

**Geert van Dijk. Het concrete is het wezenlijke. Het denken van A Janse van Biggekerke (1890-1960) over Gods verbond met mensen.** [The concrete is the real. The thought of A Janse of Biggekerke (1890-1960) concerning God's covenant with humanity.] Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum Uitgevers, 2014.

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## **Summary**

### **1 NECESSITY OF A CASE STUDY ON A. JANSE OF BIGGEKERKE**

Antheunis Janse of Biggekerke (1890-1960) was a legend in the thirties of the twentieth century in the 'Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland'. As the headmaster of the 'School met den Bijbel' in Zeeland's Biggekerke, he occupied himself not only with education, politics and philosophy, but also with church and theology. He wrote numerous articles in all kinds of magazines and spoke for many audiences. Janse emphasized the reliability of God's promises, as he saw many people struggle in their own soul's turmoil to seek assurance of salvation. These accents, amongst others by Janse, influenced the developments towards the 'Vrijmaking' in 1944. In the Second World War he called for obedience to the German occupier as the 'legal government' since the Dutch government had capitulated, which made him lose credibility with many.

This research is led by the question of the nature of Janse's theological vision on the covenant of grace (*foedus gratiae*). The covenant, a central concept in Janse's works, has to be taken as God's promise that He is the God of the believers in Jesus Christ and their children. They are taken into account in his salvation acts and incorporated in his body, the church. What were Janse's considerations? Can development be discovered in his opinions related to the covenant? What were the consequences of his opinions? The views of Biggekerke's combative schoolmaster are revealed by his biography.

### **2 YOUTH AND EDUCATION (1890-1918)**

Antheunis Janse, descendant of a French Huguenot, was the eldest son of Jan Janse, who was supposed to succeed his father on a farm near Oostkapelle. Jan died however, aged 33, when Antheunis was nine years old. As a boy Antheunis was interested in philosophy and at the age of thirteen he was impressed by the leader of the reformed society of boys ('Gereformeerde

knapenvereniging'), who explained that God's covenant related not only to Sunday services, but also to geography, history and nature. The broadness of this life in the covenant ('leven in het verbond') to young Antheunis contradicted the abstemious religiosity he encountered in the Hervormde Kerk and the Gereformeerde Gemeenten, in which his great-uncle David Janse had been a minister.

The same tension could be felt within the Gereformeerde Kerken, where in those days self-examination ('zelfonderzoek') in preaching was debated. The synod of Utrecht 1905 had reached a compromise between a tradition stemming from the Afscheiding and that of churches rooted in the Doleantie. Children of the covenant should be taken as born-again, but preachers should insist on self-examination. In his younger years Janse still would speak freely about the experience of his misery and guilt and his experience of the work of the Holy Spirit in the application of salvation. He largely derived his covenant vision from the current opinion in de Gereformeerde Kerken in those days. The views of H. Bavinck and A. Kuyper are of interest concerning that current opinion. In Zeeland Janse frequently had to deal with Kersten's views and he opposed them fiercely.

### **3 JANSE'S FIGHT AGAINST MYSTICISM (1918-1926)**

The first front that Janse battled against was mystic religion, or rather – in his own words – mysticism. This tendency in reformed Protestantism exalted the inner experience of faith in the 'soul' beyond the external aspects of life. According to Janse, a certain way of experiencing was thus made normative at the expense of the concreteness of the Bible, which he considered to be the revealed Word of God.

In this chapter the background is sketched of the fight about experience in the Gereformeerde Kerken. After the First World War people were in crisis, which could also be felt in the church. A connection was looked for between the Bible and life. One wing emphasized the antithesis, another urged for greater openness towards experience and culture. J.B. Netelenbos and J.G. Geelkerken belonged to the latter group, against whom the conservative church leadership took measures. Janse did not seek renewal in this progressive movement, but joined a more conservative one: the 'reformatorische beweging'. As a matter of fact, Janse did not consider the connection between the message of the Bible and personal experience to be a problematic one. The framework of 'life in the covenant' that he became acquainted with in his youth seamlessly fitted in with his own experiences.

Janse's practical approach is sketched from his efforts as a teacher. He approached innovative ideas such as Montessori's in a dual manner, in line with the thinking of Kuyper.

On the one hand – in line with common grace ('algemene genade') – he recognized the valuable aspects in the views of dissenters; on the other hand – because of the antithesis – no connection could be made with ideas that had not been built on the basis of the Calvinistic principles. This also became visible when Janse occupied himself with politics.

Janse wanted to build a Calvinistic overall vision and the same goes for D.H.Th. Vollenhoven, with whom he made acquaintance in 1919. The latter was building, in cooperation with his brother in law H. Dooyeweerd, a Calvinistic philosophy, to which Janse substantially contributed. In this concept the doctrine of the aspects was very important: the whole of reality was divided into fifteen aspects (the numerical, the economical, the legal etc.). This doctrine of the aspects was to Janse welcome ammunition in his fight against the idea that the soul would be more important than the body, the Sunday more important than the Monday, and religion more important than other things in life. In Janse's opinion everything in life was important, because it was all included in God's covenant. The development of a Calvinistic philosophy meant a strengthening of the aforementioned framework of the covenant.

In Janse's first book, *Eva's dochteren* (1923), two major lines were drawn that would remain decisive for his thinking. The first is God's sovereignty that became visible in the course of history. The second is related to the first: men should not revolt, but bend to injustice. In Janse's pamphlet *Lourens Ingelse* (1926) he set self-examination ('zelfbeproeving) against self-exploration ('zelfbeschouwing'), and qualified the latter negatively as mere introspection, which would lead to unwholesome despair. Janse's accents concerning the covenant were largely determined by his great dislike of mysticism. In later years a discussion would evolve within the Gereformeerde Kerken regarding covenant, predestination, self-examination and assurance of salvation.

#### **4 JANSE'S FIGHT AGAINST KARL BARTH'S DIALECTIC THEOLOGY (1926-1933)**

Janse intensively engaged himself in Karl Barth's theology. Barth was provoked by the ease that church leaders annexed God and his Word for their own – by no means just Christian – plans. Barth emphasized that God remains God and that the Bible is not exactly the same as God's Word. He thus tried to safeguard the 'Wort Gottes' from abuse by man and his ideologies. Critics feared that Barth's crisis meant the end of history. K. Schilder pointed at Barth's philosophical prepositions. G.C. Berkouwer, against Barth, drew attention to the need for the work of the Holy Spirit in the world.

Janse's criticism towards Barth started at the epistemology and philosophical background of Barth's concept. He discerned a nominalistic moment in Barth's theology, because Barth valued a reality behind the Scripture as of more importance than Scripture itself. According to Janse this would lead inevitably to underestimating the Bible, in which the truth was printed 'in black and white'.

Janse fought against Barth with great indignation. He appreciated that Barth dared to stand up for the sovereignty of God and his Word. Nevertheless, according to Janse, Barth interpreted important concepts in the Bible (such as covenant and predestination) totally different from what they actually mean. This made the small headmaster address Barth as a 'Goliath' who taunted the true people of God. In *Van de rechtvaardigen* (1931) Janse blamed Barth for erasing the boundary between church and world and conflating sinner and righteous, which was unacceptable to Janse. In later years Janse spoke in a more balanced manner about Barth, but he never withdrew his earlier criticism.

The confrontation with Barth did not make Janse change his views of the covenant. On the contrary, Janse saw a distinctive connection between on the one hand, mysticism that valued the direct word of the Holy Spirit to the soul as of more importance than the written Word of God in the Bible, and on the other hand, Barth's dialectic theology that did not locate the actual Word of God *in*, but *behind* Scripture. He opposed both enemies from his increasingly stronger fortress of God's covenant.

## **5 FIGHTS ABOUT THE SOUL AND ABOUT SELF-EXAMINATION (1933-1936)**

In anticipation of the synod of Amsterdam 1936, there were two related issues – amongst others – in contention within the Gereformeerde Kerken. The first was the issue of self-examination, the second concerned the relation between body and soul. This chapter shows Janse's part in the discussion.

An introductory paragraph sketches how Janse wrote on politics in this period. He emphasized the separation between church and state, according to Kuyper's *sphere sovereignty* ('soeveriniteit in eigen kring') and the aspects from the Cosmomic Idea. Janse is furthermore sketched as a member of the 'schriftbeweging', that focused on a renewal of preaching. Ministers such as S.G. de Graaf, M.B. van 't Veer, B. Holwerda and K. Schilder took the lead in this movement. They emphasized the reliability of God's promises, and the connection between the story of God's salvation in Scripture and the life of church members today. Janse participated in this movement and published numerous Bible meditations. He was a frequent speaker who did not shy away from controversy.

In 1933 he wrote a series of articles about death, in which he tried to imagine life in the afterlife as concretely as possible. The Hebrew term 'she'ol' (grave) was to be imagined in as spatial terms as possible. With regard to the dying of man, Janse considered it incorrect to speak of a disintegration of a higher and a lower, spirit and matter. This dichotomy was in his view the fruit of Greek philosophy. Dichotomy of body and soul, according to Janse, was related directly to self-exploration, as both emanated from a spirituality that values the soul to be much more important than the body. Janse revolted against this, as the God of the covenant redeems the whole man, both body and soul. Janse preferred to refer to man as a 'living soul' ('levende ziel'), a phrase he had discovered in Genesis 2:7. Janse tried to use this phrase as a building block for an anthropology that should be purified of unchristian blemishes.

In 1936 the battle over the issues of 'body and soul' and 'self-examination' escalated, because people from both sides published polemically tinted pamphlets. The lowest point was a series of pamphlets called *Dreigende Deformatie*, written by V. Hepp. The 1936 synod decided that a delegation was to examine the present issues and would report to the next synod, which was going to take place in 1939.

Regarding covenant and predestination Janse stayed within the limits of the Dordtse Leerregels, as he retained both predestination from eternity and the administration of the covenant of grace in time. However, he clearly emphasized the promise of the covenant and man's responsibility to accept the promises. As counterbalance against subjectivism Janse sometimes tended towards objectivism. He did not clarify the connection between the work of the Holy Spirit and faith or 'keeping the covenant' by the believer.

## **6 THE FIGHT AGAINST MYSTICISM AND SCHOLASTICISM (1937-1939)**

In this period Janse wrote some rather polemic books, in which he engaged in the fight against mysticism and scholasticism in a way that definitively closed the door to a reconciliation with his opponents. This chapter opens with the question, whether the way Janse used the concepts mysticism and scholasticism was congruent with common knowledge. Mysticism in this context is defined as man's striving for encounter (namely a union) with the Divine, that cannot be verified by reason. Gnosticism is defined as a sectarian tendency in which the soul is a remnant of the divine, invisible world.

To Janse everything that tended towards the fusion between God and man was gnostic and anti-Christian by definition. Yet, in his own way, Janse just as well sought for an encounter between God and man. This fact he insufficiently accounted for in his approach. He regarded scholasticism as a counterbalance to mysticism, and at the same time, an arrow from the same

enemy quiver. Scholasticism made human constructs and concepts reign over the concrete, God-inspired words in Scripture.

Janse pointed out that after the flourishing period of the Reformation, an undercurrent of reformed Protestantism was caught in the swamp of subjectivism and scholasticism. In this he was right: reformed theology indeed has formulated her doctrine using terms from the Greek (read: pagan) philosophy. This also may be seen as inevitable and even as a way of Christianizing these concepts. As for the relation between body and soul, Janse has not been able to establish distinctively, that the use of this pair of concepts inevitably leads to an unchristian view on man.

On the basis of Janse's book *Leven in het verbond* (1937) his view on the covenant of grace is outlined in four points. Firstly, Janse regarded the administration of the covenant in time as a *consequence* of the predestination from eternity. In that sense Janse, like Kuyper, considered the church to be God's chosen people. Secondly, Janse emphasized the promises of God as words that He speaks to man *for real* ('menens'). Doing so, he made place for the responsibility of man in answering God's promises. Thus he dissociated himself from others who distinguished between the being of the covenant and its appearance. According to Janse, this way of speech reduced baptism to a sham. Thirdly, Janse emphasized, besides the blessings of the covenant, the *curse* of the covenant for those who reject the promise of God in unbelief. Janse's view of breaking the covenant, raised the question whether unbelief really could break the covenant itself. Finally, Janse considered *faith* as a fruit of predestination. In this he stayed within the limits of the reformed confession. In *Rondom de Reformatie* (1939) Janse comprehensively discussed the distinction J. Thijs made between being and appearance of the covenant. *Om de "levende ziel"* (1939) was mainly dedicated to the objections of J. Ridderbos concerning the 'living soul' ('levende ziel'). These polemics show that the opponents did not really try to reach each other.

This chapter summarizes that Janse, at the background of one-sidedness in reformed tradition, put the concrete speaking of God in his Word in the spotlights. That is an advance. A drawback of Janse's approach was that he threw suspicion on any speaking of experience. He did speak of the Holy Spirit in the impact of salvation, but largely restricted it to the gathering of the church around Word and Sacraments. Janse's love for the phrase 'living soul' as an expression for the whole man (inside and outside) never became popular. This is logical, as the Hebrew word 'nephesh' in the Old Testament has a variety of meanings, of which 'being' is only one. Yet Janse's tireless struggle for the unity of man should be appreciated.

Janse emphasized the historic character of the covenant. In later years some theologians in the Gereformeerde Kerken vrijgemaakt, continued to think in that perspective. The emphasis on the historic character of the covenant drew the concept of predestination from eternity further into the background. Comparing Janse's view on the covenant with the view of the 'hervormd' minister J.G. Woelderink, who published about this subject in the same time, and put similar accents, Woelderink and others had a more balanced approach of experience and pietism than Janse. Woelderink, more clearly than Janse, accentuated the necessity of regeneration.

The way Janse polemicised is related to the fact that he saw himself as a reformer. He was not convinced easily and was inclined to interpret the opposition he provoked as a characteristic of the truth and as part of the fate of a martyr.

## **7 DOUBLE BATTLE (1940-1960)**

During the Second World War, Janse mainly battled the idea that one was obliged to oppose the German occupier, either passively or armed. In Janse's opinion, after the capitulation of the Netherlands, the German occupier was the legal government, which should be obeyed according to Romans 13. This way of thinking was related to the views of G.H. Kersten, a leader of the Gereformeerde Gemeenten. This is a symptom of the fact that Janse never completely freed himself from his pietistic roots. In this concept Israel and the Netherlands were identified with each other and the war was seen as God's judgement on the sins of the nation.

In 1932 Janse had written critically about National Socialism and some say there is a separation in his opinions before and after the occupation in 1940. His opinion during the war, however, is consistent with his writing before, which is illustrated by the consistency of his concept of the covenant.

Especially on the issues of the 'Arbeitseinsatz' and school resistance Janse collided with others. 'Arbeitseinsatz' was a method the Germans used to involve as many workers as possible in the war industry. Many men hid themselves because of the harsh and difficult working conditions and they also wanted to sabotage this system of the occupier. It was Janse's opinion that the occupier should be cooperated with obediently, as the Nazis were to be regarded as the government.

To many people Janse had an advisory role, especially in the area of education. That is why he received many questions regarding to the school resistance: should it be accepted that the

Nazis appoint the teachers? Or should the rights of the school board be maintained, the rights that had been fought for so fiercely in the struggle for freedom of Christian education ('schoolstrijd'), which had been concluded only a few decades earlier? Ninety-five percent of the Protestant-Christian schools chose to maintain the rights of the school boards. Janse indeed belonged to a very small minority.

It was to be expected that Janse's view was opposed, even by people who stood on the same reformed basis. Both opponents and supporters questioned him frequently on his attitude. He answered these questions in a pamphlet called *Onze houding in dezen tijd* (1942). Janse drew a parallel with the prophet Jeremiah, who called for submission to king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. According to this, a tyrant government should be submitted to and armed resistance is not allowed. Furthermore he pointed at the prophet Daniel who was loyal and constructive towards his pagan government. The apostle Paul in Romans 13 called for obedience to the government, even when it does not follow God's will. Finally Janse brought in Calvin, who had devoted his *Institution* to a king whose actions were far from the ways of God, but Calvin still honoured him as a king. Janse's appeal to the Bible was not very strong, when the huge distance between Jeremiah/Daniel and the Dutch twentieth century Christian is taken into consideration. Apart from that, it appears from the Bible, that kings should definitely account for their mischief, and should not always be obeyed uncritically. Furthermore Calvin made many statements that could support the resistance against the Nazis and it seems that Janse only chose the statements that were useful for his plea.

The Indonesian issue, however, has brought forward an interesting aspect of Janse's attitude in the war. After the war the gereformeerden took a long time to recognize that the independence of Indonesia under Soekarno was not only inevitable, but indeed could even be defended from Calvinistic principles. During the war Janse was not allowed to express his opinion that the exercising of *power* might lead to the *right* to reign, but with regard to the Indonesian issue it became an important factor.

The second battlefield that Janse fought upon during the war, was the ecclesiastical struggle that led to the 'Vrijmaking' in 1944. The Kampen professors K. Schilder and S. Greijdanus were suspended and candidates were obliged to subscribe to an explanation ('Toelichting') to synod decisions, that sanctioned the distinction between being and appearance of baptism. Janse's choice for Schilder was also influenced by the fact that his son Jan was one of those candidates. In a theological way the events during the war did not result in new developments concerning Janse's view on the covenant of grace. Yet he emphasized even more the curse of the covenant and the vengeance of the covenant ('verbondswraak'),

which was logical, as Janse regarded the war as a result of the breaking of the covenant. In this regard the grace, the promises and the salvation of the covenant seems to have faded.

## **8 THE INFLUENCE OF JANSE**

The influence of Janse has been analyzed from two points. First to be examined is what church leaders have indicated they were influenced by Janse, and how the influence can be accounted for. People like C. Veenhof, H.J. Jager and J. Kamphuis, in their turn, formed generations of ministers in the Gereformeerde Kerken vrijgemaakt. Janse's influence is noticeable in preaching that emphasizes the promises of the covenant and in a rather critical attitude towards science.

Secondly, the influence of Janse on B. Telder has been examined. Telder played an important role in another church schism in the sixties of the twentieth century. This schism resulted in the formation of the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken. Telder was critical of certain phrases in the reformed confession, in particular the words 'body and soul' from Lord's Day 1 of the Heidelberg catechism, but he got into trouble because of his doctrine of the intermediate state ('tussentoestand') between death and resurrection of man. Concerning this doctrine it can be concluded that Telder could not appeal to Janse, though Telder's critical attitude towards the wording of the confession must be seen as a fruit of Janse's influence.

In the concluding remarks it is discussed why Janse was popular. Firstly, Janse had great love for and knowledge of God's Word and the reformed confession; this appealed to many people. Secondly, Janse was rebellious: he was able to contradict learned professors and was able to maintain that the Bible was more important than all kinds of abstract distinctions. Finally he was optimistic concerning the possibilities for Biblical exegesis and research. For example, he stipulated that just a few years would be sufficient to establish a reformed anthropology. Also different reasons can be enumerated why (other) people were not inspired by Janse. Apart from his concept of the covenant, which was rejected by some, one should consider his unclear distinctions, his limited vision, his polemical tone and his restricted ability to be corrected by arguments of others.