



## Yahweh Is a Warrior

RICHARD NYSSE

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

God's association with war in the Old Testament has been a problem for the Judeo-Christian heritage for a long time. It has figured prominently in Christian anti-Semitism and in Christian movements that are decidedly other-worldly and latently if not openly Marcionite in character. The Yahweh-is-a-Warrior theme has also caused trouble for Christian apologists who refuse to apologize for the Old Testament when addressing those who claim a higher moral sensitivity than that of the "obviously" inferior and primitive biblical heritage. The matter should not be glossed over. If for no other reason, it must be dealt with to remind Christians constantly that their use of the theme has in fact had disastrous effects (e.g., the Crusades). It has been, to state it plainly, a source of sin for Christians.

### I. A PERVASIVE THEME

The theme Yahweh-is-a-Warrior is present in all sections of the canon—Torah, Prophets, and Writings:

- |                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| Exodus 15:3:    | Yahweh is a man of war;<br>Yahweh is his name.                                       |
| Isaiah 42:13:   | Yahweh goes forth like a mighty man;<br>like a man of war(s) he stirs up his fury.   |
| Zephaniah 3:17: | Yahweh, your God, is in your midst,<br>a warrior who gives victory.                  |
| Psalms 24:8:    | Who is the King of Glory?<br>Yahweh, strong and mighty;<br>Yahweh, mighty in battle. |

In these passages Yahweh is explicitly called a warrior or directly compared to a warrior. If one moves out from simple designations to actual functioning, the metaphor or image is even more extensively present. Yahweh is the subject of many verbs that belong to the sphere of warfare.

The most obvious verb to trace is "fight" (*laham*). In Exodus 14:13-14 Israel is told to watch the victory of Yahweh, for "Yahweh will fight for you, and you have only to be still," and later the Egyptians are said to confess, "Let us flee from before Israel; for Yahweh fights for them against the Egyptians" (14:25). This perspective is mentioned twice in the opening section of Deuteronomy (1:30 and 3:22) and in the defeat of numerous kings of Joshua 10 (verses 10 [sun stood still] and 42 [summary statement]). In Joshua 23:10 the fighting Yahweh becomes the "Multiplier" (one Israelite with Yahweh can handle 1000 of any others). Isaiah 30:31-32

promises the destruction of Assyria, for “[Yahweh] fights them in battle with the blows of his arm.”

The language appears in late Old Testament material as well: 2 Chronicles 20:29 describes the fighting activity of God with the result that Jehoshaphat had some peace and quiet, and Nehemiah 4:14 claims the same for the completion of the wall around Jerusalem. Zechariah 14:3 brings us into apocalyptic where God’s warring activity brings about cataclysmic and cosmic changes.

Even a brief survey of this one verb, however, brings up another possibility with the “Yahweh-is-a-Warrior” language, namely, that Yahweh will fight against Israel. Jeremiah 21:5-6 threatens this in terms that reverse much of the language associated with the exodus:

I myself will fight against you with outstretched hand and strong arm, in anger, and in fury, and in great wrath. And I will smite the inhabitants of this city, both man and beast; they shall die of a great pestilence.

Isaiah 63:10 retrospectively views the exile as just that:

But [the house of Israel] rebelled and grieved his holy Spirit; therefore he turned to be their enemy, and himself fought against them.

If we were to add references to Yahweh’s riding the clouds as chariots, roaring in the thunder like a battle cry, smashing and crushing heads, scattering enemies and the like, we would soon augment the list of instances where God functions as a warrior. We would, in addition, find them distributed throughout the biblical record and in material from every period of Old Testament history.

What soon becomes clear is that Yahweh-is-a-Warrior is central to many of the tenets of the Old Testament. Yahweh-is-a-Warrior is central to the exodus theme and to the subsequent conquest accounts. It is a frequent mode for speaking of creation in the Old Testament in hymnic material—the (military) defeat of mythological creatures. Finally, it is present in the Old Testament’s understanding of the significance of exile and in its expression of hope for future restoration (particularly as the future is increasingly expressed in apocalyptic terms).

If the Yahweh-is-a-Warrior theme is withdrawn, there would be considerable slippage in the Old Testament’s (1) emphasis on freedom from oppression and the giftedness of Israel’s existence; (2) conception of creation and the ongoing control of chaotic forces, both cosmic and historical; and (3) assertion of the reality of God’s judgment of evil in the here and now as well as the future. These three areas would need to be grounded in a different or new metaphor if the Yahweh-is-a-Warrior theme is jettisoned.

To excise this language from consideration in Old Testament theology would mean that the themes of liberation, creation, and hope would either be weakened or need to be drastically recast. Second, if God is to be part of a contemporary reappropriation of the Old Testament themes of liberation, creation, and ultimate hope, one needs to include Yahweh-is-a-Warrior. The Old Testament leaves little room for addressing such issues apart from talk about God. For

example, a sociology of Israel without theology is out of tune with the biblical heritage and, at the very least, it should not claim biblical sanction or authorization, for its key commitments and principles will inevitably be founded on extrabiblical bases.

It is particularly important that Yahweh-is-a-Warrior be kept because of its centrality in the defense of the rights of the oppressed. Scripture repeatedly calls the human community to work for and guard justice for the weak, but it does not tell the weak that their hope is in the justice work of the strong. The strong, according to the Bible, have a decidedly poor track record in maintaining justice. The hope of the weak and poor is in a God who will fight against the strong who ignore justice. Yahweh-is-a-Warrior provides, on the one hand, hope for the victim both in the here-and-now and eschatologically (or apocalyptically). On the other hand, it is a terrifying assertion for the victimizer. Thus, the options in the human community when the theme Yahweh-is-a-Warrior is enunciated in the midst of oppression are for the victim to lament and petition directly to Yahweh and to hope, based on Yahweh's hearing of those who "cry out." For the victimizer the options are reduced to repenting or suffering through the inevitable judgment and exile. In short, the one who benefits from the Yahweh-is-a-Warrior theme is the oppressed person or group.

The Bible knows full well that this assertion can be distorted. One can imagine an oppressed state of affairs and one can attempt a superficial repentance, but the reality of the Divine Warrior exposes all the frauds—or at least that is the biblical confidence. One cannot manipulate the ark, or the temple, or superficially contain unfair marketplace practices and expect that such conduct will escape the notice of Yahweh. Yahweh-is-a-Warrior works only if Yahweh does in fact do what is claimed. If Yahweh does not exist, then the poor are without hope, and the theme is a disaster, subject to all manner of totalitarian abuse.

## II. ATTEMPTS TO KEEP THE LANGUAGE

In the last decade two books by Old Testament scholars have attempted to keep or at least partially salvage the language of Yahweh-is-a-Warrior. These are by Peter C. Craigie and Millard C. Lind.<sup>1</sup> Craigie, in the more popularly oriented of

---

<sup>1</sup>Peter C. Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978) and Millard C. Lind, *Yahweh is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1980). Although I will make some negative comments below about both of these books, I wish those to be read in the context of respect for both books. Craigie's book is very clearly written and works very well for discussion groups that wish to devote several sessions to a serious examination of the issues. Lind's book has no parallel. He draws into his discussion the pertinent Ancient Near Eastern material to an extent far beyond that of other publications. His is a very detailed book from which one learns much even when one comes to a different conclusion.

the two works, does not seem to have any problem with God and war as long as the war is one that God commanded. He seems to exonerate God's involvement in war on two grounds:

(1) God, the giver of life, has the right to take life whenever God pleases and owes no human an explanation. God as Creator of life simply has a right to do so! This seems to push sovereignty to an extreme and Craigie offers little to counterbalance the impression of a very capricious and arbitrary God.<sup>2</sup>

(2) Even though war or death may be or seems evil, God uses history—even evil history—to bring salvation (the latter term is left undefined). "In general terms," Craigie asserts,

“war is prohibited, but nevertheless a problem remains precisely because war (always evil in itself) may nevertheless be undertaken sometimes in an attempt to eliminate a greater evil (e.g., genocide).”<sup>3</sup> This seems to be a the-end-justifies-the-means argument without the usual, so-called safeguards of the just war theory. Perhaps more problematic is the theological problem raised by this manner of argumentation. The just war theory mayor may not be defensible in arguments regarding human moral action, but it seems rather out of line to apply just war criteria to God. Was there always a greater evil which *God*, the rightful commander of war, sought to prevent in the Old Testament? The Bible does not seem to make that kind of argument.

Lind’s book is the more interesting, if for no other reason than that as a Mennonite his tradition weighs heavily against any use of warrior language. His argument can be summarized as follows: The central event in the life of Israel was the exodus from Egypt in which Israel experienced and recognized that “Yahweh is a Warrior,” i.e., that the exercise of violent power belongs to God alone; that he exercises it for the salvation of his people; that he accomplishes this salvation by means of miracle, not military power; and that his human agent is the prophet announcing the divine will, not the military leader (king) wielding the sword. This experience was paradigmatic for Israel’s relationship to power. God alone was sovereign, to the exclusion of human kingship. God alone was to be relied upon for decisive intervention in time of crisis through nature miracles, even though Israelite military cooperation became a fact in the wars of conquest and in the period of the Judges. With the coming of kingship, however, Israel abandoned the calling to be a people under God’s direct rule and yielded to the power politics of the surrounding nations. The warrior displaced the prophet, and military might rather than divine miracle determined the battle. This effected the equivalent of a “Constantinian Fall of the Church,” as one reviewer has stated it.<sup>4</sup>

For Lind, then, the Yahweh-is-a-Warrior theme becomes a strong argument for a pacifist position (at least, on the part of the human community). In

---

<sup>2</sup>A telling response to this sort of position is made by J. Severino Croatto in his *Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981): “Let it not be said that God is the ‘lord’ of human life, because that is to project onto God the ‘shadow’ of the oppressor whom we know and who plays with the lives of others” (p. 29). It is important to note that Croatto makes that assertion while defending operating in a violent manner.

<sup>3</sup>Craigie, *The Problem of War*, 63.

<sup>4</sup>Waldemar Janzen, *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 2 (1984) 177-181.

comparison to Craigie, Lind’s view has God both more sovereign and more intimate. God initiates and carries out all of the warring. There is no room for reducing God to being the ratifier of human action because God does all the action. To maintain this position much beyond the Exodus account, Lind increasingly resorts to what is “decisive” in a war—the turning point so to speak—and it is that portion which God does. The human effort is by and large superfluous. Or finally, it is simply apostasy. For Lind it boils down to a matter of strategy and obedience: Yahweh is the only effective warrior; and humanity is not allowed to wage war. In addition, the tribal form of government (a theo-political form) is the only one capable of maintaining that position.

Waldemar Janzen, in the review referred to above, asks the key question: “...the question arises whether anyone socio-political structure can be identified as either compatible or

incompatible with God's will." He continues, "I for my part am impressed with the fact that the Old Testament people could be a people of God under various socio-political forms of existence (tribal rule, united kingdom, divided kingdom, empire-dominated kingdoms, exiled captive community, Persian province). Each socio-political structure was a part of the fallen order."<sup>5</sup>

There are several other ways of handling the issue of war in the Old Testament that one frequently encounters. First, it is often claimed by critical scholars that the wars were not as bad or extensive as is commonly thought. Joshua presents an exaggerated and idealized picture that should be balanced by that of the first chapter of Judges. The issue, however, is not one of quantity, but of quality-attributing any battles to Yahweh remains a problem for most readers. Second, it is often claimed that the wars were only or largely defensive in character. Yahweh was only a "defensive" Divine Warrior. Apart from the problems of whether or not such a view is historically correct, it should be noted that the argument is persuasive only to those who accept the just war rationale for the legitimacy of defensive wars.<sup>6</sup> Third, it is commonly assumed that God's association with combat is an early theme but not a late one. The language, however, is simply both early and late. A variation on this approach is to admit that there is a militaristic strand in the Old Testament and then seek to outweigh or counterbalance it with the peace visions of, for example, Isaiah 2:2-4/Micah 4:1-4. Such a procedure acknowledges the presence of diversity in Scripture but provides no assistance in the resolution of the problems raised by the association of God with war in the Old Testament.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 181. Lind's interpretation is also subject to some of the general questions that are directed toward pacificism. Again, Croatto: "'Peace at any price' cannot be justified when the absence of justice makes the 'peace-lovers' into spectators of the misery of others. This attitude is proper to the tragic theater, not to Christian praxis" (p. 29). Or, the questions of Michael Walzer in his recent book, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic, 1985): "Is the individual bound only to observe the laws himself or is he bound to see to it that they are collectively observed? Is he bound to act justly or to make sure that justice is done?" (p. 84). Walzer's questions force one to acknowledge higher expectations for kingship such as those in Ps 72 than Lind entertains. Neither pacificism in general nor Lind in particular are inherently quietistic, but Lind nevertheless does not address the issue of the enforcement of justice for the other.

<sup>6</sup>This approach works best with regard to the peaceful infiltration model of the conquest and in the Judges narratives. It is not compatible with a violent conquest or rebellion model and with many of the wars during the monarchy.

### III. WHO BENEFITS?

A more productive starting point is to note for whom the metaphor is used and what the one for whom it is used may or may not do with it. Who benefits from Yahweh-is-a-Warrior, and what is the benefactor to do in view of Yahweh's warring? Who benefits? Is it as simple as Psalm 35:1-3 seems to imply?

Contend, O Lord, with those who contend with me;  
fight against those who fight against me!  
Take hold of shield and buckler,  
and rise for my help!  
Draw the spear and javelin against my pursuers!  
Say to my soul, "I am your deliverance."

That seems simple enough. Who benefits? I, the speaker, benefit. But it is not that simple, even in this Psalm, for the petitioner must wait for Yahweh to act and, at the moment of this petition, it seems as though Yahweh is only observing. No one benefits if the Warrior does not awake. Joshua may confess after a battle: “There has been no day like it before or ever since, when Yahweh hearkened to the voice of a man; for Yahweh fought for Israel” (Josh 10:14). But the story of Achan shows that he did not always have that assurance in advance, and neither is it present for this psalmist.

To address more fully the problems associated with Yahweh-is-a-Warrior from the vantage point of the question of who benefits we return to the passages in which Yahweh is called a warrior or compared to one. They provide a convenient cross section of Old Testament texts for exploring the function of the Yahweh-is-a-Warrior theme.

(1) Exodus 15:3: “Yahweh is a man of war.” This Yahweh will “reign for ever and ever” (15:18). Yahweh’s warriorhood is connected to his kingship.

*Who benefits?* Yahweh’s people, the ones whom Yahweh has redeemed from a pursuing enemy. The beneficiaries are defined in relationship to Yahweh and by no other category. To be the beneficiary is to be claimed by Yahweh or, in the words of the poem, “purchased” (15:16). If we look beyond the poem the picture remains largely the same: the Israelites are termed a “people,” but that is not simply a sociological category because they are Yahweh’s people and as such are different from Pharaoh’s people—that polarity persists in the narrative.

*What are the beneficiaries to do?* In terms of the poem, they are simply to *sing* (15:1, 23). What else? In the narrative that precedes there is little else to do but mourn and cry out or, later, prepare for worship/passover. The people’s posture is that of petition or doxology.

*Who does not benefit?* Clearly Pharaoh does not benefit, and the poem extends that to include the people of Philistia, the chiefs of Edom, etc. (15:14-16). In short, anyone who has a different allegiance.

*What is secured?* The people’s continued existence, but more specifically their liberty and the gift of the land ( “thou wilt bring them in and plant them” [15-17]—or in Deuteronomistic language: “I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and cities which you had not built, and you dwell therein; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards which you did not plant” (Josh 24:13)). Being planted in Yahweh’s land is the shape that *peace* takes when the liberating

Warrior acts. Further ahead in the narrative it is clear that *justice* is also to be one of the results. In the laws in Exodus 20-23 the motive for doing justice is the memory of the injustice from which the people were freed (e.g., 23:9). Doing justice can be understood as a form of doxology.

This is also an indication that Israel should *not presume* upon Yahweh, for the Warrior who heard their cry is ready to hear other cries (Exod 22:25-27). Israel’s recollection of its character as faithless and murmuring and rebelling is an additional protection against a presumptuous dependence on Yahweh, the Warrior. Further, the account of Israel in Egypt sharply attributes initiative to Yahweh. Everything hinges on Yahweh’s hearing, remembering, seeing, and knowing. Emphasizing Yahweh’s initiative does not mean that one has to literalize narrative features such as the bearing eagles of Exodus 19:4. Israel did physically walk out of the land, but that effort is not theologically substantial in the narrative. What is substantive is that Israel can petition and give praise or rebel.

If things are radically dependent on God and that dependence is acknowledged or believed, then questions of *theodicy* cannot be far away as the people of God live through the ambiguities of history. Such questions are very much present in the narrative of Exodus. As early as chapter 5:22-23 Moses is asking why, and the same question underlies the many instances of Israel's murmuring. Reality seems to fall far short of the promise or expectation and, as a result, the people ask why—or they simply murmur and rebel. Finally, it should be noted that while the Yahweh-is-a-Warrior theme is prominently used in narratives about the inauguration of Israel, historically it was used against Israel

when it became the oppressor. In prophetic warnings (e.g., Amos 1-2) and in its actual history Israel experienced the theme operating against itself.

(2) Psalm 24:8: "Who is this King of Glory? Yahweh, strong and mighty, Yahweh, mighty in battle." As in Exodus 15, the linkage of Yahweh's warriorhood and kingship is immediately apparent.

*Who benefits?* In the broadest terms, anyone who wishes to have a well founded earth. Everything in that well founded earth belongs to Yahweh (Ps 24:1-2). More specifically in this psalm it is the righteous worshipper, the one who seeks Yahweh with clean hands, etc. When we look beyond this psalm, the royal psalms would add the king and the nation as a whole.<sup>7</sup> The enthronement psalms focus on the nation without any explicit mention of the king.<sup>8</sup> For the most part the language is very confident, but at the edge there is frequently some form of disorder and chaos or a bellicose nation. The beneficiaries are, at least in their own minds, threatened potentially or directly.

*What are the beneficiaries to do?* In Psalm 24 no more than worship is expected. In enthronement psalms the imperative *sing* is very much in evidence.<sup>9</sup> Doxology is clearly called for. If one focuses on the king, then the establishment of *justice* is expected (e.g., Ps 72:1-4 and 12-14).

*Who does not benefit?* In short, the forces of chaos and disorder—be they Rahab (Psalm 89), the gods of the nations, or other warring nations.

*What is secured?* Creation is secured and by extension life has order. Psalm 104 is a good example of how the psalmists depicted the extension of the creation conflict into present life. The enthronement psalms make much of the establishment of *justice* and God's righteous judging of all. *Peace* is also secured when the threatening nations are subdued by the kingly warrior Yahweh. See, for example, Psalm 46:9: "He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear, he burns the chariots with fire!"

Can the tradition be *presumed* upon? It is clear that in royal hands there were such attempts, but the texts leave little room for such attempts to succeed. Creation/providence theology does not just establish and maintain order. Rather it is a basis for expecting that the presumptuously powerful will fall as Hannah's song makes clear (1 Sam 2:1-10). Similarly, it is significant that the selection of a king in Israel is balanced with an account of apostasy (1 Sam 8-12), the choice of David with chastisement language in 2 Samuel 7 and with a lament in Psalm 89. The only prerogative the texts permit is to rule well and to praise. A Righteous Judge of nations, gods, and kings watches over the whole process, and that ought to make anyone more than a bit hesitant to act presumptuously.

<sup>7</sup>The royal psalms include Psalms 2, 18, 20-21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132 and 144.

<sup>8</sup>The enthronement psalms include Psalms 47, 93, and 96-99.

<sup>9</sup>The language of singing is extended through the use of words and phrases like exalt, praise, clap your hands, shout, rejoice, etc. (Pss 47:1, 6; 96:1-3; 13; 97:1, 12; 98:1, 4-9; and 99:3, 9). Each of the enthronement psalms proclaims God's reign or kingship (Pss 47:8; 93:1; 96:10; 97:1; 98:6, and 99:1). While the enthronement psalms do not detail the conflict that leads to the establishment of an ordered creation, the other gods are rejected (Ps 96:5), terrifying elements surround Yahweh (Ps 97:2-5), the nations are trembling (Ps 99:1) and will be judged by Yahweh (Ps 98:9). This past and presumed conflict would be even more notable if one used the term "victory" where "salvation" occurs in most English translations.

The theme Yahweh-is-a-Warrior is radically unconditional in the Psalms and royal contexts, but again that means that questions of *theodicy* will not be far, off, and such is indeed the case. For example, Psalm 89 expresses a strong pro-monarchy viewpoint, but that occurs in what is now a lament psalm. The confidence in the unconditional promise to David—and by extension to the whole community—does not exempt one from facing directly the questions that human history raises about the presence and fidelity of God.<sup>10</sup>

This theme was used to sustain Israel, but it was used against Israel when it became a creator of chaos—e.g., the un-creation picture in Jeremiah 4:23ff.

(3) Isaiah 42:13: "Yahweh goes forth like a mighty man, like a man of war he stirs up his fury; he cries out, he shouts aloud, he shows himself mighty against his foes"; and Zephaniah 3:17: "Yahweh, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory." As in the previous two sections, Yahweh's warriorhood is connected to kingship. This is made explicit two verses earlier: "The King of Israel, Yahweh, is in your midst; you shall fear evil no more" (3:15).

*Who benefits?* Exiles—those who have lost the gift. The beneficiaries are given various names: daughter of Zion, Jacob, Israel, my people, and the like—clearly people with a heritage, but a heritage that is lost or very much in jeopardy.

*What are the beneficiaries to do?* In short, *sing* (Isa 42:10-12; Zeph 3:14). Again the posture is one of worship and doxology. It is remarkable how restrained these texts are in assigning any further tasks, especially since they are well aware that Israel is in exile because of its failure. Then again, that may be precisely why the assignments are so few.

*Who does not benefit?* Their captors, not because they had captured them, but because they had presumed upon Yahweh who had sent them. The captors lose because they have offended Yahweh. The nations are overthrown and, in apocalyptic extensions of this tradition, all forces of evil are put to an end.

*What is secured?* Israel's continued existence and, more specifically, its relationship to Yahweh (for all to see). Israel is not in a position to *presume* on anything in these texts. *Peace* will be God's gift in the shape of a restored, *just*, and secure community. In its more apocalyptic expressions, this language leads to the prediction of a reordering of the cosmos to make the peace more secure and enduring (e.g., Zech 14).

The tradition is radically unconditional, perhaps more so than the other two. Again questions of *theodicy* are not far away. When the restoration after exile does not seem to live up to the promise, one encounters laments. For example, "Look down from heaven and see from your lofty throne, holy and glorious. Where are your zeal and your might? Your tenderness and compassion are withheld from us" (Isa 63:15).



<sup>10</sup>It is striking how many of the royal psalms are, in their present shape, cast in the form of petition. Psalm 72 asks God to endow the king with certain characteristics. Psalm 132 asks Yahweh to remember David and not reject the anointed one. Psalm 144 petitions Yahweh to part the heavens and come down to deliver and rescue. Psalms 20-21 also start in a petitioning mode. Even Psalm 2, which is highly confident, knows a world in which the nations still conspire and plot and the faithful must take *refuge* in Yahweh.

---

page 201

This theme takes the shape of a promise awaiting fulfillment. It is also coupled with the exilic assertion that humanity will be transformed (Jer 31; Ezek, 36-37).<sup>11</sup>

The “who benefits” question in each of the three sections above is answered by pointing to a people or persons without strength. The theme does not function to protect privilege. Rather, the theme is invoked in the context of petition (or even lament) or in a doxological affirmation of what God has done. The theme is not, therefore, static or abstract in the sense of being a theological position that one can presume upon. Yahweh-is-a-Warrior is experienced, not argued. The theme is problematic because the human community wishes to invoke the theme outside of the posture of petition or doxology. The Old Testament addresses this problem not by abandoning the theme but by asserting that the community which stands outside of petition and doxology will experience the theme as against itself. For example, Joshua 6 (the conquest of Jericho) cannot be read correctly (or at least not completely) without also reading 2 Kings 25 (the beginning of the exile). The theme may be invoked in the midst of oppression, chaos, and exile. It may also be invoked after deliverance from oppression, chaos, and exile, but here the ground becomes slippery, for doxology can easily become presumptuous and, when it does, the theme is reversed.

The urge in much of the contemporary church to jettison or simply to ignore the Yahweh-is-a-Warrior language is often expressed in terms of compassion for the other nations, repulsion regarding violence, and concern for emphasizing God’s gracious characteristics. All of those are positive motivations in and of themselves, but we should still ask ourselves whether they are potentially, if not actually, a mask. Perhaps we wish to avoid the hard questions that the reversal of the Yahweh-is-a-Warrior theme asks. Does God stand over against? Does God judge us? Does God war against us and destroy or kill us? That is one set of questions that the theme raises—a very important set for the victims of many of our actions. Perhaps we also wish to avoid the radically unconditional character of the Yahweh-is-a-Warrior theme—the unconditional dimension means that we are totally dependent and that total allegiance to God is necessary. That does not mesh well with modern refrains emphasizing the independence and freedom of the individual self. We know that to use Yahweh-is-a-Warrior as a strategy is to act presumptuously, and that will lead to disaster. But we may nevertheless desire the language of strategy, for it is conditional and implies independence. We may wish to avoid the dependence that is inherent in the proper function of the Yahweh-is-a-Warrior theme, namely, in petition and doxology. Petition and doxology involve dependence and do not lend themselves to strategy. That in the end may be what we find most disturbing about the Yahweh-is-a-Warrior theme.

<sup>11</sup>The above survey has centered on the references which employ warrior language to refer to Yahweh and on their distribution in the three sections of the canon. For a very helpful survey on the issues of war and peace in the Old Testament that is organized historically, see Paul D. Hanson, “War and Peace in the Hebrew Bible,” *Interpretation* 38 (1984) 341-362.