

Featured author: Professor Geert Lorein

An interview

Why did you study theology?

Well, I started with Classics at the Katholieke Universiteit (Catholic University) Leuven, because being a teacher of Greek and Latin seemed to me an interesting and useful position. To finish that study I wrote my master's thesis on 'Antiochus IV Epiphanes according to the Jewish apocalyptic sources' with Professor Lipiński, who made the blessed mistake that he asked me to follow a course in *Aramaic* (while the relevant chapters in the book of Daniel are actually written in *Hebrew*). So I was introduced not only to the Sibylline Oracles ① and the Qumran ② writings, but also to the world of the Old Testament (through the course in Aramaic ③) and the study of the Old Testament, because with my curiosity I also read other articles in the journal issues I needed for my subject. (Not a loss of time, it appeared.)

But that was not theology yet?

Indeed, I started as a teacher of Latin, but realised that I did not want to spend my whole life just in that role. So I went on to obtain degrees in biblical philology (KU Leuven again) and theology (Heverlee and Vaux-sur-Seine). Soon I combined the Latin with teaching Hebrew at what is now the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit (Evangelical Theological Faculty). At that moment it was clear that it would be useful for the Church if I would work for a PhD in Old Testament studies in my spare time (I only obtained a scholarship for my last year). Fortunately, my wife backed the idea. If that had not been the case, it would never have worked. You also have to give enough time to the children. If the memory of a father is that of a person who gave all his time to biblical scholarship and none to them, things are wrong.

Your PhD project covered the intertestamental period. What is the importance of this period?

Yes, my project at the University of Groningen succeeded under the guidance of Professors Van der Woude and Schoors ④. Although the literature of this period is not canonical, it contains (when we exclude for a moment the latest parts of the Old Testament itself) the earliest interpretation of the Old Testament and forms also part of the background of the New Testament. When we want to understand what was in the mind of the people of New Testament times, we need to know the intertestamental literature. The period is often used by New Testament researchers, but then the risk of losing the link with the Old Testament is real.

You have also gone to the Old Testament itself?

Yes, at least its later parts, because I want to feel at home in the historical background. For me, the historical aspect always remains important, to understand what really happened and also because – although God is without any doubt transcendent – it has pleased Him to be active in history, not only in Jesus Christ, but continually. Of course, history is not the only thing that matters for exegesis. The languages also do: grammar and etymology receive too little attention nowadays; literary structures and devices are also important, but they are well served, so I do not have to make publicity for that aspect.

Of course, we have to start with the text, and I believe in a fixed text (not in a plurality of traditions). This does not mean, however, that no variation would exist in spelling or

vocabulary and neither that you would be able to play with numerical values in Hebrew texts. The canonicity of these books is a matter of fact, but their order is no matter of doctrine, only of practical needs (sometimes combined with theological motives). It is my experience that reading the Old Testament texts in a way that assumes that they are historically reliable and canonically consistent is always possible. I do not say that you can *prove* this reliability and consistency: a choice for faith will be necessary.

That seems a lot of work for exegetes ...

But we have already been working on it for some centuries. If you want to keep your list of publications healthy, that might be a problem: every generation needs to study the Bible afresh, but if you do not want to publish quite experimental theories, it is difficult to publish really new insights; anyhow, there are side roads, like the intertestamental period ⑤ ... On the other hand, it is useful to study what has happened in the course of history: we see that, already in Old Testament times, the principles were always kept, but that the application changes, according to the circumstances. The original meaning of a biblical text is fixed and does not depend on the reader. The exegesis can develop through archaeological findings or philological insights, but should not slavishly follow the beat of societal evolutions. The application of a Bible text, however, must be based on that text, but *can* depend on societal evolutions.

But how do you know whether you still stick to the principles? There you need theology, besides the exegesis. This prevents us from thinking that we are 100% right. I pray for God's guidance while writing a Bible commentary, but I do not think this implies that my commentary is 100% right.

What have been the results until now?

Some publications (see <https://www.etf.edu/medewerkers/geert-w-lorein/>). A background to do my work in Church and society. Some skills to teach young people to read difficult texts. I have never worked full-time in academia, but I am happy that a link has always existed. Besides my work in a secondary school and later as President of the Federal Synod of Protestant-Evangelical Churches in Belgium, I was first a Hebrew teacher, then a (senior) lecturer and professor ⑥ (for the British: 'Reader') of Old Testament, especially in the etymological sense of 'professor' as someone who advocates and propagates a field of interest. I try to serve by doing my academic and representative activities ⑦.

Is that not a very broad field?

Yes, but I see some common themes: a line between Antiochus IV Epiphanes (master's thesis), Antichrist (dissertation) and Daniel (Bible commentary); Jerome ⑧ as a faithful translator of the Old Testament; the theme of the Church in the Belgian society (with religious education, church history and relations between Church and State) and the overarching link of the relations between believers and civil authorities in Persian times ⑨ and nowadays; and – less seriously – Goliath ⑩ as central figure between David and the Antichrist, and the Euphrates ⑪, from Balaam to Daniel.

You said at the beginning that you felt that a PhD would be useful for the Church. Has this been the case, now near the end of your career?

Wait a moment: I hope to still have some active years! Yes, it has been useful – it would have been impossible to be a professor of Old Testament without it and it has also been an asset in my advisory role in Bible translation and as a Synod President and all that sorts of affairs. On the other hand: we have not arrived at the finish yet. There is still room to ‘deepen and strengthen the international Evangelical movement’, as the *Evangelische Theologische Faculteit* has set its goal. In order to give direction, you need to be in front of the people, but not too far ahead – otherwise it will not work. It will be necessary to express positions – without polarising, but nevertheless – against liberalism as well as against reactionary tightening.

To conclude: do you have any good advice for FEET and/or EJT?

Quality is important, but that is difficult to define, it is quite a subjective matter. I would think of the necessity of always comparing different viewpoints and always consulting the original languages. I am not only speaking here about Greek or Hebrew, but also about French or German. Anyhow, I am glad that researchers with the Confession of Faith of the Evangelical Alliance and working in our European context can work together and can publish the results of their research.

Thank you for the interview. May you be a blessing for academia, Church and society!

List of pictures

- ① Entrance to the cave of the Sibyl at Cumae
- ② Cave 4 at Qumran (6 V 2008) **OR** ② Cave 4 at Qumran
- ③ Inscription in Aramaic and Latin at Arbeia
- ④ Successful defence at Groningen (1997)
- ⑤ Menorah of the Arch of Titus at Rome
- ⑥ Inaugural lecture at ETF Leuven (2012)
- ⑦ Representatives of the faith groups received in audience by King Filip (2016); credit © Royal Palace, Belgium.
- ⑧ Jerome (recognisable by the cardinal's hat and the lion) at the Abdij van Park Leuven
- ⑨ Before the city of Ezra and Nehemiah
- ⑩ Goliath on the Menorah before the Parliament at Jerusalem
- ⑪ At the Euphrates (in Deir ez-Zor)