INTRODUCTION

This essay written in honour of Prof. dr. Bram van de Beek ties into the theme of being at home and also lost in the world. Said in another way: it is about our pilgrimage in regard to creation and salvation. In Tennyson’s words, we climb life’s “altar stairs” (LV). Our brother Van de Beek is a great encourager for many, including students and professors across continents and overseas. He has continually held before us the fact that we are pilgrims in faith and also in theology. I trust that this little essay will help bring this theme into focus by noting various aspects of creation theology in Tennyson’s longest poem series.

Tennyson’s In Memoriam struggles with the relationship between faith and knowledge. It asks questions about the possibility of human progress, about suffering and hope, and it deals in the widest scope with the meaning of life and death. The poet enters into the problem of our identity as human beings in the world of nature and culture—and this in turn is accompanied by investigations into many tangent ideas which illustrate the question, now from one side, now from another. The reader on this pilgrimage will understand that I am not giving a full exegetical discussion of the poem, since it is comprised in total by 711 four-line stanzas and these in turn are divided into 131 numbered sections. When it is printed with nine stanzas on a page, as in the edition I am using, it is 79 pages long, which is unusual for a poem. But as said above, it is a series, and its stepping along the path of several themes partly forms a unity and partly seems at times haphazardly joined. That is its charm as well as its difficulty for the reader seeking to understand the nuances. We usually think that a poem gets to the heart of the message in shorter form than prose.

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1 The Roman Numerals refer to the numbered sections of the poem which run from 1 to 131.
does. But Tennyson needed many pages to bring his thoughts and feelings into relief (whereby we may think of the double meaning of that same word as ‘making more vivid’ as well as ‘removing distress’). What we shall do with his well-crafted and also at times cumbersome thoughts, is highlight some major themes in this long lyric by dividing it into 9 movements or sections. The theme holding this essay together is the question of the meaning and the dynamics of creation theology, as expressed throughout *In Memoriam*.

At the start it is important to take notice that Tennyson, as poet and thinker, would not want us to hear only his answers but also to listen to his questions. The poem has many voices and so we may rightly expect this to point to a continuing diversity of dialogue. The voices are Tennyson’s at times, but at times the voices are those of others. Or better: all the voices are his as poet, but are not to be pinned upon him as a person. They help us think about many possible questions, answers and half-suggestions, in relation to the great themes of life. Even when the voices may be Tennyson’s more personally, which he need not hide, we are dealing with many layers of meaning. The poem refers to the person Tennyson and a variety of events in his life, to his own reflections and hints at accepting or rejecting interpretations in regard to many themes—but he allows for other *personae* or voices in the poem, to argue with him. Indeed, there are a myriad of literary references which scholars find in various lines and as it were, between the lines. Tennyson himself said that it was the voice of the whole human race that can be found in this series of poems. He addressed some of the great social, political, scientific, philosophical and religious problems of his time. The poet reminds us that abstractions cannot satisfy the human spirit.

The Poet

Alfred Tennyson (1809–1892) was the son of a church minister and studied at Trinity College, Cambridge, starting in 1827. His friendship with Arthur Henry Hallam dates from those years and Hallam was engaged to Alfred’s sister, Emily. It was a profound shock to Tennyson when Arthur Hallam, who was on vacation in Vienna, died of a cerebral hemorrhage at the age

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