific approach' is very helpful in understanding the works and ideas of Valeton.

## Introduction

### Bible and theology in the Netherlands

The scholarly work conducted in the 19th century is still the foundation on which our present work rests. Despite all sorts of interesting moves and methods such as structuralism, post-modernism, post-colonialism and many other approaches (Haynes & McKenzie 1999; Barton 2007), without the critical liberal paradigm shift we would still be in the land of pre-modernism where faith and tradition were seen as argument and where evidence and experiment were not yet listed in many dictionaries. As will become clear in this article, I do not construe the 19th century scholarly paradigm as flawless and worth of imitating in all respects. Next to that, I am fully aware of the pitfalls of positivism and the bleakness of modernism. Nevertheless, I think that we should not forget how much we owe to the pioneers and giants of that age.

Old Testament scholarship in the second half of the 19th century was stirred by the groundbreaking work of Karl Heinrich Graf, Abraham Kuenen and Julius Wellhausen (De Vries 1968:45–86; Smend 1989; Dirksen & Van der Kooij 1993). They and others designed a completely new framework for understanding the emergence of the Hebrew Bible and the development of ancient Israelite religion. Their views were – and to some degree still are – challenged by orthodox and conservative scholars, who are of the opinion that by the approach of the critical scholars the ground under the feet of their belief system is flushed away. The influence of the critical school, however, was not restricted to the small circle of liberal and modernist scholars working at North West European universities, as I hope to make clear in this presentation.

During the period around 1900 Josué Jean Philippe Valeton (1848–1912) was professor of Old Testament Studies at Utrecht University (Valeton 1945; De Vries 1968:94–104; Loader 1984; Aalders 1990; Becking 2012). He was a representative of the '*ethische richting*'. This faction within the Dutch Reformed Church has been in the position of the 'via media'. This approach in Dutch theology aimed at not dividing critical scholarship and piety, by avoiding the pitfalls of modernism as well as those of orthodoxy. Valeton, for instance, accepted the critical analyses of Graf, Kuenen, and Wellhausen, but meanwhile remained a pious person. In this contribution in honour of James Loader – who himself is more than familiar with the '*ethische*' approach to Old Testament studies (Loader 1984, 1985a, 1985b, 2004, 2012) – I would like to display Valeton's position by (1) elaborating on his theological position and (2) giving two examples of his work on Old Testament texts: creation and covenant.

## Was Valeton a theologian of mediation?

It has often been suggested that the theological position of Valeton and others could be construed as a form of *Vermittlungstheologie* (e.g. Van den Brom 2003). This theology was very much present amongst 19th century educated German scholars who would not pass their faith. They wanted to mediate between biblical history and critical philosophy. I do not have space enough here to present their views in full. Suffice it to say, that this theology – in line with Schleiermacher – combined a rationalistic approach with the idea that human feeling and sentiments open a

window unto God (Holte 1964; Göckel 2010). James Loader has made clear that, although there are connections, the theology of Valetton and his friends was quite different from the *Vermittlungstheologie* (Loader 2012).

Loader hints at the presence of six dimensions in the more theological reflective works of Valetton, namely, (1) no disguise over differences, (2) the interplay between two kinds of knowledge, (3) revelation as encounter, (4) the preference for *fides qua* over *fides quae*, (5) the history of religion and (6) polemics. On the basis of an analysis of these dimensions he arrives at the following conclusion. Valetton – as well as his peers – shared some views with the orthodox theologians that they did not share with the modernists. They however, also accepted views and ideas of the modernists that were unacceptable for the traditionalists. It should be noted that unlike the *Vermittlungstheologen*, Valetton never attempted to smoothen the impinging poles into some sort of a synthesis, ‘*tertium datur*’ was his device (Loader 2012).<sup>1</sup> The *Vermittlungstheologen* were aiming at a synthesis of the domains of ratio and fides by constructing a bricolage of elements. Valetton’s position, on the other hand, can best be summarised by the image of two concentric circles. The innermost circle is the domain of scientific knowledge. This circle is embraced by a second space, the circle of faith (Figure 1).

This issue can also be phrased in a different way. Theology as an academic discipline is restricted to the analysis of human speech about the Divine, be it in texts, songs, rituals et cetera. The religious truth, however, transcends this analysis. This religious truth is the vivid secret of mankind that cannot be caught in whatever words. They all fall short. The only thing we have is the witness of tradition, the richness and incomprehensibility of which can be probed and fathomed. In other words, this division of property, this distinction of realms differs fundamentally from the *Vermittlungstheologie*, in which these realms are basically blurred (Loader 2012). My next step will be to make clear how this approach functions in the daily work of an exegete.

## Valetton on creation

The archives of the institute for Religious Studies and Theology of Utrecht University contain a great number of *cahiers* that Valetton used in preparation of his lectures. These more than 150 *cahiers* reveal an interesting insight into the way Valetton was teaching (Van den Hoorn 1980). His strategy is characterised by a careful reading of the text, syllable by syllable, a strategy later labelled *close reading*. Views of other scholars are mentioned with Valetton’s arguments assessing them. There is an interchange of pure exegesis and broader remarks in the realm of biblical theology.

This collection contains an undated *cahier* entitled ‘*Inleiding: Kanon; Pentateuch*’.<sup>2</sup> It is arranged in such a way that each

1. Contradicting Aristotle’s ‘Law of the excluded middle’, as designed in his *Metaphysics* 4.4; see Loader (1987).

2. ‘Introduction: Canon and Pentateuch’, Archief Valetton, *Cahier* 3.

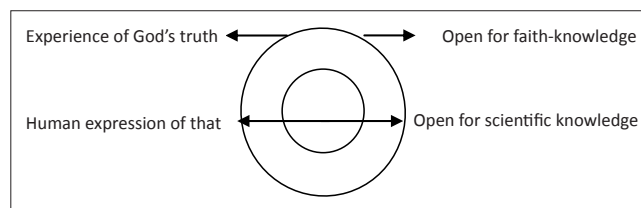


FIGURE 1: Realms and domains of knowledge.

page is inscribed for about 80% with margins of 20%. These margins were later used for additions and remarks when reapplying. In this *cahier* Valetton discusses the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. He starts off with a survey on contents and composition of the *Thora* (Valetton *Cahier* 3:56–62). In a next step, he elaborates the history of research into the emergence and growth of the Pentateuch leading to the four-sources-hypothesis as it had been formulated in the second half of the 19th century using the *sigla* J, E, D and P (Valetton *Cahier* 3:62–129). Valetton presents the views of Kuenen, Graf and Wellhausen as hypothetical construction of the past with a high degree of probability. He shows his students that this view is based on strong arguments and that there is an internal coherence in it (see also Valetton 1906). In doing so, he must have confronted his students with views that most probably were construed by them as undermining their faith and subversive to the traditional views of the Dutch Reformed Church. By way of a summary, he ends this section by presenting – in a very reticent mood – his own view (Valetton *Cahier* 3). He is of the opinion:

dat de Pentateuch uit drie hoofdwerken is samengesteld, welke in karakter, doel, wijze van voorstelling, taal en stijl, duidelijk van elkander onderscheiden zijn, en die men gevoeglijk met de namen *Boek der Volksverhalen* (V.V.), *Boek der Wetsherhaling* (W.H) en *Boek der Priesterwet* (P.W) bestempelen kan. (Valetton *Cahier* 3:131) [That the Pentateuch is composed out of three main sources, that are distinguished from each other in character, aim, religious views, language and style. They can be indicated with names Book of the stories of the people, Book of the Repetition of the Law, and Book of the Priestly Law.] (pp. 131–133, [my translation])

This proposal is in fact a variant to the four-sources hypothesis, albeit with different labels. D and P are recognisable. The *Book of the stories of the people* resembles JE, but in Valetton’s view this source has elements of what later has been called L (Eissfeldt 1934:224, 1958) or N (Fohrer 1965). He underlines to his students that these sources were not stable entities but part of an on-going scribal tradition.

What are the implications for the interpretation of Genesis 1–3 and his view on the concept of creation? In short, Valetton acknowledges that behind the present text two different and differing traditions should be assumed. The report on the creation in six days is allotted to the *Book of the Priestly Law*; the Garden story is construed as the opening scene of the *Book of the stories of the people*. Genesis 2–3 is to be seen as a traditional story from the early period of the monarchy in Israel (see also Valetton 1881). After the exile, a more schematic almost poetic ode on creation was composed.

Another *cahier*, entitled ‘Genesis I – XXXII:2’ contains a very detailed and precise exegesis on the greater part of the

Book of Genesis, including chapters 1–3.<sup>3</sup> The first 55 pages present a word-by-word interpretation of Genesis 1:1–2:4a. On every page he is in full discussion with other scholars whose view he fairly represents, but always as part of a *majeutic* discourse. An interesting example are his remarks on the plural in Genesis 1:26; ‘Let us make ...’. He discusses the existing opinions: the plural might be a reference to the Trinity – as already in Justin Martyr (*Apology* 1.59); it might be a reference to a divine council in which God is deliberating with the angels – thus Philo of Alexandria (*De Opificio Mundi* 72–76); it could be a reference to the Divine majesty and hence the expression of a *pluralis majestatis*. The options are mentioned, but no decision is made. Valeton wanted his students to think for themselves (Valeton *Cahier* 37:35–38).

After crawling through the text of Genesis 1:1–2:4a, Valeton presents some summarising and reflective remarks (Valeton *Cahier* 37:56–57). I will refer to the most important points. Genesis 1 is neither a myth, nor a story, the text is designing a scene. He approvingly quotes the Dutch scholar Van Rhijn that Genesis 1 does not refer to a *creatio ex nihilo* (Van Rhijn 1881; on the concept of creation *ex nihilo* see May 1978). Of great importance is Valeton’s remark that the view on nature of the ancients is primitive, and in his eyes defective and insufficient. With this remark, he makes a clear stand in view of the rising discussion on belief, creation, science, and evolution, which was of great importance in the 19th century. Genesis 1 is not to be construed as a report on factual events, but as what he calls retrospective prophecy. Unfortunately, he does not make clear what this label would mean. I understand it as a retro projection of a prophetic ideal into the dawn of history aiming at a dream on the future. In sum, Genesis 1 is not an accurate report on things that happened in a bygone era but the expression of a view on reality. Valeton accepts the scientific explanation on the emergence of the universe. He however, reads Genesis 1 as a religious truth that transcends this analysis as well as the naïve acceptance of Genesis 1 as historically trustworthy.

In his discussion of the Garden story, Genesis 2:4b–3:22, Valeton pursues the same strategy (Valeton *Cahier* 37: 58–155). No stone is left unturned. Students were informed on the mythic character of the four rivers of Paradise and on the fact that the Hebrew word *pardes*, ‘garden; fence’, is to be seen as a Persian loanword. Since the word *pardes* does not occur in Genesis 2–3, an emergence of this text from the Persian era is not compelling. As for the anthropology, Valeton rejects a dualistic view, but notes that ‘man’ is seen as a creature with chthonic roots but touched by a hanker after Heaven as a result of the blowing in of the Divine spirit. Eating from the fruits of the tree of good and evil is assessed by him as a trespass (Valeton *Cahier* 37:110–121). He not only avoids the concept of ‘original sin’, but the language of sin in general thus communicating to his traditional students that views other than a strict Calvinistic one are possible.

His answer to the question whether or not the serpent had spoken is interesting and reminds of the image of the two

circles mentioned above. Yes, the serpent had spoken and even with a human voice but only in – what I would call – the world of the narrative. At the level of interpretation or hermeneutics the speech of the serpent should be construed as a symbolic voice. Valeton sees the serpent as a satanic power, but closes all doors that would lead to an allegorical interpretation (adopting the view of his student De Visser 1880).

I would like to summarise his position as follows:

- Genesis 1–3 is built from two separate documents.
- Valeton generally accepts the scholarly world view of his age.
- He is not looking for a model in which religious texts and scholarly views are on par.
- Valeton does not construe Genesis 1–3 as a textbook cosmology, biology et cetera of any value for the 19th century.
- He is in search for the underlying belief system within Genesis 1–3.

## Valeton on covenant

### Introduction

In the years 1892–1893, Valeton published three articles on the concept of *brît* in the Hebrew Bible that were published in the famous German journal *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* (Valeton 1892a, 1892b, 1893). Historically, these publications should be appreciated from two different perspectives. Firstly, they more or less coincided with debates within the Dutch reformed Church(es). A separation movement lead by Abraham Kuyper gave rise to a free church and a new university, the Free University (Koch 2006). This movement is characterised by quite specific ideas regarding the concept of the covenant (Kuyper 1954). Valeton does not refer to the debates surrounding this separation. Secondly, as Simon de Vries has shown, Valeton has embarked on a programme of careful linguistic and exegetical studies (De Vries 1968:101). In various articles he was investigating terminology crucial with regard to the Graf-Kuenen-Wellhausen hypothesis (see also Valeton 1889, 1891)

His approach in the three articles is above all, scholarly. In his approach, two premises play an important role. Firstly, he adopts the Graf-Kuenen-Wellhausen hypothesis as the best way to explain the patchwork of the present Penta-/Hexateuch. This also implies that his argument runs from back to front, starting with the youngest sources up to the oldest ones. Valeton construes this hypothesis not as the final point of scholarly work, but as the starting point of interpretative exercises. The second premise is connected to the fact that Valeton is not looking for a one-to-one translation of the noun *brît* into a modern European language. He is fully aware of the fact that nouns are not names whose meaning can be deduced from etymology. He is applying what I would call a functional model of meaning or a tool-model. Loader has pointed out that Valeton’s way of a search for a meaning contains elements that later have been elaborated by James Barr (Loader 1984:207–208).

<sup>3</sup>Genesis 1 – XXXII:2, Archief Valeton, *Cahier* 37.



## The Priestly Concept of 'Covenant'

Valeton starts his survey with an analysis of the concept of *bʿrît* in P the youngest source (Valeton 1892a). He makes the observation that there are only two ways in which P relates a *bʿrît*: a *bʿrît* with Noah (Gn 6:18; 9) and a *bʿrît* with Abraham (Gn 17; Ex 2:24; 6:4–5). It is more than remarkable that a Sinai-*bʿrît* is not mentioned or referred to in P (Valeton 1892a:1). The text of Exodus 31:16: 'Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant', is construed by Valeton as part of a secondary redaction of P. In this text *bʿrît* is connected with the commandment to keep the Sabbath. From its context it becomes clear that the summons in Exodus 31:16 is theologically connected with the theme of Creation, and not with the law-giving at Sinai.

A further observation by Valeton regards the absence of the syntagma *kārat bʿrît*, 'to conclude a covenant', in P. The expressions that do occur in P indicate that *bʿrît* is a feature that originates in God; it is given or ordained to humans. Covenantal duties are not referred to in P. In the theological concepts of this source mankind is not bound by all sorts of moral obligations. Two texts and a formulaic expression seem to contradict his view. The first text is Genesis 9:4–6 – the prohibition to consume blood. The second text is Genesis 17:10–14 – on circumcision. The expression *šāmar bʿrît*, [to keep the covenant], at first sight seems to underscore that humans ought to act accordingly. According to Valeton, the two texts mentioned cannot be classified as covenantal duties. He construes the prohibition to consume blood as a curtailment to the blessing for Noah. 'Circumcision' is in his view more a symbol – an 'ôl, 'sign', – for the *bʿrît*, than a reference to human conduct. His interpretation of the expression *šāmar bʿrît*, [to keep the covenant], is not very clear. He seems to argue that Israel had the responsibility to uphold the signs of the covenant that were present in society.

He rejects the rendition of 'covenant' as an equivalent for *bʿrît* in P. His proposal is more of a describing definition: 'Durch die Berit verpflichtet Gott sich dem Menschen gegenüber zu einer bestimmten Handlungsweise' (Valeton 1892a:5). In other words, *bʿrît* is a Divine act of self-restriction. By entering into a *bʿrît*-relationship, God restricts Himself. This view is clarified by Valeton's analysis of the 'sign of the bow' in Genesis 9. In short: the 'rainbow' is a sign for God to remember himself to his self-restrictive promises to mankind that will keep him from destroying the earth and its inhabitants.

## The D-concept of 'covenant'

According to Valeton, the Book of Deuteronomy was written in the second half of the 17th century BCE.<sup>4</sup> Preluding Noth's idea of a Deuteronomistic History (Noth 1943), Valeton detects in the 'historical' books – Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings an affinity to D (Valeton 1892b). His analysis of the role of *bʿrît* in D and the related historical books lead to the following 'covenant theology'. It is clear that D adopted the

4. Adopting the views of W.M.L. de Wette who first saw the connection between Deuteronomy and the scroll found in the temple, 2 Kings 23.

view of JE that *bʿrît* refers to a public relationship between God and people. Basic to this relationship is a reciprocal friendly relationship. In this sentence the adverb 'friendly' needs to be stressed. The relationship implies that God will act in a benevolent way and that he hopes that Israel will act accordingly. These acts are primarily based on friendship and reciprocal acceptance, not on rules and regulations. As for the historical source of the relationship idea, D adopted from JE the concept of a covenant with the fathers. In this connection, it should be noted that according to Valeton, a Sinai-covenant seems to be absent in D (Valeton 1892b:249–251). In the D-view, *bʿrît* is based on Gods liberating acts at the Exodus and in the arrangements made in the fields of Moab before entering the land. These two moments underscore the responsibility for Israel of the D-concept: as liberated people they have to remain faithful to their Liberator (Decalogue) and as receivers of the land they are urged to choose life and the divine blessing (Valeton 1892b).

## The concept of 'covenant' in the Jehovistic history

As noticed above, Valeton labels JE as the *Book of the stories of the people* that he construes as a composite text stemming from the early phase of monarchy in Israel. The concept of *bʿrît* in this source is 'nicht solch ein einheitlicher Begriff, wie im PG' (Valeton 1892b:224). It contains the following elements. JE construes *bʿrît* as relationship between God and people based on reciprocal love. Basic to this relationship is God's promise under oath to Abraham that his offspring will own the land (Gn 15:8). This promise is repeated at Horeb. Significantly, *bʿrît* in the view of JE is initiated by God. The expected moral conduct to which Israel is invited is not specified very clearly. It is more an ethos expressing a fundamental attitude, than an ethics entangled in prohibitions and regulations (Valeton 1892b).

## Conclusions

I will skip here Valeton's remarks on the occurrences of *bʿrît* in prophetic texts (Valeton 1893). In his third article he arrives at the conclusion that the noun *bʿrît* hardly occurs in prophetic texts before Jeremiah – the exception being Hosea 8:1. The many occurrences of the word in Jeremiah are clearly building on the D-concept of *bʿrît*.

I would like to draw some conclusions. In Valeton's view the noun *bʿrît* is not rooted deeply in the early history of Israel. It is only in the later decades of the monarchic period that an elaborated view on *bʿrît* is developed. We now know that in that time frame the Neo-Assyrian concept of *ādê* has been formative for the understanding of the relationship between God and Israel in 'treaty' terminology. This was, of course, not known to Valeton since he wrote his articles long before the discovery of the Hittite treaties and the publication of the Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon. His conclusion, however, that only in the late monarchic period *bʿrît* became a full-blown mental institution to articulate words for the relationship between God and people, has in a way prepared the way to the modern views.

It is interesting to note that Valeton constructs a development in which, after the exile the moral obligations for the people became less important and in which the concept of divine self-restriction was inaugurated. In my view, this was one of the shifts that occurred by the movement of Exile and Return. His remark is of great importance. Operating with a Hegelian view on history, scholars like Wellhausen proposed a scheme on the development of the religion in Ancient Israel in which the post-exilic period was construed as a legalistic phase (Wellhausen 1878; Banks 2006:50–74). Valeton's position is more open-minded especially towards Judaism although he does not mention that. The roots of that religion are not to be found, according to Valeton, in a legalistic view (Valeton 1885).

## Creation and covenant in a via media position

My short and superficial analysis has – I hope – made clear that Valeton goes one step beyond the position of his contemporary critical colleagues without falling into the pitfalls of orthodoxy. He applies the historical critical method not only to reconstruct the *Literaturgeschichte* of ancient Israel and to deconstruct the biblical view on the past (see also De Vries 1968:94–104; Houtman 1993:44–46). This is done in the modus that Loader depicted as 'the human expression of God's truth that is open for scientific knowledge' (Loader 2012). He also uses this method as a springboard to construct a multi-dimensional concept of biblical ideas on the creation and covenant. The variety of concepts is connected to the changing situations in the history of Ancient Israel. His position opens avenues for a historical reading of the Hebrew Bible, *id est*, a reading of texts in connection to their historical context. Next to that his position opens a window for approaching the truth of God as knowledge of faith. Most importantly, he presents a way of doing exegesis in which a balance between these two realms is guaranteed.

In Valeton's writings – published as well as unpublished – no remarks are made on the conceptual connection between 'creation' and 'covenant'. The question, how he would have reacted to speculations such as by Karl Barth on 'creation being the external ground for the covenant' (Barth 1950; Smedema 2009), or the idea of Gerhard von Rad to whom the concept of creation was subsidiary to theme of election (Von Rad 1936), is unanswerable. The question needs thus to be rephrased. How would a contemporary scholar working along the lines of the 'ethische richting' deal with such a position. I hope James Loader will take up this challenge, especially since – in my view – the ideas of Barth and Von Rad do not account for a distinction between 'knowledge open to faith' and 'knowledge open for scientific approach'.<sup>5</sup>

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### Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationship(s) which may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

<sup>5</sup>For the time being see Vorster (2010).

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