YHWH is a Warrior

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YHWH is a Warrior.

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on.

(Chorus)
Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Glory, glory, hallelujah!
His truth is marching on.

I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps,
They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps;
I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps:
His day is marching on.

(Chorus)
Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Since God is marching on.

I have read a fiery gospel writ in burnished rows of steel:
"As ye deal with my contemners, so with you my grace shall deal;
Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel,
Since God is marching on."

(Chorus)
Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Since God is marching on.

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;
He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment-seat:
Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him! be jubilant, my feet!
Our God is marching on.

(Chorus)
Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Our God is marching on.¹

America’s battle hymn is written deeply into our national identity, and it is an example of just how religious we are as a people, and of just how closely we are accustomed to identifying our enemies as God’s enemies and justifying our

¹ Julia Ward Howe, *The Atlantic Monthly*, 1862
wars with appeals to God’s will. In this paper, I will be discussing one of the
sources of our willingness to associate our militarism with God’s will.

Let me sketch out at the beginning what I intend to cover. First, I will make
the case that the image of God as a warrior is prominent in the Bible, both in the
Jewish and the Christian scriptures. Second, I will discuss the personal and
political affects of this imagery in both the past and the present, and I will argue
that people of faith need to find “counter voices” within scripture to critique
those traditions that both justify and glorify militarism and violence. Finally, I
will offer examples of counter voices in scripture and reflect on how scripture
itself invites “people of the book” to become agents, rather than passive subjects,
within the conversation of scripture and gives them permission to raise their own
voice within that dialogue.

I will be using the term “Divine Warrior tradition” in my remarks. This is a
technical term in the field of biblical studies that refers to scriptures that use a
fixed cluster of attributes, actions and vocabulary to portray God as a warrior. 2

The image of the LORD as the Divine Warrior is present in many places in
the Hebrew and Christian scriptures and has deeply informed all three of the
Abrahamic faith traditions. I will begin with the Hebrew Bible. 3 Depictions of the
LORD as the Divine Warrior are found in the HB in its very earliest traditions. 4

2 The classic study of this biblical motif is F. M. Cross’s Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic
3 I will be confining my remarks to images of the LORD as a solo warrior, for the most part. Not
infrequently, the LÖRD is said to have a heavenly army at his command (e.g., Jos 5:14). The title
“LORD of hosts” (YHWH Sabaoth) refers to the LORD’s role as leader of the army of heavenly
beings. This title appears well over 200 times in the HB, primarily in Isaiah and Jeremiah, but
also frequently in the Deuteronomistic History and the Psalter. Occasionally, the LORD is cast as
“the God of the armies of Israel” (e.g., 1 Sam 45).
4 In addition to the texts discussed here, see Ps 46:6; 68:2; 97:1-5; Isa 11:4; 13:1-22; 42:13; Ezek
Among these are the songs of Moses and Miriam that appear at the end of the story of the exodus from Egypt. In Exodus 15:3 we read, “The LORD is a warrior [gibor]; the LORD is his name.” What follows this affirmation is a description of the LORD beating the stuffing out of the Egyptians, not through the agency of a human army, but directly: “Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power—you right hand, O LORD, shattered the enemy...you sent out your fury, it consumed them like stubble.” Miriam’s song adds, “Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.” The affirmation “The LORD is a warrior, the LORD is his name” connects the LORD’s role as warrior with the LORD’s essential being, not just with the LORD’s role in a particular situation. The song affirms that warrior is the essence of the LORD’s being. Similarly, we read in a temple entrance liturgy found in Psalm 24:8 about the LORD’s identity as a warrior:

The LORD, mighty and valiant [gibor],
the LORD, valiant [gibor] in battle.⁵

In this Psalm, the LORD is portrayed as a warrior returning victorious from battle and entering the temple. But again, the poetry closely identifies the image of warrior with the LORD’s very being.

Deuteronomy 32 provides a striking example of Divine Warrior imagery. This chapter contains what is known as “The Song of Moses.” It is an indictment against Israel for its faithlessness and against Israel’s enemies for abusing Israel.

⁵ The title “gibor” is used in several Hebrew texts from the 8th-7th century BCE to describe both the LORD (YHWH) and God (El). The depiction of the LORD as a warrior continues well into the Second Temple period, notably in texts such as Maccabees, Daniel, the DSS and the book of Revelation. The LORD is likened to a warrior (ke-gibor) in Ps 78:65; Isa 42:13; Jer 20:11. Zeph 3:17 refers to the LORD as a gibor without the preposition, though there, too, it is used adverbially. Ps 24:8 twice uses gibor to define the LORD. References to El as a gibor appear in the fixed appellation הנב יְהֹוָּה לֹא מָזוּג (Deut 10:17; Jer 32:18; Neh 9:32). Isa 9:5 and 10:21 preserve a Canaanite title for El, רָאו אָלָּף (see Frank Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 40, 99).
The LORD’s implacable wrath is described as follows:

> For a fire is kindled by my anger,  
> and burns to the depths of Sheol;  
> it devours the earth and its increase,  
> and sets on fire the foundations of the mountains.  
> I will heap disasters upon them,  
> spend my arrows against them:  
> wasting hunger,  
> burning consumption,  
> bitter pestilence.  
> The teeth of beasts I will send against them,  
> with venom of things crawling in the dust.  
> In the street the sword shall bereave,  
> and in the chambers terror,  
> for young man and woman alike,  
> nursing child and old gray head. (vv. 22-25)

....
> when I whet my flashing sword,  
> and my hand takes hold on judgment;  
> I will take vengeance on my adversaries,  
> and will repay those who hate me.  
> I will make my arrows drunk with blood,  
> and my sword shall devour flesh—  
> with the blood of the slain and the captives. (vv. 40–42)

This image of the LORD as Divine Warrior wielding sword and bow, taking vengeance on both Israel and its enemies, seems over the top to most of us, I suspect. There is a profound dissonance between the LORD’s implacable, blood-thirsty rage on display here and language that portrays the LORD as shepherd, parent, source of nourishment, merciful and compassionate, slow to anger, and the like, that is also found in the Bible.

What is source of the Divine Warrior tradition? It seems likely to those who have studied this question that the LORD’s warrior identity derives, at least in part, from the creation-battle stories that were common in the world the Hebrews inhabited. Since some are unfamiliar with the creation battle myth that was common in the Ancient Near East (ANE), I will briefly describe it.
The peaceful, well ordered creation account found in Genesis one is exceptional when compared to the creation stories told by Israel’s neighbors. Most ANE cultures, Egyptian and Babylonian in particular, but also, significantly, Canaanite culture, portrayed the creation of the world as the end product of a mighty battle between the nation’s high god—Marduk or Baal, for example—and various monsters who symbolized the forces of disorder and chaos. In these mythic accounts, we read of chaos forces with names such as Tiamat, Lotan, Tannin, Yam and Rahab. The name of the chaos monster Yam is the same as the common Hebrew word for ‘sea.’ The Israelites and other ancient peoples associated the sea with chaos powers. This is evident in the Hebrew Psalter where the LORD is frequently celebrated for his power to dominate “the sea” or “the waters.” The chaos battle was believed to take place both at the beginning of the world and, by the fuzzy logic of myths, at the turn of each year. It also reasserted itself, in a sense, whenever political enemies threatened, since the enemies of the nation were imagined as allies of the revived chaos powers. The earthly warrior king was obliged to enter into the mythic struggle to subdue chaos, with the help of his warrior god, of course. Thus the mythic creation battle and historical battles were joined together in the royal ideology of warfare, and war was portrayed as a act of cosmos maintenance and royal obligation.

This mythically constructed ideology of warfare is found in the Hebrew Scriptures in much the same form as it appeared in the epic stories of Israel’s neighbors. Israel’s god, Yahweh, replaced Marduk and Baal in the myth, but the

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6 See for example Pss 29, 74, 77, 78, 104. The mythic association of creation with watery chaos is evident also in Genesis 1, where “the deep,” the primordial sea, comprises the primal “formless and void” within which the cosmos is ordered.
monsters that had to be slain had names remarkably similar to—or the same as—those in the stories told by Israel’s neighbors.

I will provide here a few examples from the Bible where we can see the LORD fighting the chaos battle and defeating the monsters of chaos in order to create the world. Let us first consider Psalm 74:12-14:

> Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the earth. You divided the sea [Yam] by your might; you broke the heads of the dragons [Tanmin] in the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan [Lotan]; you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.

The Psalm goes on to describe God’s creation of the world following this great victory. There can be little doubt that the writer is here describing a creation battle involving Israel’s god and the chaos monsters.

Another example is found in Psalm 77, which states,

> When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; the very deep (tehom) trembled. The clouds poured out water; the skies thundered; your arrows flashed on every side. The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind; your lightnings lit up the world; the earth trembled and shook. Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen.⁷

Examples of chaos battle imagery are found outside the Psalter as well. Prophetic texts occasionally depict the Divine Warrior locked in battle with the chaos monsters. Isaiah 27:1, for example, declares

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⁷ Other notable examples include Pss. 29:3–4; 78:65–66; 104:5–9; Isa 42:13; Job 26:12–13.
On that day the LORD with his cruel and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will kill the dragon that is in the sea.

The prophet Habakkuk identifies one of Israel’s historical enemies with the mythic chaos forces and uses the divine warrior tradition to paint a vivid picture of divine vengeance in an oracle against Babylon:

God came from Teman,
the Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah

5 Before him went pestilence,
and plague followed close behind.
6 He stopped and shook the earth;
he looked and made the nations tremble.
The eternal mountains were shattered;
along his ancient pathways
the everlasting hills sank low.

8 Was your wrath against the rivers, O LORD?
Or your anger against the rivers,
or your rage against the sea,
when you drove your horses,
your chariots to victory?
9 You brandished your naked bow,
sated were the arrows at your command. Selah (3:4-6, 8-9)

This creation battle tradition, shared by the Israelites with the cultures around them, is the background for and probable source of the Divine Warrior tradition. It was a story Israel could not escape because it dominated the cultural landscape of the ANE. Nor do I think Israel had any desire to escape it or to replace it with any other story in the time prior to the Babylonian exile. And there was good reason for this. Israel’s theology of kingship was tied to it, as was its theology of conquest and holy war, both of which were politically important to the nation in the time prior to the exile.

I will say a bit more about Israel’s theology of kingship a bit later. But first I want to talk about Holy War. Israel’s theology—or ideology, if you prefer—of
Holy War had at its core the belief that the LORD would fight on behalf of Israel if the Israelites trusted the LORD absolutely, attributed their victory to the LORD, and surrendered most or all of the booty to the LORD. The method of giving booty to the LORD depended on what the booty was. Burnable items were to be burned, including the conquered cities themselves. Non-burnable items could be destroyed by other means or given to the temple. Humans and animals had to be killed. Thus all the profit and all the glory of the battle were given to the LORD. The rules of Holy War are specified in Deuteronomy chapter 20, and the practice of Holy War is primarily described in the stories of the conquest of Canaan told in Joshua and Judges. For example, the LORD defeats Jericho by knocking down its walls. In other places, the LORD gives his people victory by causing their enemies to misperceive a situation or to become confused. We read in 1 Sam 7:10, “As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel; but the LORD thundered with a mighty voice that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion; and they were routed before Israel.” One time we are told that the LORD threw stones from heaven at Israel’s enemy. Josh 10:11 records, “As [Amorites] fled before Israel, while they were going down the slope of Beth-horon, the LORD threw down huge stones from heaven on them as far as Azekah, and they died; there were more who died because of the hailstones than the Israelites killed with the sword.” These passages illustrate a belief in the LORD’s direct involvement in Israel’s conquests. “The LORD is a warrior/ The LORD is his name.”

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8 Instances of victory gained because the enemy misperceives a situation include Joshua 8, the conquest of Ai; 2 Kings 3, defeat of Moab; Judges 6, defeat of Midian.
Portrayals of God as a warrior are not exclusive to the Hebrew Bible. I want to be as clear as possible on this point because it is often assumed, incorrectly, by Christians that the Old Testament portrays a God of wrath and the New Testament a God of love. This assumption is inaccurate in both cases. The Hebrew Bible’s portrayal of the LORD is quite varied and includes images of a God of love and peace. Conversely, the authors of the Christian scriptures occasionally appropriated the Divine Warrior tradition in their own writings. Yes, indeed, the angry Warrior God is here and there evident in the pages of the NT, too.

To understand the Warrior God found in some New Testament texts, we need to know something about the literary milieu of Judaism at the turn of the millennium. During the latter half of the second temple period, a new genre of literature emerged, “apocalyptic literature.” Apocalypses occasionally featured a tremendous battle fought at end of the age between God the wicked nations that oppress God’s people. Sometimes these nations were portrayed in the guise of chaos monsters, and occasionally the Messiah took on the role of the Divine Warrior. The Bible’s two extended apocalyptic texts, the latter half of Daniel and the book of Revelation both feature an apocalyptic battle in which the Divine Warrior crushes his foes. Apocalypses were very popular among certain segments of Judaism. For example, the community living at Qumran by the Dead Sea wrote texts in an apocalyptic mode.9

9 And around the time Daniel was written, a group of Jews withdrew to live in aesthetic purity by the Dead Sea. They are typically identified with the Essene movement described in the writings of Josephus. This group nurtured apocalyptic hopes of the coming cataclysm in which the Messiah or Messiahs would defeat “the children of darkness.” The so-called “War Scroll,” found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, reflects their hopes of a final battle. It is possible that John the
Some of the writers of the NT incorporated apocalyptic ideas and images into their writings, and Jesus himself was influenced by apocalyptic ideas. His first public words in the Gospel of Mark are “The kingdom of God is at hand,” by which he meant the inauguration of a new age that would follow a time of great suffering and turmoil. And the prayer he taught his disciples contains petitions pregnant with apocalyptic expectation: “Your kingdom come” and “Save us from the time of trouble.”

I should note that apocalyptic writing around the time of Jesus is quite varied, and not all apocalypses feature mighty battles. But often enough apocalypses draw on Divine Warrior imagery and aspects of the creation-battle myth. They use these traditions to predict and celebrate in advance the defeat of oppressive rulers—Hellenic and Roman rulers in particular. The latter half of the book of Daniel contains a series of apocalyptic visions in which both chaos monsters and a divine warrior appear. Daniel’s visions powerfully influenced at least a few Christian writers, and perhaps Jesus himself.

Among the Christian writings, the book of Revelation is the best-known example of apocalyptic literature. This book is familiar to most people, so I will highlight only a few pertinent aspects of the book. The theme of the book is the defeat of the enemies of the faithful by Jesus and the angels, including the famous four angelic horsemen of the apocalypse. The enemy in view is Rome, but the empire is depicted using the mythic idiom of the chaos battle tradition. A seven-headed dragon, evidently a version of the seven-headed Leviathan of Canaanite mythology and Psalm 74, represents Satan. This beast inspires

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Baptist was influenced, whether directly or indirectly, by the ideas of this group, and foretold a great “wrath to come.”

10 See Mark 13.
another seven-headed beast—as symbol for Rome—to persecute the faithful. As is the case in Daniel, these beasts represent the enemies of the faithful, and of God. Although Rome is not mentioned explicitly, the author’s target is unmistakable. The faithful have no military power of their own to resist Rome’s domination, so the author imagines a time in the not too distant future when the Divine Warrior will avenge the righteous and destroy the wicked. The final battle is portrayed in Revelation 19-20. A white-robed warrior astride a white horse defeats the terrifying monsters representing Satan and Rome. It is Jesus who plays the role of the Divine Warrior in this vision; it is he who leads the armies of heaven to defeat the powers of chaos. Although angels and the armies of heaven carry out most of the killing, at one point fire comes down from heaven—presumably from God—and consumes the unrighteous. When the battle is over, the writer tells us that he saw “a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.” Here, then, is the pattern of the creation battle story: a great battle against the monsters of chaos results in the creation of a new world. And this time chaos is defeated forever. The statement “the sea—the ancient chaos enemy—was no more” celebrates this fact.

Visions of apocalyptic war in the NT are not limited to the book of Revelation. In the Gospels we find intimations of the Divine Warrior. For example, Jesus refers to the Son of Man coming on the clouds to judge the earth, an image quite possibly borrowed from the apocalyptic vision of Daniel. Depictions in the gospels of the Son of Man coming to judge the earth do not make explicit reference to a battle, but first-century Jews would have easily made the association. In addition, Matthew, Mark and Luke each record a lengthy
discourse of Jesus describing coming woes and God’s shaking of the cosmos at
the end of the age.\textsuperscript{11}

In sum, both the Hebrew scriptures and the Christian scriptures contain
images of the Divine Warrior executing violent judgment upon the unrighteous.
Christians cannot escape the warrior God by sealing the New Testament off from
the Old Testament. Bishop Marcion tried to do that in the second century and
got his wrist slapped. The Christian scriptures are, to a large extent, a
commentary and interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures, a Midrash if you will.
The Church cannot disown its parent. The most Christians can claim is that
images of a warrior God are far fewer in their own writings and, crucially, that
the God-man dying on a cross represents a judgment upon all human violence.

Let me move to my second point now. As I said, I want to discuss the
personal and political affects of the Divine Warrior imagery in both the past and
the present and argue that people of faith need to find “counter voices” within
scripture to critique traditions that justify, and even glorify, militarism and
violence. My central point here is that our concept of God profoundly affects our
morals and values. “Be holy, for I am holy,” says the God of the Bible.\textsuperscript{12} With
these words, the Bible calls the followers of God to become like the God they
worship. Their conception of God forms them individually and corporately by
setting the standard for their moral reasoning and behavior. This is not always

\textsuperscript{11} The Divine Warrior imagery is not explicit, but the convulsion of the natural world and the
“wars and rumors of wars” described by Jesus owe much to the descriptions of the “day of the
LORD”—which are related to the Divine Warrior tradition—found in the Hebrew Bible.

\textsuperscript{12} Lev 11:45—“For I am the LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt, to be your God;
you shall be holy, for I am holy.” Lev 19:2—“Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel
and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.” Lev 20:26—“You shall be
holy to me; for I the LORD am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be
mine.”
the case in religion. The Greek philosophers were often critical of the morality of their gods, and for good reason. But the Bible is emphatic that its God is just and righteous in every respect and can therefore serve as the standard for human justice and righteousness. God’s perfections described in the Bible are supposed to inspire whole-hearted devotion and love and to lead to imitation.\textsuperscript{13}

Indeed, the heart of worship within the Abrahamic faith traditions is the desire to please and imitate God. Such worship assigns absolute value to the object of worship, and humans are formed morally by what they value absolutely. Our image of God is thus a fundamental guide in our moral reasoning and has real, practical consequences.

When I say “image of God,” I am not thinking primarily of a visual image, I am thinking of our conception of God’s moral character, of God’s attitudes, values and behaviors as they are presented to us in the scriptures. From the stories in the Bible we construct a composite picture of God’s essential character. Our image of God in this sense is a dynamic portrait of a being who relates to the world personally, whose character emerges through words, choices and actions related in story and poetry. The Bible tells us who God is, and we are formed by this image.

Let me offer some examples that demonstrate that the Bible intends that God’s values and actions should serve as a foundation for human ethical behavior. My first example is the Sabbath commandment in Deut 5:13–15:

\begin{quote}
Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{13} The assertion in Genesis that humans are created in the image of God may be understood as referring to moral likeness. The role of dominion granted to humans in Genesis 1 suggests that they have been assigned God-like duties and responsibilities. Humans represent God in some sense, and this implies also a mandated to imitate God, to rule as God would.
son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

The logic here is simple, though perhaps not obvious at first blush. The Israelites must grant a day of rest to the underclass and to animals because the LORD treated them well when they were enslaved. The logic of the commandment is clear; God’s conduct is the model for human conduct.

Consider also Deuteronomy 10:17–19:

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Or again, we read in Deuteronomy 24:17,

You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow’s garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this.

In each of these texts from Deuteronomy, the LORD’s behavior serves as the standard for human behavior.

And this idea of the imitation of the LORD’s moral character is repeated in the Christian scriptures. In 1 Pet 1:14 we read, “Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’”

Similarly, Jesus ends the Sermon on the Mount, the most extensive speech recorded of his ethical teachings, with the words, “Be merciful, therefore, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36; Matt 5:48, “Be perfect…”).
The followers of the LORD are advised to make moral decisions by asking, What would the God do? Or, WWGD, for short. Well, what WOULD God do? And herein lies a profound challenge for our moral reasoning. Is the character of God as presented in the Bible an acceptable standard for human behavior and the anchor of moral reasoning?

As is obvious by now, this question is complicated both by depictions of divine violence and by divine commands to humans to commit acts of violence, acts that are today widely condemned, Holy War—which amounts to genocide—being the chief example.

One way around the problem is to assert that God’s ways are not human ways and to argue that the LORD transcends human moral categories, which is a way of saying that God’s moral behavior is self validating. The LORD’s actions are always righteous, by definition. If God’s actions appear immoral to us, it is because we lack a transcendent perspective. This is the answer my some of my students give when confronted with this problem. They say that if God commands genocide, it must be permissible, a necessary evil, for “the greater good.” Sometimes they argue that the genocide against the Canaanites was necessary to preserve Israel’s identity, and, indeed, the biblical writers use this line of reasoning. They assert that the Canaanites had to be killed to preserve the integrity and holiness of Israel and to keep Israel from being tempted by the idols of the Canaanites. In a few places, the writers argue that Canaanite depravity had reached the limit of divine patience.

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14 Walter L. Moberly: “Theological interpretation is reading the Bible with a concern for the enduring truth of its witness to the nature of God and humanity with a view to enabling the transformation of humanity into the likeness of God” (Briggs, Richard S., and Joel N. Lohr, eds. A Theological Introduction to the Pentateuch: Interpreting the Torah as Christian Scripture, p. 5)
But if this is the case, if God acts in ways that violate our moral sensibilities—whatever justification is given—the idea that humans are to imitate God’s character and be holy as God is holy becomes complicated, if not dangerous. Since the LORD is portrayed variously as angry and violent and as merciful and slow to anger, how are we to know what to imitate? Are humans justified in responding to what they deem to be utterly evil with murderous violence? Or are humans to be merciful and slow to anger? What WOULD Yahweh do?

Much is at stake in how we derive our images of God from the Biblical text. If we hold in our imagination primarily the image of the angry God who violently destroys individuals and whole nations for their sins, we may feel justified in responding violently when we confront what we judge unholy and wicked. We may feel justified in meting out unrelenting violence to crush evil-doers and promote “infinite justice,” just as God does.\(^{15}\)

Perhaps, someone will object that humans are not authorized to act as God does in matters of punishing sin or passing judgment. As the scriptures say, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the LORD.” Indeed. We often apply this principle to individual morality, but we less often apply it to our collective actions, that is, to state-sponsored violence. Isn’t the state God’s instrument to punish evil doers, as Paul argues in Romans 13?

The equation of the state with divinity is an ancient idea, the utility of which is undiminished by time. In the ancient world, it was widely believed that the king acted on behalf of his god. The king was seen as the ideal earthly

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\(^{15}\) “Operation Infinite Justice” was the original operation name given by the Bush administration to the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. Public outcry against this name, as well as belated awareness that the name was highly offensive to Muslims, resulted in a name change to “Operation Enduring Freedom.”
representative of the divine will. Israel’s royal ideology was based on this view.\footnote{See, for example, Pss 72 and 89:19-37.} The king’s justice was the LORD’s justice because the LORD gave the king the wisdom to judge rightly who deserved punishment and the license to punish them, both in Israelite society and among the nations.

From the time Constantine had his vision of the conquering cross, Christians have justified militarism and conquest by identifying their cause with God’s will and their enemies with God’s enemies. The United States has done so repeatedly and explicitly, as have many other nations. No further evidence of this mindset in our country is needed than the \textit{Battle Hymn of the Republic}, though other evidence is abundant. Sadly, Christian rhetoric and hymnology have long been a potent and ubiquitous form of justification for state-sponsored violence. The words spoken by President Bush on the first anniversary of 9/11 offer a recent example. Pictured with the national monument in the background the President said, “The ideal of America is the hope of all mankind. That hope still lights the way, and the light shines in the darkness. And the darkness shall not overcome it.” These words draw upon the Gospel of John where the light refers to Jesus, not to a nation at war. Scriptures printed on the cover of then Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld’s, security briefings during the Iraq war were a chilling instance of the state’s willingness to assume divine sponsorship for its militarism.\footnote{Robert Draper, “And He Shall Be Judged,” \textit{GQ}, June, 2009. Accessed online at \url{http://www.gq.com/news-politics/newsmakers/200905/donald-rumsfeld-administration-peers-detractors}.}

Thank God for counter voices in American history such as that of Abraham Lincoln who in his Second Inaugural Address spoke of the difficulty and
presumption involved in claiming God’s favor in time of war. Speaking of the religious hopes and claims of both the Union and the Confederacy, Lincoln said,

Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.

Lincoln was a better theologian, I believe, than Donald Rumsfeld and his aids.

Here’s the problem in a nutshell. First, the Bible says that the LORD is a warrior, prone to murderous violence and genocide. Second, the Bible holds up the character and actions of the LORD as the basis for human moral behavior. We can either try to rehabilitate the LORD by ignoring certain parts of scripture because the human factor has compromised the scripture’s picture of God in some places. Or we can assert that God’s behavior is, in certain respects, outside of the categories of what is moral for human behavior. God is sovereign and God’s actions, no matter how awful they may seem to us, are righteous by definition. What do we do with this dilemma?

The solution, it seems to me, is to embrace the theological pluralism of the canon and to fully accept the historical, contingent nature of scripture. Rather than seeing scripture as a monolithic word from God, a single message with but one viewpoint, we should see scripture as a conversation among traditions and viewpoints that is not reducible to a dogmatic monologue. This is uncomfortable for some because it complicates, or even destroys, the authority of scripture. This approach trusts human reason to sort through the competing viewpoints—the
counter voices—found in the Bible and to find truth in the interplay of among them.\(^{18}\)

The scriptures are far more dialogical than is usually recognized. There are some obvious examples. Job, for example, is a spirited dialogue about the justice of God, one in which the rigid retributive justice typical of Deuteronomic traditions is called into question. As Robert Frost observed, the book of Job was written “to stultify the Deuteronomist.”\(^{19}\) The book of Job embodies theological debate. Leaving aside the tale of God and Satan making a deal, the book is a long argument between Job and his friends over the cause of Job’s and human suffering and over God’s maintenance of universal justice. God comes in at the end of the book to offer a response, but, surprisingly, God’s viewpoint isn’t didactic, and it does not necessarily trump the other views in the book.

To cite a few other examples, the book of Ecclesiastes overturns the tables of those selling vapid nostrums of wisdom with a resounding cry of “Bullcrap!” Chronicles presents Israel’s history from a perspective markedly different from the one found in Samuel and Kings. Occasionally, individual pieces of scripture are themselves a dialogue. The first half of Psalm 89 is thanksgiving for the LORD’s choice of David and for all the promises made to David and Israel; the second half is a cry of pain questioning God’s failure to keep those very promises. Jeremiah both affirms and challenges God’s faithfulness. And the stories of Israel’s two greatest kings, David and Solomon, give evidence of a dialogue

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\(^{18}\) I think Jews have an easier time with this approach to scripture than do Christians. In Judaism, religious truth is embodied in an immense dialogue across the centuries. At the core of the Talmud is the record of an often contentious conversation among the Rabbis. And it is striking in the record of this conversation that the differences of opinion and interpretation are seldom resolved for the reader. Readers of the Hebrew Scriptures are invited into a dialogue that has been going on through the centuries and will surely continue for centuries to come.

\(^{19}\) Frost, “A Masque of Reason.”
within the tradition that the editors either could not or would not resolve into a triumphalist monologue. As for the Christian scriptures, we need only consider what it means to have four, rather than one, story of Jesus’ life and teachings. The church considered a harmony of the four gospels—Tatian’s Diatesseron—but decided that the tensions and conflicts between the gospel accounts should not be resolved by harmonization. And, famously, Paul and James differ on the question of faith, works and salvation.

It is evident that both Jews and Christians canonized a spectrum of belief, not a single theological system. This decision suggests that truth is not found in one voice or one testimony, but in the messiness of a sometimes-heated conversation. This fact, I think, invites us to construct an image of God from the resources of scripture without being brow-beat into accepting any one voice as the final word. Images in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures of God as Divine Warrior trouble me. As a Christian, I privilege New Testament images of God, especially as defined by the teachings of Jesus Christ and the revelation of God in his incarnation, death and resurrection. In particular, I am guided by Jesus’ teachings about peaceableness toward enemies, his embrace of outsiders such as women, Samaritans, the underclass, and tax collectors, and his rejection of the militarism associated the messianic militarism of his time. His rejection of violence affected his followers profoundly. A good number of them prior to the time of Constantine honored Jesus’ message of peaceableness by refusing military service.

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20 The notion that Jesus reveals God in a unique way is affirmed repeatedly in the Gospel of John: “whoever has seen me has seen the father” (14:9; cf. 5:19). The letter to the Hebrews claims that Jesus “is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being.” In this high Christology, Jesus becomes the perfect window into the heart of God, and the image of God revealed in Jesus stands in judgment on all competing images.
Having said that, I hasten to add that I find the God revealed in Jesus Christ also in the Hebrew Bible. The book of Jonah attacks religious nationalism and parochial images of God, and it teaches love for enemies, forgiveness and mercy. Jonah presents a bold contrast to attitudes expressed in some other parts of the Hebrew Bible. The book of Genesis emphasizes a universalism that contrasts in a remarkable way with the particularism of the rest of the Pentateuch. The depiction of God in Genesis, leaving aside the flood story, is of a kinder and gentler God, more focused on nurturing and blessing, than the God portrayed in the books that follow. It is especially significant that the story of creation in the first chapter of Genesis effectively supplants the creation battle story, by virtue both of its power and beauty and of its privileged position. In Genesis 1, God commands the elements of the world into being, thereby making the divine word and divine law the creative and ordering force in the world. If the creation battle story had been given canonical precedence, the ideology of salvation by violence and domination would have ruled the canon. Some have argued that Genesis 1 was written at least in part as a critique of the Babylonian creation-battle myth and thus as a challenge to the pretensions of Babylonian imperial ideology. Be

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21 The story of the flood presents a profound theological challenge. Was it right for the LORD to give up on “all flesh” and wipe out all but a handful of his creatures? Were humans as bad as all that? Why were the animals killed? After the flood, the LORD acknowledges the deluge did not solve the problem of human sin, that “the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth.” And the LORD promises not to send another flood to destroy all life saying, “I will never again destroy every living creature as I have done.” Was the flood a divine miscalculation? It’s hard to get around the blunt fact that God chose at a crucial juncture to deal with human wickedness through a great act of violence against the creation. The promise never again to resort to comprehensive violence against human wickedness is the silver lining—or rainbow—in this otherwise dark and terrifying story.

that as it may, it clearly challenges the creation battle stories found elsewhere in the Bible, including, by canonical association, the one in the book of Revelation.

Perhaps the most powerful challenge to the image of the Divine Warrior God is offered in the book of Job. Lost in his pain and beleaguered by “good advice” from well meaning friends, Job lashes out with accusations against God. Over and over again he accuses of God of playing the role of the Divine Warrior. He says that God has attacked him viciously, with sword and bow, with ramparts and nets. He piles up image upon image of the Divine Warrior’s onslaught, both upon himself and upon the whole cosmos. God’s answer to Job God constitutes a long list of questions to Job, both about the extent of Job’s knowledge of God’s cosmic plan and, more subtly, about Job’s theological assumptions, about his image of God and his understanding of how God relates to the world. Carol Newsom has argued that the function of the divine speeches is “to present Job with an alternative set of radical metaphors, formal patterns, and modes of perception capable of generating a fundamentally different moral imagination than that by which Job had previously lived.” God’s answer to Job subtly but powerfully reshapes his—and our—moral imagination. God systematically replaces Job’s Divine Warrior image with a different palate of images, images of God as architect of beauty, midwife, artist and the creator-caretaker of wild things. God parades ten animals before Job, wild animals that the ancients associated with untamed nature, that is, with the domain of chaos. God shows Job that God liberates, protects and feeds these animals. Significantly, God

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23 For example, Job 6:4; 7:20; 10:16; 16:9, 12–14; 19:11–12. In 7:12, Job accuses God of treating him as if he were a chaos monster. Job also accuses God of attacking the whole cosmos, of being a reckless rampaging divine warrior: 9:4–8; 12:14–16.

describes hunting on behalf of these animals. In so doing, God upends Job’s Divine Warrior image and replaces it with the image of a God whose weapons serve to supply the needs of God’s creatures and whose violence extends no further than the natural give and take of predation for survival.

At one point in God’s speech, God challenges Job to run the world according to the Divine Warrior model (40:6–14). The implicit message is that Job cannot fill this role because he is too weak, and, more significantly, that God declines to fill this role, though God is clearly strong enough to do so. God simply refuses to act the part of the Divine Warrior. God rejects Job’s theological projection. God’s speech ends with an extended description of two chaos monsters, Behemoth and Leviathan. When God brings them before Job for contemplation, an ancient audience would have naturally assumed that they were about to watch God clobber the beasts. But this is not what happens. God describes their fearsome power in loving detail, delighting in their awesome beauty and majestic strength. The chaos monsters, for their part, are not intent on battle either. God describes them as potentially ferocious but presently docile. At the end of God’s speech, Leviathan, king of the chaos monsters, swims away leaving a trail of foam behind. The great drama of the chaos battle never happens because the Divine Warrior has turned down the role. And thus the divine answer to Job concludes, leaving the audience agape and Job stunned by a previously unimagined theological vision.

The visual nature of God’s rhetorical strategy is, I think, crucial. This pictorial rhetoric contrasts with the discursive theological discourse of Job’s friends. The author of the book might well have had God answer Job with theological propositions about the nature of divinity. But Job’s problem was one
of images, not doctrines. The root of Job’s bad theology was the image of God derived from the Divine Warrior tradition. God provides Job a new image of the divine nature and of divine providence. Job responds, “I had heard of you with the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you,” and it is this new vision that re-orient Job (42:5–6).

I hope that I have been able to amplify the voices within scripture that bear testimony to a God whose shalom rests on peaceableness, both in the Christian and Hebrew scriptures. It is true that the Bible says that the LORD is a warrior. It is true that the Bible says that the LORD commands Holy War and genocide. It is also true that the Bible, in places, reconstructs or even rejects the Divine Warrior tradition. Our fore bearer’s decision to canonize theological diversity suggests that dialogue, rather than dogmatic monologue, is the proper theological mode for the people of God. The very nature of canon authorizes the inclusion of conflicting viewpoints within the community of faith, and it invites the community to live in a dynamic conversation with its scriptures. Try as we may, we cannot make the biblical authors sing in unison. We are invited instead to find the meaning in the multiplicity of voices. The truth will not be found in a forced harmony, but in learning to sing along, adding our own voices to the sacred chorus.