
War as Metaphor

WE ARE ALL ENLISTED

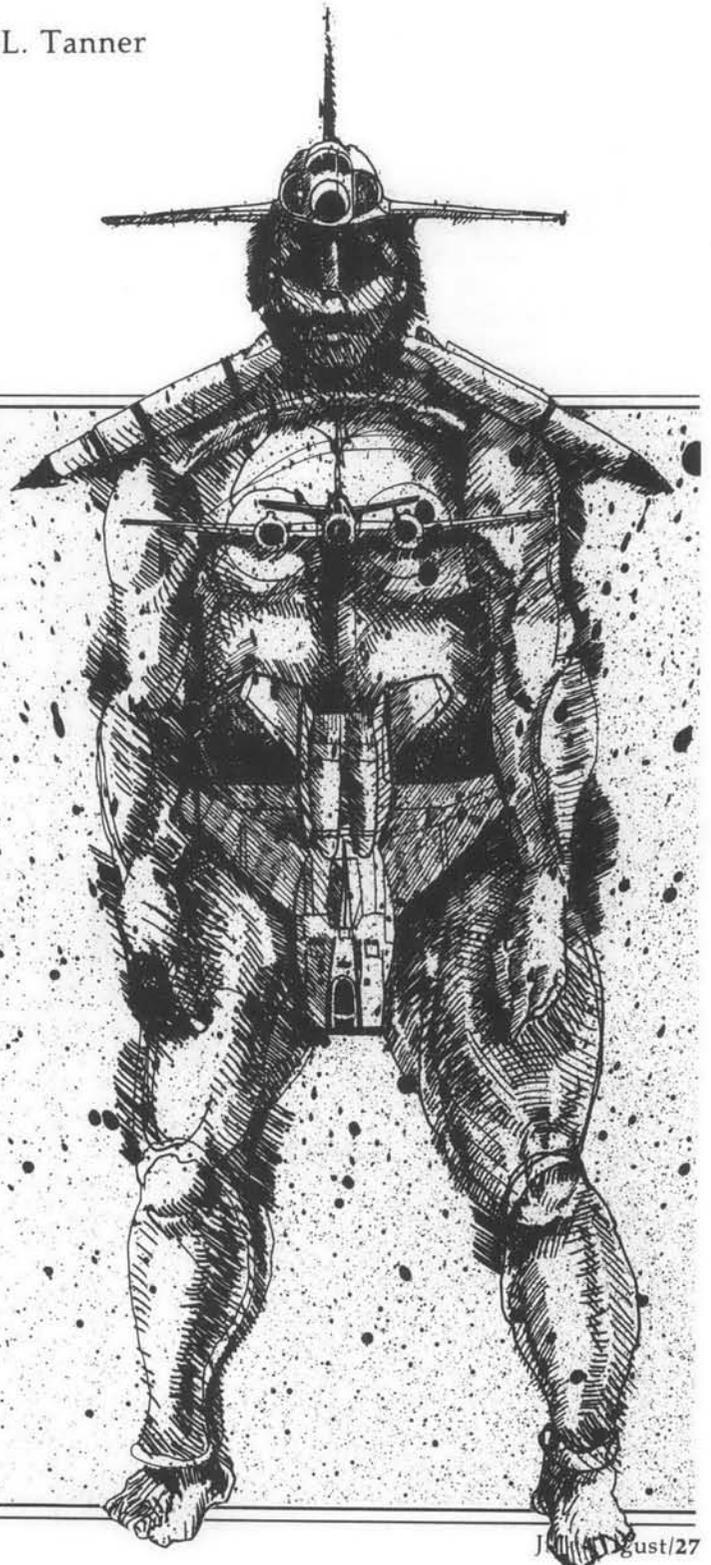
A careless regard for language may generate martial attitudes

Stephen L. Tanner

We are all enlisted till the conflict is o'er—Behold a royal army, with banner, sword and shield, is marching forth to conquer, on life's great battlefield—How martial they appear! All armed and dressed in uniform they look like men of war—Hope of Israel, rise in might with the sword of truth and right; sound the war cry, "Watch and pray!" Vanquish every foe today—Haste to the battle, quick to the field—Strike for Zion, down with error—In the fight for right let us wield a sword—Flash the sword above thy foe—All thy foes shall flee before thee—Onward, Christian soldiers—Go forth to conquer or die—Every day the battle's raging—The enemy's awake: who's on the Lord's side?—We'll make our armor brighter, and never lay it down—The blood of those that slaughtered lie pleads not in vain—Vengeance will not slumber long.

These militant phrases, many of them as familiar to us as the Lord's Prayer, are from our hymns of worship. All these marching armies and flashing swords are metaphors, of course. And our scriptures provide similar metaphorical exhortations to put on armor, breastplate, and helmet and take up sword and shield to "war a good warfare" (1 Tim. 1:18) and "fight the good fight" (1 Tim. 6:12). Concordances of our scriptures contain remarkably long lists under words related to war. It seems paradoxical that this should be so of scriptures that proclaim the gospel of the Prince of Peace.

Is this paradox cause for alarm? Should we feel uneasy about this martial strain in our religion? Consider these statements concerning the relationship between metaphor and attitudes. S.I. Hayakawa suggests that "We do not use metaphors so much as metaphors use us."¹ Weller Embler, in *Metaphor and Meaning*, points out that "Figurative language is the home of many a deep-seated, unexamined belief or mental attitude."² Owen Thomas, in *Metaphor and Related Subjects*, says that "although everyone uses metaphors to help conceptualize ideas, there are significant implications in choosing a metaphorical base."³ Terrence Hawkes, in *Metaphor*, claims that the analysis of metaphor "offers a very good way of probing the nature of languages and the ways of life which derive from them."⁴ Modern



theories of anthropology and linguistics, for example those of B. L. Whorf, Edward Sapir, and Claude Levi-Strauss, claim that language and way of life are virtually inextricable; language shapes perceptions and attitudes.

In "Myths of War and Peace,"⁵ Joseph Campbell discusses two radically opposed basic mythologies that can be identified in the broad panorama of history: one of war and one of peace. Mythologies of war are easier to name, he says, because conflict among groups has been normal in human experience and "it has been the nations, tribes, and peoples bred to mythologies of war that have survived to communicate their life-supporting mythic lore to descendants." The two greatest works of war mythology in the West, he notes, are the *Iliad* and the Old Testament. He reminds us that the mythology of the Old Testament is still very much alive in the Middle East; in fact, two war mythologies presently confront each other there. Nicholas Berdyaev suggests that the world in general lives in the enslaving power of the myth of war: "In a rationalized and technical civilization myths continue to play an enormous part. They are born of the collective subconscious. But these myths are made use of in a very rational manner. The myth of the beauty and heroism of war, of the martial *eros*, which rises above the prosaic routine of everyday life, is an aspect of human slavery. This myth is connected with other myths, the myth of the chosen race, the myth of the majesty of sovereignty and so on." All these myths, he asserts, are in revolt against the spirit of the gospel.⁶

Do statements such as these suggest that the war metaphors in our hymns and scriptures hint at a latent militarism? To what extent are we influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by myths of war? In short, exactly how figurative is our war imagery?

Before considering war metaphors in particular, it is important to recognize how fundamental and inevitable is the use of metaphor. Far from being a strange device found only in poetry and esoteric prose, it is an

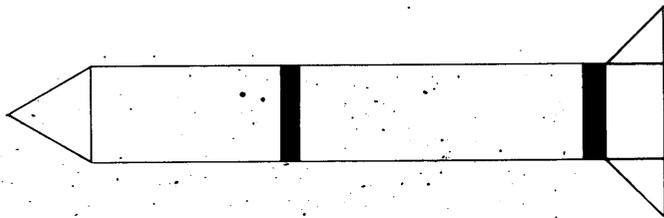
indispensable and deep quality of human perception and thought. We frequently state ideas and indeed conceive them in terms of logical contradictions. We affirm that A is B when, in reality, it is not. The ability to formulate metaphor is often necessary to the comprehension of ideas and almost invariably underlies the perception of beauty, not only in literature but also in history, philosophy, science, and religion. In the process of human communication, whatever the subject matter, metaphor has intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic value. It helps us be concrete, convey our feelings, and create aesthetic pleasure.

John Middleton Murry says in *Countries of the Mind* that "Metaphor is as ultimate as speech itself, and speech is as ultimate as thought. If we try to penetrate them beyond a certain point, we find ourselves questioning the very faculty and instrument with which we are trying to penetrate them."⁷ In other words, to attempt a fundamental examination of metaphor would be nothing less than an investigation of the genesis of thought itself. It is no wonder that Aristotle argued that a command of metaphor is by far the most important thing to master. Robert Frost reiterates Aristotle's point in "Education by Poetry" when he says that we ask students to think, "but we seldom tell them what thinking means; we seldom tell them it is just putting this and that together; it is just saying one thing in terms of another."⁸

A chief use of metaphor is to extend language, and since language is in an important sense reality, to expand reality. As Terrence Hawkes explains, "By juxtaposition of elements whose interaction brings about a new dimension for them both, metaphor can reasonably be said to create *new* reality, and to secure that reality within the language, where it is accessible to the people who speak it."⁹ Metaphor, therefore, is essential to the process of mental discovery. In order to say anything really new, or transfer that which has been unconscious to the conscious, one must resort to saying one thing and meaning another. He must talk what is nonsense on the face of it, but in such a way that the recipient may have the new meaning suggested to him.

If metaphor is significant for literature in general, it is doubly significant for the sacred literature of the scriptures and for theological discourse. Metaphor is indispensable in the expression of religious ideas and is the natural language of religion, for religion must convey in human speech to human understandings its message from the unseen and supernatural world. It is to be expected that the literature of revelation should abound in figurative language. Moreover, much of our scripture was originally addressed to ancient and Oriental people, who tended to think and communicate in images rather than in discursive logic.

So metaphor is fundamental and necessary in human thought and communication, and particularly so in the area of theology. In recognizing this, we must also recognize that metaphors have given rise to diverse and for the greater part still unsolved problems. Certainly figurative language can be a danger to clear thinking. It is a favorite resource of confused and feeble reasoning and is often abused as a means to mislead and deceive. Metaphors masquerading as literal statements and vice versa are responsible for many false notions widely accepted. The obvious problem is whether and how



Metaphor extends language and thus in an important sense expands reality.

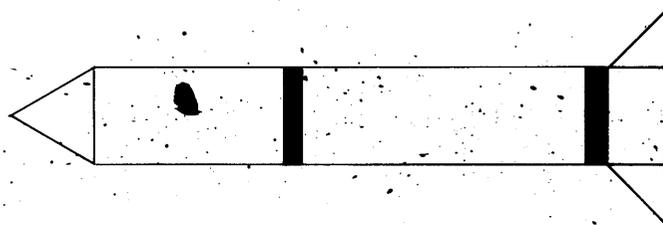
metaphorical use of language can be unambiguously recognized. The fact is that no hard and fast rule exists for distinguishing between the literal and figurative uses of language. Plenty of scope exists for dubious cases. Furthermore, controlling the meanings a metaphor might convey is difficult; readers can infer unexpected things or respond to unintended connotations. A principal danger of metaphorical language is that it might be taken literally by unimaginative persons. As a steadying influence in confronting the ubiquitous use of figurative language, the knowledge of the many ways in which speech can, legitimately or otherwise, be turned aside from literal sense is a great value to the average person. Being able to handle metaphor is better than trying to avoid it, for, as Samuel Butler noted, "Though analogy is often misleading, it is often the least misleading thing we have."¹⁰

Owen Thomas identifies the ability to manage metaphor as a mark of civilization and maturity. He explains that for primitives and children statements like "God is sun" or "Love is kissing" are statements of equality. We can say man ceases to be completely primitive and begins to become civilized when he perceives that some linguistic equations are not statements of identity—that is, are not literally true. "As a next step, man ceases to be merely civilized and starts to become intellectually sophisticated when he perceives that logical contradictions are sometimes the only means of postulating definitions."¹¹ The analogy in the psychological development of the individual works this way: a person passes from childhood to adolescence when he recognizes the existence of abstractions. He moves from adolescence to maturity when he realizes that abstractions can be discussed and partially defined metaphorically. Consequently, there are levels of understanding and sensitivity to figurative language. Some people make no significant distinctions between abstractions and physical reality; others do. "Finally, still other people recognize the distinctions between physical things and abstractions, but also recognize that, given the limitations of both man and his language, an absolute perception of these abstractions is impossible. The fact of this impossibility, coupled with a need to define, eventually leads all men to the conscious use of logical contradictions, that is, to metaphor."¹²

Misuse of metaphor or arrested development in ability to cope with it causes error in all fields of knowledge, including theology. In fact, the chance for such error is greater in theology because the truths it treats are more lofty and remote from human experience, and further beyond the ken of the ordinary senses and reason. Some of the earliest heresies in Christianity resulted from the uncompromising and indiscriminate following up of metaphor. Discerning the difference between literal and figurative terms in theology is fraught with problems. Consider as an example that Catholic theologians interpret all references to God's bodily parts as metaphorical. We consider them literal. The habitual methods of adversaries of religion is to confound metaphor and truth; and misrepresentation of religion often results from insufficient attention to the metaphorical nature of theological language. Liberals tend to interpret too much figuratively; fundamentalists tend to interpret too much literally. But despite the

possibility of error and confusion, the use of metaphor remains necessary because there are no words that describe directly heavenly realities. Jesus, our example in so many ways, taught his sublimest truths through metaphor and parable.

War metaphors in religious discourse constitute a unique case for a number of reasons. First of all, they come so naturally. We cannot think of good and evil in relation to each other without immediately conceiving that relationship in terms of conflict and warfare. The gospel view of man is permeated with war. There was a war in heaven before man inhabited the earth, and wars will usher in the millennium that culminates that habitation. Many major faith events along the way have been military victories in which the righteous or chosen have vanquished the wicked in the furtherance of God's designs.



Liberals tend to interpret too much figuratively; fundamentalists too much literally.

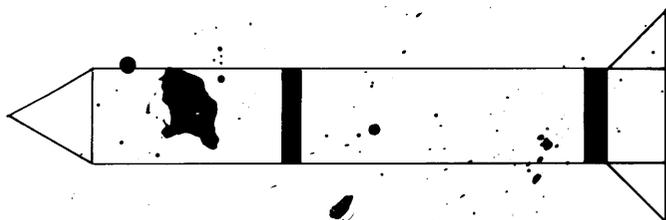
The fact that war images occur so naturally and frequently may actually encourage the likelihood they will be taken literally. According to J.R. Firth, for example, the probability of occurrence of a given metaphor or "collocability" determines whether a metaphor occupies "foreground" or "background." A probable metaphor such as "the leg of the table" is in the background. An unusual metaphor such as T.S. Eliot's "Where the evening is spread out against the sky/Like a patient etherized upon a table" is in the foreground.¹³ The further a metaphor is in the background, the greater is the possibility it will be taken literally. Foreground metaphors are easy to spot; they call attention to themselves. Background metaphors can be missed and taken literally by the unimaginative. War metaphors in religion are obviously much in the background and thus problematic.

One reason that war and religion have such a high frequency of occurrence together is the fact that strife is common to both: army against army in the one, good against evil in the other. In fact, the word "war" comes to us from Old High German *werre*, meaning strife.

Another reason war metaphors crop up so frequently in religion is that religion is the center of man's highest

aspirations and ideals; and war, even with its unspeakable horrors, has provided the most dramatic opportunities for the manifestation of courage, loyalty, total commitment, and other revered virtues. The "hero" is one of humanity's ideals, like the saint and the sage. Samuel Johnson said, "Every man thinks meanly of himself for not having been a soldier, or not having been at sea. . . . Mankind reverence those who have got over fear, which is so general a weakness."¹⁴ Nicholas Berdyaev points out that "Ideas bred by war had far greater significance for the moral education of mankind than war itself. The type of the warrior, the knight, the man who defends by force of arms his honour, the honour of the weak, the honour of his family, the honour of his country, was the predominant moral ideal and had enormous influence upon social morality."¹⁵ Think how powerful and enduring has been the pattern of the soldier-prophet or soldier-king: Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, Mormon, Alexander, Richard the Lion-hearted—the pattern abounds in the history of all nations. Even in our own culture: Joseph Smith was commander of the Nauvoo Legion. It is no wonder that when religion has desired to stimulate honor, courage, disciplined obedience, and risking one's all in the contest against evil it has turned to war metaphors.

Another distinctive feature of war metaphors in religion is that what is now figurative was once literal. The Old Testament tells us "The Lord is a man of war" (Exodus 15:3). The children of Israel were expressly commissioned to make war, even wars of aggression. Part of the reason for the census in Numbers was military; military service was one of the chief duties involved in membership in the tribal community. One of God's promises to Israel if they obeyed his commandments was this: "And ye shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword"



War metaphors may have generated militant attitudes in those who are immature, careless, or inept with figurative language.

(Leviticus 26:7). In the scriptures is a continuum of war images ranging from the literal to the metaphorical. This can generate confusion, and indeed has in the history of Christianity. Sometimes war images are clearly literal; sometimes they are obviously metaphorical; but sometimes they are ambiguous. This is apparent in the

Psalms, which are full of war images, and which are probably the principal source of the war metaphors elsewhere in the scriptures and in our hymns. The Psalms display war images used all along the continuum. Moreover, some Psalms glorify the Lord as a warrior king ("Gird thy sword upon thy thigh, O most mighty, with thy glory and majesty"—45:3) and other praise him as a peacemaker ("He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth; he breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder; he burneth the chariot in the fire"—46:9). These two examples are from consecutive Psalms.

Our militant hymns are overtly metaphorical, but even within them are examples of ambiguity. For example, "Up, Awake, Ye Defenders of Zion" has the usual exhortation to be faithful and true in doing battle for the Kingdom; but it also says, "Remember the wrongs of Missouri" and refers to the shed blood of our prophets. One cannot read the hymn carefully without feeling that the call to the defenders of Zion is not entirely figurative. And this example points up another confusing characteristic of war images in religion: they tend to be metaphorical when exhorting to offense and more literal when exhorting to defense.

Another example of the admixture of the literal and figurative in hymns is "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," which although no longer in the English edition of our hymns is a familiar favorite. The words say "His truth is marching on," but it was once sung by the Northern army as it marched on into very real battles.

War metaphors in our scriptures and hymns are highly conventionalized. The images are from ancient warfare—swords, shields, bucklers, spears, and arrows. The conventions were established in the Old Testament and have no correlation with the astounding technical advancements in warfare. There is no tendency to update the images, such as the rocket launcher of truth, the bomb shelter of virtue, the heat-seeking missiles of righteousness, defoliation or pacification of Satan's kingdom, or body counts of the wicked. Some of the images are so far removed from war as we now know it that they do not register concretely. Who even knows what a buckler is nowadays?

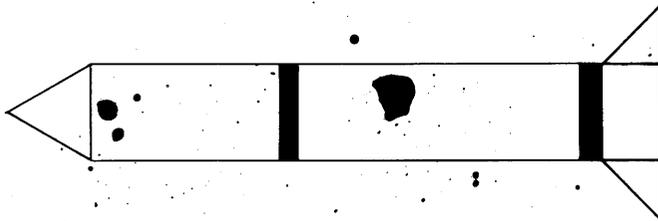
Moreover, metaphors used in religion are rigorously selective in connotation. Courage, strength, valor, victory, honor—these are the connotations emphasized. The horror, suffering, cruelty, and filth of war are absent. In a sense, these metaphors are metaphors of metaphors. That is, the images are drawn from a romanticized, essentially figurative view of war, a view from which the harsh and repugnant realities have already been filtered.

Here is another twist in war and metaphor. War in the Old Testament served as a kind of barometer of righteousness. If Israel obeyed, they won; if not, they lost. That the Lord wrought the conquest of Canaan is a frequent theme and reminder (see, for example, Psalm 44 or Joshua 24:6-11); and invariably such passages mention that it was not the people's swords and arrows that won, but God. In a peculiar reversal of the metaphorical process, the actual battles become metaphors for God's help and purposes. This same notion persisted through the centuries in the tradition of trial by combat.

The contradiction and ambiguity characteristic of war metaphors in religion is epitomized in Luke 14:31: "Or

what king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand?" Here the Prince of Peace himself uses an analogy of war to teach the meaning and cost of the highest kind of dedication to the Kingdom of God. This example illustrates something about the inevitable presence of war in the human condition and consequently about its appropriateness for instructive analogies; and it also suggests something about the nature of metaphor: the figurative meaning is radically divorced from its literal component.

Let us return now to my questions about Mormons and war metaphors. To what extent are we influenced by war mythology? More or less than are other Christians? Is there a paradoxical undercurrent of



There need be no necessary correlation between war metaphors and war mentality.

militarism in our religion? The war in Vietnam caused many members of the Church to agonize over this issue. The Church's recent statement concerning the MX system has caused many to reexamine what they assumed was a religiously orthodox attitude toward national defense. Because we identify ourselves as members of the house of Israel and accept Old Testament history as our history, we are particularly susceptible to what Joseph Campbell calls a war mythology. For this reason we need to be particularly alert to the ways of metaphor. It may be that war metaphors in our scriptures and hymns have generated militant attitudes in those of our members who are immature, careless, or inept in the area of figurative language. But when the nature of metaphor is understood, there need be no necessary correlation between war metaphors and war mentality.

The principal problem with war metaphors is that the figurative war—the one we are all enlisted in—is against such things as evil, error, and sin. These are abstractions. The question is can we war against abstractions without warring against people. The temptation is great to equate people, nations, and ideologies—particularly Communism—with the abstractions. How difficult it is to hate a man's principles without hating him. But this is exactly what Christianity requires of us.

War as metaphor is so natural, so apt, so long used that it cannot be eliminated in religion, nor need it be. What is needed is that it be recognized and understood. Every

object may be said to have a twofold significance: a significance in itself as a fragment of reality and a significance as an emblem, symbol, or image of something other than itself. "Nature," said Emerson, "offers all her creatures to a man as a picture language. Being used as a type a second wonderful value appears in the object, far better than the old value."¹⁶ Wallace Stevens said, "Metaphor creates a new reality from which the original appears to be unreal."¹⁷ Since the war between good and evil is such a transformation, we have no reason to be puzzled or alarmed by war imagery in our hymns and scriptures. Cause for alarm comes only when our members fail to respond properly to it. In metaphor theory the notion has been developed that metaphor requires a response, an act of "completion" from the reader, almost as a play does from its audience. We must beware the "uncompleted" metaphor.

The point we must remember is that war itself is *not* a metaphor, and the best way to view it is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking. But on the other hand, when war is used *as metaphor*, the best way to view it is one most purified of, most resistant to, literal thinking. We learn to make these distinctions as we cultivate our imagination and heighten our sense of figurative language at the same time we cultivate our religious and moral sense. As Robert Frost warned, "unless you are at home in metaphor . . . you are not safe anywhere. Because you are not at ease with figurative values: you don't know the metaphor in its strength and its weakness. You don't know how far you may expect to ride it and when it may break down with you. You are not safe in science; you are not safe in history."¹⁸ He might have added, you are not safe in theology.

STEPHEN L. TANNER is professor of English at BYU. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin and was a senior Fulbright lecturer in Brazil and Portugal.

Notes

1. Weller Embler, *Metaphor and Meaning* (Deland, Florida: Everett/Edwards, 1966), p. i.
2. *Ibid.*
3. (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 25.
4. (London: Methuen & Co., 1972), p. 67.
5. *Myths to Live By* (New York: Bantam, 1973), pp. 174-206.
6. *Slavery and Freedom*, trans. R. M. French (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), pp. 163-64.
7. Quoted in Hawkes, p. 67.
8. *Robert Frost: Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Edward Connery Lathem and Lawrence Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), p. 336.
9. Hawkes, p. 63.
10. Quoted in Thomas, p. 6.
11. Thomas, p. 7.
12. Thomas, p. 16.
13. Hawkes, pp. 74-75.
14. *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed. by R. W. Chapman (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. 926-27.
15. *The Destiny of Man*, trans. Natalie Duddington (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), p. 202.
16. Quoted in Stephen J. Brown, *The World of Imagery* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1966), p. 24.
17. Quoted in Hawkes, p. 16.
18. Frost, p. 334.