

## **God of the Exodus: Light from Botticelli's *Venus and Mars***

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This essay examines how ancient Israel's traumatic and polytheistic past left definite scarring upon characterizations of God in Exodus. Drawing on Bernhard Lang's discussion of "trifunctional theory" of deity as applied to ancient Israel's polytheistic context, the essay asserts that fractured narratives in Exodus signify a messiness for monotheism: "God" signifies a profoundly complex character (e.g., God is healer yet erupts as destroyer). The essay concludes by arguing that fractured characterizations of God perform similarly to Botticelli's allegorical depiction of *Venus and Mars*, balancing three natures of deity. Aesthetic appreciation of God's complex performance is helpful for making sense of the fractured-ness of both God and text in Exodus.

**Keywords:** Exodus, Moses, Botticelli, monotheism, polytheism

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### **Introduction**

Considering the characterization of God<sup>1</sup> in the book of Exodus in light of Sandro Botticelli's masterful painting *Venus and Mars* (c. 1483)<sup>2</sup> might seem an exegetical misstep, especially in light of God's command to keep other gods out of his face.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, Botticelli's allegorical portrayal of the goddess and her lover helps to illuminate discordant impressions of God in Exodus. God performs in the text as both healer and destroyer; God is compassionate and wrathful; God leads out his people yet breaks out against them. Fractured characterizations of

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<sup>1</sup> This essay predominantly employs the traditional term "God" (capital G) to implicitly highlight an aspect of monotheism's conceptual murkiness. YHWH is substituted for "the LORD" of the NRSV, the English translation employed throughout unless otherwise noted. Apologies are also offered for occasions of potentially offensive gender-exclusive language.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix for this image.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 20:3, playfully (mis)translated here as "For you, you shall have no other god before my face," which is an admittedly loose rendering of לֹא יְהִי־לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֶרִים עַל־פָּנֵי ("You shall have no other gods before me").

God that emerge in the retelling of these stories reflect ancient Israel's experience of polytheism as well as the trauma they endured. This essay examines how Israel's traumatic and polytheistic past left definite scarring upon the characterization of God in the text; it then offers salve for the scars by asserting that the narratives perform similarly to Botticelli's allegorical depiction of *Venus and Mars*, balancing three natures of deity.

To better frame a canvas for exploring depiction of the divine in Exodus with an eye to Botticelli, consider the several dualities explosively displayed yet artfully contained by *Venus and Mars*:

In the centre of the picture the view opens out to show a green meadow, a range of mountains shimmering in the distance, and a section of clear blue, cloudless sky. The foreground is filled with two semi-reclining figures, a young woman dressed in white on the left, and a young man asleep on the right. He is almost nude, covered only by a skillfully draped white cloth. . . . Four other, smaller figures also inhabit the rectangular picture space. They are indifferent to questions on clothing or nudity, for they are satyrs: mythological, faunlike creatures familiar from classical sources as Bacchus's wanton and often drunken companions. Naturally, these satyrs need no clothing, for their lower bodies are not human, but furry and hooved. . . . These mischievous little fellows are playing with some obviously dangerous and warlike objects. . . . Another satyr to the right is blowing into a large shell which he is holding up to the ear of the nude young man. . . . Here the accoutrements of war—helmet, armor, lance and sword—seen out of their usual combative context, clearly show that the recumbent male figure in this painting by Botticelli is Mars, the god of war. On the other hand, the clothed female figure opposite is not identifiable as Venus by virtue of her attributes, but . . . from the overall composition of the painting.<sup>4</sup>

Revelry and repose, sound and sleep, naked and clothed, watchful and oblivious, animal and human, feminine and masculine, war and love—such dualities explode from the canvas and are contained within its frame. As a Quattrocento Neoplatonic painter, "Botticelli did not operate in two worlds, secular and sacred, but in one, a Christian world for which [Plato's] *The Symposium* supplied the key."<sup>5</sup> In other words, the Classical myths and motifs Botticelli embodies in his art offer space for Christian reflection, as will be illustrated further on. The following attends to Exodus as a space for reflection about the nature of God.

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<sup>4</sup> Frank Zöllner, *Botticelli: Images of Love and Spring* (New York: Prestel, 1998), 17-19.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Gorrige, "Figuring the Resurrection: Botticelli as a Teacher of the Church," *Theology Today* 55, no. 4 (January 1999): 577.

After exploring discordant dualities in the God of Exodus, this essay returns to *Venus and Mars* to contemplate implications. Viewing “the overall composition of the painting” Exodus presents, readers begin to hope that unpredictable War will remain subdued and pacified beneath the watchful gaze of Love.

### **Lang and the Lord of Three Gifts**

Discordant impressions of God’s characterization in Exodus are partly sourced in the polytheistic world of the ancient Near East from which Israel’s monotheism eventually emerged. Bernhard Lang’s recent application of “trifunctional theory” to the analysis of biblical texts helps to reveal the extent to which “biblical literature shares fundamental notions with those surrounding nations,” since “ancient Hebrew culture has its basis in the antecedent high cultures.”<sup>6</sup> Within these cultures, Lang discerns evidence of a tripartite structuring of society: “According to this view, social life is based on harmonious cooperation between three social classes: the intellectuals or sages, the warriors, and the peasants,” with each group providing for a basic need of the society entire.<sup>7</sup> Yet the ancients not only structured human society in this way, but “deities and spirits were often organized according to this trifunctional pattern, for the same tripartite system underlies both the divine world and human society.”<sup>8</sup>

Within this observation, it is important to pay attention to the *function* served by each sphere of social action, whether human or divine: leadership and teaching is in the hands of intellectuals and sages, just as divine leadership is in the hands of a father-god; protection and fighting are the function of warriors, just as divine lords of war (both feminine and masculine) fight for the people; similarly, producing and supplying falls to the lower classes, just as fertility, bounty, and human well-being are the purview of a plethora of gods and goddesses. Lang simplifies his description of these three social functions by

<sup>6</sup> Lang appropriates the work of scholar Georges Dumézil, whose theory of the “three functions” of the deities of Indo-European civilizations provides a “simple yet powerful tool” for understanding the Hebrew God, biblical literature, and ancient Israel’s religion and culture. See Bernhard Lang, *The Hebrew God: Portrait of an Ancient Deity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), ix.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 3. Lang continues by asserting that, “The harmonious interaction and cooperation of the various social groups lead to what may be termed ‘tripartite completeness.’”

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 4. “In human society, the three components are teachers, warriors, and peasants; in religion, there are wise deities, gods of war, and demons promoting fertility. Each of the three agents, human or divine, has a particular mandate or . . . a certain function.”

naming them *wisdom*, *war*, and *wealth*. The significant point to notice is that gods and goddesses are named and recognized primarily as an aspect of function, based upon a tripartite system that mirrors human social structuring.

While discussion of the complicated development of Israel's monotheistic belief is outside the scope of this essay,<sup>9</sup> the point that polytheism (i.e., the existence of other gods) is assumed throughout the Exodus narrative should not be overlooked.<sup>10</sup> In the ancient Near Eastern context, the Hebrew God was one among numerous deities. As Smith states,

According to the story of the Bible, monotheism was not the original condition of the world. Instead, it stepped onto the world stage with the appearance of Israel. For when Israel's god, Yahweh, was revealed first to the patriarchs and then definitively to Moses and the Israelite people on Mount Sinai, the central moment in world history occurred: the revelation of the one God known by the one name of the Tetragrammaton. Thanks to the biblical picture, the monotheism of ancient Israel has been regarded as a revolution against the religious thought of its neighbors.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the monotheism that developed in Israel “was not a matter of evolution but of revolution,” a boundary-setting act distinguishing the One God from all other gods.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> For a significant and helpful work on the development of monotheism, see Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, 12:12, “On all the gods of Egypt I will execute my judgments: I am YHWH”; note the First Commandment (20:1), implying the existence of other deity; see especially 15:11, “Who is like you, O YHWH, among the gods?” and 18:11, “Now I know that YHWH is greater than all gods,” among other explicit examples. Consider Assmann, who asserts, “The original meaning of this idea [i.e., monotheism] is not that there is one god and no other, but that alongside the one True God, there are only false gods, whom it is strictly forbidden to worship. These are two different things. Asserting that there is only one god may be quite compatible with accepting, and even worshipping, other gods, so long as the relationship between god and gods is understood to be one of subordination, not exclusion. Exclusion is the decisive point, not oneness.

... The question is thus not whether the religion of ancient Israel was poly- or monotheistic, but whether the idea of monotheism can be found in the writings of the Old Testament, and whether individuals and groups who advocated this idea in a particular historical situation can be identified in historical reality. The Hebrew Bible is a polyphous text. For almost every voice there is a countervoice.” Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism*, trans. Robert Savage (Stanford: Stanford University, 2009), 34.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, 4.

<sup>12</sup> See Jan Assmann, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 107.

Nevertheless, Lang discerns in the biblical narratives the influence of polytheistic ideologies, the amniotic sac in which Israel was formed and which ruptured at her birth. Such influence is evidenced in characterizations of God that depict the tripartite functions of wisdom, war, and wealth. Concerning Israel's God, Lang writes,

Originally known by the name of Yahweh, he belonged with Zeus, Marduk, Mars, and Venus to the deities of the ancient world. Later, his devotees no longer used his name, for he had become, quite simply, God—the only god, the one who holds the universe in his hands and controls the course of history as well as the fate of the individual.<sup>13</sup>

Yet for Lang, the One God of Israel displays the characteristic functions embodied in a range of polytheistic deities; namely, the Hebrew God is a god who leads, protects, and provides, a god who *does it all*. Thus he characterizes Israel's God "as the Lord of Three Gifts."<sup>14</sup>

Israel's God is first and foremost a "Lord of Wisdom," a benign, wise ruler, who owns and directs the universe. God as the source and giver of wisdom establishes law and judges.<sup>15</sup> Israel's God is also a "Divine Warrior" who gives victory in war and is the essential agent of success on the battlefield. God as a warrior and deliverer rescues the people from the hand of the enemy, vanquishes on their behalf, yet also "shows himself a bellicose deity, prone to anger and destruction."<sup>16</sup> Finally, Israel's God is the ultimate source of life in all its positive meanings, caring both for animals and humans alike. God blesses both people and animals with the power to reproduce, is responsible for the health and general wellbeing of individuals, and provides prosperity and abundant harvest. Thus, Lang concludes, "When looking for a Hebrew term to denote the central activity of the Lord of the Animals, the Personal God, and the Lord of the Harvest, there is only one word that suggests itself: he 'blesses' (*berekh*)."<sup>17</sup>

Lang's characterization of God as "The Lord of Three Gifts" creates a monotheistic conundrum: If traces of polytheistic ideologies (i.e., the tripartite

<sup>13</sup> Lang., vii.

<sup>14</sup> By this title, Lang structures his book according to the tripartite functions of wisdom, war, and wealth, although the final "gift" is divided into divine roles, since the idea of "wealth" is multifaceted (e.g., life, wellbeing, productivity, and prosperity).

<sup>15</sup> Characterizations in this paragraph are heavily dependent upon Lang's descriptions of "five images of the Hebrew God," although I have conflated the final three for my purposes in this essay. See Lang, 12-14.

<sup>16</sup> Lang, 13.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

functions of the divine) are evident in the characterizations of God in Exodus, the conflation of these disparate functions as the actions of a single deity *fractures* the narrative by creating discordant impressions of God. Assmann describes the

price to pay for this form of inclusive monotheism that sees God in all gods, namely, the loss of personality and closeness with respect to the idea of God. The more all-encompassing the idea of God, the more God tends to fade into the impersonal remoteness of a Supreme Being or even into the abyss of negative theology.<sup>18</sup>

This, however, is not the price of monotheism in Exodus; rather, the price of monotheism is a fractured text. Characterizations of God in the stories of Exodus portray an *excess of personality* and, at times, an “in your face” *closeness* that disconcerts readers with contrasting juxtapositions and discordant presentations of divine character. The God of Exodus is robust, consuming, vicissitudinous, and inflamed by wrath and compassion.

At this point, then, analysis must shift from a behind-the-text exhumation of polytheistic remains to an examination of the text-as-it-is. Within the text, stories about the God of Israel *perform*; characterizations of God are like dancers who convey meaning both through unison and contrast of movement. However, the text of Exodus performs less like a chorus line and more like a dance-off. The question for analysis is, *What meanings do the discordant characterizations of God in Exodus convey by their fractured-ness?* To better understand the nature of the text-as-it-is, the following discussion employs Lang’s framework as a conceptual lens for examining specific characterizations of God in Exodus who embodies the tripartite functions of wisdom, war, and wealth (life).

### Characterizations of God in Exodus

*Lord of Wisdom.* God in Exodus is characterized as unquestionably sovereign, not only over Israel but over all the earth. Consider the depiction of God in 19:3-6:

Then Moses went up to God; YHWH called to him from the mountain, saying, ‘Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, **the whole earth is**

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<sup>18</sup> Assmann, 106.

**mine**, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.'

In multiple passages, God is portrayed as a benign and compassionate sovereign who *hears*, *remembers*, *looks upon*, and *takes notice of* oppressed Israel (cf. 2:24-25). Certainly, God is a divine king who feasts and drinks with and reveals himself to and allies himself with those on the mountain (cf. 24:9-11, a beautiful yet problematic passage,<sup>19</sup> especially when compared with the characterization of God in 19:21-25, in which God's breaking out against trespassers on the mountain seems uncontrollable).<sup>20</sup> God is the sovereign judge whose compassionate reign is depicted as timeless, for he is,

‘YHWH, YHWH,  
a God merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger,  
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,  
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,  
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,  
yet by no means clearing the guilty,  
but visiting the iniquity of the parents  
upon the children  
and the children’s children,  
to the third and the fourth generation’ (34:6-7).

God's sovereignty extends even over the human heart, for God hardens the heart of Pharaoh (cf. 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:8). Yet here arises a significant example of discordant characterizations: God is compassionate; God is sovereign. McCarthy asks a fair question of God's compassionate sovereignty when he wonders, “Why not a narrative of the God of Israel delivering his people through

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<sup>19</sup> The mountain meal is likely sourced from an ancient tradition and is in tension with surrounding texts that make explicit the deathly consequence for beholding God (cf. 33:20) or the frightening theophany of ch. 19. Of interest in this essay is the discordant characterization of God offered by the episode: here, no terrifying trumpet but rather dinner bells signal God's closeness to humanity. For recent discussion, see Bernard P. Robinson, "The theophany and meal of Exodus 24," *SJOT* 25, no. 2 (2011): 155-173.

<sup>20</sup> Of course, there is also 24:1-2, in which Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the elders are summoned to worship, yet only Moses is permitted to draw near to God; this passage also is difficult to reconcile with the subsequent benignity of the meal on the mountain with God.

softening Pharaoh's heart?"<sup>21</sup> Of course, demonstration of God's sovereignty over Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt is crucial to the narrative: God is Creator who pierces the dragon<sup>22</sup> and repulses chaotic waters as an act of new creation.<sup>23</sup> YHWH, YHWH's self-confession in 34:6-7 appropriately sustains the difficult tension between characterizations of God as compassionate and as sovereign judge; yet the collateral damage of people and livestock intended by the assertion "I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt . . . on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments" (12:12) can be difficult to reconcile with proclamations of sovereignty and compassion.

In line with Lang's trifunctional theory, God is also portrayed as the source and the giver of wisdom, for it is God who fills Bezalel and Oholiab with "divine spirit, with skill, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft" (35:31). The shining face of Moses is also a depiction of God as giver of illumination, knowledge, and wisdom, for,

When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; but whenever Moses went in before YHWH to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him (34:34-35).<sup>24</sup>

Accordingly, God is the ultimate lawgiver, the source of divine instruction. God gives the commandments and explains the tabernacle design; laws are "written with the finger of God" (31:18). Yet in the portrayal of God as both lawgiver and source of wisdom, another discordant characterization is discerned:

<sup>21</sup> Brian R. McCarthy, "The Characterization of YHWH, the God of Israel, in Exodus 1-15," in *Biblical Studies in Honor of Simon John De Vries*, ed. Simon John De Vries and J. Harold Ellens (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 9.

<sup>22</sup> See the description of Pharaoh as dragon and a compelling discussion of the exodus as co-opting an Egyptian myth of "repulsing the dragon" in Philippe Guillaume, "Metamorphosis of a Ferocious Pharaoh," *Biblica* 85, no. 2 (2004): 232-236.

<sup>23</sup> See his discussion of "Exodus and Creation" in Thomas B. Dozeman, *God at War: Power in the Exodus Tradition* (New York: Oxford University, 1996), 101-152.

<sup>24</sup> The veiling of Moses' radiant face bears similarities with other ancient Near Eastern traditions in which gods are givers of wisdom. Consider: "The type scene bears close resemblance to Mesopotamian stories of heavenly ascent. . . . Although the Mesopotamian texts involve the heavenly enthronement of a king, the parallels to Israelite tradition are striking: the king, who ascends to the realm of the gods, receives tablets of wisdom and thereby becomes a 'sage scribe.'" See discussion in Brian Britt, "Prophetic Concealment in a Biblical Type Scene," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (January 2002): 37.

God is portrayed as desiring an unembellished, unadorned altar, specifically commanding,

You need make for me only an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt-offerings and your offerings of well-being, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you. But if you make for me an altar of stone, do not build it of hewn stones; for if you use a chisel upon it you profane it. You shall not go up by steps to my altar, so that your nakedness may not be exposed on it' (20:24-26).

Yet later God intentionally empowers Bezalel and Oholiab with a divine spirit, with wisdom and skill to "make all that I have commanded," including two, elaborate, horned altars, one overlaid with bronze and one with pure gold (cf. 27:1-8; 37:25 ff.; 38:1 ff.). Janzen notes that the instructions of 20:24-26 stand in contrast with the "elaborate provision for worship in a sanctuary, including an altar highly crafted by artisans inspired by God" described in chapters 25—31. He explains the tension, saying,

This emphasizes the difference between the permitted local worship and the mandated central worship. In polytheistic religion, the local cults of a given god often became so distinctive from one another as to suggest different gods. Permitting local altars but prohibiting shaped stone altars may have served to inculcate and sustain the "oneness" of Yahweh.<sup>25</sup>

Or, perhaps the "oneness" of God is fractured by discordant commands: humble altars may be fine for some, but most gods and goddesses want bling.

*Divine Warrior.* The second function of Lang's "Lord of Three Gifts" is the divine warrior who fights for the people. Certainly, characterizations of God as warrior in Exodus are abundant and explicit. The Song of Moses (15:1-18) and the Song of Miriam (15:20-21) exalt God for glorious triumph over horse and rider, singing, "YHWH is a warrior; YHWH is his name" (15:3). It is not God's identification as a warrior that creates a discordant impression; rather, tension is generated by the *excessiveness* of God's violence. As McCarthy comments,

For one thing, if—if!—YHWH is going to use violence, we might expect him to do so with some precision, using a carefully focused minimum. Given that this is a

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<sup>25</sup> See J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 160.

'top-down' situation where the power-figure, anonymous Pharaoh, and he alone, makes decisions, we might expect to find some severe but temporary infliction of pain on him alone; followed when he finally yields by the application of some balm of Gilead. But this is not at all what we do find. Instead we hear of often brutal collective punishments which afflict the whole people of Egypt, a long series of them. And, we must ask: In this narrative, what have they done to merit such harsh treatment?<sup>26</sup>

The escalation of the plagues, eventually culminating in death throughout the entire land, in every household, is difficult to reconcile with a God "abounding in steadfast love." God fights on behalf of the people, stirring war in their hearts:

And Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the sword. Then YHWH said to Moses, 'Write this as a reminder in a book and recite it in the hearing of Joshua: I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.' And Moses built an altar and called it, YHWH is my banner. He said, 'A hand upon the banner of YHWH! YHWH will have war with Amalek from generation to generation' (17:13-16).

Yet of greatest significance is the recognition that God's own people are not quite safe from God's violence: consider the sudden, seemingly unprovoked attack on Moses somehow placated by Zipporah's blood offering (4:24-26), or the God who seems ready to destroy the people, saying, "If for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you" (33:5). Similarly, the characterization of God's very image before the people is overwhelming: "Now the appearance of the glory of YHWH was like a devouring fire on top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel" (24:17). As a warrior, God is *excessive*, abounding in wrath rather than *hesed*.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> McCarthy, 8.

<sup>27</sup> Here, it is significant to note the contrast of warrior (masculine) imagery with maternal (feminine) imagery of God in Exodus. Meyers notes: "The use of the epithet 'merciful' for God as the source of divine compassion is probably related to . . . maternal images. The adjective 'compassionate' (or 'merciful') and the noun 'compassion' (or 'mercy), as well as the verb 'to be compassionate, merciful,' all are related to the Hebrew word for 'womb' (*rehem*); and they all are used in relation to God more often than to humans in the Bible. Especially noteworthy in this regard is the oft-repeated credal statement of Exod 34:6-7 (cf. 33:19), which proclaims the abundant, unending, and steadfast nature of divine love. Such divine compassion evokes *uterine* imagery—God has powerful maternal love for Israel." See Carol Meyers, *Exodus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2005), 122-23.

*The Lord of Life and Blessing.* The final function of Lang's tripartite structure is embodied in the God who blesses, provides for, and secures prosperity for the people. One interesting example of this characterization in Exodus is that God "had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. And so they plundered the Egyptians" (12:36). God is also characterized as *healer* by saying,

'If you will listen carefully to the voice of YHWH your God, and do what is right in his sight, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am YHWH who heals you' (15:26).

God provides food and water as the people wander the wilderness (15:22-17:7). Perhaps one of the strongest characterizations of God as provider and sustainer is offered in God's reassurance that the covenant they make is one of blessing: "You shall worship YHWH your God, and I will bless your bread and your water; and I will take sickness away from among you. No one shall miscarry or be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days" (23:25-26).

According to Lang, the varied gods and goddesses who embody this third-level function (i.e., sustenance and provision) are much more intimately involved in the concrete matters of human life; in their "radical closeness to human life," such deities are even willing to live as and among humankind.<sup>28</sup> This aspect of God in Exodus is abundantly illustrated by God's presence with the people: through God's first appearance to Moses and the giving of the divine name; through God's guiding presence with the people as a pillar of cloud and fire; through God's terrifying descent upon the mountain; by God's compassionate descent and self-disclosure to Moses in 34; and in the cloud settling upon the tabernacle and the glory of YHWH filling the tent of meeting, God is characterized as a god who *goes out with* the people.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See discussion in Lang, 13.

<sup>29</sup> God's presence (God's glory, or "heaviness") dwelling upon the movable tabernacle is an image of God's willingness to go with the people. As House describes, "Evidence of this ongoing presence is the fact that a cloud of presence leads Israel to break camp and travel when necessary (40:36-38). Thus Yahweh not only dwells with the people; Yahweh also keeps the promise to go with Israel and eventually give them the promised land." See Paul House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 125. Conversely, however, some have noted God's presence as cloud and pillar of fire as a *distancing from* rather than nearness to the people. See, for example, Carey Walsh, "Where Did God Go? Theophanic Shift in Exodus," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 43, no. 3 (August 2013): 115-123.

At times, however, the characterization of God as one who is *close* to the people puts God too close for comfort. This is especially the case in the unusual episode of Zipporah and the “bridegroom of blood” (4:24-26). As Penchansky notes,

YHWH, a character in this brief narrative, behaves strangely. Virtually every interpreter must in some way account for this anomaly. When one examines the story cut loose from its context in Exodus and the Torah, one finds that the character of YHWH in the narrative appears limited, unreliable, and even hostile. This is not the God of Genesis 1, for instance—a God limitless in power and authority, an absolute monarch. Here God is more akin to the troll waiting under the bridge, or like Golum in J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, waiting in the shadows to attack nobility and steal what is good. When taken in its context in Exodus, the behavior in this passage is inconsistent with YHWH having just sent Moses on a mission. One marvels at how the same God would here attack that same man and his family, trying to kill him.<sup>30</sup>

In this episode, the characterization of God is a malevolent deity who “springs out into the middle of the road from behind a tree” with intent to kill.<sup>31</sup> God here is characterized as a deity placated by bloody ritual. The *closeness* of this God (perhaps manifested also as the *jealously* of 20:5 and 34:14) is uncomfortable and alarming, sharply contrasting with the *distance* of the deity at Sinai, where neither person nor beast (save Moses) may approach the mountain. A discordant impression of God in Exodus arises, which readers must either choose to ignore or to grapple with.<sup>32</sup>

*Interesting coincidences.* Before further considering the implications of discordant characterizations of God in Exodus, it will be interesting to notice an example of an apparent *conflation* of the tripartite functions of deity, episodes in which God is portrayed as simultaneously embodying the multiple functions of wisdom, war, and wealth. Consider the following multifaceted characterization of God, who says,

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<sup>30</sup> See David Penchansky, *What Rough Beast?: Images of God in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 73-74.

<sup>31</sup> See the interesting “story” Penchansky proposes for getting behind the meaning of this episode. Penchansky, 77-78.

<sup>32</sup> Although not in focus for this study, Jacob wrestling with a mysterious stranger (Gen. 32:22-31) offers an embodiment of grappling with the closeness of God.

I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Be attentive to him and listen to his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression; for my name is in him. But if you listen attentively to his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and a foe to your foes. When my angel goes in front of you, and brings you to the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, and I blot them out, you shall not bow down to their gods, or worship them, or follow their practices, but you shall utterly demolish them and break their pillars in pieces. You shall worship YHWH your God, and I will bless your bread and your water; and I will take sickness away from among you. No one shall miscarry or be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days. I will send my terror in front of you, and will throw into confusion all the people against whom you shall come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. And I will send the pestilence in front of you, which shall drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites from before you. I will not drive them out from before you in one year, or the land would become desolate and the wild animals would multiply against you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased and possess the land. I will set your borders from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates; for I will hand over to you the inhabitants of the land, and you shall drive them out before you. You shall make no covenant with them and their gods. They shall not live in your land, or they will make you sin against me; for if you worship their gods, it will surely be a snare to you (23:20-33).

In this passage, God is the sovereign who instructs and protects the people, issuing for them the laws and commandments they are to obey. God is also a mighty warrior who vanquishes the enemy, although the characterization in this passage is complex since God sends an angel before them who bears "his name." God also sends pestilence and terror before the people; God is "an enemy to your enemies and a foe to your foes." God is also the provider and sustainer, who blesses bread, water, and womb, giving health and wellbeing to the people. God goes with the people to bring them to the place promised, to help them increase and to possess the land. Such passages, perhaps, ease tension and the discord experienced by the text elsewhere, since here the characterization of God offers "tripartite completeness." Yet even here, the *functions* of God seem discordant: blessing upon blessing from the sovereign God for the people, and terror upon terror from the warrior God unleashed upon the enemy. This observation again raises the question, *If the whole earth belongs to God, why not provide a softer way to bring the people into their promised inheritance?* Nurturing, sovereign, terrorizer—the God of Exodus is a complex character.

## Traumatic Fractures

Here, we return the question, *What meanings do the discordant characterizations of God in Exodus convey by their fractured-ness?* Of course, one possible answer is that the presence of discordant texts means, for example, that memories of polytheistic experience and deep-rooted ideologies are bleeding through the stories making a bloody mess of any attempt to educe from the text a consistent characterization of God. Based on the discordant characterizations of God in Exodus (and elsewhere), God has been diagnosed by certain professionals as suffering from Bipolar I or a Narcissistic Personality Disorder.<sup>33</sup> Such struggles to make sense of God as presented by the text seem to neglect the text's *performance*, i.e., that the text-as-it-is performs to convey meaning both by unison and by contrast. Psychoanalyzing performers as they play might yield insight, but if the performance itself is neglected, aesthetic sensibility is lost as well. As horrifying and disconcerting as the characterizations about God in Exodus seem to be, together they perform to generate aesthetic, sensual experiences in readers that perhaps are as meaningful for understanding the text as are the words of the stories the text embodies. Penchansky notes,

I would venture that these imponderables and the fact of their incomprehensibility are the most important characteristics of [the] text. They compel us to experience the text in its mystery. What happens to our understanding of God when we examine the imponderables as imponderables, and not puzzles to be solved and unlocked? Perhaps we must see such texts not as narratives but as a place where narratives are born, as stellar clouds, nebulas, where stars are born. A reader reads the text and produces a narrative that makes sense of the text for her.<sup>34</sup>

The *aesthetic* (or, the sensual perception) experienced in the performance of discordant characterizations of God in Exodus is a recognition of the trauma Israel has endured. Fractured portrayals of God are evidence of scars, of a body in pain, of a people inscribed by the finger of God.<sup>35</sup> Closeness to the God of Exodus was often experienced as trauma:

<sup>33</sup> See Philip Helsel, "God Diagnosed with Bipolar I," *Pastoral Psychology* 58, no. 2 (April 2009): 183-191; Donald Capps, "God Diagnosed with Narcissistic Personality Disorder," *Pastoral Psychology* 58, no. 2 (April 2009): 193-206.

<sup>34</sup> Penchansky, 77.

<sup>35</sup> It may be that an aesthetic or sensual perception of suffering is a reader's best evidence of latent trauma; as Scarry says, "Physical suffering destroys language, and moral rightness (in the Old Testament as in most other human contexts) tends to lie with the most articulate. So we

Then Moses turned again to YHWH and said, ‘O YHWH, why have you mistreated this people? Why did you ever send me? Since I first came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has mistreated this people, and you have done nothing at all to deliver your people’ (5:22-23).

The aesthetic of Exodus, then, should not be ignored; an experience of discord and tension when confronting the characterizations of God is itself a source of meaning. Consider the implications of the identity-engraving command, “For you, you shall have no other god before my face.” The Hebrew people were divinely chosen to experience in *one* god the embodiment of the multiple functions of wisdom, war, and wealth. The psalmist’s query, “Whom have I in heaven but you?” becomes an expression of despair in another context, where the one and only is experienced as wrathful or bloodthirsty or unpredictable.<sup>36</sup> Hammering out the divine-human relationship is itself an experience of trauma; for Israel, the scars of this trauma are evidenced in the fractured, discordant portrayals of God in Exodus. At this point, aesthetic apprehension of God in Exodus may be heightened through brief consideration of art that captures divine war, wisdom, and wealth within the borders of a single canvas.

### **Light from *Venus and Mars***

Sandro Botticelli’s *Venus and Mars* is a mythological painting in that it portrays the legendary deities Mars and Venus surrounded by frolicking fauns, all figures from mythology.<sup>37</sup> Yet as Florentine humanist and Renaissance painter,<sup>38</sup> Botticelli’s work is also *allegorical* in that “the deities are a representation of an abstract or spiritual meaning seen in concrete or material form. They serve as

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linger with the people only a moment; then continue on in hope that their cries will end.” See Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 201.

<sup>36</sup> See Psalms 73:25.

<sup>37</sup> See Appendix for this image.

<sup>38</sup> As such, Botticelli exhibited skills for “poetic invention” in painting: “Such *inventio* eventually helped raise the painter’s status from that of mere craftsman to that of a thinking and highly creative individual whose imagination rivals the divine inspiration or genius of the poet. Botticelli’s pictures exemplify in both form and content Horace’s dictum *Ut pictura poesis*: “As is painting, so is poetry.” See Michael J. Amy, “Botticelli, Sandro,” in Vol. 1 of *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, ed. Paul F. Grendler (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1999), 264.

symbols for both mythological and nonmythological subject matter.”<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, it was the practice of Florentine humanists like Botticelli to interpret “allegorical myths and themes by combining pagan or classic motifs with Christian symbols.”<sup>40</sup> In order to discern the significance of *Venus and Mars* and how this painting provides any light for understanding God in Exodus, the scene of the painting should first be considered:

Mars is deeply asleep, lying on a pink mantle, his body half unclothed in contrast with Venus who is completely covered by a white garment. She is awake, reclining on a cushion on the grassy landscape, content to contemplate her lover. Mars is depicted in a very natural vulnerable pose, so much so, that one seems to be aware of his breathing. Around him four Fauns are playing with his instruments of war. For example, one of them is wearing his helmet; the second is holding his lance, while staring at the goddess of love; another is playing with his breastplate, attempting to wear it. The last one is blowing a Triton's conch very energetically. It seems at first glance the he wishes to awaken the sleepy god; but, on the contrary, he is trying to dispel signs of war and to create peace, like the sea deity, Triton, who caused a storm at sea to abate by blowing his conch. Mars apparently is not responding to this maneuver having fallen asleep after the conquest of Venus. Even though several wasps (*vespucce*) are buzzing over his head, nothing interrupts Mars' somnolent rest.<sup>41</sup>

Numerous interpretations of the scene have been proffered; for this essay, one profoundly connects with the God of Exodus. In Quattrocento Neoplatonic contemplation of love, “Spiritual love (Venus) governs erotic love (Mars) not by force (Fauns playing with the armors of Mars) but with peaceful repose, gentleness and ‘womanhood power.’ Moreover, Venus as a symbol of love and harmony subjugates Mars, a symbol of hate and discord.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, simply put, Christian sentiment can be ascribed to *Venus and Mars*, “where love triumphed over war and reason controlled passion.”<sup>43</sup>

In Botticelli’s mythological paintings, Venus herself exemplifies two functionalities; she is simultaneously “Twin Venuses: Heavenly Venus

<sup>39</sup> This section is informed especially by chap. 4, “Mythological or Allegorical Paintings,” of Liana de Girolami Cheney, *Botticelli's Neoplatonic Images* (Potomac, MD: Scripta Humanistica, 1993). Citation from page 43.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 38. Cf. p. 66: “The significance of the *Quattrocento* symbolism arises out of its uniting of profane wisdom (classical allegories) and sacred wisdom (Christian teachings).”

<sup>41</sup> Girolami Cheney, 57-58.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 68.

(intelligible world—Beauty) and Earthly Venus (corporeal world—bodily form)."<sup>44</sup> Further characterizations of Venus view her as “disguised as Artemis or Diana, the goddess of hunt, [who] has provided the food for her Mars (honey) and has vanquished him with the eloquent powers of mental and physical seduction.”<sup>45</sup> The mental and physical prowess of Venus to seduce and overcome Mars is apparent in many of the various poems that likely influenced Botticelli’s painting. For example, Ficino claims that,

Love is strong, Mars is strong as a planet but  
 Venus masters him, Mars never masters Venus,  
 Mars follows Venus, Venus does not follow Mars,  
 since boldness is the foot follower of love,  
 not love of boldness. Strength [Mars] is  
 powerful but unreasonable.<sup>46</sup>

According to Chidester, “In a letter that might have referred directly to these paintings [i.e., Botticelli’s paintings of Venus], the priest, doctor, and scholar Marsilio Ficino (1433-99) advocated the spiritual value of meditating on the image of Venus,” an act that “did not imply an anti-Christian revival of Greco-Roman paganism. Rather, if properly guided, the meditation would reveal layers of meaning in the image of Venus crucial for leading a Christian life.”<sup>47</sup> For Ficino (and for Botticelli), recognition of the allegorical, moral, and spiritual significance of the mythological imagery of pagan gods and goddesses afforded a source for spiritual formation.

Venus herself “represented all the virtues of humanitas, the moral qualities of love, dignity, liberality, modesty.”<sup>48</sup> She is a celestial queen, but is nevertheless near to humanity in her functions as goddess. As Cheney states,

Venus is a personification of *Humanitas*; she is the goddess of love and harmony and symbolizes spiritual love; while Mars, god of war, symbolizes discord, hatred, war and represents erotic love. The astrological analogies are also derived from Ficino’s cosmology. Venus is a celestial planet while Mars is not. Because Venus’

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>46</sup> From Marsilio Ficino, cited in ibid., 112.

<sup>47</sup> See discussion in David Chidester, *Christianity: A Global History* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), 293-94.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 294.

love is sagacious and calm and Mars' love is unreasonable and turbulent, she is the stronger planet and masters Mars.<sup>49</sup>

Nevertheless, hot-blooded Mars sleeps nearby; the accoutrements of war are close at hand. Perhaps the playfulness and unpredictability of the satyrs will rouse him. The painting seems to ask, *When Mars wakes, will Venus then be able to subdue him?* Thus, between the frames of a single canvas Botticelli captures Lang's tripartite functions of deity—wisdom, war, and wealth—yet offers no synthesis. Rather, the confluence of divine, discordant energies rouses dread anticipation that the wrathful one may suddenly wake, while conveying quiet hope by her maternal expression that she, the sage and merciful one, may prove more powerful after all.

### Conclusion

Similarly, the discordant characterizations of God in Exodus reveal the One deity as sovereign and transcendent, warlike and passionate, yet near to humanity as provider and sustainer, giver of wisdom and wealth. Gazing upon the text as upon a painted canvas, one hopes that God's abounding compassion has subdued God's excessive passion; one wonders if the sleeping god of war will wake, and at what cost? Perhaps this unpredictability itself is a kind of trauma, inescapable in the realities of divine-human intercourse. Perhaps also aesthetic apprehension of God's performance in Exodus yields clearer appreciation of the multiple, discordant, divine energies loaded in the concept "God."

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<sup>49</sup> Cheney, 113.

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## Appendix



Sandro Botticelli, *Venus and Mars* (c. 1485)