Created in the Image of a Violent God?

The Ethical Problem of the Conquest of Chaos in Biblical Creation Texts

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By its alternative depiction of God's non-violent creative power at the start of the biblical canon, Gen 1 signals the Creator's original intent for *shalom* and blessing at the outset of human history, prior to the rise of human (or divine) violence. Gen 1 constitutes a normative framework by which we may judge all the violence that pervades the rest of the Bible.

The Bible opens with the remarkable claim that humans are made in God's image and likeness (*imago Dei*) and granted real power to rule the earth as emissaries or delegates of the Creator (Gen 1:26–28). Although the history of interpretation has often separated the meaning of the image of God from the mandate to rule, today many Old Testament scholars directly connect the *imago Dei* in humans with the exercise of power. The result is a "functional" interpretation of the image of God as the status or office of humanity as God's authorized stewards, charged with representing God's rule on earth. This interpretation of the *imago Dei*, wherein the human race is granted a share in God's rule (and thus may be said to be *like* the divine ruler), is congruent with careful exegesis of the Genesis text and is supported by ancient Near Eastern parallels, where kings (and sometimes priests) are understood as the image and representative of a god on earth.

But this interpretation of the image, while exegetically warranted, remains a purely formal statement and is thus inadequate as it stands. It is not enough to claim an analogy or likeness between human power and God's own power. What is urgently needed is an investigation into the content or substance of the power humans in the divine image are expect-

ed to exercise.[1]

The question of how humans appropriately image or represent God is important to explore since we live in a world pervaded by the violent abuse of human power, often explicitly legitimated by appeal to God's will. Even when there is no explicit appeal to God, humans are religious creatures and tend—consciously or subconsciously—to reproduce in their actions something of the character of whatever they take as their ultimate point of orientation and value (their god/God). Therefore, how we conceive of the God in whose image we are created has significant ethical implications.

Among the biblical portrayals of God as Creator, we find—beyond the familiar accounts in Gen 1 and 2—the quasi-mythic notion of God founding the cosmos through an act of primordial violence (the motif of the *Chaoskampf* or the "combat myth"), which some biblical scholars have claimed is the fundamental biblical portrayal of God.[2] Such a conception of God, however, seems to enshrine violence as the quintessential divine action. The combat myth is thus highly problematic for those who believe that the canonical portrayal of God ought to be paradigmatic for the human exercise of power.

In this essay I propose to examine the presence of the combat myth in the Old Testament, with emphasis on the ethical problems that arise when the conquest of chaos is linked to God's creation of the world. I will then contrast creation-by-combat with the creation account of Gen 1, and I will conclude with some reflections on how Gen 1 might provide a normative framework for addressing not only creation-by-combat texts, but also the wider issues of violence in the Bible and in the contemporary world.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THE COMBAT MYTH?

Biblical scholars have long recognized the presence in the Bible of the motif of God's conquest of primordial forces of chaos, where these forces are pictured mythically as the ocean or sea, or a dragon or monster associated with water. In these texts God's rebellious opponent is vanquished, either by being utterly annihilated or by being captured and bound, and thus rendered impotent. The cosmos (the realm of order) is thereby established (or re-established) in the face of threatening chaos or disorder.

Herman Gunkel, in his groundbreaking 1895 work, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit*, first traced the combat myth back to the Babylonian creation epic, *Enuma Elish*, where Marduk (the chief god of Babylon) vanquishes Tiamat (the divinized ocean, the leader of the older gods, also portrayed as a monster or dragon) and constructs the cosmos

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[1]I have addressed the exegetical, comparative and ethical aspects of the *imago Dei* in a three-part study, *The Liberating Image: The* Imago Dei *in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005).

[2]The most well known recent proponent of this view is Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988; rev. ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), esp. Preface and ch. 1.

out of her corpse. Gunkel then proceeded to note a wide variety of biblical poetic texts in which the *Chaoskampf* could be found, from the Psalms, through Job, to the prophets, right up to the book of Revelation (especially ch. 12).[3] And ever since Gunkel's work, the presence of the combat myth in the Bible (particularly the Old Testament) has been evident to biblical scholars.

While the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* is undoubtedly an important source for understanding the combat myth, it is unlikely that it is the most immediate source for most instances of the combat myth in the Old Testament. Most scholars today hold to a probable Canaanite (rather than a Babylonian) origin for the biblical combat myth. It is found in the cuneiform texts from Ras Shamra (ancient Ugarit) that came to light in the first half of the twentieth century. Not only is Ugaritic a closer sister language to Hebrew than Akkadian (the language of Babylon and Assyria), but the biblical YHWH is said in a variety of texts to have conquered (or that he will conquer) many of the same "enemies" mentioned in the Ugaritic literature.

Thus, for example, in Ugaritic mythology Baal vanquishes a primordial enemy known variously as Prince Sea and Judge River, with the result that the order of the world is either founded or restored.[4] Following this battle, Baal comes to dwell in the temple/palace that is built for him in celebration of his victory over the chaotic forces. In the Old Testament, Sea and River (or Sea and Jordan) occur as parallel terms in the context of the combat myth in texts such as Pss 89:25 (Heb 89:26), 114:3, 5; and Nah 1:4, and the Song of the Sea in Exod 15 combines the victory at the Red Sea (15:1–12) with God coming to rest in his sanctuary in the promised land (15:13–19).

This motif of the conquest of watery enemies, however, is rarely used in Scripture to denote God's creation of the world. More typically, the mythological waters allude either to historical enemies whom God has vanquished or will vanquish (as in Pss 18:15–17, 65:7, 144:7; and Isa 17:12–13) or to the Red Sea through which the Israelites passed at the exodus (as in Ps 77:16–20, 106:9, 114:3, 5; and Isa 51:10; cf. Hab 3:8). Indeed, the Song of the Sea (Exod 15) contains an interesting twist on this motif, in that God does not battle the waters at all, but uses them as his instrument against an historical opponent, the Egyptian army led by pharaoh.

Besides battling the sea/waters, God is also depicted in the Old Testament as engaged in conflict with various beasts or monsters usually associated with water, some with specific names such as Leviathan or Rahab. Thus we find Isa 27:1 describing Leviathan (*liwyātān*) as a serpent that God will one day vanquish. This beast is mentioned (not always in the context of a combat myth) also in Pss 74:14 and 104:26; Job 3:8 and 41:1–34 (Heb

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[3]Herman Gunkel, "The Influence of Babylonian Mythology upon the Biblical Creation Story," ch. 1 in *Creation in the Old Testament*, ed. by Bernhard W. Anderson, Issues in Religion and Theology 6 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 25–52. Abridged and translated by Charles A. Muenchow from Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit: Eine religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung über Gen 1 und Ap Joh 12* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1895).

[4]This depends on whether the conquest of chaos in the Baal myths is genuinely cosmogonic (referring to the founding of the world) or merely pertains to the preservation and renewal of the annual cycle of nature.

40:25–41:26), and is usually understood by biblical scholars as the Hebrew version of the seven-headed water serpent known from the Baal myths as *ltn* (usually vocalized as *lôtān*). Beyond the philological similarity of the names, Leviathan in Isaiah 27:1 and *lôtān* in the Baal myth are each described as a "fleeing" and "twisting" (or "crooked") serpent (the Ugaritic and Hebrew words used are precise cognates). And Leviathan's "heads" are even mentioned in Ps 74:14.

Unlike Leviathan, however, no known parallel has so far turned up in ancient Near Eastern literature for Rahab. Although the term sometimes designates Egypt, as in Isa 30:7 and Ps 87:4, Rahab is clearly a serpent in Job 26:12, and is mentioned in the context of the combat myth also in Job 9:13; Isa 51:9; and Ps 89:10 (Heb 89:11), with the term occurring in the plural in Ps 40:4 (Heb 40:5), usually translated as proud or arrogant ones. In some texts, YHWH's mythological adversary or enemy is not named, but designated by the more general term *tannîn* (often translated as "dragon"), as in Job 7:12; Isa 27:1, 51:19; Ezek 29:3 and 32:2, with the plural *tannînîm* ("dragons") occurring in Ps 74:13.

As with God's battle with the mythological waters, most of the references to God's defeat of these various monsters are not associated with creation, but rather describe God's historical judgment on foreign military or political powers. The clearest references are found in the oracles against the nations in Ezekiel and Jeremiah. Thus Ezek 29:2–7 and 32:2–4 portray the Egyptian Pharaoh as a great water-monster (*tannîn*) whom God will pull out of the Nile with hooks or haul up with a net. Likewise, Jer 51:34 pictures king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon as a sea serpent swallowing Israel and 51:44 describes Bel (that is, Marduk) as forced to disgorge what he has swallowed (a usage that hints at the near functional identity of the king and the god in Babylon).

CREATION-BY-COMBAT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

While I do not deny that creation-by-combat occurs in the Old Testament, it is important to note that this motif is not nearly as common as many biblical scholars have claimed.[5] The majority of putative creation-by-combat texts turn out, on close inspection, to refer either to some intra-historical (or eschatological) conflict described in mythological language or to the non-conflictual containment of the primordial waters at creation. The tendency of biblical scholars to see creation-by-combat in texts where it is not obviously present is a legacy of the form criticism of Herman Gunkel—both because of his influential comparison of *Chaoskampf* texts in the Bible and in the ancient Near East and because of the very assumptions of form criticism as a comparative discipline. Whereas form criticism is predicated on the similarity and constancy of leitmotifs found in quite different texts (even from different cultures), no two texts simply replicate the same motif in exactly the

[5]I address the issue of the misreading of creation and combat myth texts at greater length in *The Liberating Image*, part 3.

same manner.[6] To assume that they do is to fall into the trap that James Barr calls the fallacy of "illegitimate totality transfer."[7] It is thus a methodological fallacy to assume that the mere presence of the combat myth in a biblical text means that it should be read as creation-by-combat or that any creation text that draws on the theme of God dividing or separating primordial waters must refer to a primordial battle. While we should certainly not ignore the embeddedness of individual texts in larger patterns of meaning (including shared motifs such as the combat myth), it is nevertheless important that we read each text for its own specificity and particularity—its "actuality," as James Muilenburg puts it.[8]

Although the vast majority of biblical texts that utilize the combat myth do not designate creation, but rather God's struggle with, and judgment on, various political empires either in the historical past or in the eschatological future, there are three rather clear creation-by-combat texts in the Old Testament. These are Job 26:7–14, Pss 74:12–17 and 89:5–14 (Heb 89:6–15). These poetic texts each portray God's creation of the world and the founding of cosmic order as issuing from the divine conquest of a primordial opponent or enemy which is variously identified using the parallelism characteristic of Hebrew poetry. In Job 26 the opponent is the sea/Rahab/the twisting serpent, in Ps 74 it is the sea/Leviathan/*tannînîm* and in Ps 89 it is the sea/Rahab/your enemies.

In contrast to Job 26, which cites the combat myth to evoke awe concerning the mystery of God, Psalms 74 and 89 clearly illustrate sociopolitical functions of the combat myth that are well known from the ancient Near East. That is, they link creation-by-combat in the divine realm with human institutions (and human power) on earth, and are thus directly relevant to our topic. Whereas Ps 74 appeals to the combat myth in connection with the Jerusalem temple (which has been destroyed), Ps 89 connects the myth to the Davidic monarchy (which is in crisis). Both psalms are laments and may come from the very beginning of the exile, when the temple and the monarchy (both institutional signs of Israel's election) came to an end.

Psalm 74 calls on God to "Remember Mount Zion, where you came to dwell" (v. 2), and describes the appalling destruction of the Jerusalem temple and the continued scoffing of Israel's enemies. In contrast to the present situation of crisis, the psalmist proceeds to draw on the ancient tradition of the *Chaoskampf*, portraying a time when God was clearly the victor over his foes (vv. 12–14), and follows this by a description of creation (vv. 15–17).

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

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[6]As Gunkel himself well recognized. Many later practitioners of form criticism, however, have not been as careful as Gunkel.

[7]James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961) 218. Although Barr is here addressing illegitimate inferences from biblical word studies, his basic critique is relevant to the issue at hand.

[8]James Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *JBL* 88 (1969) 18.

15 You cut openings for springs and torrents;
you dried up ever-flowing streams.
16 Yours is the day, yours also the night;
you established the luminaries and the sun.
17 You have fixed all the bounds of the earth;
you made summer and winter.

The description of creation-by-combat in this psalm functions as a paradigm of "salvation" in times "of old" when God asserted his kingship over primordial opponents (v. 12) and calls God to act salvifically once again by defeating Israel's enemies in the present. Cosmic conquest of a primordial foe thus sets a precedent for the historical conquest of political and military enemies.

Particularly significant, although only implicit in the psalm, is the connection between the combat myth and temple building. Just as the conclusion of Baal's battles with his opponents (in the Ugaritic myths) results in the construction of his temple/palace, presumably if YHWH has once more defeated the forces of chaos, thus re-enacting the primordial battle in history, the culmination of the victory would be God coming to rest in his royal sanctuary in Zion. The implied outcome of the new battle would be a new temple. Israel's sacred historical cosmos would once again be secure.

Psalm 89 is even more instructive about the sociopolitical function of the combat myth in ancient Israel. Like Ps 74, this psalm links God's primordial victory with the possibility of a new victory in history against Israel's enemies (implied in 89:46–51). In Ps 89, however, the cosmic battle is connected not with the temple, but with the monarchy. Here God's primordial combat against the forces of chaos serves to legitimate the power and validity of the Davidic king, who functions as God's image on earth.

The psalm begins by extolling YHWH's steadfast love and faithfulness, which are grounded in the primordial victory over chaos (1–18). The psalm then recounts YHWH's (supposedly) unbreakable, eternal covenant with David (19–37), contrasting this with the crisis of the Davidic monarchy, which testifies to the fact that the covenant is in fact broken (38–51).

What is most illuminating here is the parallel between how God is described in the combat myth section of the psalm and the description of the Davidic king which follows this section. In vv. 5–8 YHWH is praised as incomparable among the gods or heavenly beings.

5 Let the heavens praise your wonders, O LORD,
your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones.
6 For who in the skies can be compared to the LORD?
Who among the heavenly beings is like the LORD
7 a God feared in the council of the holy ones,
great and awesome above all that are around him?
8 O LORD God of hosts,
who is as mighty as you, O LORD?
Your faithfulness surrounds you.

This incomparability is then interpreted in terms of God's victory over the primordial forces of chaos, by which the cosmos was founded (vv. 9–14).

9 You rule the raging of the sea;
when its waves rise, you still them.
10 You crushed Rahab like a carcass;
you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.
11 The heavens are yours, the earth also is yours;
the world and all that is in it—you have founded them.
12 The north and the south—you created them;
Tabor and Hermon joyously praise your name.
13 You have a mighty arm;
strong is your hand, high your right hand.
14 Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne;
steadfast love and faithfulness go before you.

After the description of the creation-by-combat comes a brief stanza (vv. 15–18) extolling the blessedness of Israel for having this warrior as their God. The next line (v. 19) begins by stating: "Then (*'az*) you spoke in a vision to your faithful one" and continues with an expansion of the narrative account of the Davidic covenant found in 2 Sam 7 (the text upon which this psalm obviously depends). Quite unlike the narrative account of the origin of the Israelite monarchy in 1 Sam 8 (where the monarchy is a late institution, historically speaking, and Saul, not David, is the first king), the mythical telescoping of events in Ps 89 portrays the election of David as the next event immediately after the creation battle. This certainly warrants Richard J. Clifford's comment that "The psalm regards the founding of the house of David as part of the foundation of the world just as several Mesopotamian cosmogonies list the king and the temple as things created at the beginning."[9]

When God's relationship with David (and the line of Davidic kings) is then elaborated, the description goes considerably beyond the account of the Davidic covenant found in 2 Sam 7. The "steadfast love" and the "secure" kingdom that God promised David in the Samuel narrative (2 Sam 7:15–16), reflected in the recurring use of "steadfast love" and "faithfulness" throughout the psalm, are here explained specifically in terms of the *Chaoskampf*.[10] Not only will God defeat the king's foes, who represent the forces of chaos (Ps 89:20–24), but the king himself is described, in terms reminiscent of ancient Near Eastern royal ideology as the chosen representative of the divine on earth. While Ps 89:6 had claimed that none of the heavenly beings could be compared to YHWH, who surpassed them all by virtue of his conquest of primordial chaos, vv. 25–27 suggest there is one on earth who is indeed God's image (since, like God, he controls the mythological waters).

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[9]Clifford, "Creation in the Psalms," in *Creation in the Biblical Traditions*, ed. by Richard J. Clifford and John J. Collins, CBQMS 24 (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1992) 63.

[10]Whereas "steadfast love" in 2 Sam 7:15 appears in both the singular (*ḥesed*) and the plural (*ḥasdîm*) in Ps 89, "faithfulness" in the psalm translates *'ĕmunâ*, the noun that is cognate to *ne'ĕman* "secure" which appears as *ne'man* in 2 Sam 7:16.

Thus YHWH says of David:

I will set his hand on the sea
and his right hand on the rivers.
He shall cry to me, "You are my Father,
my God, and the Rock of my salvation!"
I will make him the firstborn,
the highest of the kings of the earth (Ps 89:25–27).

The king is both elevated to the status of God's chosen son and replicates in his own person the primordial victory over chaos. As Jon Levenson explains, "It is now the Davidic throne that guarantees cosmic stability, the continuation of the order established through primeval combat. In Psalm 89, as in the *Enuma Elish*, the bond between the exaltation of the deity and the imperial politics of his earthly seat of power is patent. David is YHWH's vicar on earth."[11] Psalm 89 thus illustrates very well the function of the creation-by-combat theme to legitimate the monarchy, via a motif remarkably like the *imago Dei*. Indeed, the term "highest" (*'elyôn*), used of the Davidic king in v. 27, may also indicate the ancient Near Eastern notion of the king's affinity/likeness to the divine, since *'elyôn* is used of God "Most High" in Genesis 14:18, 19, 22, in connection with Melchizedek, the Canaanite priest-king of Salem.

Psalms 2 and 110 also include this theme, the latter even drawing on the Melchizedek tradition. Both are royal psalms which mention YHWH's oath or decree elevating the king to elite status. Whereas Ps 2:7 describes the king's election or adoption as God's son ("I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, 'You are my son; today I have begotten you'"), Psalm 110:4 characterizes the elect king as the high priest of the Jerusalem cult ("The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek'"). Both psalms, furthermore, employ the combat myth (though not explicitly in connection with creation), in order to legitimate the monarchy. They portray YHWH together with the Davidic king (as divine father and earthly son) ruling from Zion and subduing Israel's enemies in a joint-conquest motif.

These two royal psalms, together with Pss 74 and 89, illustrate a well-known complex of ancient Near Eastern ideas concerning the mythic legitimation of human cultural institutions (temple and monarchy) on earth. The combat myth, especially when connected to creation, serves to ground the historical exercise of cultic and political/military power (by which the human world is ordered) in God's primordial ordering of the cosmos.

THE ETHICAL PROBLEM OF CREATION-BY-COMBAT

The primary question for us is whether the combat myth is a salutary or problematic

[11]Levenson, 22–23.

complex of ideas. According to Jon Levenson, the biblical combat myth should be understood in a positive light, since humans are, ultimately, the prime beneficiary of this primordial exercise of divine power. Among the many reasons he gives for valuing the combat myth, Levenson points out that God's primordial conquest of chaos results in the elimination of threats to the human community. Creation-by-combat, he explains, involves "the establishment of a benevolent and life-sustaining order, founded upon the demonstrated authority of the God who is triumphant over all rivals."[12]

But this raises the question: *Whose* life is sustained by this order? Richard Clifford has pointed out that when the combat myth is combined (in the ancient Near East or in the Bible) with a cosmogony, the resulting cosmos is (in his terminology) "ethnocentric."[13] Whereas a prominent feature of such cosmogonies (whether in *Enuma Elish* or the Psalms) is that they are concerned with the origin and founding of human society (a life-sustaining order, as Levenson puts it), Clifford explains that "the society in question is not the human race as such but a particular people or nation, e.g., Babylon, Israel."[14] The "world" that is founded by primordial combat is the world of some particular group, with their own limited interests.

Although such ethnocentrism might be relatively innocent if the group in question never encounters anyone who is different, the reality of other nations and ethnic groups leads to the pressing question of how these groups will relate to each other. Defining one's own people or nation as the normative and true humanity, whose origin is grounded in creation itself, entails that everyone else is relegated to the status of "other"—other than truly human, other than legitimate, other than normative—and thus regarded as inferior in status if not downright evil. Particularly when a people's national/ethnic identity is both grounded in creation and understood to be established by the conquest of chaos, threats to this identity must be vanquished by re-enacting the chaos battle against one's historical competitors, understood as enemies of righteousness.[15] Given this analysis, I suggest that Clifford's description of ancient cosmogonies founded by combat as "ethnocentric," although undoubtedly correct, is too tame. Such cosmogonies are not simply ethnocentric; they are inherently competitive, even violent and militaristic.

The Babylonian version of the combat myth (*Enuma Elish*) clearly illustrates this point, especially when its popularity in the sixth century is linked with the rise of the Neo-Babylonian empire. Paul Ricoeur, in his masterful study *The Symbolism of Evil*, has discerned how the primordial act of violent cosmos-making in *Enuma Elish* becomes the mythic legitimation of Neo-Babylonian imperial expansionism. The king, as the image of

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[12]Ibid., 47.
[13]Clifford, 59.
[14]Ibid.
[15]This means that power is here conceived of as a *zero-sum game*, and thus can never be shared. Since power—like cosmos or order—is a finite quantity or scarce commodity, victory is always at someone else's expense. The success of one group or person thus *requires* the defeat of others. The creation-by-combat theme thus legitimates a fundamental us/them distinction, with only a win/lose alternative.

Marduk, vanquishes the enemies of Babylon, who are regarded as the historical embodiments of the chaos monster.[16] Through a theology of holy war, Babylon's defeat of its enemies establishes a social and political cosmos in historical time, comparable to the god Marduk's establishment of the broader cosmos in mythical time.

Texts like Pss 2 and 110 do not explicitly link the combat motif with creation, but they do provide divine legitimation for nationalistic (perhaps even imperial) military aspirations in ancient Israel. Such texts raise the question of whether it makes any significant difference if the combat myth is used in connection with creation or with history. Do not both suggest that violence is God's characteristic action, thus legitimating human violence in the world? Indeed, Levenson suggests that "too much can be made of the distinction between the myth *with* creation and the myth *without* creation."[17]

On the contrary, however, I think this is a crucial distinction. The use of a "historicized" combat myth to describe a particular historical event (like the exodus) makes no particular assumptions about the primordial or normative character of violence or evil. Rather, evil is treated as an intra-historical reality, without assigning it ontological status.

Creation-by-combat, on the other hand, ontologizes evil, and assumes it is equally primordial with God and goodness. It may be even more primordial, as in *Enuma Elish*, where the older gods are the locus of chaos, while order, represented by the younger gods, is later. But not only is evil (in the form of chaos) given primordial status. The conquest of this evil/chaos to found the world order enshrines violence as the divinely chosen method for establishing goodness. Ricoeur's explanation is particularly illuminating:

> It will be seen that human violence is thus justified by the primordial violence. Creation is a victory over an Enemy older than the creator; that Enemy, immanent in the divine, will be represented in history by all the enemies whom the king in his turn, as servant of the god, will have as his mission to destroy. Thus Violence is inscribed in the origin of things, in the principle that establishes while it destroys.[18]

An important exploration of the sociopolitical implications of the creation-by-combat motif in contemporary society may be found in Pedro Trigo's profound study of creation theology from a Latin American liberation perspective, *Creation and History*.[19] In a particularly insightful section entitled "From Chaos and Cosmos to Faith in Creation,"[20] Trigo persuasively demonstrates that the same basic chaos/cosmos polarization that functioned in ancient Babylon undergirds various geopolitical and ideological splits in the contemporary world, both within and between nations and groups of nations, especially between the wealthy and the poor of the world.[21] Trigo has in mind such ideological polarizations as

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[16]Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. by Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon, 1969), Part 2, ch. 1: "The Drama of Creation and the 'Ritual' Vision of the World," esp. 194–98.

[17]Levenson, 12 (his emphases).

[18]Ricoeur, 182–83.

[19]Pedro Trigo, *Creation and History*, tr. by Robert R. Barr, Theology and Liberation Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991).

[20]Ibid., 69–110. This section consists of chs. 3 and 4.

[21]Ibid., esp. 73–79.

North/South, East/West, Capitalist/Communist, Industrialized World/Developing World, where the split replicates the chaos/cosmos scheme (that is, where the security and well-being of one member of the polarization is thought to be of primary importance and is understood as threatened in some way by the other).

Contemporary versions of this chaos/cosmos polarization, like the Babylonian combat myth, accept the polarization as inevitable. Goodness is not primordial. "Violence is original, primordial," explains Trigo. "Chaos comes before cosmos, and abides at its heart still; therefore, it cannot be transposed."[22]

The result of taking the chaos/cosmos model as constitutive of reality is that cosmos, or righteousness, is understood to exist only in eternal struggle against chaos.[23] "In a chaos-cosmos setting, the only salvation is a precarious one, never definitive, always under threat—and hence militant, sectarian, and self-repressive."[24] Life thus consists in ideological and political warfare against those regarded as one's enemies, who are demonized and stripped of their humanity.[25] This is Trigo's assessment of the oppressive function of the Western, North-Atlantic worldview from the perspective of the marginalized (those identified with chaos) in Latin America.

Whereas in the ancient Near East the king is authorized to enact the primordial combat in the historical present against the forces of chaos, the combat myth does not strictly require a monarchy. In the contemporary world, where human agency is more widely diffused, a democratized *imago Dei* combined with the us/them framework of the chaos/cosmos scheme may harbor significant potential for the legitimation of human violence at many levels.

Indeed, Trigo explains that the combat myth not only legitimates the violence of those in power, but is a pervasive temptation for marginalized groups seeking liberation from oppression. Trigo suggests it is a particular temptation of some base communities and liberation theologians in Latin America "to 'buy' the chaos-versus-cosmos schema, and simply throw in our lot with the excluded, chaotic member."[26] In this understanding of the myth, participants undergo what we might call a Nietzschean "transvaluation of values," resulting in the valorization of the chaotic marginalized and the demonization of those who stand for false order.[27] The violent suppression of otherness, in other words, can be rooted not only in an attempt to protect one's existing privilege, but also in an attempt to exact recompense for being victimized and disenfranchised by those in power. The tragic result of this reversal of the chaos-cosmos scheme is the legitimation of perpetual revolution and continued violence, indeed terror, in the name of the never-ending liberation struggle.

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[22]Ibid., 80.
[23]This would explain Levenson's strange attraction to Hegel's master-slave dialectic as a way of articulating his claim that God *needs* a worthy opponent to subdue in order to demonstrate his mastery (Levenson, xxv, 27, 140, 160, n. 1).
[24]Trigo, 80.
[25]Ibid., 80–84.
[26]Ibid., 79.
[27]Ibid., 80, 86.

It is significant that Trigo, who has seen firsthand the oppressive effects of the combat myth in Latin America, posits what he calls an "atheism with respect to the divinity of the chaos/cosmos setting."[28] As a matter of principle, he declares, "I cannot assign the name reality to what my faith tells me is a distortion of reality."[29] Acknowledging that reality is often experienced in terms of chaos/cosmos polarizations, Trigo is nevertheless unwilling to grant this experience primordial or sacred status, explaining that "we cannot accept that this polarized setting should express the original constitution of reality. Consequently, neither can we place ourselves at either term of any of these polarizations."[30]

Instead, the entire chaos/cosmos framework must be challenged. The only adequate answer to this false ideological polarization, says Trigo, is faith in God as Creator, particularly as articulated in Gen 1.

THE DISTINCTIVE VISION OF GENESIS 1

It has long been recognized by biblical scholars that the creation account in Gen 1 draws on ancient Near Eastern creation motifs—many of which are found in *Enuma Elish*—in a way that articulates a distinctive vision of reality.[31] In this vision, God's relationship to the world predates the origin of violence, which is portrayed as beginning with human disobedience in Gen 3. Whether or not Gen 1 is intentionally polemical against *Enuma Elish*, a close reading of the text discloses three crucial dimensions of this creation account that directly contradict the *Chaoskampf* myth.

The first dimension of the account that contradicts the *Chaoskampf* is the role given to the traditional chaotic elements from the ancient Near Eastern combat myths. The primordial ocean (*tĕhôm*) in Gen 1:2 and the waters on the second and third days of creation are not portrayed as God's mythological enemies. The deep is no threat and so God does not need to fight it, though God does separate or divide the waters for various cosmic structures to emerge.

But not only are the waters thoroughly demythologized in Genesis 1, so are the sea monsters or dragons (*tannînîm*) in v. 21. Although *tannîn* (in the singular or plural) is often paired with Leviathan or Rahab in biblical poetic texts and treated as YHWH's mythological adversary, this is certainly not the meaning of the term in Gen 1. On the contrary, here the *tannînîm* are, to use Gunkel's words, "transformed into a remarkable sort of fish, which is to be included among other created beings."[32] In Gen 1 even the dragons are part

[28]Ibid., 84.
[29]Ibid., xviii.
[30]Ibid., 81.
[31]Genesis 1 shares with the entire Primeval History (Gen 1–11) an unusual indebtedness to Mesopotamian literary and mythical traditions, which are utilized for the purpose of critique. See Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, part 2.
[32]Gunkel, 49.

of God's peaceable kingdom.

The second dimension of the Genesis text which clearly distinguishes it from creation-by-combat is the obvious ease with which God creates in contrast to Marduk's bloody struggle against a primordial enemy. This ease is suggested by the immediate and unproblematic response of creatures to God's commanding fiats. The typical pattern of divine command (for example, "let there be light" or "let the waters be separated") followed by an execution report ("and there was light," or "and it was so") pictures God as encountering no resistance in creating the world. God commands and creation obeys God's every word. To put it differently, God rules willing subjects, who do not have to be coerced or subdued.

Indeed, this is a ruler who does not command, so much as *invite* creatures to respond to his will. This invitational character of God's creative fiats is indicated by the fact that they are not technically imperatives at all, but Hebrew jussives (which have no exact counterpart in English). As Eugene Roop explains, the force of the Hebrew jussive can range "from the very strong (almost a command) to the very soft (almost a wish)" and "always possesses a voluntary element."[33] Whether we read the rhetorical intent of these jussives more forcefully as God's commands (to which there is no resistance), analogous with the sovereign decrees of a king, or, following Walter Brueggemann, as God's gracious "summons" or "permission" for creatures to exist,[34] we are certainly very far removed from the *Chaoskampf* motif. In Roop's words: "Creation comes by divine direction, not by a dictator's demand."[35] The ease of creation—indicated both by the jussives and by the immediate compliance of the creatures—is a prominent rhetorical feature of Gen 1, reflected even in the gentle, repetitive cadences of the text, which progressively build to a climax. Unlike a genuine narrative, Gen 1 contains not a trace of plot tension or resolution, since there is no evil to be resisted or overcome.

The third rhetorical indicator which differentiates Gen 1 from the combat myth is God's evaluation of each stage of the creative process as "good" (*ṭôb*) and in vv. 31 of the entire finished product as "very good" (*ṭôb mĕ'od*). The word *ṭôb* has in this context at least a twofold connotation, aesthetic and ethical. The cosmos is "good" in two senses: it is both pleasing to God, as a beautiful, well-constructed world, and it is evaluated positively since it enacts God's will and is not recalcitrant or rebellious.

John Day explains that, in contrast to a primordial battle, creation in Gen 1 is simply "a job of work."[36] God is pictured here not as warrior, but as craftsman or artisan. Or, in Levenson's terms, this is "creation without opposition."[37] On this point, nothing could be further removed from *Enuma Elish*, which is filled with bloody battles between the gods culminating in Marduk's dismembering of Tiamat.

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[33]Eugene F. Roop, *Genesis*, Believers Bible Commentary (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1987) 27.
[34]Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, IBC (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982) 30.
[35]Roop, 27.
[36]Day, 1, 49, 52, 61.
[37]This is the title of Levenson's chapter on Ps 104 (53–65), a phrase he also uses to characterize the Gen 1 creation account (127).

If a theology of holy war with disastrous implications for human society grows naturally out of the worldview exemplified by *Enuma Elish,* a creation which is originally "very good" sustains an entirely different understanding of society.

GENESIS 1 AS A NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK

These differing views of creation underly the contrasting comments made by Trigo and Levenson about how evil is to be treated. Commenting on the implications of the combat myth, Levenson claims it is a mistake to regard goodness as basic to all that exists. Rather, he explains, "Some things exist that ought not to, and these deserve to be blasted from the world."[38] Levenson is, admittedly, writing before the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and his comment is about God's (not our) eradication of evil. Nevertheless, against his best intentions, Levenson's comment is fully consistent with the stance of al-Qaeda and many terrorist groups in the world today as well as other nationalistic uses of power. It is certainly rooted, as he himself recognizes, in the logic of the chaos/cosmos scheme, which requires that all threats to the cosmic order be suppressed or eliminated.

While Trigo does not deny the reality of the struggle against historical evil, he nevertheless claims that the goodness of the "almighty-God-with-us" (his phrase) is more primordial than either evil or the struggle against evil.[39] And to illustrate that the "us" in the above phrase must not be understood in a narrow, partisan or ethnocentric manner (but in some sense must include even our historical opponents), Trigo makes a remarkable claim for a liberation theologian writing in the 1980s. He explains that Ronald Reagan, although denounced by many supporters of liberation theology for the violence he perpetrated in various Latin American countries, is nevertheless "a person for whom one ought to pray." He is even "a candidate for salvation."[40]

Trigo can make this claim because he distinguishes radically between creation as the conquest of chaos, which absolutizes one side of a historical struggle and demonizes the other, and creation in Gen 1, which relativizes both sides of all historical struggles vis-à-vis the sovereign and transcendent Creator. It becomes evident, then, that the contrasting views of Trigo and Levenson stem from the divergent models of creation they take to be normative. These models appeal to different interpretations of God's power in creation, and they have significantly different ethical implications for humanity made in God's image.

Granted that Gen 1 constitutes a distinctive creation account without cosmogonic conflict, what are we to make of creation-by-combat texts in the biblical canon? Do such texts constitute a different vision of reality that is in tension with the cosmogony of Gen 1?

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[38]Levenson, xxiv.
[39]Trigo, 84.
[40]Ibid., 86–87.

In addressing this question, readers of Scripture as canon ought to face squarely not only the presence of cosmogonic conflict in those texts where it genuinely occurs, but also the overwhelming violence that pervades the Bible—from the holy wars of Israel against the Canaanites (at God's command), through the plethora of violent incidents attributed either to God or to God's people in the historical books. Moreover the widespread patriarchal social structure that underlies the biblical text certainly constitutes a form of systemic violence against women.

Nevertheless, while admitting the presence of much that is ethically problematic in the pages of Scripture (including cosmogonic conflict), I propose that we take seriously the canonical placement of Gen 1 as the prologue or preface to the biblical canon. Even Levenson, despite his tendency to claim that the *Chaoskampf* is the standard biblical way of depicting God's sovereignty, is constrained to admit that the Gen 1 creation account (which does not contain cosmogonic conflict) "now serves as the overture to the entire Bible, dramatically relativizing the other cosmogonies."[41]

But the creation account of Gen 1 does not just relativize the creation-by-combat motif. Rather, by its alternative depiction of God's non-violent creative power at the start of the biblical canon, Gen 1 signals the Creator's original intent for shalom and blessing at the outset of human history, prior to the rise of human (or divine) violence. As the opening canonical disclosure of God for readers of Scripture, Gen 1 constitutes a normative framework by which we may judge all the violence that pervades the rest of the Bible.

If the portrayal of God's exercise of non-violent creative power in Gen 1 is taken in conjunction with its claim that humanity is made in the image of *this* God, this has significant implications for contemporary ethics. This opening canonical disclosure of God and humanity constitutes, not only a normative framework for interpreting the rest of Scripture, but also a paradigm or model for exercising of human power in the midst of a world filled with violence.

[41]Levenson, 100.