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GOD'S CHARACTER AND THE PLOT OF THE BIBLE

Hans Burger

INTRODUCTION

In his writings Eric Peels has focused on the image of God in the Old Testament, especially its so-called shadow sides.¹ Rather than remaining silent about these sides of the image of God, he has discussed the difficulties that have been raised about that aspect of God's image. It would be wrong, however, to limit oneself to the problems and difficulties. Instead, they should be located in their biblical context: the dealing of God with us and with his entire creation. Consequently, Peels finishes his book, *The Vengeance of God*, with a chapter on the place and function of the vengeance of God within the larger context of God's Old Testament revelation. In short, to understand theologically God's vengeance one needs to see this divine aspect in relation to God's character and attributes. Consequently, Peels describes God's vengeance in this way:

The punishing retribution of God, who in kingly sovereignty—faithful to his covenant—fighting and judging arises to defend the honour of his name, insures the maintenance of his justice, and works for the liberation of his people.²

This description indicates the interaction of God with his creation, especially with humanity, as the flow of the biblical narrative discloses it. Understanding this biblical narrative is important, particularly when one seeks for the larger whole of God's revelation.

In the first part of his *Systematic Theology*, Robert Jenson presents his doctrine of the triune God, namely, the God 'identified by the biblical narrative'.³ The only reason to read the Bible as one story, according to Jenson, is that the different biblical stories 'witness to the continuing action of one and the same agent'.⁴ As long as a story is open, the identity of the main characters of the story is open as well. However, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is a proleptic event that makes it possible to anticipate the end of the Biblical story. This anticipation gives dramatic coherence to the narrative identity of God.⁵ This implies that both the Old and New Testaments are necessary to formulate an adequate doctrine of God. Reading the biblical story from the end as the drama of God, Jenson follows the creed of the Church and identifies three

¹ See e.g. H.G.L. Peels, *De wraak van God. De betekenis van de wortel NQM en de functie van de NQM-teksten in het kader van de oudtestamentische Godsopenbaring*, Zoetermeer 1992 (ET: *The Vengeance of God: The Meaning the Root NQM and the Function of the NQM-Texts in the Context of Divine Revelation in the Old Testament* [OTS, 31], Leiden/New York etc. 1995); H.G.L. Peels, *Wie is als Gij? Schaduwkanten van het oudtestamentische Godsbeeld*, Zoetermeer 2007 (ET: *Shadow Sides: God in the Old Testament*, Carlisle 2003).

² Peels, *The Vengeance of God*, 277.

³ R.W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1: *The Triune God*, Oxford 1997, 57.

⁴ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, 58.

⁵ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, 63-66.

main characters, Father, Son and Spirit.⁶ In Jenson's concept, the biblical narrative is the entrance to a doctrine of God.⁷

For this reason, systematic theology has an interest in biblical narrative. Biblical narratives portray characters, and show who God is as their main character: the Scriptures tell about the way God interacts with human beings, in Israel, and ultimately in Christ and in the Holy Spirit. An image of God and a doctrine of God have to conform to the identity and character of God as the biblical narratives portrays it, given the presupposition that it is necessary to read the Bible to identify God.⁸

From a systematic theological point of view, it is important to observe that the story of the Bible as well as a doctrine of God both have their own 'narrative' or rhetorical logic. A narrative is characterized by what Paul Ricoeur calls 'discordant concordance', defined as 'the synthesis of the heterogeneous'.⁹ In a narrative, different elements are brought together in a temporal sequence. The Bible narrates about God's history with creation, systematic theology reflects on this narrative. A doctrine of God has its own logic: it starts somewhere, orders its material, and 'tells' its own story of God. It is not a problem that systematic theology uses analytic thinking and often has a discursive character: Scripture itself contains non-narrative books, and stories often incorporate discursive passages.¹⁰ However, it is still important to ask whether a doctrine of God (with its own [rhetorical] logic) does justice to the identity and character of God as main character of the story of the Bible. One has to ask, to which extent the arrangement of biblical material in a doctrine of God does imply a replotting of the story of the Bible. And what is the price to be paid for this replotting of the narrative?

In this article, I will contribute to understanding the larger whole of the image of God, of which God's vengeance and other 'shadow sides' are elements. Therefore, I will try to reconstruct the plot of the narrative of the Bible, the interaction of the elements of a story (like events, characters and settings).¹¹ In doing this, I presuppose that it is possible and fruitful to reconstruct an overarching but 'non-modern', 'hospitable' metanarrative with one main plot, because the triune God is acting in the biblical narratives in accordance with his goals and purposes.¹² Further, I will draw some systematic theological conclusions concerning the

⁶ Cf. R.W. Jenson, *Canon and Creed* (IRUSC), Louisville 2010, 16, 43-50.

⁷ J. Goldingay, 'Biblical Narrative and Systematic Theology', in: J.B. Green, M. Turner (eds), *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids/Cambridge 2000, 125-126, 130-131, shares the view that biblical narratives portray the character of God. He, however, minimizes the importance of the Trinitarian framework, emphasized by Jenson. Goldingay, as an Old Testament scholar, reads Scripture from the beginning to the end. Jenson reads Scripture in the light of its end.

⁸ Cf. C. van der Kooi, 'Creative Love Theism: The Doctrine of God in Reformed and Evangelical Theology', in: C. van der Kooi, E. van Staalduijn-Sulman *et al.* (eds), *Evangelical Theology in Transition* (AmSTaR, 1), Amsterdam 2012, 202. This narrative approach fits well with an earlier salvation-historical approach. The idea that the history of salvation has to be 'foundational' for dogmatics instead of merely 'illustrative' will lead to comparable results. Cf. B. Holwerda, 'De heilsgeschiedenis in de prediking', in: B. Holwerda, "... *Begonnen hebbende van Mozes ...*", Terneuzen, 1953, 88, 94.

⁹ P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, Chicago/London 1992, 141.

¹⁰ Cf. Goldingay, 'Biblical Narrative and Systematic Theology'.

¹¹ Cf. M.A. Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism? A New Approach to the Bible*, London/Minneapolis 1993, 23.

¹² R. Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World*, Grand Rapids 2003, 90, 93. And further C.J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*, Nottingham 2006, 64.

significance of this plot for the doctrine of God and for understanding God's vengeance. But first I will describe Herman Bavinck's doctrine of God as an example of establishing doctrine without a direct relation to the biblical narrative.

BAVINCK'S DOCTRINE OF GOD

In Volume Two of his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Herman Bavinck begins his doctrine of God with the incomprehensibility of God, followed by a discussion of the knowledge of God, arguing that such knowledge is based on revelation. Significantly, his doctrine of God is preceded by Volume One of the *Reformed Dogmatics*, which deals with revelation, Scripture and faith. His discussion of revealed knowledge deals with revelation and Scripture in general, not with the narrative of salvation history itself. His starting point is the modern question whether it is possible to know God at all. Epistemological questions continue to guide his doctrine of God, for his section on the names of God starts with a discussion of accommodation and anthropomorphism. Discussing the classification of the names of God, Bavinck emphasizes the importance of the divine simplicity with the implication that 'all Gods attributes are identical with its essence'. Moreover, theology has to 'honor equally all the attributes of God'.¹³ In his concept of God, Bavinck gives the primacy to the aseity of God, understood as the independence of an immutable being over against the becoming of creation that has been caused, and apart from the doctrine of the Trinity.¹⁴ Thus, Bavinck follows the conceptual structures of classical perfect being theism and its concept of God.¹⁵ His ordering of God's names and attributes is accordingly: first God's proper names: El, Elohim and El Shaddai; further YHWH, YHWH Sabaoth and Father. Then the attributes of God, ordered in the light of God's relation with his creatures: the incommunicable attributes of 'aseity, immutability, infinity (eternity and immensity) and oneness (numerical oneness, unity, and qualitative oneness, simplicity)'; and the communicable attributes ordered in accordance with the 'image and likeness of God' in humanity:

First, there are attributes of God as the living one, as Spirit: his spirituality and invisibility. Second, there are attributes that describe God as perfectly self-conscious: knowledge, wisdom and veracity. Third, there are attributes that refer to God's ethical nature: goodness, righteousness, and holiness. Fourth, there are attributes in which God appears before us as Lord, king and sovereign: his will, freedom and omnipotence. Finally, there are attributes that sum up and complete all the preceding ones and reveal God in his absolute blessedness: perfection, beatitude, and glory.¹⁶

¹³ H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, Kampen 1928 (ET: *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 2: *God and Creation*, Grand Rapids 2004, 120).

¹⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, 122, 151-153. For an insightful discussion of God's aseity, see J. Webster, 'Life in and of Himself: Reflections on God's Aseity', in: B.L. McCormack (ed.), *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives*, Grand Rapids 2008, 107-124. The influence of the modern deformation of the concept of aseity as described by Webster can be traced in Bavinck's doctrine of God.

¹⁵ On classical theism and the logic of its concept of God, see Chr. Schwöbel, 'Exploring the Logic of Perfection: Divine Attributes and Divine Agency', in: G. van den Brink, L.J. van den Brom *et al.*, *Christian Doctrine and Philosophical Theology*, Fs. V. Brümmer, Kampen 1992, 197-217; N. Wolterstorff, 'Is It Possible and Desirable for Theologians to Recover from Kant?', in: N. Wolterstorff (ed. T. Cuneo), *Inquiring about God: Selected Essays*, Vol. 1, Cambridge 2010, 37-42.

¹⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, 136.

When dealing with the individual attributes, the biblical narrative does not come in view, and Bavinck does not give an analysis of the divine attributes in the light of the doctrine of the Trinity. Only after Bavinck has finished his paragraphs on God's attributes, the doctrine of the Trinity follows as the closing part of the doctrine of God.

To sum up, the concept of God developed in this doctrine of God is not controlled by the doctrine of the Trinity or by the narrative of Scripture. The storyline of his doctrine of God (knowledge – names – incommunicable attributes – communicable attributes – Trinity) differs from the storyline of Scripture.¹⁷ Controlling concepts are God's aseity and simplicity. According to H. Jansen, this leads to a quite statically understanding of the relationship of the divine creator and creature, and to an emphasis on God's transcendence. Moreover, it becomes difficult to do justice to God's interaction with humanity in the history of salvation.¹⁸ Finally, this concept of God makes the question 'What is God?' dominant. A doctrine of God starting from the narrative of Scripture focuses more on the identity and character of God, and hence on the question 'Who is God?'.

Before I turn to the plot of the Scriptures, it is important to note that a doctrine of God can be determined by the metaphysics of perfect being of classical theism, but also by a more contemporary metaphysics of creative love, as is the case in the open theism of Clark Pinnock.¹⁹ Now, the question is whether it is possible to develop a doctrine of God controlled by the narrative of Scripture.

PLOT OF THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

The plot of the Bible has been reconstructed in various ways. I will deal with a reconstruction by three evangelical biblical scholars, the Old Testament scholar John Goldingay, the New Testament scholar Tom Wright, and Christopher Wright who as an missiologist has an overview of both Testaments.

Unlike Robert Jenson, who reads Scripture from the end, John Goldingay reads the Old Testament from the beginning, to reconstruct the faith of a reader of the Old Testament in 10 BCE.²⁰ The Old Testament is a book containing a diversity of faith affirmations, of narrative and non-narrative materials. Nevertheless, it is possible to articulate the metanarrative of Scripture.²¹ Goldingay focuses on the Old (or First) Testament, although he admits that he reads it as a Christian.²² According to Goldingay, the plot of Scripture contains the following acts:

1. God began (creation)
2. Humanity turned its back on God's instructions, and God started over (from Eden to Babel)
3. God promised, and the family grew (Israel's Ancestors)

¹⁷ Nevertheless, the subsequent parts of his *Reformed Dogmatics* do follow partly the story of Scripture, namely creation, fall, person and work of Christ, benefits of the covenant, church, means of grace, intermediate state, return of Christ, and consummation.

¹⁸ H. Jansen, *Relationality and the Concept of God* (CurEnc, 10), Amsterdam/Atlanta 1995, 60-61.

¹⁹ See Van der Kooi, 'Creative Love Theism'.

²⁰ J. Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1: *Israel's Gospel*, Downers Grove/Bletchley 2003, 16.

²¹ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, 21-23.

²² Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, 24-25.

4. Israel cried out, and God delivered (the Exodus)
5. God sealed, and Israel imperiled (Sinai)
6. God gave, and Israel took (the land)
7. Israel equivocated, and God accommodated (from Joshua to Solomon)
8. Israel turned away, and God wrestled (from Solomon to the exile)
9. God preserved, and Israel turned back (exile and restoration)²³
10. God sent (the coming of Jesus).

The narrative tells both how God is 'involved in a particular sequence of events'²⁴ and how God takes humanity seriously, letting human beings play their part in history. In this interaction of God and human beings, God's character is discovered, with moral implications for his people. Following act 2 till 9, God is 'compassionate, gracious, long-tempered, committed, truthful, carrying waywardness, not acquitting, and attending to waywardness in the way family life works out'.²⁵ The relation between Goldingay's reconstruction of the plot of the Old Testament and the character of God is evident: rightly, Goldingay affirms that the narratives tells the reader who God is.

Two comments on Goldingay's reconstruction need to be made. First, compared with Peels' work, the question emerges where the shadow sides of God's character can be found in Goldingay's version of the story of the Old Testament. God's anger is mentioned sometimes, but clearly the emphasis is on God's love and mercy, on God's loyalty to his people.²⁶ In his relationship with his people, God is 'a passionate and therefore jealous and angry lover'.²⁷ Anger can be necessary and God can be angry, but his commitment is stronger.²⁸ God's active punishment is minimized if not denied.²⁹ Similar to Peels, Goldingay stresses the prevalence of God's love and goodness over his anger and wrath.³⁰ However, Goldingay's version of Israel's gospel could have been more complete if he had also told the gospel of God's wrath and judgment. Goldingay proves to be no exception to Peels' observation 'that the Old Testament discussion of the vengeance of God has only received a very minor treatment in the discipline of Old Testament theology'.³¹

Second, Goldingay is an open theist, and it can be seen that an open theistic concept of God influences his reconstruction of biblical narrative. Also for God, creation is an adventure and a discovery.³² God's knowledge is supernatural, but this knowledge 'comes about through discovery, through 'searching out'.³³ Just as human beings, God lives 'in narrative sequence' and 'is not atemporal or outside time, although God is omnitemporal and not limited to particular times'.³⁴ God is like a teacher who prepares his lessons, who does not control his students but still has an ordered class plan.³⁵ God's sovereignty is like that of 'a prison governor

²³ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, 36.

²⁴ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, 32.

²⁵ J. Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 3: *Israel's Life*, Downers Grove 2009, 48.

²⁶ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, 139.

²⁷ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, 633.

²⁸ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, 633-634.

²⁹ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, 139, 170, 698, 705-707.

³⁰ Cf. Peels, *Wie is als Gij?*, 142.

³¹ Peels, *Vengeance*, 271.

³² Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, 45.

³³ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, 137.

³⁴ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, 63.

³⁵ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, 61.

or a parent of teenage children'.³⁶ Hence, Goldingay is critical of the influence of Greek thinking, which understood God's knowledge as God's unchangeable 'possession of all knowledge'.³⁷ According to Goldingay, the idea that God needs to reveal himself because he is hidden and transcendent to reality, likewise is a Greek thought and not a biblical idea.³⁸ Goldingay's correction of Greek thinking has to be appreciated, but he goes too far. First, he neglects the idea of God's foreknowledge as it can be found, for example, in Psalm 139:16: 'In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.' Further, as Peels has shown, more can be said about God's hiddenness as a biblical motif and not a Greek one.³⁹

John Goldingay prefers to read the Old Testament as a book distinct from the New Testament and stops reading at 10 BCE. Nicholas Thomas Wright, however, reads the Old Testament in the light of the New. Crucial for his historical reconstructions of Jesus and Paul is a worldview-model that presupposes four worldview-markers: story, praxis, symbols, and questions. These questions are the following: Who are we?, Where are we?, What is wrong?, What is the solution? And what time is it?

Because stories are an important element of the worldview-model that determines his historical reconstructions of Jesus and Paul, the reconstruction of the biblical narrative plays an important role in his work.⁴⁰ Initially, Wright reconstructed the biblical narrative as a drama in five acts: Creation – Fall – Israel – Jesus – Church.⁴¹ Recently in his book on Paul, he has given a more detailed analysis of the plots and subplots of the biblical narrative.⁴² The outer story is about God and creation. God created the world with a purpose, but due to human acts things have gone wrong. God will come to judge and restore his creation. That restoring judgment of God will bring an end to the present age, and the age to come will begin.

The first subplot is about humanity, which was created to bring creation to its purpose. However, human beings failed to play their part in God's plan to reflect God's glory to his creation and bring this world to God's destiny. God's relationship with humanity is broken, and sin and death threaten us. Now, the restoration of both God's relationship with humanity and of humanity itself is necessary, so that humanity can reflect again God's glory and take its place in God's plan with creation.

Now, the second subplot comes in, the story of Abraham and his seed Israel. God's intention with Israel was to rescue humanity from rebellion, sin and death. Abraham and his family were called to be a blessing for humanity, but they proved to be part of the problem of humanity themselves and failed due to their covenant rebellion.

The third subplot is about the role of Torah. The Torah was given to Israel to let it play its part as a light for the nations. However, from the first moment that the Torah was given, it has shown Israel that it shares in the Adamic problem of humanity. The Torah has a paradoxical function in Israel's story, both as helper and opponent. It keeps Israel together, but also makes

it more sinful, so that Israel will suffer from the curse of the law instead of being a blessing unto the nations, until Israel itself will be saved and restored.

The story of Jesus presents the solution to the problems of all the other stories. The crucified Messiah is God's answer to the problems of all the other (sub)plots. He is the Messiah, the rescuer of the rescue-operation Israel, who fulfils Israel's calling. He is the true Israel, the seed of Abraham, who brings God's blessing to the world. And he is Adam, the new man who will bring creation to its purpose.

God is the one God of Israel, who is faithful to his creation and his purpose for creation; to humanity and his plan for humans in creation; to his covenant with Abraham and Israel to restore humanity and creation. He is faithful, although humans and Israel rebel against him. In Christ Jesus he returns to his people and becomes their king again. What God does in Christ and through his Spirit shows a radical view of the problem of evil: dark powers and human sin together plunged creation into darkness. The one God of Israel, however, is willing and able to rescue his rescue-operation and give the real answer to the human plight. God himself, identified with Jesus and present in his Spirit, brings the solution to the dark problem of evil. Both his faithfulness to his creation and his covenant, and his power to judge and to restore are central elements of Wright's portrayal of God.⁴³

Wright's reconstruction of the plot of the Bible might be helpful to embed theological reflection on God's vengeance within the narratives of Scripture. Considering Peels' understanding of God's vengeance, the richness of his enumeration of elements is already striking (kingly sovereignty, covenant faithfulness, defence of the honour of God's name, maintenance of his justice, liberation of his people).⁴⁴ Wright, however, merely emphasizes the positive effect of God's judgment, which saves God's creation from the darkness of evil, and he does not focus on the 'shadow sides' of God. Peels' understanding of God's vengeance can therefore be used to enrich Wright's views.

The other Wright, Christopher Wright, is an Old Testament scholar and missiologist who gives an overview of the Old and New Testaments together in his book *The Mission of God*. Basic to his reconstruction of the plot of Scripture are two ideas. First, he uses a triangular model with God, humanity (or God's people) and the earth (or the land) as its three angles: a theological, a social and an economic angle.⁴⁵ Second, it is the mission of God that impels the narrative. God's mission is 'to restore creation to its full original purpose of bringing all glory to God himself and thereby to enable all creation to enjoy the fullness of blessing that he desires for it'.⁴⁶ Both ideas interact, for Wright's understanding of God's mission is determined by his triangular model. The mission is theocentric because it ultimately focuses on God's glory, as was God's good creation (the first angle).⁴⁷ Humanity and God's people in particular are elected to participate in this mission (the second angle),⁴⁸ 'in their engagement with God's world for the sake of the whole of God's creation' (the third angle).⁴⁹ Moreover, the triangular structure

⁴³ Cf. N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Minneapolis 1996, 612-654; Wright, *Paul*, 619-773.

⁴⁴ Peels, *Vengeance*, 277-295.

⁴⁵ Chr. Wright has developed this triangular model as an ethical triangle, structuring the Old Testament worldview in his *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, Downers Grove 2004.

⁴⁶ Chr. Wright, *Mission*, 188.

⁴⁷ Chr. Wright, *Mission*, 62-65, 404.

⁴⁸ Chr. Wright, *Mission*, 65-67.

⁴⁹ Chr. Wright, *Mission*, 51.

³⁶ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, 138.

³⁷ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, 137.

³⁸ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, 158.

³⁹ Cf. Peels, *Wie is als Gij?*, 30-44.

⁴⁰ On his worldview-model and narrative, see N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, London 1992, 122-139; N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Minneapolis 2013, 24-36.

⁴¹ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 139-143.

⁴² N.T. Wright, *Paul*, 475-537.

determines Wright's understanding of God's restoration and redemption. Wright emphasizes that one's vision of salvation has to be holistic. God's redemption is political, economic, social and spiritual.⁵⁰ Comparably, God's restoration is social (the angle of the people), economic (the angle of the land) and theological (the angle of the relationship with God).⁵¹ As a consequence, Wright opposes a soteriologically narrow understanding of the cross of Jesus Christ. Not only has the cross dealt with guilt and sin, but at the cross Jesus Christ also conquered the powers of evil and death. He restored the unity of humanity by removing the hostility between Jews and Gentiles and by creating one new man. But he also will heal God's entire creation.⁵²

Of course, the interaction in the space defined by the triangle, the interaction between God, humanity and world develops over time. At the beginning, God creates purposefully, but humans rebel against God and his purposes. Most of the story deals with how God's redemption is being realized in the interaction with his people in human history. The end of the story is the eschatological hope, that is, the new creation that is still being longed for.⁵³ During the long history, the people of God, which participates in God's mission, have their own history: from humanity to Israel and Jesus and to the Church.⁵⁴ God's people is chosen to be a blessing to the entire creation. Hence, Wright develops a missionary understanding of election and of the covenant. He takes the sequence of the various covenants not, with Walter Eichrodt, as *the* but still as 'one fruitful way of presenting the grand narrative'. Understanding the narrative as 'a cable, with several closely entwined wires running along together', the covenant is one of the constituting wires.⁵⁵ The covenants with Noah, with Abraham, with Israel at the Sinai, with David and finally the new covenant together mark the diverse steps through time in which God's interaction with his people has developed.⁵⁶ The missional understanding of Scripture also colours Wright's view of the life of God's people. The life of both Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the New Testament, has to be a witness to the other peoples of the earth.⁵⁷

As a result of the combination of a theocentric and a holistic perspective, the wrath of God is a theme in Wright's reconstruction. Rebellion against God's purpose, idolatry and injustice all raise God's anger.⁵⁸ The emphasis on the glory of God and the purposes of God prevent Wright from disarming God's wrath in the name of God's love. God's purpose, however, is not to punish but to give the fullness of his blessing to his creation. Then, God is magnified most.

⁵⁰ Chr. Wright, *Mission*, 268-270.

⁵¹ Chr. Wright, *Mission*, 290-292.

⁵² Chr. Wright, *Mission*, 312-314.

⁵³ Chr. Wright, *Mission*, 63-64.

⁵⁴ Chr. Wright, *Mission*, 65-66.

⁵⁵ Chr. Wright, *Mission*, 325. On Eichrodt's attempt to use the covenant as organizing principle in Old Testament theology, see also Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, 18. Recently, others reconstruct the narrative of Scripture, making use of the sequence of covenants. See e.g. S.W. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God's Saving Promises*, New Haven/London 2009; P.J. Gentry, S.J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, Wheaton 2012.

⁵⁶ Chr. Wright, *Mission*, 324-356.

⁵⁷ Chr. Wright, *Mission*, 357-392.

⁵⁸ Chr. Wright, *Mission*, 179, 182, 185, 278, 359-360, 377, 395, 457-460, 469-472, 495, 501.

BACK TO THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

Having described these three positions, it strikes me that none of these reconstructions of the plot of the Bible is Trinitarian. Knowing the end of the drama of Scripture by anticipation and God as triune, however, it is important to follow the creed of the Church in its identification of God as triune.⁵⁹

Furthermore, the conclusion might be that the differences in the three reconstructions are not impressive. All three read the Scriptures as a collection of books and stories, which tell one overarching narrative, from Creation and Fall, via Israel, through Jesus Christ, to the Church and God's future. But each has his own emphasis: Goldingay emphasizes God's love for his people, Tom Wright God's loyalty to his covenant, and Christopher Wright God's mission for his glory. This evokes an important theological question: how should the relationship between these three emphases be understood: God's mission for his glory (the most theocentric emphasis), God's loyalty to his covenant (relational but also forensic) and God's love for his people (potentially the most open to anthropocentrism)?

The answer given to this question has theological significance. One might give primacy to one of these emphases. Peels' micro-narrative of God's vengeance, however, should make one cautious to do so:

The punishing retribution of God, who in kingly sovereignty—faithful to his covenant—fighting and judging arises to defend the honour of his name, insures the maintenance of his justice, and works for the liberation of his people.⁶⁰

Central in a doctrine of God is the question 'who is God?'. An answer to this question could be: God is the Father, the Son and the Spirit, who in his acts is characterized by his mission for his glory, his loyalty to his covenant and his love for his people. The elements of this short description have to balance each other. Next, such an answer has to be the controlling norm of a doctrine of God and of all further discussion of God's attributes.

Accordingly, the narrative of the triune God has to control our reflection of God's vengeance. Peels' description of God's vengeance is, on the one hand, a beautiful example of a discussion of an attribute controlled by such a narrative kernel; on the other hand, because Peels is an Old Testament scholar, it is not surprising that his understanding of God's vengeance has no Trinitarian outlook. A systematic theological treatment of God's vengeance should add a reflection on the cross and the coming judgment of Jesus Christ,⁶¹ and on the purifying work of the Holy Spirit.

⁵⁹ Cf. the contribution of Arnold Huijgen and Arie Versluis to this *Festschrift*: "'Our God is One": The Unity of YHWH and the Trinity in the Interplay between Biblical Exegesis and Systematic Theology'.

⁶⁰ Peels, *Vengeance*, 277.

⁶¹ See e.g. J.M. Burger, "'Door zijn striemen bent u genezen"; een uitweg uit de verstaanscrisis', in: *ThRef* 57 (2014), 388-395.