MOTHER EARTH IN BIBLICAL HEBREW LITERATURE: ANCIENT AND CONTEMPORARY IMAGINATION

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In his book *The Land* Walter Brueggemann characteristically described a biblical topic so as to make it resonate with aspects of contemporary life and faith.[1] The biblical land, as he took it, symbolizes home and belonging. Since the concern for land is strongest in exilic literature, Brueggemann described Israel's relation to its land as basically a pilgrimage. This became a basis for his *kerygma*: a biblical sense of belonging and direction for people of the socially mobile USA.

The plea to *situate* religion is still much in force 30 years later. Studies on embodiment, ritual, etc., testify to our desire to understand how religion 'takes place'. However, any attempt to grasp human belonging in terms of a politically defined area has lost credibility, no less so if the land in question were biblical Canaan. Today, it is rather, the very earth—incidentally, a different sense of Hebrew ארץ—that circumscribes human embodiment. It is therefore curious that biblical passages depicting the earth as mother of humans should have gone largely unnoticed in recent scholarship. I would direct attention to these passages and their conceptual context. Hopefully, this could serve as a tribute to a scholarly career dedicated to inducing biblical literature into making contemporary sense.

In the early twentieth century a mother earth was commonly recognized in three passages depicting humans as *coming* from their mother and *returning* to earth:

Job 1.21: ערם יצתי מבטן אמי וערם אשוב שמה[2]
Qoh. 5.14: כאשר יצא מבטן אמו ערום ישוב[3]
Sir. 40.1: מיום צאתו מרחם אמו עד יום שובו אל [ארץ] אם כל חי[4]

1. Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).
2. 'Naked I sprang from my mother's belly, and naked I return there'.
3. 'Just as he came from his mother's belly, naked he returns'.
4. 'From the day he springs from his mother's womb, to the day he returns to (earth,) mother of all living' (Hebrew text in ms B, where the word in parenthesis occurs in the

Sigmund Mowinckel, among others, assumed the existence of a concept 'mother earth' in Hebrew religion (but not an accompanying cult).[5] The topic did, however, not enter standard discussions of ancient Hebrew religion and theology. One reason was perhaps that it could be associated with German *Religionsgeschichte* and nationalist ideology,[6] both compromised in the thirties. Before and after World War II cosmology was generally considered theologically irrelevant, part of a 'nature religion' that biblical religion had surpassed.[7] Hence, few scholars discussed mother earth in biblical literature.[8] Among those who did were Belden Lane, Gregory Vall and Meir Malul.[9] They all move away from the mythic and towards the poetical, symbolic or cognitive as a prism for reading the relevant passages.

Did the Hebrews Believe in their Myths?

Let us, therefore, briefly consider mythology. If, as I shall argue, the ancient Hebrews did speak about the earth as a cosmological authority and as mother of humans, would that imply they believed there 'really was' an earth mother goddess? And would such a belief be conceived of as conceptually at odds with stringent Yahwism? I believe not.

Most scholars would agree that a competent reader of Genesis 1 did not think the earth was actually created in seven days. The Sabbath scheme in that story is symbolical. It denotes something else than that to which it literally refers; it signifies the sanctity of the time order. If the seven-day scheme is symbolical, however, did the ancients believe that the world actually came

margin); see Pancratius C. Beentjes, *The Book of Ben Sira in Hebrew* (SVT, 68; Leiden: Brill, 1997), p. 69.

5. Sigmund Mowinckel, '"Moder jord" i det Gamle Testament', in *Religionshistoriske studier tillägnade Edvard Lehmann* (ed. Herman Österdahl; Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1927), pp. 130-41.

6. Gunkel, Mowinckel and subsequent scholars referred to Albrecht Dietrich, *Mutter Erde: Ein Versuch über Volksreligion* (3rd enlarged edn; Leipzig: Teubner, 1925).

7. See Theodore Hiebert, *The Yahwist's Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 4-12, etc.

8. For a brief research history, see Gregory Vall, 'The Enigma of Job 1.21a', *Bib* 76 (1995), pp. 325-42, and for a recent discussion, see David J.A. Clines, *Job 1–20* (WBC, 17; Dallas: Word, 1989), pp. 36-37.

9. Belden C. Lane, 'Mother Earth as Metaphor: A Healing Pattern of Grieving and Giving Birth', *Horizons* 21 (1994), pp. 7-21; Vall, 'The Enigma of Job 1.21a'; Meir Malul, 'Woman–Earth Homology in Biblical Weltanschauung', *UF* 32 (2000), pp. 339-63; cf. Meir Malul, *Knowledge, Control, and Sex: Studies in Biblical Thought, Culture, and Worldview* (Tel Aviv: Archaeological Center Publication, 2002). See also Herbert Schmid, 'Die "Mutter Erde" in der Schöpfungsgeschichte der Priesterschrift', *Judaica* 22 (1966), pp. 237-43.

into being through God's speech? Or is this element symbolical too, perhaps denoting the sanctity of divine speech? In short, what is the mode of linguistic reference for texts that we usually name myths?

Paul Veyne made a remarkable study of myths and truth claims in his book *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths?*[10] He demonstrated the existence of various modalities of beliefs in ancient Greek culture. Myth, in his view, was neither true nor false. '[T]he human past was seen to be preceded by a wondrous period that formed another world, real in itself and unreal in relation to our own' (p. 49). Mental Balkanization allowed for rationalizing and allegorizing of myths without their losing status as true or good. Mythic stock language was used to signify, for instance, political realities. Indeed, Veyne argues, all truth is the result of constitutive imagination, and every culture (and individual) has a multiplicity of conflicting programmes of truth.[11] Such truths 'are only the clothing of forces; they are practices…' (p. 90). To my mind, this should imply that the linguistic reference for myths were really these forces and practices. Veyne implies something of the kind in his comment on the rationalistic use of myth and legend: 'For the philosopher, myth was thus an allegory of philosophical truths'. And the strength of the philosophical truth, of course, was that it adequately accounted for those forces and practices.[12] Despite the apparent mental Balkanization, the philosopher did after all work towards a *single* truth, and he did so by denying literal truth to the myths. His procedure was to abandon the literal sense in a story and define its 'real' sense in accordance with what could rationally be truth. This clearly implies a perception of myth as figurative speech. The question, therefore, emerges: what could biblical imagery of the earth as mother have signified?

The Earth as a Cosmological Authority

It is indeed a complex matter to recapitulate ancient Hebrew perceptions of the earth. First, such notions would be part of the 'small tradition', that is: those views that everyone in a given culture shares, views too obvious or insignificant to become the focus of discourse. As such, they would tend to be presupposed in daily discourse. In surviving texts they would be implicit. This calls for archaeology of knowledge. And, as documented by Theodore Hiebert, such archaeology would have to dissociate itself from views of nature that struck twentieth-century theology as self-evident.[13] Secondly, recovering such small tradition, we should use whatever evidence is available and not

10. Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination* (trans. Paula Wissing; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

11. See Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths?*, pp. 79-93.

12. Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths?*, p. 65; cf. pp. 59-70.

13. Hiebert, *Yahwist's Landscape*, pp. 3-29.

just written discourse. But it would be methodologically challenging—and impossible in this setting—to give a coherent interpretation of all available evidence. For now, the aim is to situate imagery of mother earth in its linguistic and conceptual context in ancient Hebrew literature.

For a start, the earth (ארץ, תבל, etc.) has cosmological significance in the Hebrew Bible.[14] The case is similar for other natural bodies like the heavens, the primeval waters, the ancient hills[15] or *sheol* (with which the earth is associated).[16] Particularly in Priestly theology, ארץ (in all its senses 'earth', 'ground', 'land [of Israel]') takes an active part in God's administration of the cosmos: keeping Sabbath (Lev. 25.2; cf. 26.34), swallowing God's enemies (Num. 26.10; cf. 16.30-34; Ps. 106.17), or performing judgment (Ps. 50.4). Earth longs for the Lord (Ps. 143.6), and it is instrumental in bringing God's blessing (Ps. 67.7; etc.). In prophetic literature we find the image of a mourning earth (Hos. 4.3; Joel 1.10; etc.[17])

Such passages could be dismissed as linguistic symbolism (i.e. personifications) without particular intent or force. However, ארץ occurs as grammatical subject so frequently that it should not be dismissed as coincidental symbolism.[18] The earth is portrayed as a cosmic authority in biblical literature. It is one of those primaeval bodies that humans could never perceive (Jer. 31.37; Job 38.4-7). As such it performs its agency—although silently—in the workings of the world. Far from being a rival of Yhwh, cosmological ארץ tends to be something like a vendor in God's project.

Earth as Mother in Conventional Symbolic Speech

Major conventions of symbolic speech promote a view of the earth as mother or originator for humans. The first two have clear parallels in ancient Near Eastern literature.[19] Presently, however, we will focus upon ancient Hebrew literature.

14. See Jan Bergman and Magnus Ottosson, 'ארץ, *'erets* (earth, land)', in *TDOT*, I, pp. 388-405 (384-97).

15. For all these see for instance Gen. 49.25-26.

16. See Bergman and Ottosson, '*'erets*', pp. 399-400.

17. See Katherine M. Hayes, *'The Earth Mourns': Prophetic Metaphor and Oral Aesthetic* (Academia biblica, 8; Atlanta: SBL, 2002).

18. David J.A. Clines (ed.), *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), I, pp. 384, 392.

19. See Giovanni Pettinato, *Das altorientalische Menschenbild und die sumerischen und akkadischen Schöpfungsmythen* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1971), pp. 39-40, 41-46; Jean Bottéro, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia* (trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 97-103, 105-10; M. Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting* (with a chapter by F.A.M. Wiggermann; Cuneiform Monographs, 14; Groningen: Styx, 2000), pp. 9-16, 109-18, etc.

(i) The first convention prevails especially in sapiential and prophetic literature from the Persian era and later. It describes humankind as dust, dirt, etc.[20] This is explicit for instance in Isa. 64.7; Pss. 103.14; 104.29f.; Job 4.19; 33.6; Sir. 10.9; 17.32; 40.11, and of course in Gen. 2.7; 3.19.[21] Several biblical passages depict humans 'returning' to dust when dying (Pss. 90.3; 146.4; Job 34.15; Qoh. 3.20; 12.7; etc.). These form a symbolic resonance for Job 1.21; Qoh. 5.14; Sir. 40.1, where humans return (שוב) to earth.

The imagery of human life as a journey from dust to ashes branched out widely in Hebrew speech. As conventional speech it served also as a filter for experiencing life.[22] Two mourning conventions—to throw dust and dirt upon one's head or to sit on the ground—extend the view of dust as a significant substance at the margins of human life.[23] The same goes for the idea of the dead as living forth in the dust, in their graves.[24] Judging from Isa. 64.7 the view of humans as dust or clay (חמר; as in Job 4.19) formed a resonance also for imagery of God as potter and humans as pottery.[25]

Even the symbolic alignment of earth and mother received embellishment. The sapiential Psalm 139 imagines a double act of divine craftsmanship (vv. 13-15). God formed humankind 'in my mother's belly' (v. 13), and apparently simultaneously the bones were being formed 'in the depths of the earth' (v. 15). God is not as active in the second instance as in the first. This leaves room for assuming some creative agency by the earth in Ps. 139.15. A similar double act is envisioned in Job 10.9-11. Here, however, the deity has actively formed Job from clay and dust (v. 9, implicitly in the earth) and woven sinews

20. The complex should be well known, described already by Johannes Hempel, *Gott und Mensch im Alten Testament* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2nd edn, 1936), pp. 197-202. The Hebrew terms most frequently denoting human 'substance' are עפר, אפר, אדמה, דכא and חמר. According to Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible*, pp. 120, 121, etc., earth is an element actively used during birth deliverance.

21. Genesis 2–3 is best seen as Early Persian sapiential literature, See Terje Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden: Genesis 2–3 and Symbolism of the Eden Garden in Biblical Hebrew Literature* (Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology, 25; Leuven: Peeters, 2000), pp. 206-13.

22. Cognitive psychology commonly assumes such function in metaphors. See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 3-6, etc.

23. See for instance 1 Sam. 4.12; 2 Sam. 1.2; Isa. 3.26; 47.1; Jer. 14.2; Ezek. 37.30; Mic. 1.10; Job 2.12; Lam. 2.10; Neh. 9.1; and cf. inversely 1 Sam. 2.8; Isa. 52.2.

24. Cf. the transition in Gen. 37.35 and see for instance Isa. 26.19; 29.4; Ezek. 26.20; 32.23-25; Pss. 7.6; 9.17; 22.16, 30; 30.10; 44.26; 63.10; Job 7.21; 10.21-22; 40.13. Similar views are found throughout ancient Near Eastern literature; see Klaas Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and the Ancient Near East* (AOAT, 219; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1986). At this point, similarity even to Hellenistic material is obvious.

25. See Isa. 41.25; 45.9; Jer. 17; etc.

and flesh (vv. 10-11, implicitly in the belly). Both passages portray a human genesis in the earth in tandem with the formation of the foetus in the belly.

This imagery is further supported in passages where dead people are revivified in their graves. One example is Ezek. 37.12-14, where the process of revival of bones through God's spirit (רוח) is very similar to the act of creation in Qoh. 11.5 (cf. Ps. 104.29-30). Another example is Isa. 26.19, provided that we render 'give birth' for the verb נפל in this and the previous verse.[26] 'Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. [...] and the earth shall give birth to *rephaim*.'[27] We shall return to this verse. For now we just note that both passages portray a recreation inside graves that is comparable to foetal formation in the mother's womb. The same may be implied in Ps. 71.20: 'you revive me and make me return from the depths of the earth'. In short, in ancient Hebrew imagination the grave would in certain respects resemble a uterus.

One finds even the opposite comparison, imagining the uterus as a grave. Two passages envision the speaker as hypothetically either remaining dead in the mother's womb or as being invisibly transferred from womb to grave: Jer. 20.17: '[He] who did not kill me in the womb, so my mother would be my grave and her womb pregnant forever'.[28] Job 10.19: 'If I died, no eye would see me; I were as if I never existed, carried from belly to grave'.[29] All these passages testify to the chthonic paradoxes of life and death that are regularly associated with the earth as a religious symbol.

(ii) Another string of symbolic speech furthers a different view of earth as 'originator' of humankind. It presupposes the convention of depicting people as plants, in particular as grass and trees.[30] In some, apparently early Persian, passages there is a relation between the metaphorical tree Israel and the land upon which it is situated (ארץ, Jer. 42.10; etc.; אדמה, Amos 9.15; etc.). The symbolical import is that the land of Israel is instrumental in Yhwh's 'producing' the nation. In Isa. 44.3-4 this symbolism is cast in the vocabulary of creation. God spills water on the ground and pours spirit and blessing upon humankind, just as in Ps. 104.10, 30. The Israelites flourish like grass and well-watered willows. They are plants created by God through the agency of the land.

Many years ago Herbert Schmid noted that in Gen. 1.11-12, 24-25 the earth actively brings forth plants and animals on God's command. In 1.26-27,

26. With *HALOT* on this root. Similar senses in verbs for 'fall' occur in Akkadian and Hittite, all probably due to the method of delivery; see Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible*, p. 127; cf. pp. 118-21.

27. These רפאים could be spirits of the dead (cf. *HALOT s.v.*).

28. אשר לא מותתני מרחם ותהי לי אמי קברי ורחמה הרת עולם.

29. כאשר לא הייתי אהיה מבטן לקבר אובל. A similar idea is implicit in Job 3.11.

30. Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden*, pp. 87-92.

however, it is God alone who acts in the creation of humankind. Schmid argued that Genesis 1 had originally been a story where the earth brought forth plants, animals *and* humans.[31] At the time he was unable to evoke either the biblical metaphor on humans 'as grass' (above) or a concurring mythologeme of creation in Sumerian literature.[32] His interpretation did not gain much support. It seems to me, however, that the biblical redactor inserting Gen. 2.4 had a similar idea. This verse is best seen as a chiastic bridge between the first and the second story of Genesis. Given its use of the word *toledot* it would be part of the final trajectory of Genesis.[33] Usually *toledot* is a superscription naming the progenitor of the characters in the following section (i.e. *toledot* Adam in 5.1 opens the list of Adam's offspring, *toledot* Terah in 11.27 initiates the story of Abraham, etc.). Reading Gen. 2.4 in the same way, it relates the story of Adam, Eve as 'the story of the offspring of heaven and earth'.

Isa. 34.1 expresses the same imagery[34]: 'Let the earth listen along with all that fills it, the world and all its offspring'.[35] In this statement 'the offspring of the world' is a pendant to 'that which fills the earth' (i.e. all life). By way of popular (and probably historical) etymology, the word for 'offspring' (צאצא) is related to the verb 'spring forth' (יצא) denoting the activity of the earth in Gen. 1.11, 24. In Isa. 34.1, therefore, the earth (ארץ, תבל) has brought forth all life forms, including humankind. The earth is originator of humankind.

(iii) Yet another string of symbolic speech in prophetic passages portrays the nation as children of an adulterous woman Israel, who used to be married to Yhwh and is now divorced.[36] There are, of course, strong symbolic associations between women and gardens, vineyards and fields in biblical literature (cf. Isa. 5.1-7; Jer. 3.1; etc.). Jer. 50.12-13 makes the obvious symbolical combination and portrays the nation as children of ארץ ישראל. Keown, Scalise and Smothers note that a similar symbolism probably lies at the background of Hos. 2.5.[37]

(iv) Mowinckel and others pointed to a couple of instances depicting the earth as originator for the entire cosmos. These do not appear to have the

31. Schmid, 'Die "Mutter Erde"'.

32. Bottéro, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*, p. 98.

33. For this and the following, see Terje Stordalen, 'Genesis 2.4: Restudying a *locus classicus*', *ZAW* 104 (1992), pp. 163-77.

34. This is often neglected, but it is recorded for instance in Hans Wildberger, *Jesaja. 3.Teilband, Jesaja 28–39* (BKAT, 10/3; Neukirchen–Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1982), p. 1341.

35. תשמע הארץ ומלאה תבל וכל צאצאיה.

36. Isa. 50.1; Ezek. 16.44-50; Hos. 2.2; etc.; cf. R. Abma, *Bonds of Love: Methodic Studies of Prophetic Texts with Marriage Imagery* (Studia semitica neerlandica, 40; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1999).

37. Gerald L. Keown, Pamela J. Scalise and Thomas G. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26–52* (WBC, 27: Waco: Word Books, 1995), pp. 365-66.

support of conventional symbolism, but they do concur with the view of the earth as a cosmic authority. The first instance is Ps. 90.2, where Mowinckel forcefully rejected the passive reading of the versions. He argued that ארץ and תבל should be seen as co-progenitors. The other is Job 38.8, where Mowinckel claimed the primaeval ocean is born from the earth.[38]

Summing up, it should be clear that not only did the ancient Hebrews occasionally portray the earth as mother (Job 1.21; Qoh. 5.14; Sir. 40.1), there were webs of linguistic symbolism supporting and in part promoting this imagery. And as a foundation for this symbolism there was the apprehension of the earth as a cosmological authority—one that was subject to Yhwh but nonetheless cosmologically significant. Based on this insight let us proceed to some further instances depicting the earth in parental roles.

Earth Reacting to Human Conduct and Fate

(i) First, we record that the Hebrews were taught that shed blood should not be left visible on rocks and other solid ground. Instead, it should go down into the ground or be covered with dust. This view is explicit in the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17–26) and Ezekiel and mirrored in Deuteronomy and Job.[39] Scholars have offered various explanations for this concern. Walter Zimmerli and David Clines regard the un-covered blood in Job 16.18 as evidence for murder.[40] Jacob Milgrom, on the other hand, lists seven different explanations in Lev. 17.3 and concludes that the blood had to be hidden in order to avoid chthonic rites. As an alternative explanation he mentions the view that since life is contained in the blood (as expressed in Lev. 17.14), it must be returned to God who gives life to all living.[41] This implies that God 'keeps' life in the earth—a view that concurs with the above visions of the earth as a *locus* for the 'production' and potential revivification of humans.

Secondly, there are the implications that God's counterpart in the cosmic covenant in Gen. 9.1-17 is in fact the earth, acting on behalf of all offspring. Possibly due to a complex of trajectories, several covenantal counterparts are named more or less *en passant* within Gen. 9.8-17: 'you and your descendants and all living creatures, all that are with you among birds, cattle and every animal of the earth' (vv. 9-10); 'from everything that went forth from the ark

38. Mowinckel, 'Moder jord', pp. 132-33 and 133-35, respectively.

39. Lev. 17.13; Ezek. 24.7; Deut. 12.16; 15.23; Job 16.18.

40. Walther Zimmerli, *Ezechiel. I. Teilband, Ezechiel 1–24* (BKAT, 13/1; Neukirchen–Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1969), pp. 65-66; Clines, *Job 1–20*, pp. 380-81.

41. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22* (AB, 3A; New York: Doubleday, 2000), pp. 1481-83.

to all life on earth'[42] (v. 10); 'you' (v. 11); 'you and all living creatures' (v. 12). Finally, in v. 13, the covenant is named 'a covenant between me and the earth'[43]. ארץ here could be figurative, denoting 'every living creature', but in that case we would rather have expected כל הארץ.[44] Since Genesis 9 so clearly echoes Genesis 1, it seems reasonable to take 9.13 as a summary designation for a covenant between God and all life that sprang from the earth (cf. Gen. 1.11-12, 24-25; Isa. 34.1). This implies the earth as representative for God's covenantal counterparts. Such a role, comparable to that of the Israelite elders in Exod. 24.9, etc., is compatible with a perception of the earth as parent and head of the cosmic parental house (בית־אב). As a summary statement, therefore, Gen. 9.13 makes perfect sense.

The idea that humans, animals and earth (land) are bonded in a covenant to ensure peace is a common topic in ancient Near Eastern literature.[45] The covenants in Hos. 2.20 (ET 2.18); Ezek. 34.25-29; Job 5.23 ensure peace and well being for humans, animals and land (שדה or ארץ).[46] Note that the concept of a covenant between God and earth opens up the possibility of aligning the mother that brings forth humans (Isa. 34.1) with the mother that becomes a desolate plain (Jer. 52.12). Both are bound in a divine covenant.[47]

(ii) The earth sometimes punishes what would, according to the above symbolism, be its offspring. This is explicit in Isa. 24.1-20, a passage possibly composed in the late fifth century BCE and inspired by Priestly tradition.[48] As observed by Katherine Hayes, earth is here sometimes distinct from its inhabitants and sometimes includes all living things, it is sometimes the acting subject and sometimes the object of divine action (cf. the shift between Ps. 139.13-15 and Job 10.8-9). Also, in Isa. 24.4, as in Ps. 90.2, ארץ and תבל are parallel agents along with the heavens. Now, in Isa. 24.5-6 the earth is polluted when its inhabitants break the everlasting covenant.[49] As a result, a curse hits the earth and the inhabitants suffer the consequences. While this covenant is clearly not identical to the one in Genesis 9, the relation between

42. מכל יצאי התבה לכל חית הארץ. This apparent unit is often broken into different 'sources'.

43. ברית ביני ובין הארץ.

44. As in Gen. 18.25; 41.57; Isa. 14.7; Jer. 51.7, Ps. 96.1; etc.

45. See for instance Izak Cornelius, 'Paradise Motifs in the "Eschatology" of the Minor Prophets and the Iconography of the Ancient Near East: The Concepts of Fertility, Water, Trees and "Tierfrieden" and Gen. 2–3', *JNSL* 14 (1988), pp. 41-83 (44).

46. Similarly Isa. 11.6; 65.25. The idea seems mirrored also in Lev. 26.6, 42; 2 Sam. 17.24-28 (cf. the expression משפט אלהי הארץ) and possibly Joel 2.21-24.

47. For instance Ezek. 16.5 confirms the sense 'marriage agreement' for ברית.

48. For the passage, see recently Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39* (AB, 19; New York: Doubleday, 2000), pp. 346-57. See also Hayes, *'The Earth Mourns'*, pp. 129-75, and for priestly influence, pp. 137-38.

49. For this name of the covenant, see Gen. 9.16; cf. 9.12 and elsewhere in P.

earth and inhabitants seems to be. The earth is bound by a covenant first to witness the allegations against its inhabitants, and then to punish covenant violators even though they depend upon it. The earth paradoxically figures both on the giving end (as a cosmic authority enrolled by God) and on the receiving end (as bonded with its offspring). In passing, we record that this ambivalent role resembles rather closely that of the goddess Nintu in *Atra-hasis*, who gave birth to humans in the earth.[50]

A similar picture occurs in earlier priestly theology. In Lev. 18.24-25 the land is defiled because of the Canaanites, it gets punished and as a consequence it 'vomits' the inhabitants—a disgraceful 'birth' indeed! In Lev. 20.22 Israel faces a similar threat. The earth is destroyed as a consequence of human behaviour in Gen. 6.12-13; Ezek. 7.2-12; 14.13-22; 15.6-8; 22.23-32; Ps. 50.1-7 and possibly in Hag. 1.7-11; Ps. 98.9. The same seems to occur in literature closer to Deuteronomistic theology.[51] Except in Psalm 50, these instances do not mention the covenant (but in Hos. 4.1-3; Mic. 6.1-2; Ps. 98.9 the lawsuit pattern may suggest a covenant context). In any event they express relations between the earth and its inhabitants comparable to what is expressed in Genesis 9.

(iii) As seen above, earth is the proper location for the final rest of 'dust creatures' and for their blood. In happy instances, what the dead leave behind, is a *name* or respect for their memory (cf. Ezek. 39.13). If, however, a disgraceful death prevents harmonious departure, earth sometimes acts to promote, nevertheless, a memory of the dead. The blood of Abel shouts from the earth (Gen. 4.10) and the ארץ is filled with the outcry of the Hebrew nation also in Jer. 46.12. The land (earth) is similarly filled with outcry following the aggression of the Lion of Judah (Ezek. 19.7). More in the active, Job hopes the earth will refuse to cover his blood, so his outcry is not muted (Job 16.18). And the land actively cries out during the fall of Edom and Babylon (Jer. 49.21 = 50.46). Presumably, these are Edomite and Babylonian lands crying out on behalf of *their* offspring (cf. 51.29). In sum, the earth supports cries for justice on behalf of the disgracefully departed. Indeed, it 'stands up' against the evildoer (Job 20.27). And Job thinks the ground (אדמה, etc.) would punish any sin he might have committed, apparently against the workers of the field (Job 31.38-40).[52]

A most actively protecting earth occurs throughout Isa. 26.19-21, a passage loaded with imagery of the earth as mother. Taking my lead from Joseph Blenkinsopp, I regard Isaiah 24–27 as a priestly influenced composition from

50. See for instance III.iii.32–iv.13; III.v.36ff. and 43ff. (several broken lines).

51. Deut. 24.4; Jer. 51.29 (concerning Babylon); Hos. 4.1-3; Amos 8.8; see also Mic. 7.13 (concerning foreign nations).

52. On this difficult passage see A. de Wilde, *Das Buch Hiob eingeleitet, übersetzt und erläutert* (OTS, 22; Leiden: Brill, 1981), p. 303.

the early Persian era. The psalm in 26.7–27.1 occurs as a poetical unit, with vv. 20-21 as expansions to v. 19.[53] In these verses a divinely commissioned voice comforts the nation in ordeal:

19 Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise.
Awake and sing in joy, you dust dwellers!
For your dew is a dew of light,
and the earth shall give birth to *rephaim*.
20 Go, my people! Enter your chamber
and close your doors behind you.
Hide for a short time, until it passes.
21 Alas! Yhwh goes forth from the sanctuary
to punish the inequity of the inhabitants of the earth.
The earth uncovers its blood,
and it will no longer swathe its deceased.

First, in the active uncovering of blood in v. 21, earth would perhaps assist in a potential trial against the guilty (cf. the role of the earth in Isa. 24.1-20, above). However, as in Job 16.18 the aim seems to be less to punish the criminal and more to seek restitution for the poor offspring. When acting on behalf of 'its deceased' (v. 21), earth's sympathy seems constantly to remain with those long dead that come alive already in 26.19.

Secondly, there is the 'chamber' (חדר). Normally this noun refers to an inner or hidden chamber. Given the focus upon the earth throughout the passage, it seems reasonable to take חדר as reference to a grave chamber.[54] This is the sense of this word in two (or three) Hebrew inscriptions.[55] It is the sense in set phraseology ('chambers of death', 'chamber of *sheol*') found in Prov. 7.27, *Hodayoth* 18.36; 4Q426 5.1, and this is also the sense of this root in Phoenician. Reading '(grave) chamber' in v. 20, the divinely commissioned voice calls the nation to seek temporary shelter inside the earth. They will join those already dead and take part in their revivification, as envisioned in v. 19 and implied in v. 21. Here earth not only supports justice for its dead, it even hides the poor *living* offspring in its bosom. Earth then restores them to glory in an event that could be envisioned as rebirth. Even Isa. 2.10 indicates that going into the rock (grave[56]) and hiding in the dust (death) would be a way to avoid divine judgment. Indeed, it seems possible that Isa. 26.20-21 was augmented to 26.19 through exegesis of 2.10.

53. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, pp. 346-48, 368, 370-72.

54. Contra Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, p. 371, rejecting this translation.

55. From el-Qom, first grave inscription, late eighth century; see Johannes Renz and Wolfgang Röllig, *Handbuch der althebräischen Epigraphik* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995), I, pp. 200-201; and from Silwan, Jerusalem, first grave inscription, seventh century, Renz and Röllig, *Handbuch der althebräischen Epigraphik*, I, pp. 261-63. This sense is also probable in KAI 1.19 (Byblos, around 1000 BCE).

56. Again, the Silwan inscription.

(i) Further work should be done in order to adequately excavate ancient Hebrew imagery on the earth as mother. In particular, it would be necessary to explore perceptions of earth in available archaeological material, especially in iconography.[57] Also, it is necessary to relate the above linguistic evidence to practices of ancestor cult and necromancy in ancient Syria–Canaan.[58] And indeed, we need a proper study of the chthonic in ancient Hebrew religion.[59] Later Jewish sources should be searched for possible reflections of the construct above. It would be necessary to relate the Hebrew material much more intensely to Northwest Semitic and further to other ancient Near Eastern material. In particular, the relative lack of popular myths in the Hebrew Bible is a challenge when trying to make sense of the 'small tradition' surfacing in the above material. In this matter comparative material would be helpful. None of this could, however, be accomplished here.

(ii) Still, I hope that what *could* be accomplished, has shown that the earth played a serious part in biblical mythology. At least in the Persian era there was conventional and conceptual support for Hebrew individuals to imagine earth as a particularly significant authority in the universe. (And, this being part of the small tradition, there is no compelling reason to think this would have been fundamentally different in earlier centuries.) Earth acted in or reacted to matters at the margins and at the centre of human life: birth, burial, revivification and sustenance, livelihood. Hebrew people could think of themselves as 'sprung' from the earth or as formed from dust in the ground. Human life was a journey from dust to earth. When returning, one would live forth in the grave, with at least the symbolic potential for revivification from the earth as a cosmic womb.[60] They would perceive of the earth as monitoring human action, promoting justice and guarding people's life and the memory of the dead. Possibly, they could imagine the earth as their legal representative in the cosmic covenant that forms the basis for all life. Either because of

57. Relevant material occurs in Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Göttinnen, Götter und Gottessymbole* (Quaestiones disputatae, 134; Freiburg: Herder, 1992), pp. 80-85, etc.

58. Relevant material in Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices and Beliefs about the Dead* (JSOTSup, 123; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), pp. 147-51; Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, pp. 297-305.

59. In the lack of a monograph, see John H. Marks and Robert M. Good (eds.), *Love and Death in the Ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of Marvin H. Pope* (Guilford: Four Quarters, 1987). Cf. Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden*, pp. 105-11.

60. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, p. 371, challenges the *opinio communis* on the lack of hope for resurrection in Persian (and earlier) Judaism. I agree, although one evidently did not hope for 'resurrection' in the traditional Christian sense.

mental Balkanization (keeping the small and the large traditions apart) or because of a more logical coordination (taking the earth as cosmic 'vendor'), such perceptions of the earth co-existed even with rigorous Yahwism (as in Isa. 44.3-3; Jer. 31.37; 50.12-13; Hos. 2.15, 20; 4.1-3.12). It comes as no surprise therefore, that Mowinckel would find a concept of mother earth without an accompanying cult.

So, what did biblical Hebrew imagery of the earth as mother signify? A Hebrew farmer would not have gathered from all this that one could dig for yet unborn children (Ps. 139.15) or literally put one's ear to the ground to hear its voice (Isa. 29.4). Like the Sabbath scheme in Genesis 1, this mythology was symbolic: a product of constitutive imagination (cf. Veyne). On a surface level it seems akin for instance to the mythology found in Tablet II of the standard Babylonian epic of *Atrahasis*. Upon a divine decree, the earth closes its womb with the effect that plants become scarce and humans starve. They deteriorate year by year until they end up cannibals.[61] While the biblical symbolism has different facets and forms, both express a sense of human connectedness to earth and environment. Such dependence would be basic in agrarian cultures, while its form, presentation and interpretation would vary with climatic and cultural context. Biblical mythology of the earth as mother and originator of humans seems to have given form and expression to those forces that link humanity to the environment. This mythology recovers deep levels of meaning in human practices that reflected these forces: fertility in human reproduction, sustenance in agriculture and a sense of cosmic circular flow in inhumation. As such they contribute to giving symbolic localization and residential rights—inside the small tradition—to those agrarian modes of religion that theologians so often have dismissed in biblical religion.

(iii) A sense of human dependence upon the environment may have been immediate to people of the ancient Near East, but for a long time it was far from evident in Western discourse. Indeed, our awareness of this matter is still rather 'thin' (Geertz). Could biblical mythology contribute to enrich contemporary Western discourse?

Let us start inside Christian religion. It is the role of religion *inter alia* to formulate symbolic universes that are capable of coherent interpretation of life and of prescribing adequate action. Such symbolic universes are regarded as truths and have tremendous influence upon the way people think and act. Now, the more serious failure of Christian religion in matters of ecology was not that it paved the way for modern exploitation of nature (contra Lynn White). Rather, the fatal collapse has been the silent acceptance of technocracy as self-evidently good. Thomas Berry writes: 'The prevalent feeling is that the Christian spiritual tradition does not really need to be concerned about

61. *Atrahasis* II.iv.4-18.

the natural world... [A]ny concern about the universe or the planet Earth has no great urgency. It has no overwhelming relevance to the Christian life.'[62] As a politically progressive move, Protestant theology before and after World War II argued that cosmology should be disregarded altogether (cf. Hiebert, above). This led to ecological insensitivity, which is now being exploited by conservative forces. They profit from Protestants maintaining a symbolic universe that resists arguments for ecological action. However, the segments of Christianity supporting this view should be apt to honour biblical voices. If ecologically loaded biblical imagery could be part of a reorientation in Protestant theology, this could potentially be a factor in political change, especially in the USA.

Secondly, biblical imagery helps us constitute 'alternative worlds that exist because of and in the act of utterance'.[63] Cognitive psychology contributes to our perception of this function by discovering how metaphors filter perceptions and help shape everyday action.[64] In this perspective, an important question for any biblical imagery would be: Does it perform well? Is it good for our discourse, for our environment? If it is, it could potentially be recognized as relevant beyond the churches.

Catherine Roach recently analysed the imagery of nature as mother in North American popular and consumer culture.[65] She found three different images. The first two are widespread and very powerful: the image of the self-sacrificing and all-nurturing mother; and that of the treacherous and man-eating mother. Both images are potentially damaging to responsible ecological reasoning. The fantasy of the never-ending abundance of the Good Mother warrants mindless consuming and destruction of natural resources. The imagery of the demonic mother licenses a war on nature: '[O]ur ambivalence...is exacerbated by paranoid-schizoid phantasy about the human mother...' (p. 120). The third image is that of the victimized mother. This is where Roach finds some hope for the future, provided one is able to avoid idealizing as well as demonizing nature and also to avoid anthropocentric self-interest. She argues that much New Age environmentalism chooses a 'too simple route' that resembles manic reparation without dealing properly

62. Thomas Berry, 'Christianity's Role in the Earth Project', in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans* (ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether; Religions of the World and Ecology; Harvard: Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, 2000), pp. 127-34 (132).

63. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2nd edn, 2001), p. x. In this foreword Brueggemann gives an account of his engagement with imagination as an interpretative and epistemic mode.

64. Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, pp. 3-6.

65. Catherine M. Roach, *Mother/Nature: Popular Culture and Environmental Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

with guilt and loss (pp. 137-44). Her position is that we must pay attention to connotations and resonances of whatever nature imagery we use. Additionally, she recommends self-irony as a strategy to avoid absolutizing mother earth imagery, but simultaneously to confirm, still, its ability to make intuitive sense (pp. 160-70).

Biblical imagery of the earth as mother combines the 'Good Mother' and the 'Bad Mother' in its chthonic imagery. אֶרֶץ acts in giving as well as taking life, in hiding the life-to-become as well as the life-that-was. As age-old wisdom this chthonic constellation seems to symbolically provoke some of the awareness and critical distance that Roach calls for. Also, biblical imagery firmly identifies humans as part of the cosmos, thereby avoiding non-reflective anthropocentrism. The biblical metaphor seems capable of embracing biological knowledge of environmental interconnectedness without unwittingly muting moral and other dimensions that are so important in humanist reflection. In short, it seems worthwhile to bring the biblical imagination to the contemporary *agora* to explore whether it could perhaps contribute positively in public discourse—as a prism for perceiving humans in the environment and as a vehicle to propagate such themes in popular discourse. In so doing, of course, the imagery would be subject to Roach's call to constantly review the connotations and resonances of this vision of humankind and its place in the cosmos.

And by this move we come full circle, returning to Walter Brueggemann's opening issue: human belonging in the world. Thirty years later our vision of the earth as mother resembles his vision of the land as home at least in one respect. Both give direction and yet defy finitude. As *der Jubilar* himself might have put it: biblical mythology consigns us to continued pilgrimage towards embodiment of humanity in nature.

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