

## DIVINE AGGRESSION IN PSALMS AND INSCRIPTIONS

The aggression of the biblical God named Yhwh is notorious. Students of theology, the Bible, and the ancient Near East know that the Hebrew Bible describes Yhwh acting destructively against his client country, Israel, and against its kings. But is Yhwh uniquely vengeful, or was he just one among other, similarly ferocious patron gods? To answer this question, Collin Cornell compares royal biblical psalms with memorial inscriptions. He finds that the Bible shares deep theological and literary commonalities with comparable texts from Israel's ancient neighbours. The centrepiece of both traditions is the intense mutual loyalty of gods and kings. In the event that the king's monument and legacy comes to harm, gods avenge their individual royal protégé. In the face of political inexpedience, kings honour their individual divine benefactor.

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# Divine Aggression in Psalms and Inscriptions

Vengeful Gods and Loyal Kings

COLLIN CORNELL

*The University of the South (Sewanee)*



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At least four intellectual tributaries have led into this project – and each tributary itself drew momentum from several intellectual and spiritual conversation partners and supporting communities.

The first stream that runs into the present project is Walter Brueggemann. My brother Arley gave me Brueggemann's *Old Testament Theology* as a Christmas gift in 2009, and I read it devotionally. What excited me most about this book was its searching and intensive preoccupation with God, and the presentations of God in the Old Testament. Brueggemann took each biblical text and pushed and probed it as if it were – for the moment and heuristically – the only source of knowledge about God. I loved this exercise, and the surprising results it yielded to serious and open-ended exploration. I would myself reprise this same procedure for almost every paper I wrote in seminary, asking as a thought experiment: what if I treat this biblical text, or this theological author, as the sole witness to God's character? In a real way, this book is more of the same – a sustained and provisional answer, anchored in specific texts, to this God-question. I have my undergraduate Greek professor Joel Williams to thank for first setting me on a theological trajectory that would even consider Brueggemann as a viable resource, and my seminary professors for treating my repeated attempts to think about God with and from various biblical texts as a worthwhile enterprise.



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The second stream begins with Choon-Leong Seow, my esteemed seminary professor. He permitted me to join an informal, extracurricular seminar on West Semitic inscriptions. I was hopelessly out of my depth, but the experience was electrifying. I especially remember the moment of first translating through the Mesha Inscription – and the kind of theological vertigo it induced!<sup>1</sup> What could it mean that this other god named Kemosh looked so similar to the biblical God, Yhwh? I knew that whatever the answer was, the process of finding it would be theologically interesting and productive. I was at that time an avid and regular blogger, and I wrote a piece shortly after completing this seminar entitled “God’s Anger on the Surface, God’s Love Beneath.” In it I reflected on the practice – shared by the Hebrew Bible and the Mesha Inscription – of reading the divine pleasure or anger off the surface of the nation’s history. King and temple and land operated as metrics of the national god’s will. But once all of these were destroyed in Israel, the disposition of Yhwh floated radically free; God’s love had to be discerned “beneath” the vicissitudes of national life. This book doesn’t get very far into the second part of these observations,<sup>2</sup> but it does go some way toward filling out the first: the theological characteristics, that is, shared between Yhwh and his counterpart Kemosh (among others!). I thank Jacob Wright for leading a crucial independent study on patron deities of the Iron Age Levant, which layered real knowhow onto these interests, and I thank Brent Strawn for allowing me to write one of my comprehensive exams on the god Kemosh. Josey Bridges Snyder also deserves recognition for her role in founding the “Emory Kemosh School,” to which I can only hope this work makes a contribution.<sup>3</sup> (My friend Philip Ryan rightly calls Kemosh my “second-favorite god.”)

The third stream finds its font in (once more) Jacob Wright, who introduced me to Wellhausen: or rather to the current-day European revival of Wellhausianism. He it was who first recommended that I should read Reinhard Kratz, whose writings now pepper the footnotes of my own publications, and whose article on “Chemosh’s

<sup>1</sup> I wrote at greater length about that vertigo in Collin Cornell, “Theological Approaches to God’s Ancient Look-Alikes,” in *Divine Doppelgängers: YHWH’s Ancient Look-Alikes*, ed. Collin Cornell (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns/Penn State University Press, 2020), 101–114.

<sup>2</sup> An early exploration of these ideas appeared as Collin Cornell, “Holy Mutability: *Religionsgeschichte* and Theological Ontology,” *HBT* 38 (2016): 200–220.

<sup>3</sup> For more on that “school,” see the “Editor’s Preface” in *Divine Doppelgängers*, vii–xii, esp. ix–x.

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Wrath and Yahweh's No" inspired the main questions of the present book. Jacob's own pioneering work on the catalytic role of defeat on ancient Judah's heritage forms an important subtext of the present work.

The last stream originates with Brent Strawn, a man of boundless intellectual energy and roving academic interests. I came to Emory University, in a nutshell, because I wanted to study with an Old Testament scholar who could write an article on Ernst Käsemann and also on Ugaritic poetry; on Herodotus and on the genre of Jonah. There aren't many like that out there! Some of Brent's own foremost preoccupations seeped into the present project: his own work on rhetoric, his attention to comparison and the hermeneutics thereof, and his commitment to reading ancient texts as witnesses to powerful, real, religious energies in the lives of ancient people. Indeed, in an important conversation around Christmastime of 2016, Brent complimented the nimbleness of my Psalms exegesis – but also urged me to make sure I was just as nimble in my interpretation of the memorial inscriptions. I hope the present work lives up to that charge. Brent has been far more than a *Doktorvater* to me: at various times he has been my teacher, my editor, my independent study leader, my employer, my reference, my collaborator, my editorial mentor, and my publishing guide, among other roles.

Alongside these tributaries, the present work has also benefited from the friendship and collegiality of my cohort-mates, The Justins (Pannkuk and Walker). It was a rare gift and joy to progress together through our time at Emory, and I could not have asked for a more personable, encouraging, or brilliant pair of colleagues. Many others at Emory exercised generosity toward me that made the journey lighter: Myron McGhee, the Pitts librarian, deserves special thanks, as does the interlibrary loan staff at Woodruff, to whom I was a constant pest for several years. Joel LeMon gave me the chance to workshop some ideas from the dissertation in his Psalms seminar in Fall 2016, and Brent's invitation to be a special guest instructor for his seminar on ancient Near Eastern religions in Fall 2017 offered the ideal "finishing school" for the dissertation project. Mike Suh has been a stimulating conversation partner and friend. Ted Smith and Kendall Soulen showed me the best of Emory collegiality, going above and beyond to offer me opportunities to teach and write and discuss. I also thank the Candler summer Hebrew class of 2017, on whom I tested a few of the dissertation ideas, and whose collaboration in learning refreshed me at a slow and low point in its progress.

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I thank my parents for their unrelenting support and love. (As my dad said after reading the first fifteen pages of the dissertation, "Well, I'm learning just how pissed off God can get – so thanks for that.") I thank my wife Vienna – the *maḥmad 'ênay* ("desire of my eyes," Ezek 24:16). Our marriage has been a place of safety, peace, and fruitfulness, a pool of water in the desert; her companionship and steadfast love are priceless to me. She has sacrificed much for my academic pursuits. And she has become something of a minor expert herself on Elephantine and Kemosh and Brevard Childs (etc.!) for no other reason than to show love to her eclectic husband. I love her.

Finally, I have petitioned from the start that this work would be somehow an act of "subterranean praise." It is not mine to decide whether I have succeeded, and though this stage of the writing and preparation has come to an end, I have not rested my case.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE ON THE TRANSLATIONS

The presentation of the translations on the pages that follow seeks graphically to represent some judgments about their structure, signaling relationships of subordination, parallelism, and addendum. Lines that belong to a common unit of thought or to a single stanza have been grouped together, oftentimes under the same heading. Smaller units or episodes that support the same more general claim have been arranged in like fashion to reflect their shared purpose. Superscriptions or postscripts sit “outside” the regular unit formatting. At the same time, the visual configuration of lines in the translations that follow (and the references to half-lines in the discussion, e.g. “21b”) also follows the line-divisions of the inscriptions themselves.