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DIVINE AGGRESSION IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

“God damn America!”

So the Reverend Jeremiah Wright infamously declared in a sermon on April 13, 2003. He made the pronouncement, of course, in direct counterpoint to the beloved civil benediction, “God bless America.” “No, no, no!” Wright insisted, “not ‘God bless America,’ ‘God damn America’ – that’s in the Bible.”¹

A video clip of this moment from Wright’s preaching would surface nearly five years later during the American presidential campaign of 2008. It generated a media firestorm.² White Americans were shocked. They called Wright anti-white and anti-American, and reviled then-candidate Barack Obama for his connections to Wright and Wright’s congregation. But they also responded to an additional, theological dimension of Wright’s sermon. Wright had, as it were, lodged a fundamentally disorienting claim about God, which commentators then sought to re-stabilize. Literally thousands of think-pieces appeared in the aftermath of the video clip’s circulation. Mark Steyn’s is especially telling. In his column for the *National Review*, he plies the phrase “God bless America” no fewer than seven times, and he contends in closing that “God *has* blessed America, and blessed the Obamas in America, and even blessed the Reverend Jeremiah Wright.” Steyn works by force of assertion to recoup the national deity’s role – because whoever the patron deity is that blesses America, that is his

¹ “Unofficial Transcript” from Carolyn J. Sharp, “Hewn by the Prophet: An Analysis of Violence and Sexual Transgression in Hosea with Reference to the Homiletical Aesthetic of Jeremiah Wright,” in *Aesthetics of Violence in the Prophets*, ed. Chris Franke and Julia M. O’Brien, LHBOTS 517 (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 50–71, here 71.

² For an overview of this event, see Carl A. Grant and Shelby J. Grant, *The Moment: Barack Obama, Jeremiah Wright, and the Firestorm at Trinity United Church of Christ* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).

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only job.³ To proclaim that this god would damn his own client country presents, then, “a paradoxical thought – as if the national God were to cut the ground out from under His own feet!”⁴

Wright’s line was theologically shocking and category-jamming to white Americans in 2008. But comparable claims were no less shocking and category-jamming in antiquity. Rightly did Wright say that his malediction is “in the Bible.” The character Amos in the biblical book of his name declares, for instance, that the king of Israel, Jereboam, shall die by the sword and his country will go into exile (Amos 7:11). The national deity – that is, the god named Yhwh – would prosecute the destruction of his own client king and nation. In other words, “God damn Israel!” In response to this announcement, the book of Amos narrates how a priest of the royal administration commanded the prophet Amos to leave. “Never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom” (Amos 7:13b). Words of damnation simply did not belong in the national sanctuary, dedicated as it was to Yhwh’s patronage of king and country.

In the late nineteenth century the great biblical critic Julius Wellhausen gave forceful expression to the paradoxical quality of this scenario. He wrote of Amos’s prophecy of imminent national doom at the hands of the patron god that “it was nothing short of blasphemy to utter anything of this kind . . . for the faith in Jehovah as the God of Israel was a faith that He intervenes on behalf of His people against all enemies.”⁵ Wellhausen characterizes the default relationship between Yhwh and Israel as a “natural bond”:

As for the substance of national faith, it was summed up principally in the proposition that Jehovah is the God of Israel. But “God” was equivalent to “helper”; that was the meaning of the word . . . the relation between the people and God was a natural one as that of son to father; it did not rest upon observance of the conditions of a pact.⁶

³ Mark Steyn, “Uncle Jeremiah,” *National Review* (March 15, 2008), www.nationalreview.com/article/223934/uncle-jeremiah-mark-steyn

⁴ Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel*, trans. William Robertson Smith (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 471.

⁵ Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 471.

⁶ Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 469. See also Hywel Clifford, “Amos in Wellhausen’s *Prolegomena*,” in *Aspects of Amos: Exegesis and Interpretation*, ed. Anselm C. Hagedorn and Andrew Mein, LHBOTS 536 (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 141–156.

Yhwh's job (so to speak) was to bless and protect and help his country and its head of state, the king.⁷ By announcing that Yhwh would destroy them both, Amos effectually "severed" the "natural bond" that had been thought to exist, according to Wellhausen, between deity and country.⁸ In doing so, Amos radically reenvisioned the divine character. If Yhwh could be decoupled from Israel – if he were free either to bless or to damn – then the foundation of their relationship must lie elsewhere than in the simple "fact that Jehovah was worshipped in Israel and not among the heathen."⁹ Yhwh's loyalty to Israel must instead reflect his own free choice, and so must remain revocable. This was also the theme of Wright's sermon that day: that God is freer and more enduring than any human government. God's freedom, for both Amos and Wright, was visible precisely in his damning aggression.

Wright was preaching from the Bible and taking up a long tradition of defiant black preaching.¹⁰ Amos, on the other hand, as Wellhausen saw it, had no real antecedent. "Amos was the founder," Wellhausen wrote, "and the purest type, of a new phase of prophecy."¹¹ Amos's theological innovation would, however, prove immensely successful. When doom befell Israel and the Neo-Assyrian empire devoured all

⁷ For a good recent summary of Wellhausen's view of Israel's early and "natural" religion, see Aly Elrefa'ei, *Wellhausen and Kaufman: Ancient Israel and its Religious History in the Works of Julius Wellhausen and Yehezkel Kaufman*, BZAW 490 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), 55–74. See also, *inter alia*, Friedemann Boschwitz, *Julius Wellhausen: Motive und Maßstäbe seiner Geschichtsschreibung*, Libelli 238 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968), 18–32.

⁸ Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 474.

⁹ Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 473.

¹⁰ E.g. Brian K. Klardy, "Deconstructing a Theology of Defiance: Black Preaching and the Politics of Racial Identity," *Journal of Church and State* 53 (2011): 203–221.

¹¹ Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 472. On the prophets as "Wegbereiter des Judentums," see Uwe Becker, "Julius Wellhausens Sicht des Judentums," in *Biblische Theologie und historisches Denken: Wissenschaftsgeschichtliche Studien aus Anlass der 50. Wiederkehr der Basler Promotion von Rudolf Smend*, ed. Martin Kessler and Martin Wallraff, Studien zur Geschichte der Wissenschaften in Basel 5 (Basel: Schwabe, 2008), 279–309, here 289–292, as well as Lothar Perlt, "Hebraismus–Deuteronomismus–Judaismus," in *Deuteronomium-Studien*, FAT 8 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1984), 247–260. See also James Pasto on the context of the ancient Israel/early Judaism distinction during nineteenth-century German nationalization ("When the End is the Beginning? Or When the Biblical Past is the Political Present: Some Thoughts on Ancient Israel, 'Post-Exilic Judaism,' and the Politics of Biblical Scholarship," *SJOT* 12 [1998]: 157–202); also and relatedly, Walter Brueggemann and Davis Hankins, "The Invention and Persistence of Wellhausen's World," *CBQ* 75 (2013): 15–31; and Gillian M. Bediako, *Primal Religion and the Bible: William Robertson Smith and his Heritage*, JSOTSup 246 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 74–104.

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the petty kingdoms of Syria-Palestine, “the prophets of Israel alone did not allow themselves to be taken by surprise . . . or to be plunged into despair. Where others saw only the ruin of everything that is holiest, [the prophets] saw the triumph of Jehovah.”¹² By envisioning Yhwh as independent of his client nation, the prophets laid the groundwork for the worship of Yhwh to survive national downfall. By absorbing the destructiveness of Assyria into their God-concept, they inoculated themselves theologically against it. The whole Bible, Wellhausen argued, lies downstream from Amos and his prophetic colleagues. The book of Deuteronomy, for example, whose theology saturates so much of the Hebrew Bible, “is the progeny of the prophetic spirit.”¹³ The Psalter, too, Wellhausen thought, derives from these same headwaters.¹⁴ The Bible at large follows Amos: Yhwh freely chose to love Israel – and can choose (and has chosen) to aggress against his client country.

If Amos’s preaching had no antecedent, Wellhausen also alleged that it had no parallel. The nations around ancient Israel shared a civil religion much like Israel’s, each centered on the worship of a single patron god.¹⁵ The job of such a patron deity was to bless and protect his client country. Wellhausen wrote that “Israel and Moab had a common origin, and their early history was similar. The people of Jehovah on the one hand, and the people of Chemosh on the other, had the same idea of the Godhead as head of the nation, and a like patriotism derived from religious belief.”¹⁶ In the face of Neo-Assyrian conquest, however, these other nations nearby to Israel did not make the theological adaptation that Amos and the Hebrew Bible did. The paradoxical thought that Kemosh could damn Moab, cutting out the ground from under his feet, did not arise or take root, and the aggression of these

¹² Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 473.

¹³ Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 487. Cf. Peritt, “Hebraismus–Deuteronomismus–Judaismus.”

¹⁴ Julius Wellhausen, *The Book of Psalms: A New English Translation with Explanatory Notes and an Appendix on the Music of the Ancient Hebrews*, trans. Horace Howard Furness, Sacred Books of the Old and New Testaments 14 (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Company/Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1898), 163.

¹⁵ Wellhausen wrote that “Moab, Ammon, and Edom, Israel’s nearest kinsfolk and neighbors, were monotheists in precisely the same sense in which Israel itself was” (*Prolegomena*, 440).

¹⁶ Julius Wellhausen, “Moab,” in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, ed. William Robertson Smith, 9th ed., 25 vols. (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1878), 16:533–536, here 535.

patron deities remained more limited and occasional. A patron god of this kind “might indeed, of course, hide his face for a time, but not definitively.”¹⁷ Consequently, Wellhausen thought, these countries – and their gods – faded.¹⁸

The contrast Wellhausen drew would exert a massive influence on academic biblical scholarship: on one side, the gods of the nations, whose aggression remained limited and occasional; and on the other side, Yhwh, the God of the Hebrew Bible, whose aggression through the preaching of the prophets became distinctively fierce, in that it could encompass even his own client king and country.¹⁹ The deep impact of Wellhausen’s contrast is apparent from the fact that even scholars who disagree fundamentally with his account of Israel’s religious history still reproduce the same difference that he constructed. Walther Eichrodt was a Swiss Calvinist scholar of a generation later than Wellhausen, who would rejuvenate the enterprise of Old Testament theology. He argued that Israel’s primordial experience with Yhwh at Sinai was the taproot for the theology of the entire Hebrew Bible – and not the preaching of eighth-century prophets, as Wellhausen proposed.²⁰ At Sinai Yhwh made a covenant with his people, a relationship that “God has entered freely and which he on

¹⁷ Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 471.

¹⁸ For more on which, see Collin Cornell, “What Happened to Kemosh?” *ZAW* 128 (2016): 284–299.

¹⁹ On that influence, see again Brueggemann and Hankins, “The Invention and Persistence of Wellhausen’s World.” Another current-day iteration of the (theological) contrast that Wellhausen drew are vexed discussions of the so-called *proprium* of Old Testament prophecy, especially “oracles of unconditional doom” (*unbedingte Gerichtsankündigung*); for an overview, see Matthijs de Jong, “Biblical Prophecy – a Scribal Enterprise: The Old Testament Prophecy of Unconditional Judgement Considered as a Literary Phenomenon,” *VT* 61 (2011): 39–70; also Erhard Blum, “Israels Prophetie im altorientalischen Kontext: Anmerkungen zu neueren religionsgeschichtlichen Thesen,” in *From Ebla to Stellenbosch: Syro-Palestinian Religions and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Izak Cornelius and Louis Jonker, ADPV 37 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz in Kommission, 2008), 81–115. The crux of these arguments is to explain how biblical depictions of Yhwh’s unique aggression arose. Also, in point of fact, forms of Wellhausen’s contrast antedate him; thus Pasto: “the distinction between a pre-exilic Hebraism and a post-exilic ‘Judaism’ was de Wette’s invention” (“When the End is the Beginning?” 162).

²⁰ D. G. Spriggs: “In many ways it is possible to consider Eichrodt’s *Theology* Deuteronomistic, not only because of the place given to the Mosaic covenant, but also, for instance, because it is a combination of prophetic and priestly approaches, with an eschatological orientation, because of its concern for unity and its subordination of wisdom traditions and the monarchy to the covenant tradition. Many other points can also be supplied” (*Two Old Testament Theologies: A Comparative Evaluation of the Contributions of Eichrodt and von Rad to our Understanding of the Nature of Old Testament Theology*, SBT 2.30 [Naperville, IL: A. R. Allenson, 1975], 109n78).

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his side may dissolve at any time.”²¹ Indeed, the golden calf episode illustrates just how close Yhwh could come to dissolving the covenant. The “possibility of annulment,” raised so vividly at Sinai, stood always and from the outset before Israel, according to Eichrodt.²² Except his people obey, Yhwh could and would destroy them.

Eichrodt’s emphasis on the solubility of the relationship between deity and country emerges through contrast with another possible understanding. Eichrodt sees the covenant concept as a “safeguard against an identification of religion with the national interest.”²³ The latter form of national religion dominated Israel’s religious environment:

[Israel’s] covenant agreement excluded the idea, which prevailed widely and was disseminated among Israel’s neighbors as well, that between the national God and his worshippers there existed a bond inherent in the order of Nature, whether this were a kind of blood relationship, or a link between the God and the country which created an indissoluble association between himself and the inhabitants. This type of popular religion, in which the divinity displays only the higher aspect of the national self-consciousness, the national “genius”, or the *mysterium* of the forces of Nature peculiar to a particular country, was overcome principally by the concept of covenant.²⁴

Eichrodt’s footnote to this paragraph cites the Moabites as exemplars of this “natural religion,” to which Israel’s “religion of election” is “the exact opposite.”²⁵ Eichrodt elsewhere describes this national

²¹ Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. A. Baker, 2 vols., OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 1: 44; hereafter, *TOT*.

²² Eichrodt, *TOT*, 1: 457.

²³ Eichrodt, *TOT*, 1: 42.

²⁴ Eichrodt, *TOT*, 1: 43.

²⁵ Eichrodt, *TOT*, 1: 43n1. Cf. also *ibid.*, 1: 67. Eichrodt’s treatment of inscriptions was limited in part because of the data then available. At the time he wrote his Old Testament theology in 1933, several memorial inscriptions from the nations nearby to ancient Israel and Judah were already published: the Mesha inscription (KAI 181, first published 1870), the Hadad inscription (KAI 214, in 1893), the Kilamuwa inscription (KAI 24, in 1902), the Zakkur inscription (KAI 202, in 1907), as well as the royal inscriptions unearthed at Zinjirli (KAI 214–221). On the discovery of the Mesha Inscription, see Siegfried Horn, “The Discovery of the Moabite Stone,” in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman*, ed. Carol L. Myers and Michael O’Connor, American Schools of Oriental Research, Special Volume Series 1 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 497–505; M. Patrick Graham, “The Discovery and Reconstruction of the Mesha’ Inscription,” in *Studies in the*

religion as a kind of “national egoism.”²⁶ It endangers the gratuity of the deity’s relation to the people by making their connection seem like “something simply ‘given’ and not as founded in the first place by a special act of condescending grace.”²⁷ It construes God as an unconditional “benefactor deity” of the country, and a “protector of the natural and national life.”²⁸ Conceiving of God in such a way “abrogate[s] the doctrine of election in judgment” – which is to say, it limits the scope of the deity’s aggression.²⁹

Eichrodt positions the gods of the nations on one side as benefactor deities incapable of extreme aggression, and on the other side, the deity Yhwh of the Hebrew Bible, under whose threat of damnation Israel had lived from the beginning of their relationship, and not, as Wellhausen argued, only from the eighth century onward. But to the point: in spite of their differing chronology for Israelite religion, Eichrodt reproduces Wellhausen’s theological contrast, and with equally vivid language. The distinguishing criterion for them both is the aggression of the patron god.

Only one difference is outstanding between these two influential biblical scholars: Wellhausen believed that the entire Hebrew Bible

Mesha Inscription and Moab, ed. J. Andrew Dearman, ABS 2 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 41–92; and Neil A. Silberman, “Race for a Relic: The Affair of the Moabite Stone, 1868–1870,” in *Digging for God and Country: Exploration, Archeology, and the Secret Struggle for the Holy Land, 1799–1917* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 100–112. On the discovery of the Hadad inscription, see Felix von Luschan, “Einleitung,” in *Ausgrabungen in Sindschirli: Einleitung und Inschriften*, 4 vols. (Berlin: W. Spemann, 1893), 1: 1–10; and Ralf-B. Wartke, *Sam’al: ein aramäischer Stadtstaat des 10. bis 8. Jhs. v. Chr. und die Geschichte seiner Erforschung* (Mainz am Rhein: von Zabern, 2005), 7–56. On the discovery of Zakkur by Henri Pognon, see René Dussaud, “La stèle araméenne de Zakir au Musée du Louvre,” *Syria* 3 (1922): 175–176; Stefania Mazzoni, “TELL AFIS: History and Excavations,” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 76 (2013): 204–212. Of these, by far the most discussed and important is the Mesha Inscription, which is also the only one mentioned in Eichrodt’s account (in a discussion of “seers”; it witnesses to “Oriental heathenism” [*TOT* 1:296]). Since the first edition of his Old Testament theology several more royal inscriptions have been discovered, including (among others) Azatiwada (KAI 26, in 1946), the Amman citadel (KAI 307, in 1968), and Tel Dan (KAI 310, in 1994). On the discovery of Azatiwada, see Halet Çambel, “Karatepe: An Archeological Introduction to a Recently Discovered Hittite Site in Southern Anatolia,” *Oriens* 1 (1948): 147–162; on the Amman Citadel Inscription: Siegfried H. Horn, “The Amman Citadel Inscription,” *BASOR* 193 (1969): 2–13; on Tel Dan, see Hallvard Hagelia, *The Tel Dan Debate: The Tel Dan Inscription in Recent Research*, Recent Research in Biblical Studies 4 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 1–12.

²⁶ Eichrodt, *TOT*, 1: 371.

²⁷ Eichrodt, *TOT*, 1: 48.

²⁸ Eichrodt, *TOT*, 1: 46.

²⁹ Eichrodt, *TOT*, 1: 373.

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aligned with the theology of Amos. For him, the contrast between the characteristic theology of the Hebrew Bible and that of Israel's ancient neighbors was complete. For Eichrodt, a few pieces of the Hebrew Bible itself share in the theology of the heathen nations. In the royal psalms – especially Psalms 2 and 110 – Eichrodt thought that Israel “assimilate[d] to Canaanite ways of thought.”³⁰ This “perversion” of the covenant concept can be seen nowhere more clearly than in the king's arrogation to himself of the title “Son of God” (see also Ps 2:7, “you are my son”). “By thus disguising his egoistic-dynastic or imperialistic aims he enlisted the support of the covenant God in the most emphatic way for the institution of the nation as such and caused Yahweh to appear as the natural ally of the national greatness and power.”³¹ Or again: these psalms “present features of the court-style and the king-mythology of the ancient East which could only have percolated into Israel from her heathen environment . . . this brought with it the temptation to use cultic apotheosis to enlarge the royal power and authority.”³² For Eichrodt, these royal psalms reflect a changed understanding, not only of deity and people, but especially of divine aggression. Speaking of the relation between Yhwh and Israel, Eichrodt writes, “The possibility of its dissolution was obscured by the confident conviction that, because God was using this means to achieve his purpose in history, namely the establishment of his kingdom, he would therefore *not allow this particular manifestation of his sovereignty to be vitiated.*”³³

The Research Question(s)

The present study interrogates the contrast that Wellhausen constructed – one that persists, in revised form, into current-day biblical scholarship.³⁴ It seeks to answer the question, “Is the aggression of

³⁰ Eichrodt, *TOT*, 1: 48. See also Spriggs, *Two Old Testament Theologies*, 68.

³¹ Eichrodt, *TOT*, 1: 48.

³² Eichrodt, *TOT*, 1: 125. See also his remarks about the royal psalms in 1: 324, 477.

³³ Eichrodt, *TOT*, 1: 458 (my emphasis). Cf. Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible*, New Voices in Biblical Studies (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1985), 101.

³⁴ Perhaps the essay that most pointedly illustrates the endurance of Wellhausen's contrast is Reinhard G. Kratz, “Chemosh's Wrath and Yahweh's No: Ideas of Divine Wrath in Moab and Israel,” in *Divine Wrath and Divine Mercy in the World of Antiquity*, ed. Reinhard G. Kratz and Hermann Spieckermann, FAT 2.33 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 92–121. But see also and more generally, Christoph Levin, who writes: “gegenwärtig erleben wir eine Wellhausen-Renaissance” (“Die Entstehung der Bundestheologie im Alten Testament,” in

Yhwh really uniquely devastating relative to the patron gods of the nations?” Did the latter present only a civil theology of “God bless Moab,” while the Bible alone lofts the paradoxical declaration “God damn Israel”? Or is Eichrodt correct, that heathenism makes inroads into the Hebrew Bible, especially in several royal psalms?

To pursue these questions, the present study stages a comparison between relevant texts from ancient Syria-Palestine and the Hebrew Bible. Its inquiry faces in two directions: it first surveys texts from Israel’s ancient neighbors to determine how they present the divine aggression of patron gods. It next surveys select texts from the Hebrew Bible in order to render a theological comparison. The project is thus

- (1) theological: in the sense that its focus is on deity profile or characterization, and particularly on the aggression of deities toward enemies, king, and country;
- (2) comparative: it seeks to compare biblical texts about the deity Yhwh with texts from Israel’s ancient neighbors in order to assess the contrast and/or commonality of conceptions of deity;³⁵
- (3) textual: it focuses on comparing biblical texts about Yhwh with ancient Levantine texts that depict other patron deities. The textuality of the present investigation means that, although disciplined by philology and text-criticism, the argument of the present work is primarily
- (4) rhetorical-literary: as seen already, the project traffics in terminology drawn from rhetorical or literary criticism, e.g.

Verheissung und Rechtfertigung: Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament II, BZAW 431 [Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013], 242–259, here 244). See also the overview of Erich Zenger, “Die Bundestheologie – ein derzeit vernachlässigtes Thema der Bibelwissenschaft und ein wichtiges Thema für das Verhältnis Israel-Kirche,” in *Der Neue Bund im Alten: Studien zur Bundestheologie der Beiden Testamente*, ed. Erich Zenger, *Quaestiones Disputatae* 146 (Freiburg: Herder, 1993), 13–49, but esp. 13–26; Konrad Schmid, “Zurück zu Wellhausen?” *ThR* 69 (2004): 314–328; Uwe Becker, “Julius Wellhausens Sicht des Judentums,” 299–302; also Reinhard G. Kratz, “Eyes and Spectacles: Wellhausen’s Method of Higher Criticism,” *JTS* 60 (2009): 381–401, here 400–402.

³⁵ For more on the comparative enterprise, see Brent A. Strawn, “Comparative Approaches: History, Theory, and the Image of God,” in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Peterson*, ed. Joel M. LeMon and Kent Harold Richards, *SBLRBS* 56 (Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 117–142; also Shemaryahu Talmon, “The ‘Comparative’ Method in Biblical Interpretation: Principles and Problems,” in *Essential Papers on Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 381–419.

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profile or characterization.³⁶ Even the concept of aggression is meant as a conceptual re-description of various concrete, textual means of characterizing deity. Also: “Divine aggression” intends as a topic to encompass more than “divine anger”; the latter is affective only, whereas the former includes the deity’s destructive actions.³⁷

The present study addresses several fields of inquiry within the larger area of Hebrew Bible scholarship. Like the work of Deena Grant or even more so of Stefan Wälchli, it limns depictions of God in biblical texts, especially depictions of divine aggression, and so it addresses the field of Hebrew Bible theology.³⁸ Like Scott Starbuck

³⁶ In focusing on deity characterization, the present project has affinities with literary-critical works such as Dale Patrick, *The Rendering of God in the Old Testament*, OBT 10 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981); as well as Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995); Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Disappearance of God: A Divine Mystery* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1995); Mark H. McEntire, *Portraits of a Mature God: Choices in Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013); Mark H. McEntire, *An Apocryphal God: Beyond Divine Maturity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015); Mark H. McEntire, “The God at the End of the Story: Are Biblical Theology and Narrative Character Development Compatible?” *HBT* 33 (2011): 171–189; Mark H. McEntire, “Portraits of a Mature God: What Would a Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures Look Like if Ezra-Nehemiah was at the Center of the Discussion?” *PRS* 39 (2012): 113–124. All of these draw a theological portrait on the basis of literary observations.

Attending to the role of deity characterization within the rhetoric of each given text means, however, that the present project considers biblical and ancient texts as acts of persuasion, on which see Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969). As will be seen, other works, particularly on the rhetoric of psalms, have informed the approach of the present study: e.g. Johan H. Coetzee, “Politeness Strategies in the So-Called ‘Enemy Psalms’: An Inquiry into Israelite Prayer Rhetoric,” in *Rhetorical Criticism and the Bible*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Dennis L. Stamps, JSNTSup 195 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 209–236; Davida H. Charney, *Persuading God: Rhetorical Studies of First-Person Psalms*, HBM 73 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2015).

It should be noted that “deity characterization” is by no means exclusively the province of rhetorical or literary scholarship; see, e.g., these recent and entirely historical deity profiles: Mark S. Smith, “Athtart in Late Bronze Age Syrian Texts,” in *Transformation of a Goddess: Ishtar–Astarte–Aphrodite*, ed. David T. Sugimoto, OBO 263 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht/Fribourg: Academic Press, 2014), 33–86; Maciej Münnich, *The God Resheph in the Ancient Near East*, ORA 11 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2013); and Aren M. Wilson-Wright, *Athtart: The Transmission and Transformation of a Goddess in the Late Bronze Age*, FAT 2.90 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016).

³⁷ Cf. the “prototypical gestalt” of divine beneficence, destructiveness, and exaltation in Collin Cornell, “A Moratorium on God Mergers? The Case of El and Milkom in the Ammonite Onomasticon,” *UF* 46 (2015): 49–99, here 62–69.

³⁸ Patrick Considine, “The Theme of Divine Wrath in Ancient East Mediterranean Literature,” *SMEA* 8 (1969): 85–159; Ulrich Berges, “Der Zorn Gottes in der