

The Remorseful God?

Considerations about Moral Sentiments in the Doctrine of God

Der bereuende Gott?

Überlegungen zu *moral sentiments* in der Gotteslehre

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A remorseful God. What is this supposed to be? How can we speak of such a God? In general, one can ask: in what way can emotions be thought theologically as divine attributes? In this text I want to take an interdisciplinary look at this question insofar as I will combine exegetical and dogmatic, as well as theological and practical-philosophical aspects. Is there anything to be learned from this interdisciplinary synopsis for a theology of divine emotions?

Coming closer to the topic of “emotions in the doctrine of God”, one notices at first: especially for the speech of God’s wrath (dt. “Zorn”) and remorse (dt. “Reue”) there are two partly contradictory traditions in the history of theology. In the Bible, both emotions are (also) encountered as emotions of God. Wrath and remorse are central motifs of Old Testament theology and as such present in almost all parts of the canon.¹ The two theologoumena have also become important in the history of interpretation and have been a significant topic of exegetical research.²

This presence and prominence in especially biblical literature is contrasted with a long tradition of skepticism and also sharp rejection of theories of divine pathos in systematic theology and Christian philosophy.³ There is a strange tension between the strong biblical position of this motif and its dogmatic denial. This is irritating, because precisely the biblical idea of God’s wrath and remorse – and thus the idea of a divine changeability – holds important potentials for systematic theology. I will

¹ Allein für die Reue Gottes s. z.B. Pentateuch (Gen 6,6), Geschichtsbücher (1Sam 15), Prophetie (bes. Jer), einschließlich Dodekapropheten (Hos 11; Jo 2; Am 7).

² S. dazu: STEFAN WÄLCHLI, *Gottes Zorn in den Psalmen: eine Studie zur Rede vom Zorn Gottes in den Psalmen im Kontext des Alten Testaments und des Alten Orients*, Göttingen 2012; sowie zur Reue Gottes: JAN-DIRK DÖHLING, Art. Reue Gottes (AT), in: Wissenschaftliches Bibellexikon im Internet (Wiblex), <https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/stichwort/33422/> (abg. am 28.10.2022), 40–69.

³ Vgl. JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN, *Trinität und Reich Gottes. Zur Gotteslehre*, München 1980, bes. 36 f. und den dortigen Literaturbericht in den Anm. 1, 2 u. 4; ähnlich diagnostiziert für die Rede vom Zorn Gottes: STEFAN VOLKMANN, *Der Zorn Gottes*, Marburg 2004, 1–10.

try to indicate these potentials briefly in the following, especially with regard to covenant theology. For this purpose, I will characterize wrath as a ‘norm violation reaction’ and remorse as a following ‘violation reaction’. Together these feelings⁴ have regulative and identity-forming functions in reciprocal communities. I want to try to apply this to the covenant of God and Men and to see the covenant biblically formulated in the mode of ‘moral sentiments’.

I will present this proposal in five steps – and very briefly: After a short terminological note (1), I will first discuss exegetical perspectives that unfold God’s wrath as a ‘mode of his justice’ and remorse as a divine counterforce of self-control (2). I will then contrast this with traditional systematic-theological skepticism and the so-called ‘apathy axiom’, which itself has been criticized by more recent theologies (3). In the next step, indignation, wrath and remorse will be characterized as identity-creating ‘social emotions’, taking into account practical-philosophical perspectives (4). At the end, the partial aspects shall be brought together and the covenantal-theological potentials of such speaking of indignation, wrath and remorse shall be highlighted (5).

1 Preliminary Remarks

I will first distinguish two aspects of the “God’s wrath”-motif. For the presentation of my thought a distinction between ‘wrath’ and ‘indignation’ (dt. “Empörung”) of God seems helpful to me. Thereby I want to understand ‘indignation’ – following linguistic positions⁵ – as an emotional reaction to violations of valid or as such perceived conventions and normative values. As such, indignation is still negotiable in a certain way and ready for discussion. In contrast to indignation, wrath is no longer discussable.

But even with this simple differentiation, the following talk of God’s wrath remains completely inadequate to the biblical text. It is only an approximation. In Hebrew, the wrath of God is expressed by a variety of terms.⁶ Nevertheless: for the now relevant context of God’s wrath and remorse it can be stated in a somewhat general way, that these are mostly characterized in the biblical texts as “counter-forces”, which struggle in God himself and of which remorse finally turns out to be the dominant force.⁷ God’s remorse has therefore also been described as an expression of

⁴ Die Begriffe Emotion und Gefühl werden in diesem Beitrag weitgehend synonym verwendet. Eine Diskussion der Nuancen dieser Ausdrücke bietet u.a.: VOLKMANN, *Zorn*, 19ff.

⁵ S. u.a.: NORBERT FRIES, *Gefühle, Emotionen, Angst, Furcht, Wut und Zorn*, in: Wolfgang Börner/Klaus Vogel (Hg.), *Emotion und Kognition im Fremdsprachenunterricht*, Tübingen 2004, 3–24, hier 12.

⁶ Die häufigste Vokabel ist $\eta\lambda$, die hunderte Male im Alten Testament begegnet. Insgesamt lassen sich etwa zwanzig Termini anführen, die (mit göttlichem Subjekt) im Bedeutungsspektrum „Zorn“ liegen; vgl. JANOWSKI, *Gott*, 151.

⁷ Vgl. JEREMIAS, *Theologie*, 145.

„Yahweh’s self-control“⁸, which can mean a withdrawal of acts of salvation or punishment, but also more generally a change of God’s will.⁹

2 Wrath and remorse of God as biblical motives

This can only be a very rough, but still necessary overview of the Old Testament motif of God’s wrath and remorse.¹⁰ Very general abstractions are necessary, because “the wrath of God is not a fixed concept”¹¹. There are “no less than a dozen terms for divine wrath”¹² found in the Old Testament texts. Something similar can be noted for the concept of remorse.¹³

In view of this plurality of God’s wrath in the Old Testament, Stefan Wächli has made a helpful typology.¹⁴ For this purpose he evaluates existing exegetical typologies and finally proposes a fourfold differentiation. According to this, the Old Testament texts speak of God’s wrath mostly reactively and in relation to (i) either violations of holiness or (ii) concrete human misbehavior. In addition, he mentions (iii) the type of wrath against enemies as well as a more open class (iv). By far the most numerous type is the second type, i.e., the determination of wrath as an emotional reaction to destructive human behavior.¹⁵ Two aspects of this diagnosis are of particular systematic-theological interest: first, the overwhelming majority of Old Testament passages identify God’s wrath (immanently) as an emotional reaction to violation,¹⁶ and second, it is usually (economically) the emotional expression of a violation of the God-human covenant caused by human action, to which God reacts.

2.1 God’s indignation as salvation-economical loop of reflection

Especially this second aspect has led Old Testament scholars to understand God’s wrath as an element of his salvation and justice acting. In this, wrath and, I suggest, also God’s ‘indignation’ appear precisely as modes of his authority that make it possible to even achieve a plus in the covenant relationship out of the one-sided relational violation caused by human misbehavior. Bernd Janowski suggested that God’s

⁸ JÖRG JEREMIAS, *Reue Gottes. Aspekte alttestamentlicher Gottesvorstellung*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 21997, 98 (Translation: D. Dietz).

⁹ Vgl. JEREMIAS, *Reue*, 98.

¹⁰ Eine Übersicht über die exegetische Forschung zum Zorn Gottes bietet WÄLCHLI, *Zorn*.

¹¹ JEREMIAS, *Theologie*, 285 (Translation: D. Dietz).

¹² JEREMIAS, *Theologie*, 285 (Translation: D. Dietz).

¹³ S. dazu JAN-DIRK DÖHLING, *Der bewegliche Gott*, Freiburg 2009, 15.

¹⁴ Vgl. WÄLCHLI, *Zorn*, 146–149.

¹⁵ S.a. WALTER GROB, Keine Gerechtigkeit Gottes ohne Zorn Gottes. Zorn Gottes in der christlichen Bibel, in: Günter Kruck (Hg.), *„Deine Bilder stehn vor dir wie Namen.“ Zur Rede von Zorn und Erbarmen Gottes in der Heiligen Schrift*, Ostfildern 2005, 13–30, hier 19: „Vom Zorn Gottes spricht das AT, um einerseits Gottes engagierte, tätige Gegnerschaft gegen lebensverneinende Handlungen der Menschen [...] sichtbar zu machen.“ Ähnlich: JAN ASSMANN, *Herrschaft und Heil. Politische Theologie in Altägypten, Israel und Europa*, München 2000, 55.

¹⁶ S. dazu ULRICH BERGES, Der Zorn Gottes in der Prophetie und Poesie Israels auf dem Hintergrund altorientalischer Vorstellungen, in: *Biblica* Bd. 85 (2004), S. 305–330, hier 312.

wrath should be understood as a “mode of his justice and love”¹⁷ insofar as God’s wrath expresses God’s non-indifference to human destiny. Bernd Janowski further emphasized that God’s wrath is “everything else as non-negotiable.”¹⁸ Earlier, Jörg Jeremias already emphasized that God’s wrath in the Old Testament is praised as limited in time, while his goodness is praised as eternal and lifelong.¹⁹

In order to get a closer look at this, I want to focus on the ‘indignation of God’ for that aspect of God’s wrath under which it is (still) rational and negotiable. Indignation is understood, as mentioned above, as an emotional constitution in which the wrathful act of destruction is still open to discussion – a ‘divine loop of reflection’. Here, a confrontation of God with himself takes place. By presenting this ‘reflection process’ in the biblical texts both internal (Isa 63:1-6) and bilateral in conversation with a human counterpart (Am 7:2; Ex 32:7-14), God is presented as an emotional counterpart who is at the same time rationally reflected and open to dialogue.

In many cases, the biblical texts enact God’s wrath as a limited emotion.²⁰ The indignant God has “his wrath under control ... and set firm limits to it that cannot be broken.”²¹

2.2 Remorse as counterforce and self-overcoming

Jörg Jeremias names God’s remorse as such a limit. This is a “counter-force” in God against his own wrath.²² He speaks of a “self-commitment”²³ of God, out of which he is not a limitlessly angry, destroying potentate.

This self-committed changeability and remorse is unfolded in the OT through a multitude of evidence of God’s remorse. This remorseful retraction is sometimes more strongly expressed as a divine change of will or attitude (as in the ancient texts Am 7:3,6; Hos 11:8f.) and sometimes as a turning away from a planned punishing action (e.g. in Jon; Ps 90:13; Ps 110:4; Jo 2:13). As characteristics of these passages

¹⁷ JANOWSKI, *Gott*, 173 (Translation: D. Dietz).

¹⁸ Beide Zitate aus JANOWSKI, *Gott*, 168. Diese „verhandelbare“ Seite des Gotteszorns will ich in diesem Aufsatz gerade als Gottes *Empörung* verstehen (Translation: D. Dietz).

¹⁹ Vgl. JEREMIAS, *Theologie*, bes. 28 9–295. Jeremias verweist dabei u.a. auf Ps 30,6 – „Sein Zorn währt einen Augenblick, lebenslang (aber) seine Güte“ – sowie Ex 34,6f.

²⁰ Vgl. JEREMIAS, *Theologie*, 288. S. dort u.a.: „Dass Gottes Zorn zeitlich begrenzt ist, wissen alle Texte, die ihn nennen, auch die verzweifelsten.“

²¹ JEREMIAS, *Theologie*, 295 (Translation: D. Dietz). Ähnlich auch MARIE-THERES WACKER, Gottes Groll, Gottes Güte und Gottes Gerechtigkeit nach dem Joel-Buch, in: Ruth Scoralick (Hg.), *Das Drama der Barmherzigkeit Gottes*, Stuttgart 2000, 107–124, hier 115: „Die Erinnerung an JHWHs Langmut und Güte [...] weist eher darauf, dass dieser Gott nie lange in seinem Groll verhartet [...]“

²² Vgl. JEREMIAS, *Reue*, 110; s.a. GERTZ, *Noah*, 519: „So ist schließlich die göttliche ‚Selbstbeherrschung‘ diejenige Kraft, die den göttlichen Zorn an der endgültigen Vernichtung hindert und ihn besiegt, obwohl dieser Zorn nur zu gut begründet ist und seine Veranlassung weiterhin anhält.“

²³ Vgl. ANDREAS SCHÜLE, Das Angefochtensein Gottes. Überlegungen zum Motiv der „Umkehr Gottes“ bei Hiob, Jeremia, Jona und der nicht-priesterschriftlichen Fluterzählung, in: Leonie Ratschow/Hartmut v. Sass (Hg.), *Die Anfechtung Gottes. Exegetische und systematisch-theologische Beiträge zur Theologie des Hiob-Buches*, Leipzig 2016, 137–161, hier 153.

on divine remorse Jörg Jeremias names the distance between God and man, the human regret and the divine retraction of punishment.²⁴ Thus, the theme of remorse testifies to a double turning away situation, namely God's turning away from his grievous plans of punishment and a human turning away from sinfulness and wrongdoing.²⁵ With this mutual turning away, the covenantal relationship of God and humanity is renewed and deepened.²⁶

In summary, God's wrath and remorse are noted as central Old Testament motifs. They are presented as counterforces. Remorse follows as a "violation reaction *reaction*" to God's wrath and limits the wrath. Part of the wrath-remorse complex is the relationship to the covenant partner Israel. God does not confront Israel as an apathetic, arbitrary potentate, but chooses a different mode for his authority, namely that of emotional openness to communication and regulation.

3 Emotion, Remorse and the Changeability of God in Systematic Theology

The biblical testimony of God's wrath and remorse is contrasted with a surprising tradition of rejection in the Christian history of dogma.

3.1 *The Long Shadow of the Apathy Axiom*

The denial of God's changeability is already rooted in pre-Christian philosophical theology and was afterwards cemented in the early church and scholasticism.²⁷ To attribute changeability and pathos to God means to attribute imperfection to him and is therefore a sacrilege. In the early church, the unchangeability of God was declared above all as a sign of divine faithfulness and was sometimes strongly defended.²⁸ The basic view of the apathetic God therefore had a major impact on the dogmatic disputes of the fourth century.²⁹

²⁴ Vgl. JEREMIAS, *Reue*, 109–113.

²⁵ S.a. DÖHLING, *Gott*, 502. Döhling sprach entsprechend von einem „doppelten Bewegungskonzept der ersttestamentlichen Reuetexte“ (ebd.).

²⁶ Dass sich hier explizit von der ganzen Menschheit und nicht nur von Israel sprechen lässt, gibt das Jona-Buch zu erkennen, mit dem Jörg Jeremias eine „Ausweitung der Selbstbeherrschung Jahwes auf die Heiden“ (JEREMIAS, *Reue*, 105) dokumentiert findet.

²⁷ S. für eine ausführlichere Darstellung: VOLKMANN, *Zorn*, 2–5; LENNART PINOMAA, *Der Zorn Gottes. Eine dogmengeschichtliche Übersicht*, in: ZSTh 17(1940), 590–611.

²⁸ Vgl. WOLFHART PANNENBERG, *Systematische Theologie*, Bd.1, Göttingen 1988. Als Ausnahme in der Alten Kirche nennt Jürgen Moltmann allerdings Origenes (vgl. MOLTSMANN, *Trinität*, 39). Jan-Dirk Döhling dagegen reihte Origenes explizit mit ein (vgl. DÖHLING, *Gott*, 41f.).

²⁹ So geriet Athanasius im arianischen Streit in die Schwierigkeit, die Unveränderlichkeit Gottes hochhalten zu wollen und gleichzeitig gegen die arianische Bestreitung der Gottheit des Sohnes argumentieren zu müssen. S. dazu PANNENBERG, *Theologie*, 42: „Daraus musste sich die Aporie ergeben, dass mit der Inkarnation für den ewigen Gott keine Änderung verbunden ist, das Stattfinden oder Ausbleiben dieses Ereignisses für ihn also keinen Unterschied macht.“

The rejection of God's changeability and emotionality can be traced in variants through scholasticism into the Reformation period.³⁰ Luther then speaks of the "highly changeable"³¹ God but interprets God's changeability only on the level of the "change of action"³².

Schleiermacher still upholds the axiom of apathy and speaks of the "difference-less unity"³³ of God.

Numerous other examples in the history of dogma could be cited for the denial of God's changeability. Only in the 20th century the apathy axiom is step by step denied and a "theology of divine pathos" is developed.³⁴ In the dogmatics there are now clearer assertions of God's changeability and pathos: Karl Barth – in direct opposition to Schleiermacher's doctrine – explicitly speaks of God's "touchability" and that God can "feel, sense, be affected".³⁵ In so far as "God's affection ... is self-affection"³⁶, this is distinguished from all anthropopathic thoughts of wrath. For Dietrich Bonhoeffer, too, God's ability to suffer and empathy are central elements of the doctrine of God.³⁷ Explicitly arguing with the tradition of the unchangeability axiom, Wolfhart Pannenberg also emphasizes that God's faithfulness shows itself precisely in his historical action as a reaction to human behavior. Wrath, however, is overcome by God himself and often in response to human prayers: "The prayers of Moses and the prophets, the appeal to his covenantal justice and the helplessness of his people before his wrath, motivate God's remorse and 'self-control' with which his will of grace overcomes the effects of wrath."³⁸

In the twentieth century, oppositions to the apathy and unchangeability axiom proliferate. Explicitly, Jürgen Moltmann even spoke of an axiom of God's passion that had to be formulated in opposition to the apathy axiom dominating in tradition.

³⁰ Vgl. u.a. PANNENBERG, *Theologie*, 472; JEREMIAS, *Reue*, 9f. Beispielsweise spricht auch Thomas von Aquin hinsichtlich der Rede von Emotionen Gottes von einer „metaphorischen Benennung“, etwa der *punitio* Gottes durch den Zornesbegriff (vgl. VOLKMANN, *Zorn*, 3).

³¹ Vgl. DÖHLING, *Gott*, 3.

³² Vgl. JEREMIAS, *Reue*, 10. Auch Calvin habe versucht zu zeigen, dass „der mit der Rede von der Reue Gottes gemeinte Wandel sich nicht in Gott, sondern im Menschen vollzogen habe [...]“ (ebd.).

³³ CLAUS-DIETER OSTHÖVENER, *Die Lehre von den Eigenschaften Gottes bei Friedrich Schleiermacher und Karl Barth*, Berlin 1996, 215.

³⁴ Vgl. MOLTMANN, *Trinität*, 40. Als einer der Ersten habe Abraham Heschel vom Pathos Gottes gesprochen und dabei direkt auf die Bedeutung göttlicher Emotion und Leidensfähigkeit für die Bundestheologie hingewiesen (a.a.O., 41).

³⁵ KARL BARTH, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik II/1: Die Wirklichkeit Gottes*, Zürich 1987, 416f. (Translation: D. Dietz). Insbesondere im Blick auf den göttlichen Zorn sucht Barth eine konstruktive dogmatische Aufnahme und bestimmt den Zorn Gottes als „Kehrseite seiner Gerechtigkeit“ (ders., *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik II/2: Gottes Gnadenwahl*, Zürich 1988, 541).

³⁶ VOLKMANN, *Zorn*, 237 (Translation: D. Dietz).

³⁷ S.u.a. DIETRICH BONHOEFFER, Widerstand und Ergebung, in: *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, Bd. 8, hg. v. Christian Gremmels u.a., München 1998, 534: „Die Bibel weist den Menschen an die Ohnmacht und das Leiden Gottes; nur der leidende Gott kann helfen.“ Weniger prominent, aber noch deutlicher: „So ist es gut, früh genug zu lernen, dass Leiden und Gott kein Widerspruch ist, sondern vielmehr eine notwendige Einheit; für mich ist die Idee, dass Gott selbst leidet, immer eine der überzeugendsten Lehren des Christentums gewesen.“ (ders., *Konspiration und Haft 1940–1945*, in: *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, Bd. 16, hg. v. Jørgen Glenthøj/Ulrich Kabitz/Wolf Krötke, München 1996, 759).

³⁸ PANNENBERG, *Theologie*, 472 (Translation: D. Dietz).

3.2 The “Axiom of God’s Passion”

Moltmann takes up a “theology of divine pathos” of the Jewish religious philosopher Abraham Heschel³⁹ and claims that “creation, liberation, covenant, history and redemption [...] arise from divine pathos”⁴⁰. Without the ability to sympathetically, passionately and suffering participation in the creaturely fate, it would not be possible to speak of God’s freedom and historicity.

Abraham Heschel had led this thought further into a “bipolar theology of the covenant”⁴¹, according to which God is the free “God of the gods” and at the same time has committed himself by pathos to his people in the covenant:

*In his pathos, the Almighty goes out of himself. He enters into the people of his choice. He makes himself the covenant partner of this people. In this pathos for his people ... the Almighty is himself affected by the experiences of Israel, its actions, its sins and sufferings. In the covenant history with Israel, God becomes capable of suffering. His existence and the history of the people are connected by the divine pathos.*⁴²

God’s pathos is thus at the same time the precondition and the result of his self-definition in the covenant with humanity. Moltmann thus turns the talk of God’s passions upside down: instead of rejecting God’s emotion and pathos as projections of human qualities, these are now explained as conditions of the possibility of divine emanation, communication, and covenant with humanity.

4 Indignation, wrath and remorse as “moral sentiments”

What role do the emotions of wrath and remorse play in such a “theology of God’s pathos”? I argue that these play a central role, especially given the covenantal-theological significance of the axiom of God’s passion, and that remorse as a moral communicative and regulatory emotion is central for this. Also, the God’s ‘state of indignation’, i.e. the negotiation phase of God’s divine wrath, is of relevance in this context.

In the following, I will focus on the emotions indignation, wrath, and remorse as ‘moral sentiments’ that have a community- and identity-constituting function. In doing so, I will first refer to Ernst Tugendhat’s explicitly non-theological theory of moral sentiments.⁴³

³⁹ ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL, *The Prophets*, New York 1962, 221 ff.; zit. n. MOLTSMANN, *Trinität*, 40 (Translation: D. Dietz).

⁴⁰ MOLTSMANN, *Trinität*, 41 (Translation: D. Dietz).

⁴¹ A.a.O., 42 (Translation: D. Dietz).

⁴² A.a.O., 40f (Translation: D. Dietz).

⁴³ Vgl. ERNST TUGENDHAT, *Moralbegründung und Gerechtigkeit*, Münster 1997, 19ff.; ders., *Dialog*, 83.

4.1 Moral sentiments and the identity-creating character of demands

For Tugendhat, moral communities are normative systems that are regulated, stabilized, and defined by emotional sanctions.⁴⁴ A special role is given to the emotions indignation, wrath and remorse.

In this context, the moral feelings have a protective function. Community members, through these emotions, reciprocally make themselves aware of the normativity and the boundaries of this community. These emotional sanctions are therefore not destructive instances that endanger communities by accusing each other, but function as “protective mechanisms designed to prevent exclusion from the moral community.”⁴⁵

4.2 Morality and law as normative systems of identity constitution.

The interdependent character of demand of moral sentiment energizes and dynamizes communities; its intrinsic sanctioning character marks their social boundaries and standards.

A socially and emotionally based moral theory designed in this way raises at least two concerns: first, these emotionally driven processes of ordering and stabilizing communities could only be considered as having a particular effect, so that non-members of the community would not be protected. Second, the structure of internal sanctioning suggests the fear that unreasonable and unjust mutual judgments will soon take place in the community structured in this way, also because an authorized, external sanctioning instance is missing.

The first point can be responded to by pointing to the “transgressive tendency”⁴⁶ (dt. “überschießende Tendenz”) of moral norms. According to Tugendhat, members of moral communities feel committed to certain rights and duties even toward those who have themselves violated moral norms or who do not (or no longer) belong to the community. As a rule, non-members are first attributed the moral rights and duties that also apply internally, and it is through the moral sentiments that the adoption and acceptance of the norms are elicited and regulated.

The second question leads into the field of law, which transcends as a ‘normative system of external sanctioning’ the internal moral self-regulation of communities. This external sanctioning of law guarantees relations of security and also justice that cannot be established in all cases by internal regulation alone.

⁴⁴ Vgl. JOSEF HOFFMANN, Ernst Tugendhats Theorie der Gerechtigkeit und die Begründung eines Rechts auf ein Existenzminimum, in: Archiv für Rechts- und Sozialphilosophie (ARSP) Bd. 88 (2002), 495–518.

⁴⁵ Ebd.

⁴⁶ HOFFMANN, *Theorie*, 511 (Translation: D. Dietz); s. dazu auch: ERNST TUGENDHAT, *Vorlesungen über Ethik*, Frankfurt(M) 1993, 195f.

5 God's self-controlled authority and the emancipating relationship of the covenant

The Old Testament characterizes the covenant relationship as one of commitment. God freely binds himself to his people and expects them to honor this commitment.⁴⁷ Israel's violation of the covenant in "disobedience to God's directives"⁴⁸ signifies a violation of the external commitment and of the self-commitment. Israel violates the normative boundaries of the community of commitment. These boundaries must therefore be *re*-marked and *re*-established through moral-emotional sanction. In Old Testament theology – and in this quite consistent with moral-theoretical reflection on social sentiments – the internal sanctioning process is articulated through God's wrath. Here, a parallel emerges between Old Testament theology, in which covenantal violations are followed by divine affects, and moral theory of social sentiments, which regulate communities of commitment through emotional sanctioning.

According to the Old Testament testimony, however, God's absoluteness is limited by God himself. God sets limits to his lordship through his own self-overcoming expressed in his remorse. Through his self-control he limits the wrathful sanctioning action, which can thereby fulfill a socially constructive function and does not lead to total destruction.⁴⁹ Remorse also fulfills a comparable social protective function in the moral theory of emotions by emotionally articulating and thus preventing excessive sanctioning and one's own transgression of boundaries.

By explicitly emphasizing the emotional dimension in the covenantal relationship between God and human beings, the Old Testament texts fix important theological points of view that are generally connected with an exegetically as well as systematically adequate speech of God's changeability and the 'axiom of God's passion'. Beyond that, however, the covenant relationship is described by this form also insofar more differentiated, more subtle and insofar more 'realistic'. The dynamic communication processes of moral sentiments are also taken into account here in the biblical characterization of the God-human relationship. As an election community, this community is characterized by reciprocal relations of commitment.⁵⁰ The emotions of God – especially indignation, wrath and remorse – have a constitutive significance. In this context, remorse has a special significance, since it represents an affective form of divine self-control as a 'violation reaction'. In connection with the

⁴⁷ S.a.: BERND JANOWSKI/KLAUS SCHOLTISSEK, *Bund*, in: Angelika Berlejung/Christian Frevel (Hg.), *HGANT*, Darmstadt 2006, 124.

⁴⁸ JEREMIAS, *Theologie*, 304 (Translation: D. Dietz). Der zitierte Teil entspricht Jeremias' Definition von „Bundesbruch“ im dtr Denken.

⁴⁹ Vgl. JEREMIAS, *Reue*, 111: „Wo Jahwe seinem Zorn so Schranken auferlegt, kann er noch strafen, aber nicht vernichten.“ Ähnlich beobachtet STOELLGER, *Anfechtung*, 185: „Vom AT aus gesehen ist die Geschichte seit Adam und Eva ... eine Geschichte permanenter Anfechtung Jahwes durch sein bundesbrüchiges Volk. [...] Umso bemerkenswerter bleibt dem gegenüber, dass seine Anfechtung nicht definitiv ins Gericht führt, sondern sich in Reue und Barmherzigkeit wendet und wandelt.“

⁵⁰ Vgl. JANOWSKI, *Bund*, 124; ferner: JEREMIAS, *Theologie*, 304.

negotiable indignation and the definitive wrath, remorse arranges an identity-forming triad of emotions. Highlighting these emotions of God also means expressing God's care and discursive interest in the permanent process of understanding in the covenant community. The God of these emotions participates in the communication by way of the "moral affects in their [...] constitutive meaning" through which the covenant community is further developed.⁵¹

Thus, in addition to its immanent meaning for the doctrine of God ('transformations of God' and his 'self-controlled lordship'), the concept of God's emotions also acquires significance for covenant theology. The fact that God, in his indignation willing to dialogue and in his reflective remorse, engages in emotional communication with human beings, means a valuation and recognition of human beings as partners in the covenant. God's remorse also has an emancipatory character. His external actions of judgment become discursive through the emotional communication. This means an emancipation of the 'weaker covenant partner', which in the Old Testament also finds expression in the fact that people can bring God to remorse (e.g. Ex 32, Am 7).⁵² In the collective communication through moral sentiments all members of the covenant community are involved. Here, "each individual is the source and addressee of the norm"⁵³. People are thus taken seriously within the community as covenant partners in such a way that God engages in communication with them through moral sentiments and allows them to have their say as partners in negotiation and bargaining. Only there, where the discursive pedagogical approach fails because of man's sin, God acts as the absolute lord of the external sanction and punishment action – but: this is always limited by his immanent self-control in the mode of remorse.

Literatur

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⁵¹ TUGENDHAT, *Dialog*, 57.

⁵² Vgl. JEREMIAS, *Reue*, 61.

⁵³ HOFFMANN, *Theorie*, 497.

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