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# Divining Shod: the Second Boer War, Predestination & Metahistory

*James Robert Applenwhite*

‘The Boer was a religious man always,’ wrote journalist Howard C. Hillegas in 1900, scribing from the depths of the dry, grassy veld, at the furthest corner of the earth mapped out by the white imagination. For his audience back in New York, Hillegas cranked out play-by-play, blow-by-blow articles covering a modern-day David and Goliath confrontation between two unlikely foes. On one side, the Boer Republics: two tiny states in what is now modern South Africa, populated by the distant descendants of Dutch settlers. They were a regional force, commanding influence over South African natives disproportionate to their size. The challenger, the British Empire, hardly needs introduction.

This paradoxical showdown, one that pitted pioneer emigrant against purifying empire, gripped the imagination of a scandalized Protestant world. The British Empire was the premier Protestant colonial power of the age, but the Boer Republics were themselves also Protestant powers. Describing the Boer fighter, Hillegas wrote:

when he [the Boer] went to war he placed as much faith in prayer and in his Testament as in his rifle. He believed that his cause was just, and that the Lord would favour those fighting for a righteous cause in a righteous spirit.<sup>1</sup>

As well as being Protestant, the Boers were also white — perhaps the most successful white settlers Africa had yet seen. Without the go-to dimensions of religion and race available to other their opponents, there was little to draw media attention from the rapacious objective of the British campaign: to get at the Republics’ vast reserves of gold and diamonds.

Before the Boers were the Boers, they were the Dutch pioneers who had first settled the Cape of Good Hope. When the Cape became British in 1806, some *Afrikaners* bid their Cape Dutch cousins goodbye, migrating into the hinterlands of South Africa to continue living as their ancestors had.<sup>2</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> H. Hillegas, *With the Boer Forces* (London 1900) 83-84.

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘Afrikaner’ and ‘Boer’ are used interchangeably in most preexisting works that deal with the topic of South African religion, but these groups are not equivalent

Dutch first set foot in South Africa in 1652. The Boers shoved off into the veld in 1835. With their churches, with their *landdrosten* magistrates and *dominee* preachers, and especially with their slaves, the Boers sought to recreate their world as it existed before the British came.

By 1880, their facsimiles of the old Dutch Republic, the Boer Republics of the Orange Free State and Transvaal, had picked up enough of the trappings of statehood that the British could go to war with them. This First Boer War, the Republics won. In 1899, the Boers went to war with the British again, this Second Boer War being a preemptive, defensive strike instead — a war that would hopefully match the stunning, against-all-odds success of the first. Only through such a first strike, before the British army could gather its forces from the far corners of the Empire, did the Boers see a realistic path to victory.<sup>3</sup> As a journalist, Hillegas attached himself to these loosely organized masses of mounted infantry that were the Boer commandos, as they had speared forth from the rugged, scrubby hills. By 1900, the British had occupied both Boer Republics. By the time Hillegas returned to New York in 1901, there were still *bittereinders*, Boer guerrilla fighters, at large in the countryside. They would not be pacified until May of 1902.<sup>4</sup>

The Second Boer War was not the triumphant curtain call of open empire that the British had hoped for. Instead of being the confident finale to the Scramble for Africa with the British Empire as the clear winner, the war alienated the voting public both in Britain and the Dominions, strained relations with the Netherlands and the up-and-coming German Empire, and ran up the national debt.<sup>5</sup> Worst of all was the discovery that the flow of

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to each other. Afrikaners are broadly defined as all white South Africans who speak Afrikaans as their first language (although the racial aspect of that definition has become increasingly relaxed in recent years). Boers were a subset of Afrikaners, rural folk who are generally associated with the Great Trek and the Boer Republics established by them. Their counterparts were the Cape Dutch, Afrikaners who had elected to remain within and about the environs of the old Cape Colony.

<sup>3</sup> T. Pakenham, *The Boer War* (London 1979), EPUB, 14. 25.

<sup>4</sup> M. Bossenbroek, *De Boerenoorlog*, (Amsterdam 2012), EPUB, 26, 35, 51, 52.

<sup>5</sup> Public opinion worldwide was generally sympathetic to the Boers, but especially so in Germany and the Netherlands, both of which contributed the largest number of foreign volunteers to the Republics. Regarding Germany specifically, Kaiser Wilhelm II channeled his frustration about British rejection of his diplomatic overtures into aggressive, public support of the Boers. Furthermore, British failures during the war convinced German policymakers that the Britain was both weaker and more

technology was now no longer for, but against, colonialism. In particular, the magazine rifle that the Boers had utilized to great effect against their khaki-clad opponents would prove to be the bane of British colonial authorities for the next fifty years in insurgencies worldwide.<sup>6</sup>

The Second Boer War had been for the British, at best, a qualified victory, but for the Calvinist world looking in, it was a moral one.<sup>7</sup> The Boer's

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belligerent than had previously been supposed. This antagonism and recognition of British weakness prompted the passing of the second Naval Law in the Reichstag, perpetuating the ongoing Anglo-German Naval Arms Race. The rising tensions between the two powers caused by the German reaction to the Second Boer War prompted Britain to seek an alliance with France, Russia, and Japan immediately after the war's conclusion, laying the groundwork of what would become the Entente / Allied powers in the First World War. See: Hillegas, *Forces*, 257 and P. H. Wilson, *Iron and Blood* (Cambridge, MA 2023) 406.

<sup>6</sup> D. Headrick, *Power over Peoples: Technology, Environments, and Western Imperialism, 1400 to the Present* (Princeton, NJ 2010) 264 - 269; C. Harinck, "'Bloodshead on a Rather Large Scale': Tactical Conduct and Noncombatant Casualties in Dutch, French, and British Colonial Counterinsurgency' in: T. Brocades Zaalberg and T. Lutikhuis ed, *Empire's violent end: Comparing Dutch, British, and French wars of decolonization, 1945–1962*, (Ithaca, NY 2022) 141-161: 147-150, 157, 160; J. Jansen and J. Osterhammel, *Decolonization: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ 2017) trans. Jeremiah Riemer, 43, 73, 109. Following the Second Boer War, Britain found itself putting down increasingly intense guerrilla campaigns, the most notable being the Irish Revolution, the Malay Emergency, and the Mau-Mau Rebellion. While Britain had been the first power to adopt a bolt-action magazine rifle, the tactical benefits it provided (being able to take rapid follow-up shots from a concealed position) benefited guerrilla forces more than traditional militaries, something the Boers used to notoriously great effect. Improvements in technologies related to communication and transportation, namely telegraphs, phones, and cars, all tended to benefit the organization of guerrilla cells more than they did counter-insurgency operations.

<sup>7</sup> 'Calvinism' is a term fraught with problems, the worst being that it is not preferred by Calvinists themselves as a descriptor for their theology. Calvinists refer to their churches and theology as Reformed, but do self-refer as Calvinists and their beliefs as Calvinism in more informal contexts. The other problem is that whether John Calvin himself was a Calvinist, or whether Calvinism is only that which Calvin directly taught, is an open question amongst Reformed theologians. I use the term here because that is the term preferred in all previous literature on Afrikaner Calvinism, despite its imprecision, and the term Reformed theologians use for outward-facing publications. For a modern Reformed perspective on the suitability of 'Calvinism' as a descriptor of historical Reformed theology, see: 'Was Calvin a

resistance was a triumph of the Calvinist moral will; British Christianity, disgraced; her national piety, discredited. Abraham Kuyper, prime minister of the Netherlands during the war and influential Calvinist theologian in his own right, said that at the beginning of hostilities 'the heroism of old Calvinism was again brilliantly evident.' He urged his fellow Calvinists to take inspiration from the Boers, arguing that 'Calvinism alone arms us with an inflexible principle, by the strength of that principle guaranteeing us a sure, though far from easy victory.'<sup>8</sup>

And so it was received, by both imperialists and anti-imperialists, the architects of Apartheid and the resistance movement against it, the icon of the praying Boer on commando, a stock character to fill in the background of Afrikaner and Calvinist history forever after. Sturdy, rough, bearded, with an unshakable belief in Calvin's God, the Old Testament deity of his ancestors, and His predestined providence to rule over all South Africa as promised land, and all the native Blacks therein in eternal systemized servitude. Such a figure is a stereotype in South African historical memory. He has modeled for everything from statues to bas reliefs to postage stamps, serving as honored vanquished and imperial villain, model Christian or settler hypocrite.

It was thus perfectly natural, perhaps even inevitable, that the images of the Bible-thumping Calvinist on commando and Afrikanerdom itself would start to merge in popular myth. Appropriations of that myth have resulted in a persistent, layered confusion, mutating into what Afrikaner Calvinism in its wholeness is imagined to be: a spartan cult worshiping white supremacy, which plotted Apartheid as the realization of its depraved eschatology, and revered John Calvin as their high prophet of racial hatred.

Historians of South African history unanimously agree this gothic depiction of Calvinism in South Africa does not reflect the facts, even if the architects of Apartheid were Calvinists and occasionally defended it in theological language. Yet the idea persists despite academia's best efforts. How is this possible, even as researchers bemoan that it is well overdue for an overhaul?

The answer does not, as is often imagined, lie in a failure to refute the theology of Apartheid, Afrikaner nationalism, or any similar thing. This has been the subject of nearly all previous research on this question. The solution

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Calvinist?' 52-71 in: R. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI 2012).

<sup>8</sup> A. Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI 1999) 40.

is significantly less grand than that, almost disappointing in its mereness. The reason academics studying Afrikaner Calvinism struggle still to revise this model despite their consensus is because secular academics don't know what Calvinist theology is. It's hard to revise something one doesn't understand. In the case of Afrikaner Calvinism, it's proven to be nigh impossible. To make it possible, those presumptions must be dealt with both in light of each other and also in light of actual systemized theology written and published by Christian theologians, not through retrospective descriptives by openly partisan historians and whose mode of accessing Christianity is primarily political. That does not mean scrapping all of the work done on Afrikaner Calvinism in the previous decades, of course, but discerning what to keep and what to toss must be done.

### **The Afrikaner Calvinist Paradigm**

Despite popular misconception, Calvinist theology — identifiably, conventionally Calvinist theology — was not known in South Africa until the late nineteenth-century. Historian John Alton Templin, whose *Ideology on a Frontier: The Theological Foundation of Afrikaner Nationalism, 1652-1910* (1984) still serves as reference for historical Afrikaner religion today, bluntly concluded that:

In the absence of trained theologians among the Boers on the frontier and in the republics, a lay piety developed among respected and pious leaders. Consequently, South African theology was not explicit, seldom systematic, seldom orthodox, and not based on educated theological leadership. Most religious leaders knew little more about Calvinism than the name.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the total lack of evidence, belief in a primeval Calvinism in Afrikaner history persisted among academics. Hermann Giliomee, a leading Afrikaans-language historian on the Afrikaners, laid bare the assumptions of his colleagues when he wrote that:

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<sup>9</sup> J. Templin, *The Theological Foundation of Afrikaner Nationalism, 1652-1910* (West Port, CT 1984) 285.

Historians have long ascribed to Afrikaners a deeply held belief about the inferiority of the blacks. They attributed this to a degenerate form of primitive Calvinism that developed on the frontier and to a culture clash between whites and blacks. Some believe that racism has been a fundamental organizing principle in the relations between white and black ever since Dutch immigrants settled at the Cape of Good Hope, but in fact history took a different course.<sup>10</sup>

The issue at stake in discerning the nature of historical Afrikaner religiosity was the roots of white supremacy in South Africa. That Calvinism amongst the Afrikaners had catalyzed their hatred of Africa's native people was taken for a given by historians both from within and without South Africa, that it was an immutable and original feature of Afrikaner cultural character. However, in Giliomee's estimation, historians had never actually done the work to actually establish that presumed connection. To the credit of those historians, however, political circumstances had developed in such a way as to make that presumption.

The irony is that the two are so focused on arguing about the historiography of Apartheid that Calvinism itself is left entirely by the wayside. In a discussion that is supposed to be about Calvinism, Calvinism is surprisingly not up for discussion, nor is its theology. It's either settled or irrelevant, and apparently Afrikaners wouldn't know Calvinism if they encountered it in their own history anyway. Such blindness would have been necessary for the Afrikaner Calvinist paradigm to infect popular Afrikaner culture so extensively in the first place.

But, to level the charge that the Afrikaner Calvinist Paradigm was a phantom — that Afrikaners didn't know their own religion or their history of their own religion, either then or in the then Apartheid present — would require historians to know the Afrikaners' religion better than they did. It is an easy thing to presume. Paul Kruger, for example, high prophet cum warmaster of the Republics during the Second Boer War, supposedly believed the earth was flat.<sup>11</sup> It is serendipitous then that both critiquing and advancing

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<sup>10</sup> H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: a Biography* (Charlottesville, VA 2003) 35.

<sup>11</sup> Akenson, *Peoples*, 71. Paul Kruger was the president of the South African Republic (the Transvaal) and was the cultural spokesman of the Boer struggle to the international community for the duration of the war. He was also a minister in the hyper conservative Doppe church. The Doppes did not believe as a matter of doctrine that the earth was flat, nor has any Christian church at any point in history for that matter. How Kruger maintained this apparent belief in a flat earth despite

the Afrikaner Calvinist Paradigm makes reconstructing what the Boers, either of the Great Trek or the two Boers Wars, *should* have believed if they were Calvinist relatively easy. Calvinism has a fairly narrow canon of core texts, and they paint a fairly narrow target if one aims for the title of Calvinist.<sup>12</sup> Ergo, it is easy to demonstrate misses of that target. That work can be further pared down by making the point of aim that notorious Calvinist keystone: predestination.

### A Misrepresentation of Predestination

Predestination is so infamous for its role in Calvinist thought that it hardly warrants mention or description, but relevant to the Afrikaners, Templin defines predestination as such:

God's election is gratuitous; human beings can do nothing toward salvation on their own, and election is in no way dependent on one's actions, good works, or the possibility that God can foreknow that one will be faithful and hence elect that person accordingly. On the other hand, that certain individuals are not elected is not a negation of God's mercy and kindness but reflects deserved punishment because of their own willful sinning.<sup>13</sup>

Templin goes on to clarify that 'God's election, in true Calvinistic sense, is not dependent on culture, education, custom, or skin color, and it is the

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visiting Europe multiple times leading the fight against a global empire is a riddle for the ages.

<sup>12</sup> These texts are the Three Forms of Unity: the *Canons of Dordt*, the *Belgic Confession*, and the *Heidelberg Catechism*. Of these, the *Canons of Dordt*, drafted in Dordrecht 1618-1619, contemporaneous with Dutch settlement of the Cape, was the most influential on Afrikaner folk theology and early Afrikaner society. The Forms remained influential in Dutch Calvinism into and through Abraham Kuyper's time and the Boer Wars. Beyond these are John Calvin's own writings, in particular *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which while intended as a catechitical text doubled as a manifesto of Calvinism's distinctives. It is the *Institute's* and *Dordt's* emphasis on predestination that gave Calvinism a reputation for being associated with that doctrine. Templin, *The Theological Foundation of Afrikaner Nationalism*, 6; D. Hart, *Calvinism: a History* (New Haven, CT 2013) 16-17, 237; Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: a Biography*, 43.

<sup>13</sup> Templin, *The Theological Foundation of Afrikaner Nationalism*, 302.

prerogative of no one to assume that one who now acts as a sinner is truly lost.<sup>14</sup> He nevertheless caveats that definition with the analysis that the Afrikaners' 'prior assumption that they were God's special chosen people [...] was decisive for their theological interpretation,' including of that doctrine.<sup>15</sup> Thus, this lead to the racialized direction in which the Afrikaners ultimately took that doctrine.

On predestination, Akenson argues that 'Calvin believed that after the original fall from grace of Adam, there was no such thing as freedom of the human will. From the absence of free will was derived the dogma most characteristic of Calvinism: Predestination.' Thus, in colonial projects, Calvinists can 'define the natives as immutably profane, and damned, and oneself as predestined to virtue.' Akenson concludes that 'Calvinism, therefore, was a perfect tribal religion.'<sup>16</sup>

Akenson continues that, wanting completely for a school of theology of their own, but still possessing a cultural affinity for Calvinism and Calvinist thought, the Boer Republics imported a form of Calvinism that flattered their preexisting prejudices: Kuyperian Neo-Calvinism.<sup>17</sup> Abraham Kuyper, whose great project both as a theologian and the Prime Minister of the Netherlands was the political re-Calvinization of his country, taught that both individuals and nations could be sanctified by Christ's grace. In introducing this idea to the Boer republics, 'Afrikaner national consciousness and its theology are joined. The nation becomes a sacred tribe.'<sup>18</sup>

Laid out so, the case against the Boers failing to understand their own religion is quite damning. Devoid of any theology of their own, motivated by white supremacy in adopting a foreign import, and using it to excuse both their quixotic intractability and their ultimate defeat, all of it in service to an original idea that they were a divinely chosen people, not something Calvin ever taught. The logic and actual history are quite ironclad, but the definition of predestination that Akenson gives upon which his arguments rely is wholly false.

To wit, predestination is not a doctrine impugning human free will, although critics of it often frame it that way, but of God's sovereignty. It is also not a uniquely Calvinist idea. Predestination is an ancient idea in

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<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, 302.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, 303.

<sup>16</sup> Akenson, *God's Peoples*, 112.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, 71.

<sup>18</sup> Akenson, *God's Peoples*, 72.

Christian theology, but its present formulation originates with St. Augustine of Hippo, more than a thousand years before Calvin's birth. It is a feature of all Nicaean (i.e. mainstream) Christianity, be it Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant.<sup>19</sup> If Akenson's understanding of the doctrine were true, Christianity generally would be a siloed, nationalized faith, consisting of many 'sacred tribes,' each practicing their own little Apartheids. Given Christianity's multitude of plurinational expressions, especially within South Africa itself, this is demonstrably not the case.

What predestination is, in its simplest expression, is the idea that God has willed all things. For this to be true, God's will necessarily is made and expressed without reference to the will of any of God's creatures, that is sovereign. So often presented as a brain buster, the sovereignty of God's will is a simple consequence of cause and effect. This is not contrary to free will, but a *prerequisite* for it. Only God sovereignly willing that there be free will allows for free will. Being purely an effect of God's will, human free will necessarily can never be its cause. That God's will supremely supersedes

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<sup>19</sup> *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic 2nd Ed.* (Downer's Grove, IL 2016), s.v. 'Sovereignty of God,' 'Predestination'. While it has had varied interpretations throughout its history, predestination is a core doctrine of Christianity and has been since the Patristic Era. Rejecting it puts one beyond the boundaries of conventional Christian practice *ipso facto*. Debate regarding predestination is generally over St. Augustine's codification thereof, as well Calvin's elaborations, not the doctrine itself as is sometimes presumed. Usually, these debates are over how God's will logically interacts with human salvation and how to express this relationship discretely, as well as the issue of divine assurance. That said, the word 'predestination' without modifiers in popular usage is often conflated with Calvin's specific understanding of it, but this is not the meaning of the word in theology as a term of art. Non-Protestant Christian theologians that opined on predestination as formulated by St. Augustine include the Roman Catholic St. Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae* (1247) and St. John of Damascus in his *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* (~740), who, while from before the Great Schism, is especially revered in Eastern Orthodoxy. Both are considered Doctors of the Church (Aquinas by Catholics, John by Orthodox), and both the *Summa* and the *Exact Exposition* are foundational theological texts. See: T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [Summary of Theology], Pars I, Q. XXIII, (1247); and J. Damascus, *Ἐκθεσις ἀκριβῆς τῆς ὀρθοδόξου πίστεως* [An Exact Exposition on the Orthodox Faith], Book II, Ch. 30. For other foundational Protestant perspectives, see: (Anglican) E. Browne, *An Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles* Ch. XVII (London 1860) and (Lutheran) M. Luther, *De Servo Arbitrio* [On the Bondage of the Will] (1525).

human will means humans must have a free will to supersede — wills for God's will to never reference.

Calvin himself reminds his followers 'that our ruin is attributable to our own depravity,' that is to one's own choices.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, that God wills human free will also means God's will does not negate human free will, which means humans are not excused from the culpability of sinning. The Canons of Dordt reiterate, 'by their own fault, [sinners] have plunged themselves' into 'common misery.' God's sovereign will thus 'does not make God the author of sin, but rather its fearful, irreproachable, just judge and avenger.'<sup>21</sup> Understanding God's will as negating human free will would be both framing God's will in reference to human will *and* implying God's will conflicts with itself. Such a characterization of God is directly contrary to a classical Calvinist understanding of predestination. As God's will is the source of all things, it is also logically inconsistent. Either historical Afrikaners are Calvinists and would know this, or they were not Calvinists and so whether they understood this or not doesn't matter. Akenson's analyses that rely on his faulty understanding of predestination, including what role predestination plays in prejudice and Afrikaner religiosity, are, at best, irrelevant.

But not even Akenson's characterizations of Kuyper's theology hold up to scrutiny. D. G. Hart is a Calvinist historian of religion trained at Princeton Theological Seminary, the same seminary where Kuyper delivered his famous *Lectures on Calvinism* in 1898, a century prior.<sup>22</sup> He is also an elder in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, one of the most conservative Calvinist denominations existent. He matter-of-factly notes that Kuyper 'did not endorse the theology that underwrote the racial segregation practiced in South Africa.' There's little reason why he would. Kuyper's dream was to reforge the anemic Calvinist churches in the Netherlands. His view of Africans was paternalistic, not antagonistic. Kuyper believed Africans were backwards and in need of Christianity and western civilization as a default opinion fashionable in Europe during that time. Kuyper did not believe Africans posed an existential threat to that civilization in Africa and that they

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<sup>20</sup> J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Geneva 1559), Henry Beveridge trans. (Edinburgh 1845) 219.

<sup>21</sup> *Canons of the Synod of Dordrecht* (Dordrecht 1619), Reformed Protestant Dutch Church trans. (Philadelphia, PA 1840) Head 1, Article 15.

<sup>22</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures*, ii.

had to be systematically oppressed to keep them in their place.<sup>23</sup> To Kuyper, the greatest enemy to both Calvinism and Boerdom in Africa was not Africans or violations of the color barrier, but John Wesley's Methodism. Kuyper considered Methodism responsible for both the Second Boer War and imperialism in general. J. D. du Toit (no relation to André du Toit), the most prominent Boer Kuyperian, reinterpreted Kuyper's antipathy for Wesleyan ideas by instead faulting it for the growing consciousness of native Africans, but not British imperialism or the loss of Boer independence writ large — a fine distinction with gross difference.<sup>24</sup>

Templin, whose research into Afrikaner theology grounds much of the later forays into the subject, fares better. His definition of predestination is sufficiently conventional. He even textures that it reflects his personal readings of the Canons of Dordt, which Afrikaners held in especially high estimation as a theological guiding document.<sup>25</sup> However, Templin tips his hand when he claims that 'that Christ is prefigured in all Old Testament narratives disappeared' from historical Afrikaner theology in the eighteenth century. He continues that instead, 'Afrikaner theological nationalism did not have a Christological dimension, but rather, the Old Testament narrative was taken literally,' a position he contrasts with what he terms 'orthodox Reformed' theology.<sup>26</sup> It is difficult to intuit here what Templin is intending to communicate.

'Christological' is the term in Christianity for the study of the person of Jesus Christ and His nature. In Christian theology, it is understood that the person of Jesus is foreshadowed and prophesized ('prefigured') both directly and indirectly by God in the narrative of the Jewish scriptures as the messiah.<sup>27</sup> What Templin seems to be saying is that this position (which is

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<sup>23</sup> D. Hart, *History*, 241-242.

<sup>24</sup> Wesleyan Methodism is the most prominent expression of Arminian theology in the modern period, whose refutation prompted the original Synod of Dordt to reemphasize the importance of predestination in Calvinism. It's no wonder that Kuyper viewed it so negatively, nor is it surprising that S.J. du Toit would so flexibly source it as the cause of white South Africa's social ills. I. Hexham & K. Powe, 'The Spread of Christianity among Whites and Blacks in Transorangia' in: R. Elphick and R. Davenport ed., *Christianity in South Africa: a Political, Social, and Cultural History* (Berkley, CA 1997) 121-134; 129.

<sup>25</sup> Templin, *Theological Foundation*, 303.

<sup>26</sup> Christology is the study of Jesus Christ as a character. Ibidem, 279-280.

<sup>27</sup> *Systematic* s.v. 'Christology'.

universal to Christianity) is incompatible with understanding the Old Testament as document relating literal, historical events. Except an interpretation of the Old Testament as depicting literal, historical events is the default position of Christianity, indeed all Abrahamic religions that look to the Jewish religion as their progenitors and presume the core relevance of their texts. Does Templin mean to say that all other Reformed (i.e. Calvinist) theology doesn't take the Old Testament literally? Does he mean to say Christological prefigurement is incompatible with a reading of the events of the Old Testament as having literally occurred? If any of these are the case, Templin ascribes to all of Calvinism and to large swathes of Christianity disbelief in the literal events of the Old Testament, a liberal paradigm that is simply not normative either at present or historically.<sup>28</sup>

Neither were the Afrikaners before the Second Boer War a theological monolith. Thomas François Burgers, who served as the president of the Orange Free State from 1872 to 1877, infamously denied the Bible's inerrancy, something so scandalous that Abraham Kuyper, long a promoter of closer ties between the Boer Republics and the Netherlands, relentlessly protested a visit from the sitting president to the Netherlands in 1875.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, the Afrikaner Bond, an Afrikaner nationalist organization as conservative as conservative got, protested uncritical consumption of Kuyper's theocratic theology. When arguing against the adoption of his political and theological program for the Transvaal, the Bond admitted that 'Some branches of the Bond have welcomed [Kuyper's] program. It has a certain religious aura, [...] and those of a Reformed persuasion will readily identify themselves with that. But will we now expel someone from the Bond

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<sup>28</sup> Muddying this issue is a recent turn by certain Protestant Churches in the Global North adopting an allegorical or non-historical reading of scripture, but this is an impulse is associated with a specific strain of liberal theology. Speaking bluntly, liberal theology of this type is incongruent both with the thought of the Early Church Fathers and the original Reformers and is openly so. That the Boers on commando didn't associate with it is to be expected. If Templin is presuming this liberal theology is normative, he is assuming a position too paritstan from which to draw meaningful conclusions about the Afrikaners or their historical religion. Alternatively, he is conflating the whole of the diversity and depth of Christianity with one of its most recently developed, heterodox, and openly untraditional (i.e. unhistorical) schools of thought. See: *Systematic* s.v. 'Modernism (English)', and 'Liberal Theology.'

<sup>29</sup> A. Burnett, *The Dutch Rediscover the Dutch-Africans (1847-1900): Brother Nation or Lost Colony?* (Brill 2022) 68-69.

because he is not Reformed?<sup>30</sup> Contrary to either Akenson's or Templin's characterizations, it would seem that Afrikaners had both a confident but diverse understanding of theology, one that could accommodate political disagreement and diversity of opinion, granted that it was in a broadly Protestant mold — no different than the rest of the Protestant world.

### **Kuyperian Neo-Calvinism as Culprit**

It is hard to read either Akenson's or Templin's analyses without questioning their understanding of Calvinism and Christianity broadly, seeing the misrepresentation of foundational theology. It is thus hard to accept that they know the Afrikaners' religion better than the Afrikaners do, prerequisite to charging the Afrikaners with a terminal ignorance of their own religion, prerequisite to proposing a model contrary to the myth of academic Calvinist corporate on commando. What could be responsible for this sustained confusion?

The answer does not in fact lie in assessing the validity of Primitive Calvinism or the Afrikaner Calvinist Paradigm. Rather, this is where the Boers, the myths being told about them in the press, and Abraham Kuyper come back into play. Akenson and Templin both presume that the Calvinism of the Afrikaners is actually that of Abraham Kuyper (which at best seems unlikely). However, they unwittingly go a step further by treating Kuyper's views as normative without realizing. In doing so, Templin and Akenson stumble into a metatheological ambush set by Kuyper with the unaware help of the Boer commandos.

Predestination has two forms: *supralapsarian* and *infralapsarian*, relating to the logical orders of God's decrees. Predestination asserts that God wills all things. Sin entered the world through Adam, the first man, causing the Fall of Man, thus mankind had to be saved from their sins. This begs the question of which event caused the other. The *infralapsarian* view is that God permissively willed the Fall, thus necessitating that God wills that people would be saved or damned. In the *supralapsarian* view, God wills that people would be saved or damned and to accomplish this thus wills the Fall. In *infralapsarianism* it is God's allowance of free will and his great love that organizes predestination and its role in salvation. *Supralapsarianism*,

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<sup>30</sup> *De Zuid-Afrikaan*, Editorial, 22 March 1884 trans. André du Toit.

however, is indeed the stuff of non-Calvinist nightmares. The supralapsarian view posits that God arbitrarily has willed people for heaven or hell irrespective of their merits, or has cursed them with the relevant merits or demerits to warrant their salvation and damnation totally apart of any exercise of their will, and then allowed the world to be plunged into sinful misery to begin this grim sorting. When people critique Calvinist perspectives of predestination, it is the supralapsarian view that they are usually attacking, although rarely are they aware of the distinction. The supralapsarian position is also not the normal Calvinist position, to the surprise of many.

Calvin was an infralapsarian, as most Calvinists have been throughout history.<sup>31</sup> Kuyper, on the other hand, was a supralapsarian, possibly the most politically powerful and famous supralapsarian since the Reformation.<sup>32</sup> It would appear researchers are convinced that normative historical Calvinism is that which aligns with Kuyper's supralapsarian views and always has been, despite this being distinctly not the case. It is not clear that historians have adopted Kuyper's theology explicitly, but they have undeniably adopted it implicitly, if unknowingly. In doing so, they have inadvertently given Kuyper *carte blanche* to set the conversation of what Calvinism was and was not.

As Abraham Kuyper was speaking and writing, and seeking support for this idea of a Calvinist rejuvenation for the Netherlands and the entire Calvinist world, he would utilize the Boers as model Calvinists. Indeed, the fate of the Afrikaners in their war against the British concerned Kuyper greatly, penning works such as *The South-African Crisis* which came out in their clear support while he was head of government.<sup>33</sup> Kuyper was a key leader in the *Stamverwantschap*, the movement in the Netherlands to reconnect with the Afrikaners as kindred peoples and to leverage that relationship for the political and economic gain of both.<sup>34</sup> Kuyper commanded greater influence in shaping public perception of the Boers both politically and theologically, whether as a theologian speaking at Princeton Theological Seminary or as the Prime Minister of the Netherlands in the European press. It does not take a huge leap to see how Kuyper's ideas could easily have used the Boer commandos as vehicles. Instead of Boers downloading Abraham Kuyper's

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<sup>31</sup> *Systematic*, s.v. 'Predestination.'

<sup>32</sup> Hart, *Calvinism*, 244-245.

<sup>33</sup> A. Kuyper, *The South-African Crisis*, A. E. Fletcher trans. (London 1900).

<sup>34</sup> A. Burnet, *The Dutch Rediscover the Dutch-Africans (1847-1900): Brother Nation or Lost Colony?* (Brill 2022) XII-XIII, 1-2.

theology, it seems more likely that Kuyper uploaded his theology to the academy using the most famous Calvinists in modern history as his medium.

## Conclusion

When debating the nature of Afrikaner religion and the racial strife of South Africa, no one stops to compare it to Anglican Rhodesia, Catholic colonial Mozambique, or Lutheran German Southwest Africa. Sure, none of those countries have an Afrikaner Calvinist Paradigm equivalent, but nor do their historiographies have any debate about the ‘real’ theological origins of, say, Rhodesia’s Unilateral Declaration of Independence or Portuguese Pluricontinentalism.<sup>35</sup> Those concepts do not have the same degree of urgency as getting to the bottom of Apartheid, but they are the same kind of questions. Why did these minority governments have these specific reactions to ruling a people they thought were lesser yet felt they could not survive without?

The answer is that to divest from white supremacy would have brought an end to their way of life, so they thought. Apartheid is the same. Using it as the lens to determine the origins and historicity of the Afrikaner Calvinism is almost superfluous. Enough of the National Party bought into the idea, or pretended to, to make Apartheid a political reality in 1948. Trying to determine the cause of an effect by studying how its effect caused its cause gets one nowhere.

In trying to cut through the propaganda of the perfect Calvinist on commando, historians have become hopelessly entangled in its web, freezing this debate since it slowed down at the end of the 1990s. This is hardly surprising, as historians went at the job with the wrong set of tools. Revising

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<sup>35</sup> Portuguese Pluricontinentalism (*Pluricontinentalismo*) is the concept that the Portuguese Empire was a unitary nation-state spread over multiple continents. Ergo, Portugal’s colonies were not possessions but integral parts of Portugal itself, termed ‘Overseas Provinces’ (*provincia ultramarinas*) that had to be retained at all costs for the sake of national cohesion, even if this made little economic or strategic sense. Pluricontinentalism played an important role in ideologically motivating the Portuguese Colonial War, the anti-guerrilla campaign waged by the Estado Novo to retain Portugal’s possessions in Africa. See: N. MacQueen’s ‘Portugal’s First Domino: “Pluricontinentalism” and Colonial War in Guiné-Bissau, 1963-1974’ in *Contemporary European History* 3.2(1999): 209-230.

a theology requires knowing theology. At the very least, it requires engagement with theologians on their home turf. Most Calvinist theologians no doubt see the crusade to tear Apartheid's pseudotheology down as noble, but it seems no one bothered to ask them for their help. Historians have instead only offered another myth, this one of their own telling, paving over the gaps of their knowledge instead of hitting the books themselves — or less charitably, to pass off anti-Calvinist prejudices as scholarly consensus.

It is no wonder that Afrikaners preferred, and still sometimes prefer, the Afrikaner Calvinist paradigm, false though it might be. That is a story infused with drama, daring, with their people taking center global stage in two epic crusades, the Boer Wars, albeit metastasizing into a racial triumphalism. The alternative is a series of confusing, foreign imports of still dubious historicity and even weaker theology: the Afrikaners of history both were and weren't Christians, state dependent on whichever paints them as more racist and ignorant right now. Theological content already off the table, what self-respecting Afrikaner Calvinist would assent to that? Without knowing their theology, historians of South Africa may as well be searching for the truth of Afrikaner Calvinism with a divining rod — relying on blind faith, which is really dumb luck, to guide them.