

# “God Deals More Roughly with His Creature than We Would Like”

*Leviathan in the Work of Arnold A. van Ruler*

*Dirk van Keulen*

## 1 Introduction—Fascination with a Biblical Monster

Arnold Albert van Ruler (1908–1970) is considered to be one of the most original theologians in the Netherlands in the twentieth century. He is often mentioned in one breath with O. Noordmans and K.H. Miskotte: they were the three most important theologians that the Netherlands Reformed Church (Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk) provided in the previous century. After two seven-year stints as a minister—from 1933–1940 in Kubaard, a small town in Friesland, and from 1940–1947 in Hilversum—Van Ruler was appointed professor of theology by the Netherlands Reformed Church at Utrecht University. He would remain a professor until his death in 1970. He taught various subjects but became most well-known for his work in dogmatics.<sup>1</sup>

Van Ruler liked to articulate his views in short, provocative statements and had the gift of announcing his opinions in one-liners. To give a few examples: “Football is just as important as prayer;”<sup>2</sup> “In terms of the gospel, my cigar is just as important as my relationship to my neighbours;”<sup>3</sup> “Reality is funny—a joke by God.”<sup>4</sup>

The title of this chapter is also a one-liner: “God deals more roughly with his creature than we would like.” Whoever Googles this saying (in Dutch) will find a number of websites where this saying is cited and ascribed to Van Ruler.

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1 An edition of Van Ruler’s collected works is being prepared. So far, four parts in five volumes have appeared: A.A. van Ruler, *Verzameld Werk, Deel 1–6B*, ed. by D. van Keulen, Zoetermeer 2007–2016. Hereafter I will refer to the parts of the *Verzameld Werk* as *VW*, followed by the number of the part. For a short biography of Van Ruler, see Van Keulen, “Inleiding,” in: A.A. van Ruler, *VW1*, 17–45.

2 Van Ruler, “De verhouding van de mens en de wetenschap in het licht van de theologie,” in: idem, *VW1*, 138.

3 Van Ruler, “Jezus als voorbeeld,” in: idem, *VW4A*, 122.

4 Van Ruler, “De vreugde als wezenlijk christelijk levensgevoel,” in: idem, *VW3*, 440.

I learned it from Harry Kuitert's book *Het algemeen betwijfeld christelijk geloof* (English translation: *I Have My Doubts*), where it is cited approvingly in a section on "The Dark Course of Providence."<sup>5</sup> I do not know where the saying is found in Van Ruler's work, but that does not mean that he did not come up with it. Given how he wrote about the Leviathan, it is possible to demonstrate that the title of this paper could very well have originated in Van Ruler's mind.

Three texts indicate that Van Ruler became interested in the figure of Leviathan in the first half of the 1950s. On Sunday, 31 August 1952 he preached a sermon on Psalm 104:26 called "Het spel met de Leviathan ('Playing with Leviathan')." About the same time he published a meditation on the same text called "Het spel met de chaos ('Playing with Chaos')," which was published in a volume of meditations called *Vertrouw en geniet* ("Trust and Enjoy"). Some years later (1958) Leviathan resurfaced in his essay "God en de chaos ('God and Chaos')"—one of Van Ruler's most controversial texts.<sup>6</sup> After that, there was no further mention of Leviathan in any of his works.<sup>7</sup>

Van Ruler's interest in Leviathan lasted a relatively short time, but his interest, while it lasted, was intense. Van Ruler was fascinated, one could claim, by this monster in the Bible. We know this from another source, in addition to the texts cited. When I wrote his daughter Janneke that I would be speaking at a conference about Leviathan in her father's work, she mailed me that he also talked about Leviathan to his family: "Leviathan had been portrayed to me as something very scary. . . . But Dad could get very enthusiastic about it.

5 H.M. Kuitert, *Het algemeen betwijfeld christelijk geloof: Een herziening*, Baarn 1992, 108: 'Waar komt het kwaad vandaan? Het klassieke antwoord van de christelijke traditie schiet tekort. Niet alleen van de zonde, er is meer aan de hand. Er is een raadsel in de omgang tussen God en Zijn schepping. De uitspraak van Van Ruler dat God ruiger met Zijn schepsel omgaat dan ons lief is, valt mij hier opnieuw te binnen. Er is ook kwaad dat niet op ons conto staat, maar op dat van de Schepper.' In the English translation of Kuitert's book—"Where does evil come from? The classic answer of the Christian traditions falls short. Not just from sin; there's more to evil than that. There's an enigma in the dealings between God and his creation. I think once again of Van Ruler's statement that God is more involved in his creation than we would like. There's also evil which is not to be put to our account, but to the Creator's" (H.M. Kuitert, *I Have My Doubts: How to Become a Christian without Being a Fundamentalist*, trans. J. Bowden, London 1993, 93)—the point of Van Ruler's quote is missed. Instead of "God is more involved in his creation than we would like" I would prefer to translate: "God deals more roughly with his creature than we would like."

6 For the disputed character of Van Ruler's "God en de chaos," see Van Keulen, "Inleiding," in: Van Ruler, *VW3*, 19–24.

7 Aside from the three texts mentions, Leviathan does appear one other time in Van Ruler's work, namely, in an oblique remark in a lecture in 1953: "De vreugde in bijbels perspectief (Joy in Biblical Perspective)," in: Van Ruler, *VW3*, 433–434 (note q).