

---

---

## THE CONCEPT “TEACHING MODEL”

---

---

THE WAY the Bible speaks about Adam is under vigorous discussion today. That way of speaking is often characterized as a “teaching model,” a notion found in the booklet of H. M. Kuitert, *Do You Understand What You Read?*

For Kuitert, the all-important consideration is that we see the biblical writers within the framework of their own time. “The time-bound dimension of Scripture,” he says, “is . . . essential to its very character.” Important questions for understanding Scripture have a direct relation to this “time-boundedness.” Kuitert points, for example, to the fact that the biblical writer can speak of a “firmament” that God has created (Gen. 1:6 KJV), while we know that one cannot speak of a firmament in a literal sense. The blue expanse above our heads is not an outspread blue cloth or something of that sort but an effect of light. In the same context, Adam and Eve are mentioned. Just as we find little to indicate that the “firmament” really exists in the sense of something spread out

above us, so we find little evidence—the farther we go back in history—for a first set of parents in a garden of Eden. “On the contrary, the oldest humanity for which we have evidence appears to be of a very primitive sort, hardly like the neatly portrayed Adam of Genesis.” Therefore Kuitert has “as little difficulty” with the existence of Adam and Eve as with the existence of the firmament. “The living world in which the writer of Genesis expresses himself as he proclaims God as the creator was a world in which a first married couple was as much a natural part as was a firmament. Both elements fit the picture people had of the world at that time. When we confess today that God is the creator, we do that with the help of our current scientific knowledge and thus we speak about evolution, cells, and atoms.”<sup>1</sup>

The way the New Testament speaks about Adam does not force Kuitert to revise this conclusion. That would be necessary if we had to understand what the New Testament says about Adam, especially what Paul says in Romans 5, in the sense it was usually taken in earlier times, namely, as decisive for the question concerning the historicity of Adam. According to Kuitert, however, modern biblical study has made clear that the question about the historicity of Adam does not come within the purview of the New Testament, not even Romans 5. When in Romans 5 a parallel is drawn between Adam and Christ, that happens only for the purpose “of illuminating through Adam the meaning and scope of Jesus Christ and his

1. H. M. Kuitert, *Do You Understand What You Read?*, trans. L. Smedes (Grand Rapids, 1970), 36–37.

work. Adam serves Paul by helping the apostle preach Jesus.”<sup>2</sup> Because of this specific connection in which Romans 5 speaks of Adam, namely, in the interests of instruction about Christ, the historical aspect we wish to retain for Adam could be considerably less conclusive for Paul than for us. Then follow the words in which the term “teaching model” occurs: “As a pedagogical example or, if you will, a teaching model, Adam does not have to be a historical figure.”<sup>3</sup> In order to avoid any misunderstanding, Kuitert has explicitly assured us that the historical aspect of Adam was far less important for Paul than for us. He derives this from the fact that in Romans 5:12–21 it is essential to Paul’s argument that Adam and not Eve was the first transgressor, while in 1 Timothy 2:14 the reverse is the case. There Paul argues that Eve, not Adam, began to sin. According to Kuitert, the one instance in the nature of the case excludes the other and proves that Paul was not interested in the historical course of things. As a student of the rabbis, Paul used all sorts of Scripture passages for his own purpose, and that purpose was to make clear the significance of Jesus as the Messiah. Paul was concerned with Adam not as a historical figure but only as an instructional or teaching model.<sup>4</sup>

It is not clear from whom Kuitert borrows the term “teaching model,” granted that he borrows it and that it is not his own invention. His use of the term displays an obvious similarity to the use of the term “model” by C. A. Van Peursen in his *Filosofische orientatie*. In this study the concept “model,”

2. Ibid., 40.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 40–41.

borrowed by Van Peursen from the natural sciences, occurs repeatedly. He points out that both quantum mechanics and astronomy work with models. “These models,” says Van Peursen, “are not ‘pictures’ of reality; they only intend to make it understandable.”<sup>5</sup>

Apart from whether speaking about a model indicates a direct relation between Van Peursen and Kuitert, it seems that what Van Peursen understands by a model is precisely what Kuitert means by this term. When he calls Adam a “teaching model,” he intends to make clear that in all the New Testament says about Adam we do not have a “picture” of the reality of Adam but (only) an illustration, an explanation of the reality of Jesus as Messiah.

Thus speaking of a teaching model contains two inter-related elements. First, the teaching model always serves to illustrate, so that it always points away from itself. The second element is that the teaching model has no independent significance apart from what it intends to illustrate, so the historical aspect is entirely missing from it, or at least can be missing.

It has to be said that the concept “teaching model” is not a felicitous choice, if it is used with reference to the New Testament. The concept calls up clear associations with the concept “model” as employed in the natural sciences, and perhaps has been borrowed directly from them. The concept is scarcely compatible with the language of the New Testament and cannot be considered useful for letting the New Testament say what it intends to say.

5. C. A. Van Peursen, *Filosofische orientatie* (Kampen, 1958), 155.

Many have the same view as Kuitert of the way the New Testament speaks of Adam, although they do not use the concept “teaching model” with reference to Adam. Two recent studies from Roman Catholic circles may be used as examples.

In *The New Catechism*, which is a “declaration of the faith for adults” and was published by order of the bishops in the Netherlands, how Adam is to be spoken of comes up for discussion. *The New Catechism* starts from an evolutionary picture of the world. In the development of our earthly reality, different phases are to be recognized; concerning these, “Nearly everything is uncertain: dates and points in time, the interrelationships between phases. Only an unexpected line stands out with ever greater certainty: a species of animal, living in trees and plains, ascends in a slow development (evolution) to . . . us.”<sup>6</sup> Thus Genesis 1–3 does not give us a description of the beginning of things. Nor does the New Testament make an exception on this point, not even what Paul says in Romans 5. “At first sight” it may have the appearance that in Romans 5 Paul intends to emphasize the fact that through one man sin has come into the world. “But this echo of the word ‘one,’ corresponding to the world view of that time in which Paul took his point of departure, is a literary form, not his message.”<sup>7</sup> Thus *The New Catechism* too will not admit to an Adam who, as a historical person, stands at the beginning of the history of humanity. Adam serves only to illustrate the message concerning Jesus.<sup>8</sup>

6. *De nieuwe catechismus* (Hilversum, 1966), 13.

7. *Ibid.*, 308.

8. With reference to Rom. 5:12–21, then, *The New Catechism*, 308, concludes: “The message in this difficult passage is this: how much sin, along with death, reigns in humanity, and how much grace, restoration, along with eternal life, has come in greater abundance through Jesus.”

We find the same ideas expressed in the strongest terms in a study, *Adam und Christus*, by the German Roman Catholic theologian P. Lengsfeld. When in Romans 5:14 Paul calls Adam a type of Christ, according to Lengsfeld he makes use of this typological conception to achieve a certain end. That means the typology is not an end in itself but a means and tool. The only point of the typology is to explicate the Christ event for Christians.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, nothing can be read into the typology concerning the historical individuality of the figure of Adam. Paul neither intended nor was able to make historical pronouncements about Adam and his descendants. He intended with the help of Adam simply to explicate the Christ event, that is, he was only interested in the “role” of Adam as the porter who opened the door for the entrance of the dominion of sin, in order to be able to accentuate more sharply the function of Adam as the type of Christ, who establishes the dominion of grace. For Paul the point in the figure of Adam is the “typical” factor and not the historical reality of a man from whom all other men are descended biologically.<sup>10</sup> Thus for Lengsfeld, Adam as a historical person and Adam in his explicating significance with reference to the Christ event come to stand in competition.

To answer the question whether Adam is spoken of in the New Testament as a teaching model in the sense understood by Kuitert—for the purpose of clarifying the message concerning Christ so that the historical element is of no significance—we

9. P. Lengsfeld, *Adam und Christus. Die Adam-Christus-Typologie im Neuen Testament und ihre dogmatische Verwendung bei M. J. Scheeben und K. Barth* (Essen, 1965), 218–21.

10. *Ibid.*, 115ff.

want now to turn to the New Testament itself. In doing so we will confine ourselves to the texts and passages where Adam is mentioned explicitly.<sup>11</sup> We begin with Romans 5:12–21 because, as we have seen, this passage occupies the central place in the discussion concerning Adam as a teaching model.

11. Texts in which Adam is not mentioned by name but which also could be discussed in this connection are, e.g., Matt. 19:4 and Acts 17:26.