



# Narrative Theology and the Use of the Bible in Systematic Theology

## Abstract

An important development in Christian theology during the second half of the twentieth century was what we might call the ‘narrative turn’—i.e. the idea that Christian theology’s use of the Bible should focus on a narrative representation of the faith rather than the development of a set of propositions deduced from the data of revelation. This paper inquires, first, whether and to what extent a narrative approach to systematic theology is incompatible with a ‘referential account’. It is argued that a referential account of theology is compatible with narrative theology. Second, the author elaborates on the nature of reference in narrative by scrutinising three popular maxims of narrative theology, namely, (1) that narrative expressions do not have the universal pretensions of propositional expressions of faith; (2) that references in narrative always remain implicit in the story whereas, in propositional expressions, they are always explicit; and (3) that narrative forms of expression are typically associated with the ‘ambiguity’ of reference, whereas propositional forms are typically associated with lack of ambiguity.

## 1 Introduction

[1] An important development in Christian theology during the second half of the twentieth century was what we might call the ‘narrative turn’.<sup>1</sup> By ‘narrative turn’ I mean the idea that Christian theology’s use of the Bible should focus on a narrative representation of the faith, rather than on the development of a metaphysical system that draws infallible logical inferences from the data of revelation. One proponent of this narrative turn is Dennis Nineham, who remarks in his, by now classical, *The Use and Abuse of the Bible*, ‘that from the sort of story we have discovered in the Bible no irrefutable deductions could possibly be drawn.’<sup>2</sup> Another example is the Dutch theologian Harry Kuitert who, in his popular book *I have my doubts* says: ‘We needn’t read the Bible for morality: we read it for the story that bit by bit shows us the face of the God to whom we can say “You”.’<sup>3</sup>

1. For introductions to and bibliographical data on narrative theology, see: L. Gregory Jones, ‘Art. Narrative Theology’, in: Alister E. McGrath, editor, *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 395–398; Bernd Wacker, *Narratieve Theologie?* (München: Kösel, 1977).

2. Dennis Nineham, *The Use and Abuse of the Bible: A Study of the Bible in an Age of Rapid Cultural Change*, Library of Philosophy and Religion (London and Basingstroke: Macmillan, 1976), 200.

3. H.M. Kuitert, *I Have My Doubts: How to Become a Christian Without Being a Fundamentalist*, trans. from the Dutch by John Bowden (London/Valley Forge: SCM Press, 1993), 286.

[2] The narrative turn in Christian theology has an important link to what has been called the 'linguistic turn' in philosophy, especially philosophical hermeneutics. What links the narrative turn to the linguistic turn is the fact that both attack the referential nature of language in relation to the reading of texts. During the seventies and eighties of the previous century, philosophers like Paul Ricoeur, Umberto Eco, Jacques Derrida, and others – each in his own way – emphasized the 'playful nature' of language, mainly as opposed to its referential nature.

[3] Although the narrative turn in theology was strongly rooted in a movement of resistance against the referentiality of theological language,<sup>4</sup> there have also been scholars of narrative hermeneutics who tried to retain the notion of reference in various ways. In this paper, I inquire whether and to what extent a narrative approach to systematic theology is incompatible with a 'referential account'. In the first section I discuss some recent contributions to the question of referentiality in narrative by theologians and philosophers, most of whom are themselves part of the pro-narrative movement. In the second section, I elaborate on the nature of reference in narrative by scrutinising three popular maxims of narrative theology, namely (1) that narrative expressions do not have the universal pretensions of propositional expressions of faith; (2) that references in narrative always remain implicit in the story whereas, in propositional expressions, they are always explicit; and (3) that narrative forms of expression are typically associated with the 'ambiguity' of reference, whereas propositional forms are typically associated with lack of unambiguity.

## 2 In Defence of Reference in Narrative

[4] The problem of reference in narrative has been discussed from many different philosophical and theological angles. Defences of the referential nature of narrative can therefore also – to some extent – be differentiated according to the different areas of research within which they were proposed. First, then, there are those who defend the referential nature of narrative in the sense of reference to historical facts as part of past or present reality. A number of people could be mentioned here.<sup>5</sup> Let me briefly consider two examples. In a recent article, Henry Jansen addresses the, by now common, dichotomy between reading Scripture as a literary text and reading the Bible as a report of events in history.<sup>6</sup> By

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4. See for example David F. Ford, 'System, Story, Performance: A Proposal about the Role of Narrative in Christian Systematic Theology', in: Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989), 191–215.

5. Those who are not discussed here include: James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London: SCM Press, 1973), 65; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'The Semantics of Biblical Literature: Truth and Scripture's Diverse Literary Forms', in: D.A. Carson and J. Woodbridge, editors, *Hermeneutics, Authority, & Canon* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995), 51–104; John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*, 2nd edition (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996); Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Reading* (London: Harper Collins, 1992).

6. Henry Jansen, 'Poetics and the Bible: Facts and Biblical Hermeneutics', *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 40 (1999), 22–38. Jansen's approach partly depends

means of various arguments, Jansen shows that, when we interpret literary texts, the historical context is necessary for a proper understanding of the texts.<sup>7</sup> We should realise, however, that knowledge of the historical context of a text is not equally crucial to the interpretation of all genres of texts. Even within genres – such as in the case of novels – the importance of the historical background is not always equally important. A historical novel, for instance, bears a closer relation to the past than a purely fictional one, which may involve the invention of a fantasy world quite unconnected with reality.<sup>8</sup> Jansen applies these reflections to the referential nature of the gospels, concerning which he argues that they present themselves as history writing; this means that we cannot understand them apart from their historical context. The events are the subject matter that they seek to convey. Naturally, this kind of argument leads inevitably to the problematic notion of the authorial intention behind a work of art and its value for interpretation. Jansen tackles this problem by arguing that, in the case of the gospels, the texts themselves claim – e.g. in Luke 1 and John 20/21 – to be history writing, so that, in this case, we have good reason to interpret them accordingly.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>[5]</sup> In his recent book *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology*, Francis Watson argues for an interconnection between historiography and narrative along similar lines.<sup>10</sup> Watson refers to current discussions in historiography, where it is now widely accepted that historiography is neither merely neutral description of the facts nor purely arbitrary fantasy. Historiography is always basically narration, which means that it brings order to the data it describes. In many cases, this ordered narration takes the form of a narrative with a literary structure, but that need not be the case. By emphasising historiography as writing, we diversify the criteria for calling something history. One cannot simply say ‘This is an objective description of the facts; hence, it is historiography’, or ‘This is a literary work; hence, it is fiction’.<sup>11</sup> Such a distinction is too easy. Watson links this argument from historiography with Paul Ricoeur’s analysis of plot as the key feature of narrative. Narratives, whether or not they are historiographical, are always plotted configurations of reality. They present a certain picture of the way the world is, but also a picture of the way the world should be, or should become.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>[6]</sup> Moving on to the second angle from which a defence of reference in

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on: Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

7. Jansen, 28ff.

8. Jansen, 30ff. Jansen offers an interesting criticism of David Ford, who argues that historical accuracy is as unimportant to the gospels as it is to Solzhenitsyn’s *Lenin in Zurich*. Jansen argues that this fictional novel is not a good example to compare the gospels with. The importance of the gospels’ historical accuracy should rather be compared to that in Solzhenitsyn’s historical novel *Gulag Archipelago*.

9. Jansen, 31f.

10. Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), esp. 33–70.

11. Watson, 41–45; see also: Ford, 196–197.

12. Watson, 55f.

narrative is given, there are those who defend the referential nature of narrative as reference to our world of action. These contributions come mainly from two areas of research: first, from speech act theory,<sup>13</sup> and second, from the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, who argues that the idea of 'mimesis' is central to narrative, and that mimesis is somehow related to reference.<sup>14</sup> Here, I want to draw attention to two contributions to the theory of hermeneutics by James Fodor and Clarence Walhout. Each in his own way explores the implications of Ricoeur's notion of *mimesis* in connection with the referentiality of narrative. Much of the Western preoccupation with reference has been with the extent to which narrative may truly *imitate* (*mimesis*) the external world to which the text refers.<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur's notion of *mimesis* tries to overcome this preoccupation by showing that, in *mimesis*, much more is involved than mere imitation of the external world of the text.<sup>16</sup> In narrative, a threefold process of figuration of our world of action takes place. First, the actual world in which the narrator lives is in some way *prefigured* in the narrative. Second, a world of reference is *configured* in the narrative by way of referring to a world that is implicit in it. Finally, the narrative *refigures* our future world of action.<sup>17</sup>

[7] The first kind of *mimesis*, prefiguration, means that the plotted reality that is imagined in narrative always bears some kind of relationship to the actual world in which people live. This relationship can be of various kinds, e.g. historical or ideological. The second kind of *mimesis*, configuration, means that narrative is never just a copy of reality as we already have it. Narrative projects its own world of reference, which need not be identical to reality. At the same time, configured reality as we have it in the second kind of *mimesis* always points to the actual world in which we live. Narrative never lets our understanding of our being in the world untouched, as it confronts us with an understanding of our being in the world. Therefore, narrative as refiguration ends in action as a result of a transformed understanding of the world.

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13. Among these scholars are: Mary Louise Pratt, *Towards a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

14. Particular proponents of this view include James Fodor, *Christian Hermeneutics: Paul Ricoeur and the Refiguring of Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), and Clarence Walhout, 'Narrative Hermeneutics', in: Roger Lundin, Clarence Walhout and Anthony C. Thiselton, editors, *The Promise of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 65–132. An elaborate discussion of *mimesis* is also provided by Theo L. Hetteema, *Reading for Good: Narrative Theology and Ethics in the Joseph Story from the Perspective of Ricoeur's Hermeneutics*, *Studies in Philosophical Theology* 18 (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996).

15. Walhout, 71ff.

16. Fodor, 189–190.

17. The description of *mimesis* in Ricoeur depends on Fodor, *Christian Hermeneutics*, 190ff; Hetteema, *Reading for Good*, 38ff; Walhout, 'Promise', 74–85. Ricoeur's main analysis of *mimesis* is to be found in Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. from the French by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, 3 vols. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983–1985), I, pp. 52–87. Walhout does not present his discussion of *mimesis* as an interpretation of Ricoeur, and differs from Ricoeur in some respects. Nevertheless, his view is very similar to Ricoeur's.

[8] By formulating reference in narrative in terms of this threefold kind of *mimesis*, we are able to see a more subtle connection between narrative and reference than would result from simply saying that narrative is connected to the historical world of the 'facts'. Reference to the world of the past, present and future is not only factual, but also practical in the sense that it influences our being and acting in the world.

[9] Finally, I want to draw attention to one particular contribution from the field of literary theory: Meir Sternberg's book *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, in which he argues that, in biblical narrative, certain 'proposition-like' ideas may be central to the message of the structure of the story.<sup>18</sup> So far, we have dealt primarily with reference in narrative in the sense of historical reference or practical reference. Both kinds of reference are related for the most part to the visible world of human experience. In systematic theology's use of the Bible, however, references to God play a particularly important role. Hence, we should ask whether contemporary hermeneutics could corroborate that kind of reference in narrative. One of the interesting aspects of Meir Sternberg's work is that he enables us to understand how some presuppositions about the nature of God may play a central role in biblical narrative—for him: the Tenach. As one part of his analysis of biblical narrative, Sternberg focuses on the role of the different actors in the narrative and the different kinds of access they have to information. There are, for instance, the storyteller, the main figures in the story, background figures and, last but not least, the reader. These may have different degrees of access to vital information during different stages of the narrative. Sometimes the reader knows more than the main figure, and sometimes the roles are reversed.

[10] One of the central theses of Sternberg's book, however, is that, in the biblical stories, God figures as the great 'Master of the Play' who, as an omniscient and omnipotent figure in the story, knows everything and directs everything to its proper end. However, this aspect of the story is not explicitly stated at every place in the story. It may not be explicitly mentioned at all, although it nevertheless functions as the governing theme.<sup>19</sup>

[11] There seems to be an interesting resemblance between the way Sternberg construes God's function in biblical narrative and the way Vincent Brümmer construes the function of belief in God's existence in the life of the religious believer, in Wittgensteinian terms, as a so-called 'tacit presupposition'.<sup>20</sup> Brümmer argues that, although the existence of God is not a primary focus for believers in the sense that they pray or worship *because* they have sufficient reason to believe that God exists, the existence of God is nevertheless constitutive for their religious form of life. To worship or pray would be senseless to believers if they did not

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18. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, Indiana studies in Biblical literature (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), chapter 3.

19. Sternberg, 89f, 101ff.

20. Vincent Brümmer, 'Wittgenstein and the Anselmian Project', *Bijdragen* 60 (1999), 444–447.

presuppose that the God to whom they pray or worship, really exists.<sup>21</sup> The *tacit presupposition* that God exists may not be empirically verifiable, but nevertheless have constative force.<sup>22</sup>

[12] Along similar lines, we could argue that while, in biblical narrative, not many explicit references to God's nature are made, certain presuppositions about God's nature are nevertheless constitutive for the structure and message of the narrative. Moreover, in the case of biblical narrative, the story may be told precisely in order to direct the audience to an implicit affirmation of the presuppositions governing it.<sup>23</sup>

### 3 The Nature of Reference in Narrative

[13] So far, I have argued that reference of some kind is compatible with narrative. Let us now proceed with an inquiry into matters surrounding the specific nature of reference in narrative. Various proponents of narrative theology have argued that, while narratives may contain references to external objects, the narrative embeddedness of these references qualify them to such an extent that they cannot be taken out of their narrative setting without corrupting their true nature. This argument may take various forms. First, one might suggest that narratives are more 'contextual' than propositional accounts of faith. Propositional expressions of faith seem to claim universal validity and truth, in contrast to narrative expressions, which seem to restrict themselves to the world of the story that they project. Second, one might suggest that narrative expressions of faith make more modest claims because the references to external objects contained in them remain implicit in the story, whereas they are always explicit in propositional accounts of faith. Finally, one might point to the fact that, while narratives may imply reference, it belongs precisely to the power of the story to construe these references in a lapidary or ambiguous way.

[14] Let me start with the suggestion that narratives are more 'contextual' and hence less 'universal validity claiming' than propositional accounts of faith. In many cases, dogmas take the form of 'such and such is the case', which is obviously the form of a proposition. To begin with, a quite formal criticism is possible of the idea that expressions of the form 'such and such is the case' always involve an absolute claim to timeless truth.<sup>24</sup> The idea that an expression of faith in propositional form always makes an absolute truth-claim is based on a concept of proposition that is too straightforward. Following Peter Geach, Paul Helm argues that we should make a distinction between propositions and assertions. In a proposition, something is 'propounded for consideration', which means that what is said has truth-value. However, this does not mean that a proposition is always

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21. Brümmer, 445f.

22. Brümmer, 447.

23. Sternberg, 90ff.

24. For a detailed discussion of the idea of timelessly true propositions in connection with theology, see: Paul Helm, 'Revealed Propositions and Timeless Truths', *Religious Studies* 8 (1972), 127–136.

claimed to be true, which would mean to assert something.<sup>25</sup> Conditions in hypothetical clauses, for instance, have truth value, but are not asserted. Therefore, propositional formulations of faith may 'propound something for consideration', but need not necessarily claim absolute, unqualified truth. Moreover, the use of qualifiers suggests that even abstract dogmatic formulations may be narratively embedded in the existential experience of the believer. Be that as it may, the fact that traditional dogmatics used propositional forms to express its claims does not necessarily imply that it makes absolute claims without qualification.

[15] Let me introduce a concrete example to illustrate this. In his discussion of 'Biblical Narrative and the Philosophical Idea of God',<sup>26</sup> Henk Vroom opens his argument with a quotation from Isaiah 57: 15, where God says:

Thus speaks the high and exalted one, who abides forever, and his name is Holy: I live in a high and holy place and with the oppressed and the humble in spirit to revive the spirit of the humble and to revive the heart of the oppressed.<sup>27</sup>

[16] Vroom uses this quotation to criticise traditional doctrinal theology:

In this biblical text several predicates are ascribed to the Lord God: exalted, living in a high and holy place and with oppressed and humble people. Given the context of Isaiah (and biblical prophecy as a whole), this can be taken to mean that God does not live everywhere. In one sense God is not omnipresent but only present in some places and not in others; He does not dwell with all people equally. God, the Holy One, the High and Exalted, is the God of the humble and the oppressed. It seems that God is not everywhere unqualifiedly: He does not dwell with the oppressor or with those who think highly of themselves. This view, however, contradicts the classic scholastic doctrine of God.<sup>28</sup>

[17] Vroom's critique of the 'classic scholastic doctrine of God' illustrates clearly how he interprets the propositions of the classic scholastic theologians, namely, as claiming that God is near to everybody in the same way unqualifiedly and without any contextual consideration. This is, however, most definitely not the opinion of the scholastics. For the scholastics, their proposition that God is omnipresent was perfectly compatible with the belief that God is present to the humble and oppressed with his special care and love, while being present to the godless in his

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25. Helm, 129–130. See also the interesting discussion between Igor Douven and Theo van Willigenburg in *Ars Disputandi*: Igor Douven, 'Review of Belief's Own Ethics', *Ars Disputandi* 3 (2003), <URL: <http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000084/index.html>>; Theo van Willigenburg, 'P, but I lack sufficient evidence for p', *Ars Disputandi* 3 (2003), <URL: <http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000131/index.html>>.

26. Henk Vroom, 'The Biblical Narratives and the Philosophical Idea of God', *Theological Forum* 25 (1997), <URL: <http://rec.gospelcom.net/TF-July97-vroom.html>> – visited on 2005-12-15.

27. Vroom, (Vroom's translation).

28. Vroom.

wrath and punishment.<sup>29</sup>

[18] The possibility of qualifying propositional expressions of faith already makes clear that propositional forms of communication are less 'context-free' or 'abstract' than proponents of a narrative theology tend to suggest. It may be argued that, for propositional representations of faith to have force, they need to be embedded in some sort of 'narrative', much in the same way as narrative representations. We may elucidate this by recalling Ricoeur's analysis of narrative. Narrative is embedded in our world of action, and we cannot understand its meaning without the context of action being taken into account. However, we can also imagine certain kinds of discourse that may once have been embedded in a narrative framework of action, but that now appear to us, in isolation, as abstract formulas. In this case, it would be quite easy for us to suspend judgment, because we do not see how the formulas would change our being in the world; alternatively, we may not be convinced that the live option presented by the dogmatic claim is worth the bet. To put it in Wittgensteinian terms: we do not understand the conceptual grammar of the language game.<sup>30</sup> This may well be the reason why many contemporary believers have dropped the traditional dogmas—it is simply because they were no longer able to connect them to their own forms of life.

[19] Let me add a final observation on the universality of narrative claims. Some narrative theologians suggest that their approach makes theology more context-related and less inclined to claim universal validity. Is this true? It must be granted that narratives can be interpreted in strikingly different ways in different contexts. Sometimes they may be especially open to different interpretations. However, the same goes for abstract dogmatic conceptions—the less these are connected to a coherent and commonly accepted set of presuppositions, the more they are open to creative reinterpretation. At the same time, telling a story involves, in particular, the phenomenon of longstanding traditions transmitting, by means of retelling, the same story from one generation to the next, so that we sometimes speak of 'universal stories' that appeal to universal experiences in human life. In this sense, the message that the story conveys may well have universal significance.

[20] Proceeding to the second reason why narrative theology is favoured over its rivals, we should investigate the contention that, in narrative, references remain implicit whereas, in propositional expressions, they are always explicit. This may be granted, but then with two restrictions. First, the danger of generalisation should be acknowledged. Some narratives contain very specific and

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29. For an alternative interpretation of Isaiah 57:15 that is much more in line with the scholastics, see: Arjan Markus, *Beyond Finitude: God's Transcendence and the Meaning of Life*, Contributions to Philosophical Theology 11 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004), 51–60.

30. Cf. Brümmer, 441–444. For Wittgenstein, of course, this means that we cannot even understand what it means to refute the claims made within the game if we ourselves are not part of it: Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, edited by Cyril Barrett et al. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966). However, this only confirms my point that some kind of narrative framework is needed for a set of claims to have real persuasive force.

very explicit statements of fact or proper behaviour. Second, implicit reference in narrative should not be taken automatically as *more moderate* or *weaker* than references in propositional representations. In many cases, stories seem, at first sight, not to claim very much.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, we can mention several respects in which the claims of narrative on the reader may be powerful or more effective than propositional accounts:<sup>32</sup>

[21] First, narrative's claims are powerful in a rhetorical sense. Whereas the naked proposition has nothing to present but its content, a narrative may hide its message between the lines, implicitly pushing the reader towards the heart of the story. At this point, we may reflect on what we have said above about stories that make certain implicit claims about reality. A story may not claim explicitly that the fate of a person is in the hands of God – as the Heidelberg Catechism does,<sup>33</sup> – but it may nevertheless convey the implicit suggestion that everyone's fate, or ultimate destiny, is in the hands of God.<sup>34</sup>

[22] This rhetorical force of a narrative is reinforced further by the fact that a narrative's claims are often intimately connected with our real life situation. In this respect, a narrative presentation has stronger persuasive force than a propositional formulation of faith. Narrative shows us a picture of the way the world is, which is to say: the way the narrative *suggests* the world is. In addition, a narrative does not argue for its picture of the world. It simply tells the story *as if* that which is narrated is obvious.<sup>35</sup>

[23] Taken together, these two arguments suggest that, in some cases, narrative claims may well be equally or more powerful than the claims of an abstract dogmatic formula. A narrative may combine the strength of a real life picture with the power of rhetoric; thus one is moved by the story almost without having the ability to decide whether one agrees with the message or not. This cannot, of course, be taken to count *against* narrative. On the contrary, it must count in favour of it.

[24] Finally, we need to pay attention to the suggestion that, while narrative may imply reference, it belongs precisely to the power of the story to construe these references in a lapidary, or ambiguous way.<sup>36</sup> Vroom again illustrates this point:

In speaking of God one must begin from experiences which people have undergone. God has revealed himself to humans in history and this history

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31. Elsewhere, I discuss the example of the *Testament of Job*, see: Maarten Wisse, *Scripture between Identity and Creativity: A Hermeneutical Theory Building upon Four Interpretations of Job*, *Ars Disputandi Supplement Series 1* (Utrecht: Ars Disputandi, 2003), (URL: <http://adss.library.uu.nl>), 46–50.

32. For an alternative account of this point, see: Wisse, 107–110.

33. Cf. G. den Hartogh, *Voorzienigheid in donker licht: Herkomst en gebruik van het begrip 'Providentia Dei' in de reformatorische theologie, in het bijzonder bij Zacharias Ursinus*, Ph.D. dissertation Utrecht University (Heerenveen: Groen, 1999).

34. Cf. Sternberg, 90ff.

35. Cf. Hetteema, 63.

36. In addition to Vroom, see also: William C. Placher, 'Gospels' Ends: Plurality and Ambiguity in Biblical Narratives', *Modern Theology* 10 (1994), 143–163.

is given in the form of stories. These stories, in turn, reflect both the event and the meaning of the historical event. They are both fact and interpretation and thus reflect significant events. *Another characteristic of narratives is their polyvalence.* If the concepts of scholastic theology and analytical philosophy are concerned with clear, distinct and simple notions which lack nuancing, one encounters nuance and polyvalence in the biblical narratives, the feeling of seeing a distorted reflection in a mirror.<sup>37</sup>

[25] In the second half of the twentieth century, narrative analysis of the Bible paid much attention to ambiguity in the biblical stories—with much success.<sup>38</sup> What exactly does this imply for the difference between narrative and propositional accounts of faith? I would like to suggest that there is no single, straightforward answer to this question. An appropriate answer depends on an adequate understanding of the systematic implications of narrative analyses of the biblical texts *and* an adequate understanding of the (in)compatibility of these implications with traditional doctrinal reflection.

[26] Since such an extensive response lies beyond the aim of this paper, I would like to outline various lines of argument, each yielding different outcomes for either narrative or traditional doctrinal theology. One could respond, first, by drawing attention to the different functions of narrative and doctrinal theology. Narrative theology aims to connect the faith with the real life context of the believer, whereas doctrinal theology attempts to provide an overall description of what Christian faith amounts to in the most precise terms possible. Arguments along these lines may then include a word of caution against uses of either narrative or doctrinal theology that amount to a replacement of all the different ways of doing theology with just one type. Narratives will probably not be optimal bearers of precise overall descriptions of faith; on the other hand, an overall description of the Christian faith may not be directly located in the everyday experience of the believer—liberation theology should, however, be noted as an interesting counterexample.

[27] Another response might be to criticise the oversimplified view of doctrinal theology as a clear and distinct abstract set of propositions.<sup>39</sup> Such a view of traditional theology seems anachronistic, and does not do justice to the complex-

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37. Vroom, emphasis mine.

38. To mention but a few examples: Jan P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 2nd edition (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991); Sternberg, *Poetics*; David Penchansky, *The Betrayal of God: Ideological Conflict in Job*, *Literary currents in biblical interpretation* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990).

39. In this connection, it is particularly significant that Vroom's criticisms of classic scholasticism lean heavily on an interpretation of Descartes. Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676) – a typical exponent of seventeenth century Reformed scholasticism – would not have appreciated this criticism of his thought in terms of his early Enlightenment opponent. At the very least, the difference between them is, for example, that, for Descartes, the attributes of God can be rationally deduced from the powers of reason (Vroom), whereas, for Voetius, the attributes of God are inferred from the data of Revelation (see Voetius disputation 'De ratione humana in rebus fidei' in Gisbertus Voetius, *Disputationes Selectae* (Ultrajecti, 1648)).

ity of traditional theology.<sup>40</sup> It may well be that the great systematic theologies of the tradition were no more than rather fragmentary attempts to think the different elements of the biblical stories together. Ongoing discussions in systematic theology show how the interconnection between the different aspects of Christian doctrine is a matter of continual debate. In this sense, Christian doctrine is far removed from a closed rationalistic system.

[28] Finally, one might respond by relativising the impact of ambiguity in narrative on doctrinal expressions of faith. This might seem an odd way of putting it, and perhaps even indicative of the deplorable nature of traditional systematic theology, in being so loosely connected to the true form in which Revelation came to us. Let me therefore emphasise, first, that this argument is not intended to propose a simple return to traditional dogmatic forms of theology. I hold that ambiguities in narrative are important for their function *as narratives* and, hence, important for those forms of theology where narratives play an important role. Ambiguity adds much to the richness and complexity of the biblical stories, and increases their power to engage the audience with the biblical message. Nevertheless, I would like to maintain that much ambiguity and fragmentariness in the biblical stories need not necessarily imply serious ambiguity, incoherence or inconsistency in systematic reflections based upon them. Let me give an example from Placher's emphasis on the differences between the endings of the Gospels:

But is the package of Christian Scripture all that neatly tied? Can we talk about *the* Christian story, *the* biblical narrative? Not without a great many qualifications. To illustrate this point, consider a deceptively simple question: The Gospels tell the story of Jesus. How does that story end? The obvious problem, of course, is—in which Gospel? The differences do not involve merely variation of detail. Contrast Mark's frightened fleeing the empty tomb with Matthew's great commission from the mountaintop in Galilee with Luke's account of the disciples walking back to Jerusalem with John's mysterious final appearance by the seashore. The mood, the dramatic shape of the ending, varies radically from one to another.<sup>41</sup>

[29] Anyone reasonably informed on recent biblical scholarship would agree with Placher's account of the matter. One can also see quite easily that, in attempting to convey the power of Mark's story, the fear and trembling surrounding the resurrection event, one should not mix up Mark's account with those of the others. Suppose, however, that we took the body of traditional scholasticism for granted. Would any incoherence then arise between the different narratives and the scholastic account of the resurrection of Jesus, including its soteriological implications? That remains to be seen. Doctrinal accounts of the resurrection generally focus on the *event* of the resurrection and its soteriological significance,

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40. See, for example, the various contributions to the Aquinas revival of the last few decades; a discussion of these may be found in: Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); see also the new interest in Reformed Scholasticism: Willem J. van Asselt and Eef Dekker, editors, *Reformed Scholasticism: An Ecumenical Enterprise*, Texts and Studies in Reformation and post-Reformation Thought (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

41. Placher, 146–147.

not primarily on the different human experiences surrounding it, however important such experiences may be in other forms and areas of theology. In addition, it could be argued that part of the traditional doctrinal reflection was indeed motivated by exegetical questions. Pim Valkenberg, for example, argues that Aquinas' *quaestiones* on the resurrection of Christ are motivated by exegetical problems.<sup>42</sup> Even if one were to object that Aquinas' *quaestiones* are still far removed from the liveliness of the Gospel stories, one should realise that the purpose of Aquinas' argument is different from that of the individual Gospels. Within a systematic account, the biblical stories are read in the light of what they imply for 'the Christian story' as a whole—that is, basically, for the economy of salvation.

[30] The idea that narrative ambiguity need not necessarily imply doctrinal ambiguity can also be illustrated with Meir Sternberg's analysis of 'gap filling' in the Hebrew Bible. Sternberg argues that, in the biblical stories 'gap filling' often directs the development of the plot.<sup>43</sup> For example, in the story of David and Batsheba, much hinges upon gaps in the audience's access to information. Sternberg analyses these gaps in great detail, and one may wonder whether all his gaps are indeed gaps in the story, but the point he makes is clear enough: the gaps in the story add much to the richness, effectiveness, and complexity of the story. Nevertheless, for Sternberg, this only affirms the earlier argument in his book, namely, that the great theme of these stories is the overall omniscience of the great 'Master of the Play', God. More generally speaking, my intention is to point out that, while on the level of the *story* ambiguity may be the key to a proper understanding of its function as story, this need not imply that the 'message' or the main theme of the story is ambiguous or inconsistent.<sup>44</sup>

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42. Wilhelmus G.B.M. Valkenberg, *Words of the Living God: Place and Function of Holy Scripture in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Publications of the Thomas Instituut Utrecht, New Series 6 (Louvain: Peeters, 2000), 54–140.

43. Sternberg, 186–263.

44. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Conference of the European Society for Philosophy of Religion, Helsinki 2000. I would like to thank Marcel Sarot, Arjan Markus, Theo Hetteema, and Edwin Koster for their comments on the conference paper, and Gerrit Brand for improving the English of the final version. The research for this article was funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.