A HERMENEUTICS OF RETRIEVAL: BREATH AND EARTH VOICE IN LUKE’S MAGNIFICAT—DOES EARTH CARE FOR THE POOR?¹

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ABSTRACT

This article uses the concept of “breath” as a hermeneutic key for applying the ecological hermeneutic of retrieval to suggest ways of reading the Magnificat with an ear to an Earth voice. The principle of voice, articulated by the Earth Bible Team, can be understood as a biblical principle, evident in the psalms. Much of the Second Testament, however, seems not to mention Earth directly and this raises questions concerning the application of the principle of voice. Taking the Magnificat as an example, I ask how might the interpreter retrieve an Earth voice in a text that seems oriented toward inter-human concerns for social justice? I suggest four ways in which the voice of Earth might be retrieved in this song in the mouth of a woman, Mary of Nazareth, through: i) the materiality of the text; ii) attention to the human body, especially the senses and the breath; iii) attention to the sustaining capacity of Earth in relation to poverty and riches; iv) the implicit reference to the land in the promise to the ancestors. The overall intent of the article is to situate the human question of poverty and oppression as an Earth question.

καὶ ἐγενήθησαι τῷ πνεῦμά μου ἐπὶ τῷ θεῖῳ σωτηρίῳ μου
Luke 1:47

BREATH, HUMAN AND OTHER-THAN-HUMAN, IS A PHENOMENON THAT CONNECTS humans with the wider Earth community of which we are part.² William Bry-

¹ This article is a revised version of a paper given in the Ecological Hermeneutics Section on the theme “Poverty, Ecology, and the Bible,” at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, Baltimore, MD, 24 November 2013.
² For ecological hermeneutics, it is critical to recognise the embeddedness of human-kind in, and interdependence with, a wider Earth community. At the same time, the Earth is much more than any human community or their habitats. Inevitably, when writing about humans and Earth some distinctions as well as interconnections will be evident in the choice of language.
ant Logan in his delightful book, *Air: The Restless Shaper of the World*, writes of the breath of creatures—including humans, birds, spiders and insects—living in the reserve near his home:

> In all, the living on the preserve breathe better than ten million gallons of air in a single day. If you ran a hose nonstop, it would take about ten thousand hours for that volume of water to come out. It is then perhaps neither a poetic way of speaking nor an exaggeration to say that the atmosphere is regulated by the living. From air and water, all the living are derived through the medium of breath. Perhaps it is fair to say that breath is being, and that creatures are the expressions of its existence.³

Later he says of breathing: “It is the body’s constant ceremony as long as we live.”⁴ Luce Irigaray recalls the materiality of the air as a forgotten given of our being and thinking.⁵ Breath is, moreover, an important part of language, of the space between words, inhabiting different sounds and cadences, making speech and singing possible.⁶ I begin with a reflection on breath and speech, because I am interested in the aspect of an ecological hermeneutics of retrieval which attempts to recover and “speak” an Earth voice in human words.⁷ Concerning the process of retrieval, Norm Habel writes: “As the interpreter exposes the various anthropocentric dimensions of the text—the ways in which the human agenda and bias are sustained either by the reader or the implied author—the text may reveal a number of surprises about the nonhuman characters in the story.”⁸ But what of texts in which there are no other-than-human characters, where the text seems focused on human concerns without any apparent reference to other than humans, even as background? My text, the Magnificat from Luke’s infancy narrative, is one such; yet with its reference to ΤΟ ΠΝΕΥΜΑ ΜΟΥ in the second line, the text invites the reader to employ breath as an interpretive key. In the Magnificat, a woman’s breath carries the song of reversal. The woman breathes in, and exhales into, the

⁴ Logan, *Air* 324.
⁵ Luce Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* (trans. Mary Beth Mader; Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1999).
⁸ Habel, “Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics” 5.
air/atmosphere of Earth. How does her voice intersect with an Earth voice when she sings the reversal of poor and rich? In exploring a hermeneutic of retrieval of an Earth voice that is not obvious in the text, I bring to my reading of the Magnificat the question: does Earth care for the poor?

THE HERMENEUTICS OF RETRIEVAL AND THE PRINCIPLE OF VOICE

To address this question, I consider first how I might listen to the Magnificat with an ear to an Earth voice. The hermeneutic of retrieval that Habel outlines comes in a series of three: suspicion, identification and retrieval. A hermeneutics of suspicion concerns an alertness to the anthropocentrism of biblical texts and interpretations. A hermeneutic of identification involves the “task of empathy” and requires the reader to endeavour “to come to terms with his or her deep ecological connections,” and to acknowledge and take in “the prior ecological reality of our kinship with Earth.” My focus on breath as an interpretive key is one way of affirming this ecological connection and kinship. Vicky Balabanski situates the hermeneutic of identification as a necessary step between suspicion and retrieval, one requiring of the interpreter an ecological conversion to the other, to Earth as other. Earth is an other with which humans and human communities, interpreters and readers are enmeshed. Identification with Earth is complex, entailing not so much an identification with an other from which humans stand separate but an identification that prompts us to know ourselves other-wise, to know ourselves through a reorientation to-


ward another frame of reference, where we understand ourselves as enmeshed, and sharing habitation, with many others. Balabanski argues that identification requires imagination, self-reflection, critique and, cautiously, a “self-transcendence” where transcendence means going beyond “the narrowly defined individualized self”; such identification requires an ability to draw connections.13

A hermeneutic of retrieval builds on such identification and ideally employs writing styles that invite from readers sympathetic and empathic identification with Earth others, or that shift the perception of the readers’ anthropocentrism or their habitual identifications with human concerns. Such writing needs to go beyond discursive language that tells the reader what to think but does not “turn the breath” toward empathy, to effective creative language in order to occasion a turn in human perception of ourselves in relation to Earth, and so to enable a more attentive and less destructive mode of human dwelling and acting within the Earth community.14 Much as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues in a feminist frame, the three hermeneutics (suspicion, identification and retrieval) are not simply applied consecutively but form a circle or web, so that suspicion is re-applied to our ecological identifications and retrievals, with an ear for example to where in ecological interpretations we are “colonizing the referent,” namely Earth or members of Earth community.15

For Habel, “[d]iscerning Earth and members of Earth community as subjects with a voice is a key part of the retrieval process. In some contexts their voices are evident but have been traditionally ignored by exegetes. In other contexts the voice of Earth and Earth community is not explicit, but nevertheless present and powerful.”16 The question Habel and his colleagues address, concerning whether “Earth voice” is metaphor or more than metaphor, points to an important question about the relationship between Earth and human language, that is a question of the materiality of language and texts themselves.17 That metaphor is lively is in no small part due to the liveliness of that to which

14 The concept of turning the breath comes from the great post-Holocaust poet Paul Celan (“The Meridian,” in Selections (trans. Rosemarie Waldrop; ed. and with an introduction by Pierre Joris; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) 162) who writes: “Poetry is perhaps this: an Atemwende, a turning of our breath. Who knows, perhaps poetry goes its way—the way of art—for the sake of just such a turn?”
16 Habel, “Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics” 5.
it refers. That the retrieval of an Earth voice occurs in human speech acts and written texts might prompt us to consider their materiality, their status as “bits” of Earth, including atmosphere/air, albeit mediated by way of human and other-than-human labour.

Further, as Habel suggests when he refers to “nonhuman figures communicating in some way—mourning, praising, and singing,” the principle of voice is in effect already a biblical principle. Earth itself is responsive. There is in play, especially in the Hebrew Bible, a biblical animism, that readers should not assume is outside the background of the Gospel narratives (and other Second Testament writings). It makes more sense to assume that an understanding of land, sea and sky, and other animals, as potential (and potent) respondents to each other, to humans and to the divine, is part of the scriptural ethos inherited by the first century CE writers and their hearers.

The ecojustice principle of voice, therefore, is not simply a metaphor enabling biblical interpreters to attend to an Earth community of which humans are part, as if Earth had a voice like a human subject, but the principle of voice is also a biblical principle, evident in the psalms (for example, Ps 98:7–9), which can be read as expressing a biblical animism where Earth has subjecthood and agency.

Drawing on David Abram’s *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Heather Eaton writes: “To experience the Earth as a ‘speaking’ subject, a living entity, is to engage all of the senses (Abram 1997). To articulate this is to move into the realm of poesies; vivid and intense imagery being the only metaphorical language that can contain and mediate these experiences.” Eaton’s appeal to the

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20 Habel, “Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics” 5.


senses is important and I will come back to the role the senses play in mediating an Earth voice, because like other animals, through the senses humans are immersed in the materiality—of Earth and cosmos—that flows over our skin or hide, in and through our nostrils, mouths, ears, eyes, antennae, and so on. Moreover, not only the senses but perhaps more particularly the life-sustaining activities of breathing and eating mediate our interconnectedness with the Earth community of which we are part.

While all animals breathe while they live, it is perhaps the activity of eating (and drinking) that marks the relation of the animal to poverty, to the question of a life sufficiently sustained or otherwise. We know that while on some (perhaps disputable) markers absolute poverty has decreased, myriad human beings are unable to feed themselves adequately, and the question of other animals forced into poverty through loss of food sources and habitat needs to be considered. Human poverty can be more broadly defined, so that while the Magnificat specifically recalls the hungry, in the context of the wider Lukan narrative the song’s references to power can also remind us of the related issues of land tenure and work under imperial rule.

THE MAGNIFICAT

The song comes toward the close of the visitation episode (1:39–56) where, rather than focusing on the supposed competition between two sons (yet in utero), as many commentators were once wont to do, the scene depicts two women who it can be argued mediate the divine to each other (with the breath/spirit as catalyst, and through the breath/voice of prophecy and blessing). The song then becomes part of a pattern of call-response between the two women, where pregnant bodies already mediate the kind of gift relation that occurs between Earth (through local habitats) and animals (including humans). It is beyond the scope of this article to define the complexities of this gift relation or its tragic possibilities (at the nexus of life and death). While I am not arguing for speaking of Earth in maternal language, as Mother Earth, nonetheless Earth and the pregnant body have characteristics in common precisely in regard to their necessity for certain forms of life, a necessity that can be figured as a material givenness that is gift-like.

Spoken into this context of the gift-like givenness of Earth life, the Magnificat echoes the songs of Miriam (Exod 15:19–21) and Hannah (1 Sam 2:1–10),


in the tradition of women’s songs of victory, liberation and thanksgiving. Gail O’Day writes: “there are important echoes of the Song of Miriam and the Exodus liberation in Mary’s song. Mary stands in direct line with Miriam and Hannah and sings of the same liberating and world-transforming God.”

I might want with Habel to be suspicious of a “world-transforming God,” or at least to ask if Earth is considered as agent, victim or otherwise in this transformation that is sung as liberating for humans. Do human and a wider Earth liberation coincide?

Barbara Reid describes Mary as a prophet in the tradition of Miriam, Judith and Deborah, proclaiming “God’s victorious power in song and dance.”

“These,” Reid writes, “are not sweet lullabies; they are militant songs that exult in the saving power of God that has brought defeat to those who had subjugated God’s people. In the same vein, Mary’s song declares the overthrow of Roman imperial ways and the triumph of God’s reign.” Warren Carter argues similarly that the Magnificat can be understood, along with the other songs of Luke’s infancy narratives, as a protest song having the following dynamics: “naming contexts of oppressive suffering”; “bestowing dignity”; “fostering hope for change”; and “securing communal solidarity.”

I want to suggest that in this song of protest in the voice of a human being—a woman, Mary of Nazareth—we can attend to an Earth voice in at least four ways:

- through the materiality of the text;
- through attention to the human body, especially the senses and the breath;
- through attention to the sustaining capacity of Earth in relation to poverty and riches; and
- through the implicit reference to the land in the promise to the ancestors.

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As noted earlier, another mode of attentiveness to Earth voice employed as part of a hermeneutics of retrieval is a form of creative writing that attempts to “speak” in some way an Earth voice in response to or as part of a reading of the biblical text. Several of the examples in the Earth Bible volumes and in Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics make the attempt at retrieval in something like verse. In my experience, this is rarely successful in literary terms but can work liturgically, and is beyond the scope of this article.

AN EARTH VOICE IN THE MAGNIFICAT

Earth speaks through the materiality of the text

The text itself is not simply words in Koine Greek or in translation; rather the words of the song and its rhythms, the voice of the speaker or singers, the media in which the song comes to us across the centuries all have their own materiality, their Earthiness. Bach’s Magnificat in E flat major performed in Melbourne by the Brandenburg Orchestra and Choir on 22 February 2014 is one particular material instance (and interpretation) of this biblical song. The Greek version I can call up on screen in my Accordance software is another very different instance (with its links to a variety of metadata from commentaries and lexica). In the former, the breath of a cast of singers gives voice to the song, and the music interprets the lyrics in particular joyful, solemn and triumphal ways. In the latter, the breath is muted; the fan of the computer whirs, but the breathing in the song itself appears in the spaces of white light between the black text on the screen, in the hyper-connections being made between primary and secondary texts, and in the breath of the producers and programmers of these texts and their electronic connections. Underlying these texts are the multiple intersecting relations of human and other-than-human

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31 Some others use prose narrative. Such expressions of a hermeneutics of retrieval have echoes in the feminist hermeneutic of creative imagination described by Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, esp. 26–28, 73–76.
33 Here for instance the question of the original language of the song (see for example, Stephen Farris, The Hymns of Luke’s Infancy Narratives [JSNTSup 9; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985] 31–66) has a different resonance, since the human breath is marked differently in languages with vowels and those without. Moreover, the poetics itself may give evidence of its original language. Randall Buth (“Hebrew Poetic Tenses and the Magnificat,” JSNT 21 [1984] 67–83) argues that the shifts in tenses in the song are an aesthetic device employed in Hebrew poetry but not in Greek. This device has been carried over into the Greek song we have in the Lukan infancy narrative. Whether Buth is correct that there is an underlying Hebrew original, he offers evidence for Luke’s use of this Semitic aesthetic device whether from adoption and adaptation of a prior Hebrew song or songs, or from his familiarity with Semitic aesthetics as passed on in Greek translations or otherwise.
producers and sustainers of the texts as they appear in specific instances (for example, the creatures and habitats that provide sustenance and shelter to the musicians and their audience to enable them to gather at the Melbourne Recital Centre on one Saturday night in February; or the plastics and metals, the transformed fossils and ores, that constitute this laptop on which I can call up an electronic text).

To this extent, Mary’s song, like every human text, speaks in more-than-human Earth voice or voices. While, as Val Plumwood reminds us, we need to affirm both the qualities of difference and continuity of humans and other than humans, it is important also to remember that humans, as Gen 2:7 has it are groundlings, Earth creatures, breathing members of an Earth community.34 Human voices, born on the air and in the materiality of a text, are Earth voices, albeit partial, particular and limited.

Orality studies may assist us in reading the text with an ear to the rhythms of the breath that connect humans, their habitats and the atmosphere.35 Richard Horsley suggests setting out the Greek text to show some of the movements of the writing as it might have worked orally.36 The following is my setting out of Luke 1:46b–55:

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The spaces may be a visual way of representing the breath. Parallels, repetitions and echoes suggest interpretation. For example, the trope of reversal is heightened by parallels that work as contrasts, for example, δυνάστας / ταπεινοῦς (1:52). The long vowels followed by -σιν — ὀδυσσιν — at the ends of ταπεινῶσιν and μακαριοῦσιν respectively in lines 4 and 5 suggest echoes (even though one word functions as a noun, the other as a verb) which lead us to hear these words together rather than paralleling the verbs ἐπέβλεψεν and μακαριοῦσιν, another possibility (1:48). Luke has brought together Hannah’s proclamation of her humiliation in 1 Sam 1:11 (LXX) and Leah’s exclamation of good fortune in Gen 30:13 (LXX). Reading ταπεινῶσιν with μακαριοῦσιν recalls Elizabeth’s makarism in relation to

Farris, The Hymns of Lake’s Infancy Narratives 25.
Mary in the visitation (1:45). In the Magnificat it is Mary’s humiliation that becomes fortunate.38 Where Elizabeth spoke the beatitude in 1:45, all generations will speak it from now (1:48). Generations are repeated in the song, at 1:48 and 1:50 leading back at the end to previous generations, the ancestors, and present and future descendants of those ancestors into the ages (1:54–55).39 The interplay between parent and child, ancestors and descendants, is expressed in verses 54 and 55 through this pattern:

Israel, God’s servant/child
our fathers/ancestors
Abraham
his seed/descendants

In relation to Israel, there is a crossing over between the divine κύριος and the patriarchal ancestor Abraham. We might be tempted in an ecological framework to read the generations of the people Israel as more-than-human generations, though I am not sure that the text can be pushed this far.40 Although the generations in Mary’s song seem to refer later to the ancestral line, described patriarchally, the reference in 1:48b to Leah’s exclamation in Gen 30:13 reminds the reader of women’s proclamations of good fortune, but this recollection is at best ambiguous. On the one hand there is Elizabeth’s proclamation in 1:45; on the other there is an unnamed woman’s makarism in 11:27 which the Lukan Jesus apparently corrects in 11:28. Nonetheless, the generations’ proclamation of makarism need not be confined to the patriarchal lineage of Abraham (1:54–55) nor to human generations in isolation from the rest of creation. At the very least the ecological reader can affirm the more-than-


39 The movement from past to future is already at play in 1:48 in the aorist “already” of ἐπέβλεψεν and the “to come” of the future μακαρισθησίν.

human interrelationships and interdependencies of these human generations, especially in considering the way the language of generation evokes covenant and promise, as I will briefly below.

*Earth speaks to and through the human senses, the breath, the body*

Human generations are linked to more-than-human generations through the sensing body embedded in its habitat. In his work on the five senses, Michel Serres describes a sixth or inner sense, necessary to the operation of the five “external senses.” Each of the senses (touch, taste, smell, sight, hearing) mediates an interchange of matter, light or sound waves, between the body and its habitat. The inner sense enfolds and interprets this interchange in the body, at the point where the personal subject and the subjecthood of Earth are in communion. I want to suggest that what in Greek is called *ψυχή* is something like this inner sense, and as such represents in the text a potential point of connection between the voice of a woman and the voice of Earth. Ulrich Luz comments that “*ψυχή* is not ‘soul,’ since it eats and drinks, but (Semitically) ‘life.’” *Ψυχή*, the life of the creature, is shaped by habitat; it can be enculturated in its place.

Parallel with *ψυχή* in the song is *πνεῦμα*. Reid writes:

Mary proclaims God’s greatness with her whole being (v. 47). The Greek terms *ψυχή*, ‘soul,’ and *πνεῦμα*, ‘spirit,’ are not different parts of the human, nor should they be understood as opposed to *σῶμα*, ‘body,’ or *σαρκ*, ‘flesh.’ Rather, each term describes the whole human person as viewed from a particular perspective. Soul, *ψυχή*, refers to the whole living being, equivalent to the Hebrew *נפשה*. ‘It expresses the vitality, consciousness, intelligence, and volition of a human being.’ The meaning of *πνεῦμα* is barely distinguishable from that of *ψυχή*. It suggests the aspect of the self that is particularly able to receive the Spirit. Both terms can be used simply as a substitute for the personal pronoun, ‘I.’ Mary, like Elizabeth, recognizes God in bodiliness, conception, and

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incarnation, not as removed to a purely spiritual plane. She proclaims this with her whole being.⁴⁵

Reid’s emphasis on embodiment is important for an ecological reading, but we need also to recall that πνεῦμα, so often translated as “spirit” in Second Testament writings means “blowing,” “breathing,” “breath,” “(life-)spirit,” sometimes also “wind,”⁴⁶ and takes us back to the Hebrew נֶפֶשׂ, which Theodore Hiebert reminds us is a word/concept that connects air, wind, breath and the sacred.⁴⁷ When the Lukan Mary sings, “my breath exults/rejoices,” the reader can hear the intake and exhalation of the breath—the living interplay of a human creature and the air/atmosphere, such as Logan describes.⁴⁸ When I think of air and atmosphere, I ought not forget, moreover, that in many places our air is polluted and the atmosphere is warming in ways of dire concern for humans and many other Earth kind.

*Earth, poverty and riches*

This interplay of life and breath, therefore is not simply a “nice” idea to mark our live-giving connectedness. This connectedness itself is a connectedness with the death-dealing that humans as a species have occasioned in our atmosphere and habitat more generally. The song is alert to the death-dealing that accompanies the Roman empire. The breath of the Lukan Mary is shaped around a refashioning of the destructiveness of empire even as it in some ways reinforces imperial values through the imagery of divine might and the portrayal of “political victory,” which at this stage of the Lukan narrative is “nationalistic.”⁴⁹ Beneath the imagery of lord (κύριος) and slave woman (δομήνη), the language of opposition—of humility and pride, plenty and want—the appeal to power, might, and thrones, is the real experience of oppression and poverty, hunger and servitude.⁵⁰ O’Day writes: “Freedom as celebrated in the

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⁴⁶ BAGD 674–75.
⁴⁸ Logan, Air 320–21.
⁵⁰ Trainor outlines the likely social composition of Luke’s audience and their respective stances to Earth, suggesting that Luke’s audience is diverse as regards social and economic status, but excludes the ruling elite and the very lowest classes (for which he borrows the term “expendables”). Trainor, *About Earth’s Child* 26–38. It is an audience for which the question of poverty (and riches) is salient, even pressing.
songs of these three women [Miriam, Hannah and Mary], means ‘the actual recovery of those basic necessities that the oppressor has taken from the poor.’”\(^5\)\(^1\) But as Carter notes: “Luke’s engagement with the empire is not one-dimensional. While Luke’s songs resist Roman imperial order, they also reflect aspects of that same order.”\(^5\)\(^2\) He continues:

Mary describes herself in 1:48 as a slave of God, thereby expressing her relationship to God in the language of one of the empire’s most oppressive structures. While it can be argued [and has been so argued] that the language thereby contensively refuses allegiance to earthly masters and ascribes it to God, it nevertheless reinscribes the relationship with God in terms of the dominant imperial structure of master and slave. A similar dynamic exists in her language of ‘savior.’\(^5\)\(^3\)

Carter is similarly wary of the use of the term “the proud” in 1:51, noting that in Virgil’s *Aeneid* (6.851–53) it is Rome’s purpose to “crush the proud”; what is meant in each text, Carter argues, is “the destruction of those who oppose their dominant power’s will and agenda,” where the dominant power is either the “mighty” God (Magnificat) or Rome (*Aeneid*).\(^5\)\(^4\) Reid, however, argues that the reclamation of imperial language for God, is a deliberate counter-ideology.\(^5\)\(^5\) The reversal, too, of rich and poor, full and hungry, that is a theme not only in the Magnificat but in Luke’s beatitudes and woes, Luke 16 and elsewhere, is part of this counter-ideology. “Mary,” Reid writes, moreover, “subverts the system of enslaving subjected peoples by presenting herself as an empowered person who chooses to serve.”\(^5\)\(^6\) The song in its references to

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\(^5\)\(^2\) Carter, “Singing in the Reign” 42.

\(^5\)\(^3\) Carter, “Singing in the Reign” 42.

\(^5\)\(^4\) Carter, “Singing in the Reign” 42.


ταπείνωσιν she argues, also “voices the dream of having no more fear of sexual humiliation by occupying imperial forces.”

In this breathy human singing of liberation for the poor and oppressed in the alternative rule/reign of God, where is Earth? The material givenness of Earth, the life-sustaining capacities of soil and rain and sun, the more-than-human (including human) labour that makes possible the satiation of the hungry (including ravens), the clothing of both lilies and disciples (12:24–28), must be retrieved for ecological readings. The proclamation of an alternative reign (βασιλεία), requires this possibility: that Earth (and its climate)—however indifferently the soil might give itself to growing the seed, the rains and the sun to making ready the harvest—will give itself to the nourishment of the poor. The imperial system of land debt, of lordship and absentee landlords, of peasants pushed into subsistence or beyond, also relies on the sustaining capacity of Earth, even where this is taken for profit.

What the song potentially proclaims, when read in the light of the Lukan Eucharistic feeding and last supper narratives, is a relationship to Earth where the capacity for Earth to sustain human life is received (not taken for profit) as gift. In this grateful receptivity, oriented explicitly to God in the song, is also the fissure: the imperial mode that links land and debt, that denies the gift, with all the potential for exploitation of Earth this might allow.

Earth and the promise to the ancestors

The reference to what God spoke (ἐλάλησεν, i.e. the promise) to the ancestors (1:55) makes explicit that an alternative relation to land (and thus Earth) is at the heart of the vision for a rule that offers liberation for the hungry and enslaved. This reference recalls not only the promise of offspring (because of the context of the infancy narratives and the repetition of generations in 1:48, 50) but the promise of land. Indeed the promise to Abraham and his seed (σπέρμα) is the promise of the land which invokes the biblical interrelationship between land, social justice, Torah/law, and God. This relation to land, as I noted earlier, should not be read out of Second Testament texts because of silence; rather silence can allow us to assume that the relation to land is, as Karen Wenell argues, inherent in such concepts as the twelve, and here in the Magnificat’s reference to the ancestral promise. For Michael Trainor: “The story of creation is indirectly part of this narrative recall of the heritage of Israel’s encounter

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57 Reid, “Women Prophets” 54.
59 For an ecological reading of the feeding and last supper narratives, see for example, Elvey, The Matter of the Text 175–77.
60 Wenell, Jesus and Land 104–38.
with God’s mercy.”61 For C. S Song, the Magnificat, “the song of God’s reign” is situated in Earth and cosmos; it is “a mighty chorus [that] rises from the heart of humanity to fill the entire creation—the space-time of God’s saving activity.”62 The implication is that the song promises a more-than-human liberation, unsurprising since justice for humans and ecological flourishing are frequently enmeshed. A full exploration of how Earth might be heard speaking in and through the promise is beyond the scope of this article.

CONCLUSION

I have sketched a number of ways in which a text such as the Magnificat in the Gospel of Luke can be read with an ear to the voice of Earth, even where the text does not explicitly refer to other-than-human characters or interests. Through these sketches I have suggested that in the materiality of the text, the human voice of its speaker, the breath held in its language, the song’s resistance to the death-dealing of empire, and its reference to the biblical land promise (and the way that promise suggests a certain relationship to ecological justice), the Magnificat’s proclamation of good news for the poor (see also 4:18) can be heard in part at least as conveying an Earth voice. In tension with this suggestion I need also to hold the reality that Earth (and its climate) seems on some observation indifferent to the social, economic and power status of particular human groups, although not unaffected by these in terms of the damage such inequalities can occasion ecologically. As the recent encyclical of Pope Francis Laudato Si’ insists, moreover, ecological destruction and human poverty are interrelated not only in their effects but in their root causes.63 In terms of a contemporary ecological reading of the Lukan Magnificat, then, Earth occupies a complex position, as both potential sustainer of the poor and itself identifiable with “the poor,” as species become extinct, soils grow less fertile, seas warm and the atmosphere is polluted. Attentiveness to an Earth voice, or better voices, in this context suggests less a creative “writing” of this voice but, as Trainor rightly insists, a creative “listening” through practices of interpretation attuned to an Earth community (human and other than human).64

61 Trainor, About Earth’s Child 75.
64 Trainor, About Earth’s Child, esp. 47–61.
Such is required for a hermeneutics of retrieval even where other than human characters or interests appear absent from the text.