Homogenizing violence, Isa 40:4 (and Luke 3:5) and MTR (Mountaintop Removal Mining)

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Abstract
With the metaphor of leveling hills and filling valleys, Isa 40:4 presents an image of homogenizing violence toward Earth. This biblical text has been adopted by proponents of Mountaintop Removal Mining (hereafter, MTR). Justification of MTR by explicit reference to Isa 40:4 has occurred principally in response to Christian protests against MTR. The same text has been used by those resisting MTR. This article begins with ecophilosopher Val Plumwood’s critique of homogenization and draws on Paul Ricoeur’s reading of Aristotle on metaphor, to ask if, other than as a crass use as a proof-text for MTR, the application of Isa 40:4 to this destructive practice points to a deeper problem with homogenizing metaphors whose content is other-than-human. While the Isaian metaphor is problematic, it is grounded in the underlying liveliness of its subject. Attention to the liveliness of these biblical mountains and valleys allows that the text, and its metaphors, can also empower resistance to MTR. The liveliness underlying the mountains and hills of the Isaian metaphor can prompt a renewed focus on, and solidarity with, the Appalachian mountains and their communities.

Keywords
Mountaintop Removal Mining - Isaiah 40 - Christianity - homogenization

Introduction
In Feminism and the Mastery of Nature, the late Australian ecophilosopher Val Plumwood (1993) critiques a kind of dualism (or hyper-separation) as bearing a logic of colonization. As part of her critique she address the violence of homogenization (Plumwood, 1993, 53-55). Homogenization is akin to stereotyping, where it is necessary that an oppressed class appear homogenous so that its members can be identified with, and assimilated to, their “nature” as subordinate (Plumwood, 1993, 53). Homogenization applies in relation to race, ethnicity and gender, and is a feature of colonial relationships including relationships between humans and
other-than-humans. Plumwood insists that a critique of dualism is not a critique of difference per se: “Dualism should not be seen as creating difference where none exists. Rather it tends to capitalise on existing patterns of difference, rendering these in ways which ground hierarchy” (Plumwood, 1993, 55).

Indeed, homogenization renders difference in two ways that are problematic: 1) all members of a (usually dominated) group are characterized as the same, as their difference from each other is denied or minimized; 2) this rendering of sameness enables the dominated group and its members to be seen as completely other than, and open to exploitation by, the dominant group. For Plumwood this kind of colonizing operation works to keep the dominant group at the centre (1993, 55). Plumwood is critical of all manner of centrisms, among these, androcentrism, Eurocentrism, and anthropocentrism. In the case of anthropocentrism, nature and animals are assimilated to each other when all are characterised as lacking consciousness, which is understood to be exclusively human (Plumwood, 2002, 107). This anthropocentric paradigm homogenizes other-than-humans promoting “insensitivity to the marvellous diversity of nature, since differences in nature are attended to only if they are likely to contribute in some obvious way to human welfare” (Plumwood, 2002, 107). In passing, I note that the term “nature” itself is problematic in that it can also exacerbate this homogenizing tendency where the word “nature” collapses the vast diversity of things. For example, particular mountains, valleys, rivers, lions, sheep, and so on, are encompassed in a single category (“nature”) that is often construed as distinct from, and in opposition to, human culture.

This article explores ways in which the imagery of Isa 40:4 carries an homogenizing tendency, and asks how the metaphors of valleys raised/exulted and hills/mountains leveled operates in relation to Mountaintop Removal Mining (MTR), where the text has been taken up both by proponents of, and resisters to, MTR. The question is not whether there are better or worse readings of Isa 40:4 from the perspective of critical biblical studies, but that the metaphors employed in the text, even the nature of metaphor itself, may be such that it “colludes” in its violent uses. Does the text, and its metaphors, also empower resistance? Which critical principles can help a hearer/reader discern between violent (homogenizing) readings of Isa 40:4 and readings empowering resistance to the practice of MTR? My proposal is that the principles are not those of historical criticism, though these may be of use, but rather reside in the liveliness underlying metaphor, the dynamism of the valleys and hills of Isa 40:4, affiriming and in conversation with the liveliness of the mountains and valleys subject to MTR.
Isaiah 40:4 and MTR

Homogenization

Homogenization of other-than-humans takes on a particular nuance when it appears in biblical texts as something like a metaphor for the people’s aspirations and God’s longed for actions on their behalf. That predator and prey might lie down together has been read as a sign of an age of peace, a “peaceable kingdom” (Isa 11:6-9; 65:25). The image both relies on the specific behaviors of members of different species and seems to promote the dissolution of these characteristic behaviors into a singular peaceable relationality. In an address on the Bible and violence, John J. Collins comments: “After all, it is only in the utopian future that the wolf is supposed to live with the lamb, and even then the wolf will probably feel the safer of the two” (2003, 20). Collins’ wry observation aside, that the image is directed toward a utopia only adds to its homogenizing dynamic.¹ This trope appears in colonial and later contexts, for example in the paintings of Edward Hicks and in animal theologies, as one that has both positive and negative aspects for its uses in theological politics and ethics (Elvey, 2005). The focus of this article, however, is the image in Isa 40:4 which is taken up in Luke 3:5:

Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain (Isa 40:4 NRSV).

Every valley shall be filled
and every mountain and hill shall be made low
and the crooked shall be made straight
and the rough ways made smooth (Luke 3:5 NRSV).

Rather than principally reading these verses from any number of critical approaches to biblical studies, I propose to look at the kind of homogenization that is suggested by the image of valleys being lifted up/filled and mountains made low. It appears on the surface that

¹ See the brief critique in Habel (2009).
this text gestures toward the roughness of terrain and the specific altitudes of high and low places being smoothed out, so that everything is level ground or plain. This is different in one respect from the homogenization I described earlier that erases difference in order to stereotype. But it does entail a smoothing out of difference (valley and hill) to create a third category (plain). The character of valleys as low places, through which rivers or streams often run, and of mountains and hills as high places, is each reduced to the level character of a plain, or a smooth road across a plain, and subordinated to the anticipated coming or intervention of Yhwh, which promises “comfort” to the people. While historical and literary critical readings of the text will give context and nuance to the homogenizing aspect of the image (and I will consider some important contextual aspects below), I have wondered whether these verses have had impact outside biblical studies at this surface level.

Mountaintop Removal Mining

An internet search quickly shows that the Isaian text has been used in relation to Mountaintop Removal Mining, a process for coal extraction that occurs in the United States in six Appalachian states, namely Kentucky, West Virginia, Virginia, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, in an area of around 12 million acres. John McQuaid writes: “Since the mid-1990s, coal companies have pulverized Appalachian mountaintops in West Virginia, Kentucky, Virginia and Tennessee. Peaks formed hundreds of millions of years ago are obliterated in months. Forests that survived the last ice age are chopped down and burned” (2009). In addition, thousands of miles of rivers and streams are being filled with debris. At a Coalfield Justice Rally in February 1999, Denise Giardina said: “You are flattening our mountains and filling in our hollows, and this is the last evil you will do” (Barry, 2012). MTR remains a current issue affecting the Appalachian region. On September 12, 2014, a small group of protesters rallied at the White House Council on Environmental Quality to call on the Obama administration to act on its five year old Memorandum of Understanding to address the destructive impacts of MTR in the Appalachian region.²

There has been and remains significant Christian resistance to MTR in the U.S.³ A 1999 article by Kevin Clarke in U.S. Catholic is titled “And every mountain brought low,” with a summary line which reads: “Hiding behind economic development, King Coal is making molehills out of mountains.” The article points out that in the process of MTR, used to extract what is a comparatively “cleaner” form of coal (namely low sulphur coal), “[e]ntire

² See Copeland (2013, 1); McQuaid (2009); Appalachian Voices (2014); ilovemountains.org (2014).
³ See, for example, CFTM (2012); Fincher (2014); Rausch (2012); Witt (2013).
mountaintops are blown up, cut up and ground into dust as the coal is extracted. The rubble left over is dumped into nearby valleys—over the last few years obliterating hundreds of mountain streams” (Clarke, 1999, 23). The article which depicts the leveling of mountains and filling in of valleys as the physical reality of MTR, appeals to the Isaian text as a kind of implied critique of this process. Clarke points out the ecojustice implications of a situation in which residents of Kentucky and West Virginia ultimately pay, in terms of health and loss of environmental amenity, such as fresh waterways, for some local economic benefit and for cleaner air for others outside their locality. This latter point, that some humans pay in poor working conditions and local environmental degradation, and that other creatures pay through loss of habitat to benefit other, usually richer, urban populations resonates with Plumwood’s (2008) critique of our unacknowledged reliance on “shadow places” for our local sustenance and comfort.

I will not rehearse the arguments against MTR here but briefly point to studies that have considered the fallacy of the economic arguments for this mining process in the U.S., its link with cancers, analyses of the affects along gender lines, including the deleterious effects on women’s reproductive health and on infants, and the loss not only to species whose primary habitat is water, but also to the biodiversity of terrestrial life, and a likely overall negative impact in relation to climate change. Rebecca Scott highlights an interesting aspect of human populations residing in mining areas, observing the homogeneity of “mining town economies” where most men worked either as “miners or managers” (2007, 489). This homogeneity is reinforced by stereotypical gender, class and racial expectations, that, she argues, continue into the present in some coal company practices (Scott, 2007, 489). This homogenizing transfers into biblically-based Christian communities of the region as Allen Jones, cofounder of Christians for the Mountains, puts it: “You have someone who is driving a coal truck in one pew, and in another pew you have someone whose life is being messed up by the effects of mining. What do you do as a pastor? You ignore that issue and just pray for people to get to heaven” (Alston, 2010, 21). In this homogenizing gesture, immediate differences in the economic, social, health and ability status of humans are subsumed into the sameness of souls destined for an otherworldly heaven, eliding the claims for dialogue concerning social and ecological justice in the here and now.

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4 Stewart Burns (2007); Woods and Gordon (2011); Barry (2012); Holzman (2011); Cancer Weekly News Reporter-Staff News Editor (2013, 173); Alston (2010); Wasson (2014); Wickham et al. (2013); Campbell, Fox, and Acton (2012). This last article is cited in IPCC AR5. III. Ch. 7 (2014, 48, 92).
An evangelical Christian Julia (also known as Judy) Bonds who died in 2011 was an outreach worker of the Whitesville, West Virginia-based Coal River Mountain Watch (Newberry, 2005, 26). In 2003, Bonds was one of seven activists from across the world to win the Goldman Environmental Prize. Beth Newberry comments on Bonds: “Whether she is testifying before congressional committees, speaking at a rally, or leading a lawsuit to strengthen environmental protections, her source for renewal and unwavering dedication to her cause is her relationship with God, grounded in a critical reading of the Bible” (2005, 26). In her article, Newberry highlights Bonds’ appeal as an evangelical Christian to biblically-based creation and covenant theologies to uphold her resistance to MTR.

A network of evangelical Christians in the Appalachians, Christians for the Mountains (CFTM), of which Bonds was a member, similarly appeals to covenant theology, a covenant with God and a covenant with creation, to support their resistance to MTR. CFTM also appeals to Psalm 24:1 in support of its mission. Dwight Billings and Will Samson analyze the way “name calling,” a mode of homogenization or stereotyping, works to devalue the name “environmentalists” among many “evangelicals” (2012). Indeed the opposite could be said to be true, that “evangelical” or “fundamentalist” becomes a homogenizing term among those who see these sectors of Christians as opposed to environmental protection. The CFTM prefers the term “Creation Care” to “Environmentalism” to avoid the negative stereotype.5

On Mountain Sunday in 2012 during the Season of Creation, an initiative of the Earth Bible chief editor Norman Habel, Erik Christensen delivered a sermon resisting MTR. He situated MTR in the context of the rich mountain imagery of biblical texts from both testaments and made the telling link between sacred place and care for place: “Perhaps it is because we have, in our religious imaginations, removed God from the mountaintops and relocated God into our sanctuaries, that we no longer care so deeply for the real-life mountaintops here at home and around the world” (Christensen, 2012). He reminded his congregation that while some mountains have become holiday resorts, others are being destroyed (Christensen, 2012).

Against the growing resistance to MTR, coal companies have been trying for several years to play up the benefits of MTR.6 In response to Christian resistance to MTR, more than

5 See CFTM (2012); Billings and Samson (2012).
6 See, for example, West Virginia Coal Association (2012). It would seem that the resistance to MTR is successful to some extent, at least enough so to be threatening to mining interests. The Senior Vice President of West Virginia Coal testified on October 10, 2013, to the Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources of the Natural Resources Committee oversight hearing: “EPA v. American Mining Jobs: The Obama Administration’s
one coal association has referred to Isa 40:4. For example, on the Kentucky Coal Association website in 2013, one could read: “Under most circumstances, we are of the opinion religion should not play a role in political debate. Recently, however, we’ve learned some religious leaders are railing against mountaintop mining and, as we hear it, invoking the Almighty to bring an end to the mining method.” The comment continues with an appeal to 1 Tim 5:8 and the onus on people “to provide for their households,” then turns to Isaiah citing the New American Bible version of 40:4-5 as support for the practice of MTR. The attorney representing the West Virginia Coal Association has also used Isa 40:4 to support MTR (Keith930, 2012).

Responses to mining companies’ uses of Isaiah sometimes appeal to the tools of biblical studies, whether accurately or otherwise is not the precise point, to argue that Isa 40:4-5 does not refer to valleys being “filled in,” but rather to their being “exalted.” One argument then proffers: “It would require the most cynical misreading of the Bible to assert that we would be adhering to the will of God by destroying a valley with fill, according to religious experts.” In a similar vein Kenn Hermann writes: “It is so comforting to know that the good Christian owners, operators, and stockholders of Hobet 21, the 12k sq. mile strip mine in West Virginia owned by Arch Coal Company, take their Bibles so seriously. How could I have missed the meaning and scope of Isaiah’s prophecy?” (2006). Hermann refers to an ecclesial understanding of the metaphorical nature of the passage as pertaining to the parousia, and then with irony writes: “Now we know that Isaiah was foretelling the coming of the newest advances in mountaintop mining to feed our insatiable need for coal” (2006).

Anne Shelby from Clay Country, Kentucky, on a hilly seventy-acre farm inhabited by her family since the beginning of the twentieth century comments that: “The coal association takes that verse from Isaiah and uses it literally. As if the prophet were talking about MTR rather than the coming of the Messiah.” Shelby finds the assumption that Appalachians are simple-minded, insignificant people who read their Bibles literally condescending; this

7 Kentucky Coal Association (2013). By October 1, 2014 this seemed to have been removed from the KCA website.  
8 Kentucky Coal Association (2013).  
10 House and Howard (2009, 238). The point is not whether Shelby is correct in presuming that Isa 40:5 points to Jesus Christ as Messiah; in its original context in the Hebrew Bible this is not the case but a later interpretation by Luke and other early Jesus followers and of course later Christians.
condescension reveals the companies’ desperation as they respond to every critical prompt.\textsuperscript{11}

In his discussion of hyperbolic or exaggerated biblical language, Robert L. Plummer writes in reference not to Isa 40:4 but to Matt 17:20: “Jesus is not preparing his followers to work for coal-mining companies—moving the tops of physical mountains. Rather, through faith in God, Jesus’ followers will overcome seemingly impossible obstacles” (2010, 225). Penny Loeb takes up this biblical imagery in the title of her book \textit{Moving Mountains}, in relation to Patricia Bragg’s effective campaigning against MTR (2007). Another blog shifts the Christian response a little with the title “Religion’s View from Appalachia: Only God Should Move Mountains” (Morford, 2009).\textsuperscript{12}

Norman Wirzba in his review article on three books responding to and resisting MTR creatively and critically, comments that many Appalachian residents see themselves as “throwaway people” (2007, 44). He likens MTR to rampant robbery and violence, in which immense areas of the Appalachians resemble a lunar landscape and communities are in conflict or decimated by coal mining politics (Wirzba, 2007, 44). He compares the diversity of the forests of the region with the waste and pollution of mining companies including their unsuccessful reclamation projects (Wirzba, 2007, 44). In conclusion, referring to the president of the Kentucky Coal Association, Bill Caylor’s appeal to Isa 40:4-5 to support MTR, Wirzba writes: “Somehow I doubt that bulldozers and bombs, wasted lives and throwaway landscapes, are the means of the revealing of God’s glory” (2007, 45).

So, is it simply that representatives of coal mining companies are misreading the biblical text? That they need to be trained in critical biblical studies? Or, does the Isaian image repeated in Luke lend itself to this (abusive) reading? There is a wider issue here concerning the problematics of a particular kind of proof-texting, where a text is used out of context to support its literal enactment. What is specific to the situation of MTR is the actual mountains and valleys themselves in the Appalachians, and their relationship or otherwise to the mountains and valleys of Isa 40:4. To consider the nature of the metaphor in Isa 40:4 and the “living character” of these mountains and valleys, I draw first on Paul Ricoeur, before turning in more detail to the biblical text.

\textbf{The living character of metaphor}

In chapter one of \textit{The Rule of Metaphor}, Ricoeur develops his theory of metaphor through a careful exposition of Aristotle’s writing about metaphor in \textit{Rhetoric} and \textit{Poetics} (2003, 8-48).

\textsuperscript{11} House and Howard (2009, 239).
\textsuperscript{12} See also the appeal to Isa 40:12 in Banjeree (2006).
Ricoeur highlights three characteristics of metaphor, among others, that are useful in
addressing the question I am raising: deviation, mimesis, and what might be called
actualization.

Metaphor is a deviation from so-called “ordinary language.” At one level this is
simply a “difference in meaning” (Ricoeur, 2003, 26, 36, 45). The purpose of a metaphor is
to occasion, through this shift of meaning, an affective response in the hearer. Here poetic
language intersects with rhetoric, through its purpose to persuade. Persuasive language is “set
between two limits exterior to it—logic and violence” (Ricoeur, 2003, 35). The deviation
proper to metaphor can, but need not, be stretched toward violence.

The making of metaphor occurs by way of recognition of a relation between things
that are at once similar and dissimilar. Metaphor is a substitution of one name for another
name, a substitution that both arrests or engages the reader by its deviation from the thing and
offers an insight into the thing (re-)named through the recognition of a relation to the alien
substitute. Metaphor is also and properly discursive, picking up in action a relation between
things. As I will discuss in the next section, in the Isaian text, the underlying metaphors are
the metaphor of road-making and the metaphor of the divine (warrior/king) who is able to
visit and stride or march across the land (Isa 40:3-4). The underlying metaphor for a divine
who will rescue the people, bringing comfort through a return to an edenic state, is
accompanied by the call to build a road for the easy procession of Yhwh across the land. This
opens the text to the kind of abusive reading used to support MTR, because Isaiah’s road-
building metaphor is developed by way of the related imagery of raised valleys and razed
hills. There is both logic and violence to the metaphor of divine procession.

Metaphor works by mimesis. The hoped for procession of Yhwh across the land
occurs not only as a contrast to the suffering that accompanied the long journey out of Egypt,
but as a kind of mimetic reference to the procession of the invaders that took the people into
exile. The Targum version of Isa 40:1-5 no longer has the roadway prepared for Yhwh; it is
for the people themselves returning to Jerusalem from exile (Snodgrass, 1980, 27-28). The
link with exile might turn the reader to Isa 45:1-8 where can be found the “scandal” that
Yhwh describes Cyrus as shepherd and anointed, Yhwh’s agent, to bring blessing to the
people (Goldingay, 2012, 390-92). This affirmation of the human Persian ruler Cyrus as
rescuer of the people, suggests that Yhwh’s procession across the land is being allied through
mimesis to that of Cyrus.

Mimesis is not simply imitation, but it is “imitation” characterized by a “double
tension,” in its “submission to reality and fabulous invention, unaltering representation and
ennobling elevation” (Ricoeur, 2003, 45). While mimesis has an aspect of deviation from reality, such that Yhwh’s procession across the land may refer to but also depart from the procession of occupying armies, especially in its consequences (a new eden in contrast to exile), mimesis also reinscribes something of the reality from which it departs.

A further aspect of mimesis relates to the imagery around the valleys and hills of Isaiah; for Ricoeur: “If *mimēsis* involves an initial reference to reality, this signifies nothing other than the rule of nature over all production. But the creative dimension is inseparable from this referential movement” (2003, 44). We are reminded by mimesis that our belonging to a world is never suspended by discourse (Ricoeur, 2003, 48). Mimesis is “*mimēsis phuseōs*;” the referential function of metaphor is connected through mimesis to a coincidence of reality and agency (Ricoeur, 2003, 48). Thus, the mimetic function of metaphor or metaphorical discourse is such that in animating a thing, it is already responding to and enhancing the animate character of things through a kind of actualization. When supposedly inanimate things are represented as animate, they are not being related to an abstract quality such as animation; rather they are being shown to be themselves agents (cf. Ricoeur, 2003, 38).

Ricoeur notes that the ancient Greeks (and we might say the same for Hebrew notions of *eretz* and all that is in it) did not as a rule identify *phusis* with an “inert” given (2003, 48). While speaking more particularly of human action, Ricoeur’s thought could be extended to more-than-human action: “To present men ‘as acting’ and all things ‘as in act’—such could well be the *ontological* function of metaphorical discourse, in which every dormant potentiality of existence appears as blossoming forth, every latent capacity for action as actualized./Lively expression is that which expresses existence as alive” (2003, 48).

The metaphors of an anticipated divine (royal) procession across the land and the road-building that might respond by making this way easier, seem on the one hand to reinscribe an imperial mode of thinking in which Earth, hills and mountains, are subject to what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1992) has described as kyriarchal interests and what Plumwood (1993) would critique as falling under a logic of colonization. This colonizing logic is supported by the symbolic homogenization of valleys, hills and mounts, which becomes actual in MTR. Nonetheless, in deviating from that which it imitates, the metaphor of divine procession along a well-laid road seems to open a space for the responsiveness not only of humans but also of valleys, hills, mounts and rough ground to the divine procession. An assumed and implicit liveliness (rather than givenness) of the land underlies the sustained metaphor of road-building in Isaiah 40.
The force of the metaphor in Isaiah 40:4

Isaiah 40:4 appears in the opening poem of the prophetic unit that comprises Isa 40–55. In major part likely composed shortly after the fall of the Babylonian empire in 539 BCE, Isa 40–55 refers to events in, and concerns of, the Judean community in the preceding decade, and addresses their socio-religious needs after the exile. Both during the exile and afterwards, the Judean community is aware that the Babylonian and Persian empires surpass it in power (Goldingay and Payne, 2006, 30). Speaking to the people’s doubt concerning Yhwh’s faithfulness, Isa 40–55 opens by recalling in 40:1 the covenant between Yhwh and the people:

By commencing his oracle with the words “My people” (עמי) and “your God” ( אלהיכם), terms that echo the well-know covenant formula (e.g., Jer 7:23, “I am your God and you are My people”; cf. Exod 6:7; Lev 26:12; Jer 11:4; 31:33), the prophet is declaring that the covenant between God and Israel, which they thought had been broken because of their iniquities, was still intact (Paul, 2012, 127).

In Jewish liturgy, Isa 40:1—“Comfort, comfort my people …”—is recited on the first of the seven Sabbaths of comfort (Paul, 2012, 71). Comfort is a recurring motif in Isa 40–66. As Paul Hanson notes, Isa 40:1-11 affirms what has become a classic theme of Judaism and Christianity, namely divine presence in human history, so much so that the Persian king becomes the key to the future of the exiled people. Luke 3:3-6 reprises Isa 40:3-5 to proclaim the presence of God in the salvation John the Baptist is looking toward in Jesus: Luke’s John proclaims a baptism of repentance; Luke’s Jesus will proclaim forgiveness and liberation. But these themes of covenant, comfort, presence and forgiveness in Isa 40–55, and in its traditions of interpretation, in large part reflect anthropocentric interests.

While covenant in the Hebrew Bible involves a three-way relationship between Yhwh, land and people, here the comfort of a promised return to the land depends on “changes in the rugged desert terrain that must take place in order that a worthy and

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13 On Isa 40–55, frequently known as Deutero- or Second Isaiah, as both a distinct unit and properly part of a single biblical prophetic book called Isaiah, see Goldingay and Payne (2006, 1-4).
substantial highway for the great new work of the Lord may be established” (Thompson, 2001, 5). Norman Habel in his critique of “grey” (ecologically problematic) texts and identification of “green” (ecologically helpful) texts writes: “In the visions of Isaiah 40-55, we sense that the agonies of the past, represented by the wilderness, will be overcome by God with radical acts of transformation. The summons to prepare a way in the wilderness (Isa 40:3) is answered by sympathetic responses from God and the wilderness itself” (2009, 102). In response to the needs of the poor for water, God transforms the land, and what is properly “a dry landscape” becomes through divine miracle “a fertile forest.” Habel goes on to show the way the promise of Isaiah in these chapters plays on a contrast with the “past trials in the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt;” these trials, conveyed in the exodus narrative in a way Habel reads as ecologically destructive, are reversed in “a virtual return to Eden”(Habel, 2009, 103). In summary, the ecosystems of the desert are transformed by divine act into an idyllic place akin to Eden (Habel, 2009, 103). One might call this a promise of divine terraforming.

If Isa 40:4 is not to be taken to support, or at least offer an ancient preview of, contemporary practices of destructive terraforming such as MTR, then the covenant, comfort and presence Isa 40:1-11 proclaims would need to be understood in ways broader than its apparently dominant anthropocentric interests. But to point instead to the theocentric interests of the text—the divine initiative and care for the people—is frequently in effect to return to prevailing anthropocentric ones. What is needed is a shift of perspective toward framing divine-human relationship ecologically. Posing the question, “[h]ow does the land itself respond?”, Habel imagines the land asking: “Why demonise my wilderness and then seek visions that transform her into a different ecosystem?” (2009, 104). Adopting this “Earth voice,” he concludes: “Yet God bringing water to my wilderness is preferable, I suppose, to having my water turned into blood!” (Habel, 2009, 104). But if we return to the verses at the start of Isa 40-55, reading them as the West Virginia Coal Association and Kentucky Coal have suggested, the terraforming that occurs in MTR is anything but edenic. It is hard to imagine that the land, should it speak, would say that the filling and leveling of MTR is preferable to other worse treatment.

Working with the Hebrew Text, Shalom Paul translates Isa 40:3-5 as follows:

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18 It would seem the desert land is not the promised land.
20 My preference would be not to use the feminine pronoun for the land or Earth, as Habel does here, but to use a gender-neutral pronoun.
A voice rings out:
“Clear in the desert a road for the Lord!
Level in the wilderness a highway for our God!
Let every valley be raised
And every hill and mount be made low
Let the rugged ground become a plain
And the mountain ranges become a valley.
The presence of the Lord shall be revealed,
And all humanity, as one, shall see it.”
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken (Paul, 2012, 73).

This is poetry, and as Michael Thompson notes, it is satisfyingly effective poetry (2001, 5). The dominant image is of preparing a roadway for Yhwh. Paul comments that “the repetition of כל [every/all] … emphasises the wondrous miracle of the straight and level highway” (2012, 131). The overcoming of the “obstacles to engineering,” in the raising of valley and lowering of hills and mounts, and the smoothing of rugged ground, serves this metaphorical preparation of a royal highway for the divine (Goldingay, 2005, 19). But, in this metaphor the resonance of being raised and made low is broader. There is, as Habel implies, a call to valley, hill, and mount to respond to the cry, to participate in the preparation of this thoroughfare for the divine (2009). There is a sense, too, that the divine dispensation enables a response not only from humans, but from the wider Earth community—here valley, hill, and mountain. Moreover, the imagery of Isa 40:4 suggests that valley and mountain share both the exaltation (or attitude of praise/lifting up) and the humility summoned, when the כבוד (kabod; presence, glory) of Yhwh is revealed.

None of this, however, diminishes the problematic use of the text to support MTR. Nonetheless, the Isaian vision of terraforming occurs in the Hebrew text in part due to the volition of the things themselves, namely the valleys, hills and mounts. They are what we would now call ecosystems, represented as capable of responding to the call of the divine, delivered through the prophetic voice. Thus, in this text the metaphor contains or conveys something of the living character of its subject, perhaps rendering the death-dealing character of MTR all the more poignant.

The liveliness of valley and mountain—the liveliness of the particular landscape that Yhwh, Cyrus and the returning exiles might encounter on their way to Jerusalem—is prior to the road-building metaphor it supports. The transformation of this landscape to make a

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smooth way not only for Yhwh but also implicitly for the returning exiles serves the covenant, recalled in Isa 40:1, in Yhwh’s faithfulness to which the people will find comfort. The liveliness of valley and mountain required for the metaphor can be understood as also necessary to the reaffirmation of Yhwh’s covenant with the people. It is not surprising then that members of CFTM (Christians for the Mountains) appeal to covenant theology to inform and support their resistance to MTR.

Conclusion
Where does this leave us in relation to the use of Isa 40:4 to support MTR? The use of Isa 40:4 by advocates of MTR might lead us not to set up biblical studies classes for mining executives, but rather to ask other questions of the text, for example, as I have suggested above: How does the primary metaphor of Yhwh processing across the land inform or influence the homogenization of valley, hill and mount? What is at work here in the way metaphorical discourse touches on and/or gives way to violence? It is not sufficient to find a better reading of the text in its contexts (socio-cultural, historical, literary, liturgical, theological); rather it is necessary to recognize the violence inherent in the metaphor, and then, against its homogenizing tendency, to affirm the liveliness of valley, hill and mountain that precedes and underlies the metaphor.

How does the imagery of a lively responsive land, even if this is subordinated to a human desire for divine intervention, speak back to the reality of a land treated as if inert and rendered passive—constructed in Martin Heidegger’s (1993) term as “standing reserve”—even apparently deadened, in the processes of MTR? For many residents of the Appalachians fighting MTR, the response to the land itself is as to their own bodies, embedded in memory and stories, and the response to its destruction is “visceral” (McNeil, 2011). This interplay between land and body is both evidence of the liveliness of the land and poignant witness to its deadening in MTR, but perhaps also to the capacity for land and its human inhabitants to engage together in resistance. Rausch provides often poignant descriptions of tours and prayer in areas affected by MTR (2012). In these activities, participants witness the destruction, link their own lifestyles with the demand for cheap energy that makes MTR attractive to policy makers, commit to action, and perform symbolic actions of hope. Their practices offer instances of a more-than-human cooperative resistance, where people embedded in their land respond to the death-dealing of MTR through lively partnerships.

Not only can the reaffirmation of the covenant, despite its potential anthropocentric focus, offer empowerment for Christians to resist the destruction of MTR, but also—and I
would argue necessarily—the liveliness underlying the problematic homogenizing metaphor of Isa 40:4 needs to be given precedence alongside this covenant theology. There are two key reasons for this. First, the potentially anthropocentric focus on covenant needs to be understood in the context of a lively, responsive Earth and cosmos, where God and creation are covenanted to each other. Second, an affirmation of the liveliness of the specific ancient valleys, hills and mountains to which the prophet refers needs to call forth in contemporary Christians an affirmation of the liveliness of the Appalachian mountains. Such an affirmation resists both the homogenizing tendencies of the text and the destructive homogenization of mountains and valleys through MTR. This resistance is in solidarity with the Appalachian mountains, the destruction of which includes damage to communities (human and other-than-human) where many endure dying habitats and homes.

References


