IN MEMORIAM

JOHANNES DE ZWAAN

June 26th, 1883 — December 23rd, 1957

DE ZWAAN departed this life on December 23rd, 1957, at the age of 74. There is always something unexpected about death. Also in this case; the end came quicker than could be foreseen. Though even here death cast out its shadow. Far out in fact. Those who knew DE ZWAAN intimately saw him deteriorate, sometimes in an extremely slow, undulating, smooth line, then again abruptly. His mental and physical strength began to fail him, especially after his retirement as professor in 1953; although it cannot be denied that it was already obvious before then that his great mental and physical vitality was declining by slow degrees. What did not decline was the intensity of his faith. In the tragic death-struggle of his last days he continued to testify that his salvation was anchored in Christ, and in Christ only. Those moments in which his spirit all but gave way and his body lay on the verge of going under were followed by moments in which he clearly and distinctly bore witness of Christ.

DE ZWAAN verified the truth of the words of the apostle Paul, whom he so greatly admired: Death is an enemy. He fought to the last against the steady decline of body and mind. There was no question of his giving up, no matter how difficult it was for him on occasions to persevere. But finally for him too the moment came in which he had to say with the apostle: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course..." Though he was also able to repeat after the apostle: "I have kept the faith; Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing". II. Timothy iv: 7 and 8. And those who knew him may go on after his parting in the knowledge that to this man, who had not been spared suffering in his life, God will make good those words, the tenderness of which had moved him so deeply: "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes..." Revelation xxi: 4.
Johannes de Zwaan. His students thought of him not only as a great scholar but also as somebody who must have been an extremely brilliant student in his time; and indeed he had justified this reputation. Having passed through the Gymnasium Haganum—where the study of Greek was not, as one might have expected, exactly one of his favourite pastimes—he arrived in Leiden as a student in 1901, and wrote an article of international standing as early as 1905, while in 1906, not only his Dutch rendering of E. W. Burton’s Syntax of New Testament Moods and Tenses came off the press, but also the edition of the Syrian text of the treaty of Dionysios bar Salih, “Against the Jews”.

There were professors who did not always appreciate his capacity for brilliant study. That the student De Zwaan considered that his time could be better spent following private lectures in Neo-Greek, Syrian, Coptic and Armenian and Georgian, than in faithfully attending the lectures which were considered essential for the preparation of examinations in Theology, occasionally caused him serious difficulties. Once it even went so far that he was warned, in a letter bearing the seal of the faculty, to faithfully attend stipulated lectures in future. But for De Zwaan, difficulties existed to be overcome and he pursued his own course.

In De Zwaan as a student one can already discern the traits which were later to characterize the man and professor. With an inconceivable energy he not only came to grips with his studies, but also with other things that fascinated him. This energy remained his till shortly before his death, also this tenacity. At a time when the linguistic study of the New Testament was passing through a glorious period, he especially came to grips with this aspect of his work. This openness for that which really lives will always be characteristic of him. And it was this openness which brought him to the study of Greek because his real interest in this language—an interest; yes, more than that, a love which he maintained even unto the difficult days of his passing—only became real on finding a booklet at the Hague book market which led him to discover the connection between classical and contemporary Greek. Openness for that which lives: hence it is that even Oriental Christianity was able to attract his attention and drew him further into the study of linguistics. That explains why De Zwaan could simply not limit himself to a career strictly confined to the four walls of the academy, why he had to be in his way the popularizer of science,